

Despite the list of orders I gave, it did not take long for the crew of the Triumph of Fives to prepare. The transport ships and cargo shuttles were quickly moved to the Hope, after transferring my crew and I over to the warship, of course. Everything else was done without my needing to micromanage anyone, something I greatly appreciated.

Once we arrived, I hung out on the bridge, waiting at the back for word of the incoming Fleet Lead. I did my best not to step on anyone's toes, just quietly waiting in the back.

Eventually, around forty-five minutes after our conversation ended, an old Gozanti-Class left one of the repair station's hangars, flying out straight across the gap to meet us, though they were going considerably slower than a ship of that make could. Once we spotted them, we began to cross the gap as well, matching their speed so we would meet in the center.

While technically, our ship had theirs beat in just about every way, by a considerable margin at that, it was still a tense approach. Our weapons were powered down completely, as were theirs, and the crawl we were traveling at seemed to make everything feel sluggish and slow. Eventually, we met in the middle of the gap between our fleets, and the ships carefully docked, hooked up through an airlock access hatch. The Gozanti, even if it wasn't the older C-ROC class, was still way too big to fit in our hangar.

The negotiating party crossed through the connection point, stepping out onto a cleared hallway, with our groups several meters back, so they wouldn't feel pressured. First out of the airlock was Fleet Commander Erba, which, in my mind, was a good sign. Most commanders would hide behind guards or lackeys, letting them test the waters before coming out themselves. It was far from a sure thing, but the commander stepping out first told me a lot about how his command might work.

As the Sullustan stepped forward, now back in normal gravity, he reached out to shake my hand. While we had prepared for their arrival, I had taken off my armor and put on my woven uniform. The rest of those with me, specifically Tatnia, Nal, and Vaz, were in their uniforms as well.

"Admiral Deacon," he said, reaching out and shaking my hand. "Thank you for letting us on board one of your vessels."

"Fleet Commander Erba, thank you for agreeing to meet with us," I said, giving him a slight bow as we shook hands.

Before I could continue greeting him, the Separatist leader's escort arrived. First was a single human stepping onto our ship, followed by a Nemodian. Behind him, ten BX commando droids followed. I raised my eyes at the large guard force, but ultimately said nothing. We had encouraged them to bring whatever kind of guards they wanted. I couldn't be upset that they took me up on the offer.

Besides, as dangerous as they were, they were no match for Commander Frost's men, not to mention Ahsoka and Julus, all of whom were ready and waiting nearby. I had more than enough magic to cover our retreat while reinforcements arrived.

"If that is everyone, let us move to a conference room where we may talk more comfortably," I said with a smile, gesturing down the hall behind us. "It is just around the corner."

"Very well."

Our now larger group walked for a minute through the ship's decks before I finally guided everyone into a large meeting room. It was a circular room with a central holoprojector at its center, surrounded by a long circular table. Fleet Commander Erba led his group to one side of the circle, while my group settled into chairs around the opposite side.

"Before we begin, I believe we should open with introductions," I suggested, turning slightly to gesture to my people. "This is Tatnia, my second in command, both as the leader of the Skyforged and as the leader of our first ground team. Besides her are Nal and Vaz. While they both are on our ground team as well, they have also served as my advisors for as long as they have been with us, which is the role they play here."

"Indeed, it is good to see you including non-humans among those who advise you," he commented, first turning to the human. "My compatriots are leaders of a different sort who work beside me to guide the fleet. Sal Horuna has become something of a spokesperson for the civilians living on our ships, while Kar Gerol here is the head of our engineers, those workers who were on board the stations when the war was declared over, and our fleets were shut down."

"Perhaps we could start there, clearing up a bit of confusion for me," I suggested, continuing when Erba made no moves to stop me. "When your fleet received its shutdown orders, why did you not evacuate? Or at least leave this place behind, find somewhere safer to live."

"Some of us did," He explained, a frown on his face as he recalled an older memory. "In the beginning, we had a second Munificent-class stationed here. After recovering from the shutdown, our commanding officer, my superior, left to discover the truth of the shutdown. He assured us he would send word or return himself, but he never did."

"The Empire slammed down pretty hard on the remnants of the movement once the war was 'won'," I explained, letting my own frown color my features. "They wanted people to forget about the war as quickly as possible. I can only imagine it was to keep people from realizing that with a spark, a message, and a lot of credits, you could raise a pretty halfway decent army."

"I suppose so," He responded noncommittally. "When the Fleet Commander did not return, I feared what would happen if we left as well. I took control, and we settled in to prepare to wait. Time passed, and the paranoia of what may happen if we leave settled into our bones. We have waited considerably longer than we anticipated, however... eventually this place became home. Some among us wish to leave, of course, but most have grown used to it."

"How up to date are you with galactic news?" I asked, leaning back.

"We have managed to stay relatively up to date," he said vaguely. "But I believe I should get a question now? Who is the Skyforged Vanguard? What do you do?"

"We are a mercenary group," I explained, giving him the clean, honest answer, rather than dressing us up. "We primarily take bounties and jobs to clear out pirates, slavers, and raiders, especially around the Outer Rim. We are also decidedly against the Empire. It might be hard to tell from this fleet, but a good chunk of our ships are stolen from them."

"Why are you against the Empire?"

"Because the Emperor is a dick, who needs to be stopped," I explained simply. "He is responsible for so much suffering, and has twisted the galaxy so much more than it ever needed to be."

"More than it needed to be?" the Sullustan asked, sounding curious. "What does that mean?"

