

After describing broadly what the Skyforged was about and what sort of things we got up to, Commander Frost finally asked the question that had been on his mind for a while.

"Are you going to let us go free after we pay you back?" He asked, looking directly into my eyes as he did. "We are willing to work off our debt, but will you agree to free us once we have? We cannot be slaves again, not after spending so long under the control of the Imperials."

The clone commander's question caught me off guard. I had expected some variation of "what are you going to do to us?" but not something as... dark as that. I had assumed he would be concerned about how his men would be treated, anyone would be after experiencing what they did for the last thirty or so years of their lives. I did not expect him to jump straight to indentured servitude.

"Commander Frost, in no way, shape, or form am I holding you and your men hostage. This lockdown exists only to protect my people, not to keep you under lock and key," I assured him, tapping my finger against the table to emphasize my words. "I consider the money spent on getting you here and unbound from that biochip to be a public service. Righting a wrong that, while I might not have been responsible for, is still my responsibility to help stop, as a reasonable sentient living being. You and your men owe us *nothing*, and I will not hold you to some extravagant debt to gain access to your expertise."

"...You would just let us leave?" He asked, sounding genuinely baffled. "You don't want us to join you? What about the clones you already have working with you?"

"That's exactly it, Commander Frost. They are working *with* me. Every single one of your men would be welcomed with open arms if they chose to join us, but I refuse to demand their service as payment," I explained. "I would love for you guys to join us, as soldiers, starship crew, or pilots. But I would be equally happy to accept you as farmers, shopkeepers, chefs, explorers, contractors, freight haulers or everything in between. You and your men are more than just soldiers, or, at least, you can be."

"And... if we didn't want to join?" Frost asked, almost as if he was afraid I would change my mind if he drew attention to it.

"Then you're free to leave. In a way that keeps this place secure and secret," I assured him with a smile. "I will give you each a couple hundred credits, and land you on your Outer or Mid Rim planet of your choice. Within reason, of course, I'm not dropping you off at an Imperial waystation."

"...Why?" the confused clone commander asked. "Why would you go that far for us?"

"Because what this galaxy did to you and your brothers is, frankly, horrific," I responded easily. "And you deserve better, and I am honored to be the one who does that for you."

"We are soldiers, we were made for it," he responded, shaking his head in confusion. "And you would let us be farmers?"

"My friend, I understand you may feel like all you're good for is war, but you are human," I said with a smile, patting his shoulder. "We are known for denying our fate. If one of you wanted to be a doll maker, I would make sure you had the resources to start your business and shake your hand with a smile."

A silence fell over the room, my words struggling to sink into their heads. These were clones who had spent nearly thirty years in forced servitude, almost twenty of them with the constant pressure of their slave chips. I wasn't surprised they weren't sure how to handle freedom.

"Perhaps it would be best for you to think on it, let your imaginations flow a bit. Try to figure out what you really want," I said, standing from my seat. "I will happily accept anyone who wants to stay, as a soldier or otherwise. A word of advice? Focus on figuring out if you want to stay or not, as that's your first major decision. After that, you have all the time in the world to figure out what you're looking to do with us."

I smiled, shook Commander Frost's hand, before making my way out of the packed room, heading for the ship's bridge, but pausing along the way at a viewport. The clones deserved the chance to talk amongst themselves and figure out what they wanted. I also made sure that Frost had a way to contact me when he was ready to talk more. I was confident that quite a few of them would end up joining us, the only question is how many would be seeking civilian jobs and how many would want to continue being soldiers.

I already had living space for around two hundred of them set up, and had money ready for farming and production expansions. The city was growing steadily, but we could handle an injection of two hundred clones without much trouble, as long as they didn't all decide they wanted to do the same thing.

I was a little concerned about what we would do for those who wanted to continue being soldiers. Part of me wanted to expand our assets by starting a Fifth Group, but I wasn't sure if we were ready for that. On the other hand, I could also make our existing groups bigger, adding more ground teams to each one, while also rounding out their ship complements.

Despite all the success we had seen with each group, it was hard not to compare them to the threats that existed out there, waiting for us. Just a pair of [Star Destroyers](#) would be a death sentence for our entire fleet. Even letting the starfighter pilots use their heavy ordinance would only ensure an eventual victory, not the clean, predictable victory I preferred. Only bringing in the *Fury* would ensure we come out relatively unscathed.

Until the third Star Destroyer showed up, and then we were fucked.

Of course, there was the ever-daunting, slowly encroaching, looming threat that I had kept to myself. The second Death Star, which was likely floating around the moon of Endor already. It was hard to judge due to a lack of reference points, but I was pretty sure that we were slowly approaching, or perhaps around the time that the Invasion of Hoth would have occurred. I was pretty sure there was around a year gap between New Hope and The Empire Strikes Back,

and almost a year between The Empire Strikes Back and Return of the Jedi. So, actually, we were probably closer to before Hoth than after it.

All of that boiled down into one thing. The Skyforged Vanguard was doing well, we were helping people, helping ourselves, and slowly hurting our enemies. But we were *far* from big time. We were a tiny dot, not even a road bump on the Empire's path, at least from a purely asset point of view. We still posed a threat between our gear and our methodology, but...

It was hard to think positively about your chances when your enemy had more Star Destroyers than we had *people*. Hell, that might even be true for the *Rebellion*.

"We need more defenses," I said to myself, looking out of one of the viewports around *Boxi's Fury*, one that overlooked Nirn. "We need more automation... More heavy assets."

I wracked my brain for anything that might fit that bill, wondering just what sort of CIS assets might be stranded in deep space, just waiting to be recovered. At this point, I was less concerned about big, powerful ships like Lucrehulks or Providences, although I would love to get my hands on either of those. What I really wanted was automated production, the ability to produce a droid mining fleet, which could then funnel resources into more automated production.

