

I sat on the edge of the holoprojector, watching as my people rushed to file into the room. Everyone knew the timer for the mission was rolling down, so no one was surprised to get the call for the final meeting, or to find out that we would be leaving only a few hours after it was over.

As we all gathered together, between the room and the misfit collection of aliens and humans, all from different walks of life, I was having flashbacks to some of the rebel meetings from the movies. People of all shapes and sizes, leaning over each other, [sitting around a holo projector](#). The fact that everyone was wearing our uniform lit a spark of pride burning in my chest. I let out a cough, both to dispel the line of self-doubt beginning to form at the back of my head, and to get everyone's attention.

"Alright, everyone. You all already know the basics, but let's go over it again," I said, standing by the large projector at the center of the open room. "The plan is simple in form, but will require a certain level of competence and cooperation to complete.

The projection of a dead planet, a blue-gray dustball that was insanely cold, but its utter lack of water meant there wasn't even a speck of ice on its surface. Instead, clouds of an unknown yellow gas slowly spun around the sphere.

"This is planet Z-728fdU. It is the only planet orbiting in this system, and appears to be exactly in the middle of nowhere," I explained, pacing around the holoprojector. "Beyond being just about equidistant from both Moff Burbill and Moff Calyso's territories, there is essentially nothing special about it or the system, which is probably why it is where our mission will take place."

I turned to focus on the crowd, watching their reactions and catching a few eyes. Besides the ships we hadn't staffed yet and the *Fury*, this mission was basically all hands on deck, meaning there were a lot of people sitting around the center projector.

"This mission starts with a handful of smaller ships, ships that are fast, maneuverable, have a low sensor presence, and powerful onboard scanners," I explained, the projection showing off one of the ships in mind, the Starcaller. "These ships will land on the surface, aim the sensor up, before going into low power mode. Then, we wait."

Dots decorated the planet, their green coloration denoting them as friendlies. A timer runs in the corner, spinning fast to show time is passing. It was a significant chunk of time, starting at four days before spinning downward.

"Eventually, the Moffs will arrive with the trade goods, and any sort of ship they feel they can spare. Now, neither of these Moffs will be present, and despite having *some influence*, they are not all-powerful. There is a limit to how much they can send at once. Let's start off with the worst-case scenarios, which would result in a mass retreat."

The projection switched from the dotted planet to a projection of an Immobilizer and three Imperial Arquitens, our primary targets. After another moment, more projected ships

arrived, divided on either side of the original group, signifying that they belonged to different Moffs. On one side was a [Victory-class Star Destroyer](#), as well as a pair of [Imperial Arquitens](#) and four [Gozanti-class cruisers](#), while the other side had a pair of [Vindicator-class Heavy Cruisers](#), one Imperial Arquiten, and four [IPV-1 Patrol Crafts](#)

"As you can see, the absolute worst-case scenario is something we would struggle to handle," I explained, gesturing to the large fleet around the four target ships. "However, this is, again, the absolute worst-case scenario. Getting all of these ships on one mission would require a lot of moving around, the kind of movement we would be able to notice. So far, we have seen no sign of this level of activity. As of now, this is what we believe we can expect."

The holoprojection flickers, and a significant number of the ships disappear. The Victory-Class was now on its own, with no support ships in sight, while one of the Vindicators, the Arquiten, and two of the IPVs vanished from the other. The forces have been greatly diminished, almost by half on one side, and still significantly on the other.

"This is what we have seen beginning to move around and prepare for a mission, meaning this is what we believe we can expect," I explained. "Now, obviously, if they arrive at this planet with more than we can handle, then our waiting ships will simply send the information before retreating, jump away from the planet. In fact, the waiting ships will not be engaging in combat at all, as by and large they are not combat prepared, not to mention that they would only get in the way."

The holoprojector shifted again, this time showing the anticipated fleet above the surface of the planet.

"The strategy here is to drop out of a microjump right on top of the fleet, then using our presence to push them down," I explained, before pointing to the projection, the Immobilizer, and three Arquitens blinking. "The focus of this push will be our target ships, as those are the ones we don't want escaping. Our target of attack will obviously be the active enemy ships, specifically the Victory-Class first, which I'm hoping to destroy relatively quickly by concentrating fire on it completely. We can then use that in an attempt to force a surrender, removing the need to punch through the target ship's shields to board them."

The projector displayed our forces approaching the target starships while targeting the active ones with their weapons.

"Now, as I said, our first priority should be the Victory-Class. Once that is destroyed or disabled, the firepower of the Imperial fleet is essentially cut in half," I explained, looking out at our people. "To get that done as fast as possible, both the *Hope*, *Forge*, and *Anvil* will be focused on taking it down, as well as a significant amount of Heavy ARCs. The rest of the fleet will be in charge of harrying the smaller ships to weaken their shields and even take down a few of the smaller ships. Any questions?"

"What are the chances that this is an ambush?" Ahsoka asked, just like I had asked her to.

"The risk of ambush is never zero," I admitted with a frown. "The Empire, and a few others for that matter, will always be trying to catch us off guard, or to trap us so we can't escape."

I walked around the projector, looking out at my people, all of them looking back with steady, prepared looks.

"However, taking into account how we found this information, the source, as well as nearby Imperial movements, it's unlikely this is an ambush," I continued. "If the worst happens, we have a plan for a fighting retreat to minimize casualties and ensure as many of us get home as possible. Of course, our Jedi support will constantly be on guard for any incoming enemy forces, as always."