"I mean that the Separatist Republic war was more or less always going to happen," I responded, watching his reaction closely. "The Republic was a bloated corpse puppeted by greed and corruption, pushing a dangerous ideology of blind peace. But rather than having a Separatist faction that could take a moral high ground, you were cursed from the very beginning to be led by some of the greediest, most corrupt people among them."

"And how exactly is that the Emperor's doing?"

"He was playing both sides," I explained with a shrug. "He wanted the war so he could give himself more and more power over the Republic, taking it over without having to raise a hand in violence. To you, the war may have been about being seen, about better treatment and the right to govern yourself, but to your leaders, it was all about money and power. And he is the reason it was like that."

Fleet Commander Erba was silent as I talked, studying my face. As silence set over the table, I got the distinct impression that he wasn't quite picking up what I was putting down. Rather than push and potentially scare him off, I shook my head and waved the conversation away.

"As terrible as it was, that was then, and this is now. You intimated you would be happy to trade food, supplies, and materials?" I asked, hoping to push the conversation to more stable ground. "We have a pretty serviceable resource network at this point, so we can likely find what you need."

"There are some things we could use more of," the leader reluctantly admitted. "You said you would allow us to pay in with services provided?"

"Potentially," I added, with a so-so gesture. "At the moment, our fleets are in good repair and need no modifications. Is there any other service that your stations can provide?"

"Only the medium-scale station is functional at the moment," Erba corrected. "We closed the large-scale station down ten years ago to cut down on our fuel and parts consumption."

"Have you stripped it for parts?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"In minor ways, but it is mostly intact," Kar Gerol responded. "It is fully operational, including its repair droid contingent."

That sparked a spike of excitement. An automated repair and works station for larger ships is precisely what we needed.

"Well... if you're not using it... Perhaps we could convince you to part with it?" I suggested. "Obviously, we would provide more than just supplies for it, but a station that size would be something we would be willing to trade for."

"The whole station?" Fleet Commander Erba asked, his eyes narrowing. "Why would we trade that to you?"

"Well, if you're not using it, why not?" I pointed out. "It's just sitting there, losing value as it ages."

"Perhaps, but what could you provide that would be worth such a large functional station?" He countered. "I will not sell or trade something so valuable for some food and metal stock."

"Well then, what about credits?" I suggested. "We deliver food and materials, as well as... three million credits."

"Not only is that amount insultingly low, but what good are credits to us? We cannot leave," Erba asked, shaking his head. "We cannot risk opening ourselves up to being found. You said it yourself, Admiral Deacon. The Empire will come down hard on us if there is even a hint of our existence."

"Of course, showing up in decades-old Separatist ships would probably spark some concern," I agreed, happily letting their paranoia help my bargaining. "Which is why we will also provide you with several small freighters. Random, clean, ready for work, and completely unattached to the Separatist movement. As long as you stick to the Outer Rim, no one will ever suspect you have Separatist ties."

As I explained the concept, all three of the leaders seemed to be surprised. Sal and Kar shared a look, while Erba simply listened and waited. When I was done, he leaned forward.

"I don't quite understand you, Admiral Deacon," He admitted with a frown. "Your fleet is a match for ours, and I know you have more forces to bear. You could force us to surrender, take all of this without batting an eye. Not only could you do this easily, but the public's opinion of the failed Separatist movement would likely leave most people cheering for you. And yet you offer trade. You offer a solution to our problems. You and your people have been flying around the Outer Rim, helping many, and never asking for more than is offered. Why?"

Now it was my turn to frown. What he was saying implied a level of knowledge I didn't think they had.

"Seems like someone was hiding just how well informed they are," I commented with a knowing smile, the acknowledgment of a hand well played.

"One of our ships has a specialized ECM system, including a secure holonet connection," He responded with a shrug. "It wasn't hard to find reports and news about your group, even with the Empire suppressing them."

"Handy," I agreed with a nod. "But to answer your question, we do that because it's the right thing to do, it just so happens that it's also good business. But by taking down pirates and helping the Outer Rim, the people we recruit are loyal and eager to work with us. Our sales are easier because people know they can trust our products and prices. And because we don't ask for more than is offered, people are less likely to try to stiff us for our work. But at the end of the day, doing good is better than doing bad, that's why we do it."

"And why help us? You stand to gain much and lose little by forcing us to surrender. The entire core sees us as villains, and our failures tainted any connection to the outer or mid rims that might have existed. So why?"

"Because you agreed to talk to us," I explained with a simple shrug. "You didn't threaten us, posture yourself as our superior, demand we hand ourselves over. Sure, it was a bit bumpy when you implied we couldn't leave, but at the end of the day, you agreed to talk. That counts for a lot more than you might think."

"Despite the fact that we are Separatists?"

"That only makes it more impressive," I responded. "Besides, Nute Gunray and General Grievous might have been evil, but that doesn't mean every Separatist was. Hell, if circumstances were different, I could imagine a world where the current Rebellion wasn't against the Empire, but against the Republic."

"Hmm... An interesting thought. Either way, I appreciate your desire to solve things in a way that is beneficial to all, rather than just to yourself," the fleet commander responded. "Your words ring of truth, but I am not sure if I am quite willing to agree to your deal just yet."

"In that case, how about we break for a meal?" I suggested, biting back a smirk as Sal perked up. "It won't be anything miraculous, but it's made with fresh ingredients, which I imagine are rare for you."

The three humbly accepted the offer of food, and together we made our way to another room, another, simpler meeting room temporarily set up as a dining room.

"Please, take your seat, and enjoy," I said with a smile, gesturing to three waiting seats, while Tatnia, Vaz, and Nal took their own. "If you have any questions, please feel free to ask, as a good amount of this food is native to our home."

Our three guests settled into their chairs, following our example. Not long after, they were enjoying some of the many fruits of Nirn.