Of course, introducing the galaxy to the concept of a [Von Neumann](#)-esque production structure was terrifying. That was the kind of horror that could not be put back in the box, and I was very hesitant to be the one to introduce it into the galaxy.

I ran my hand through my hair, leaning on the edge of the viewport as I watched our ships. There was a near constant stream of shuttles flowing between the planet, the Fury, both cargo and transport. The *Hope* was also slowly making a circuit around the starship, its central hatch open as cargo was transferred back and forth. I let out a long breath, turning away from the view and dropping heavily onto a nearby bench.

If only I had more data, another central core to work from. The Rebels had been sure there was likely one or two small bits of protected data inside the core they were working on, the one that led us to the shipyard ambush, but there was likely nothing else inside of it that matched that large scale. I needed another place to start, another area to search. Clairvoyance could fill in a lot of gaps, but I still needed a general link.

"A link to the past..."

A thought clicked together in my head, and I jumped off the bench and started running before I even processed it. I passed through the halls of the *Fury* at a breakneck pace, actually using my buffing spell to increase my speed, dipping and dodging droids and crew along the way.

I needed automated systems and starships that I could integrate into our infrastructure without having to massively scale up our population. The best sources of large-scale automated systems were CIS assets. To get that, I need information about said assets. So far, most of that

information had come from the central core. But I had another potential source, right at my fingertips, and like an idiot, I had been ignoring it. Our already integrated CIS assets were wiped clean, most of them before we got to them.

But our clone trooper allies had participated in that war as well!

They had fought the separatists on hundreds of planets for nearly a decade. If they didn't know about some CIS assets that they maybe didn't blow up enough, or that they disabled but left behind mostly intact, then I'd eat my armor.

The best part was that we didn't even need to find whole, untouched ships or resources. What we needed was intelligence gathering, which we could piece together via slicer droids and the surviving computer systems. The clones could point us to partially intact systems, and then those systems could point us to the real prize.

I skidded to a stop just outside the room, dropping my buff and reaching out to activate the door. Just as I was about to press the open button, I stopped, realizing that I was probably jumping the gun. I had other clone members I could talk to, Commander Frost and his men should be focusing on figuring out what they wanted. I would ask them later, once they were ready to talk.

I turned around, still breathing a bit heavily from my run through the massive ship, heading back the way I came, my destination now one of the shuttle bays.

When I eventually reached the surface of Nirn, I had already managed to gather a good percentage of the clones we rescued on Omega Station. Well, a combination of Finder, Flip, and Toggle had gathered all of the clones around Nirn. Lieutenant Rider was away with the 2nd Group, and a few clones working under Quartermaster Finder were two days of hyperspace travel away. However, we still managed to gather twenty-three clones in total, more than enough to work as a proof of concept. They gathered in one of the empty lecture halls, where I had Finder get them some food so they at least got a free meal if my idea turned out to be crap.

I arrived on my speeder about a half hour after I had the idea, quickly making my way to the lecture hall. The clones were sitting around, most of them dressed in civilian clothes, though some of them did have their uniforms on. They were eating the food, trying to guess what I had called them for when I came in.

"Everyone, thank you very much for coming on such short notice," I said, dragging a seat down in front where everyone was sitting. "I know it was a bit sudden, but I had an idea, and well..."

Finder snorted, but the rest simply nodded, waiting for me to explain further.

"So, one of our current issues is that we can't possibly grow fast enough to be a legitimate threat to the Empire," I explained. "We are doing our best to pick them apart, taking bits for ourselves and selling what we don't need to the Rebellion. But the population of Nirn and

the members of the Skyforged... we can't sustain the necessary level of expansion. We need automation, wherever we can get it."

"I mean, hasn't that always been the plan?" Toggle responded with a frown. "You spend a lot of money to keep your ships as automated as possible, and the *Fury* and *Forge* are both almost completely automated."

"It has been our goal, but our main source of automation has been spending money to update our ships and buy mostly automated tech, which is fine, it works when we want to add a corvette or something smaller. But updating the *Hope* cost millions of credits," I pointed out, shaking my head. "CIS resources are a great potential fix for this, but our current direct source of them is just about out. We need more intel, more opportunities to commandeer their automation for our own use. And not just starships, though those are fantastic. Having automatic production and resource gathering, that's what we really want. Again, we could pay for those things... but I'm hoping that won't be necessary."

"...So you're hoping that we might have a location we could raid?" Toggle asked with a frown. "I'm not sure how likely that is. We didn't leave much of that stuff intact."

"That would be the holy grail, but remember, intel is the real king here," I pointed out. "Maybe there was a CIS starship that wasn't blown up as well as it should have been, or maybe a base that was bombarded, but probably not deep enough. I'm looking for stranded, half-destroyed ships that we can scrap, sure, but that might also have intact records or computer cores. *Those* are our tickets to fully intact resources."

"I... okay, that might be a bit more reasonable," Toggle admitted, looking up and away as he thought to himself. "Remember, though. A lot of us were stationed on Omega Station for quite a while before we were stranded."

"I know, I just want you guys to do your best," I said. "Put together a list, Finder can add to it when his men get back, and then after that, when your brothers from the deep space storage facility come to their decision, this will be their first task. With any luck, within a week, we will have a concrete list of places we can raid for deeper intel. We won't know how effective this idea is until we've had a chance to try it, but I'm hopeful it will lead to something."

The clones nodded, and with some prompting, Finder handed out some simple datapads. Together, they began reviewing their battles, some of which they had been through together, while others were just working through their memories verbally.

I sat down nearby, listening to their stories.