Ahsoka nodded, though she didn't have many concerns to begin with. She was only asking the question I was sure plenty of people had, but were too nervous to ask. Several people around the meeting hall nodded in understanding, and a few more looked relieved that we had investigated the surrounding forces.

"Alright, everyone, we have about three hours for everything to be loaded up. After that, we deploy," I explained, getting several nods in return. "Make sure your people know this will likely be a long trip, mostly involving waiting for our targets to arrive."

I got a dozen or so nods in confirmation after that, before I released the meeting so people could get moving and prepare their various contributions. I would be riding on the bridge of the *Hope*, directing the battle, leaving Tatnia and Ahsoka in charge of the crew. I hated it, but at the moment, I felt the bridge was where I could do the most good. We would have plenty of ground teams working together to take ships, and depending on how the battle went, there was a chance I would be able to join in, but for now, I was focused on leading the battle.

I had a bad feeling that, going forward, that would be happening more and more. I knew I needed to take on the larger responsibility, as the leader of my people, but a large part of me absolutely refused to stop fighting on the ground, not while I was still in good condition.

Once the final planning meeting was over, we split up pretty quickly. The journey to our target would take just under three days, and once there, we would be waiting for quite some time for our targets to arrive. Thankfully, I had no end of things to enchant, which would keep me plenty busy.

When we finally left Nirn behind, I was standing on the *Hope's* bridge, looking out over everything before we made the jump. Standing there as we left was entirely ceremonial, as they did not need me there to make the jump. However, if it made my people feel better that I was with them from the start, I had no issues spending a few hours on the bridge. Ahsoka was also there, as was Tatnia, Commander Frost, and Commander Toggle. Commander Frost was the leader of the two ground teams for the *Hope*, and Commander Toggle was the head of our starfighter corps, and was joining us since around eighty percent of the corps was accompanying us on this mission.

"Honestly, sir, I reckon our squadrons could defeat the expected forces on their own," Toggle, who had been with us as far back as the clearing Omega Station, where we found him and his brothers, said. "I think pulling back from the larger possible ship level is underestimating us."

"I know, Toggle," I admitted. "But that's not how the Skyforged work. Acceptable casualties is not a phrase I am willing to admit into our lexicon. Not when we are perfectly capable of using numbers and strategy to overwhelm our target."

"While I find myself greatly enjoying the fact that our leader refuses to spend our lives without concern, pulling back from a fight we could otherwise win..." Commander Frost, leader of the more recent clone conglomerate we added to our ranks, pointed out. "It seems like a waste."

"Lives are not a currency to be spent," I repeated, before turning to look at both of them. "That isn't to say that, some day, I won't ask my people to risk their lives in a fight that we cannot guarantee a clean victory. Whether it be to inflict a grievous wound on an enemy, to stop a catastrophe, or simply to let the galaxy know that fucking with the Skyforged Vanguard will always be a mistake. I'm not afraid to put us at risk for a good enough cause. Why do you think I was willing to push the envelope for Clan Galti? I just don't think material gains are worth putting my people at risk. Especially not when there is always going to be another opportunity."

My words seemed to get through to the two clone leaders, who I honestly didn't blame for thinking the way they did. Both of them had been born and raised for combat. Being a soldier was in their DNA, built into their brains. While none of them wanted their soldiers' lives to be spent needlessly, their understanding of what was acceptable was skewed by what their creators wanted them to believe. Hundreds of clones dying just to reach an objective was more or less acceptable during the Clone Wars, so fretting over minor casualties must seem silly to them. I wasn't worried that they would do anything reckless; both of them understood what I wanted from them and wouldn't go against orders or our combat standard operating procedure. However, I was hoping I could eventually change their minds about their own worth over time.

We continued to talk as we left the bridge, turning it over to the actual captain of the ship. Together, we made our way down to the main hangar, which at this point was a hive of activity. The *Hope*, which usually carried two squadrons of each of our custom starfighters, was now carrying *four*, which combined with the troop transports was actually starting to fill the hangar. It was far from actually full, but since two squadrons were spread out along the hangar, not stored in our rack systems, they took up considerably more space. It didn't help that the *Talos Chariot* and a few other ships were on board, both for convenience and, in case I had the opportunity to go with them during our ship takeover.

I knew that the rest of our ships were similarly loaded down with smallships, so we could bring the full brunt of our starfighter corps down on them.

We would likely be spending a fortune on proton torpedoes very soon.

I really needed to push Miru to find a solution to that problem. Perhaps some extra funding and a specially assembled team would convince her to focus on and solve that particular problem.

We toured the hangar for a while, shaking hands and getting to know people we didn't work with often. Eventually, we settled into a large gathering meal, with shelf-stable food being passed out, along with some drinks and some small treats. The lead of Glacial Squadron took the opportunity to make a toast to the two fallen pilots, and thanked me for the chance to lay some hurt on the people who funded Gideon's little project.

Once we were done, Ahsoka and I headed back through the ship to some of the sleeping quarters. There were a lot of spare rooms on board, so I had my enchanting set up in a room next to ours. I spent a few hours working on gear for our new members before finally calling it a day and heading to the room I shared with Ahsoka.

With more than two days left in our trip, there was little we could do but settle in and kill time until it was time for us to go into battle. Even worse, when we did finally arrive at our destination, all that we did was wave goodbye to the dozen or so small starships that would be landing around the planet, acting as our eyes on the system. Meanwhile, we simply stood by in nearby deep space, twiddling our thumbs and waiting for word from our people.

We knew the deal would be happening within the week, but unfortunately, we didn't have a clear-cut, exact window of when it would happen. This left us stranded in deep space, on what was essentially high alert, waiting for days.