

Finally jumping to lightspeed aboard the *Hope* was a bit of a relief. Technically, at this point, my crew didn't have much to do with most of the mission prep. We had people who were in charge of stocking the kitchens, inspecting non-personal gear, checking fuel levels for our vehicles, verifying ammo levels for our droids, and whatever else needed to get done. However, this would be our first trip on board the *Hope* since it became our primary transport. This meant that, between our mission gear and travel supplies like clothes and toiletries, all needed to be transferred over into our new.

On top of all that, I also had the added concern of having my enchantment setup, which needed to be lugged through the ship, then set up in the room across from the one I was sharing with Ahsoka. This meant the enchanting table, a half dozen crates of soul gems, and the nearly dozen boxes of things I needed to enchant. The enchanting table itself was a pain to move, especially since I didn't trust a droid to move it.

"I'm going to have to make another one of these," I said, finally pushing the table into the corner. "Lugging it in and out of the *Chariot* was one thing, but this was too much. This ship is way too spread out to move this in and out whenever I need it somewhere different."

"Why not make several?" Ahsoka suggested as she directed the droids carrying the crates of soul gems to stack them in the corner. "I mean... pretty soon you're going to have more than one reason for wanting multiple tables."

My eyes went wide for a moment when I realized she was absolutely correct. If I was going to have magical students, then making multiple tables was absolutely necessary. How else would I dump off all my enchanting to them?

"Huh... yeah, I hadn't thought of that, to be honest," I admitted, shaking my head a bit. "I mean, there's no rush, they won't be ready for that for a while, but it's something to keep in mind. I'll have to sit down some day and make a bunch all at once, maybe find some way to streamline the process a bit."

Once our quarters were selected, our stuff was stashed, and all my enchanting gear was carefully set up, we made our way to the bridge for our first jump. At this point, I was officially captain of the *Hope*, with my second in command, for the ship at least, prepared to take over whenever I left to fight alongside my crew. That meant standing at the bridge much more often, even when nothing was happening.

After we made the jump, we stuck around for a few hours, chatting with the bridge crew and discussing your destination. I had plans for a final meeting before we arrived, but it was nice to communicate with the crew directly so that they felt more comfortable and confident. Eventually, after a few hours on the bridge, my second in command arrived and took over for me.

After leaving the bridge behind, Ahsoka and I made our way down to one of the mess halls. Technically, we had already eaten recently, but the mess hall was also a social meeting space, where we could interact with my team and the rest of the crew.

We spent a few hours there before I closed the day off by enchanting, trying to finish off my current list of orders. I was pretty sure that I was building a buffer at this point, preparing for future people to join, but the quartermaster, the one who let me know how much enchanted gear we needed, didn't tell me one way or the other.

I couldn't wait until I had other people to help with this process. Before I knew it was possible, enchanting was something I endured because I was the only one who could provide what my soldiers, pilots, and crew needed to be the best. Now, though, I knew it was possible to change that. I knew it was not something that would happen soon, I had a whole host of obstacles to pass, but it still teased at the back of my mind.

Our trip into the outer Rim, where our CIS checkpoint was waiting, was going to take three days in total, or at least just under three days. Just before that time, I put together a meeting to talk to the captains and leaders of the other ships of 1st Fleet. On my side, we were sitting in a large meeting room designed for holocalls. With me, I had my second command, all four squadron leads for the *Hope's* starfighter complement, and Tatnia with me. Through our holoprojection connection, I could see that the other ships had similar groups gathered. When everyone was connected, I gave a brief intro, then let everyone introduce themselves.

This was technically a new mix of people, after all, so it was good to help people keep track of people they hadn't gotten to know yet. When we were done with introductions, I started the meeting off rather bluntly.

"So, here is the deal. We don't know exactly what we are heading into," I explained, looking around at the various projections. "There is likely going to be *some* infrastructure, but beyond that, we could be walking into a mostly empty orbit, or we could be walking into another huge fleet."

"I dislike this," Corvak volunteered, shaking his head. "I have gotten used to our usual overplanning and overpreparedness. To jump in blindly into a situation grates on my new instincts."

"I would agree, which is why our hyperspace drop point is going to be quite a good distance away from the actual site," I explained, several people nodding in appreciation. "So far, we haven't had any signs of Bad Omens, but we will keep our eyes open, and the second we drop, we will start calculating a jump out. While we scan the area, of course."

"Do we have a best case and worst case?" Commander Frost asked, his projection shifting slightly.

"Only an uninformed one," I admitted with a frown. "Best case is a situation like when we found the *Fury*, which I'm sure you've all read about at this point. If something like that occurs, we have a list of what should be functional Separatist identification codes. If used properly, they will give us a halfway decent chance of bluffing our way through to taking control."

"And worst case?" Frost repeated.

"Well, honestly, the worst case scenario is that we stumble into the same situation... but we are second, and some pirate group has already taken control."

That got a wince out of nearly everyone, including myself. Even starting at an extreme distance, running into a fully functional CIS fleet, controlled by pirates, was not something any of us wanted to endure. We would likely be okay, but damn, it would not be fun.

"Either way, our primary mission is to investigate and find out what sort of resources are waiting for us," I explained, looking around the projections. "I have no real desire to stick around and slug it out with active enemies. Whether we stick around at all depends on a whole list of factors..."

We continued to discuss the situation and our options, before eventually I called the meeting to an end. Not long after that, we began preparing for our arrival. Our ground teams armored up and checked their gear, while our pilots and crew did their own checklists, preparing their starfighters or stations for combat.

Now, typically, before jumping into a potential combat situation, we would stop and deploy our starfighters. This gave us a head start in combat, as we would arrive fully deployed and combat-ready. This time, however, I was concerned that, if we were to be forced to run right off the bat, having our fighter screen deployed would make the entire process significantly more difficult.

I was standing on the bridge, looking out of the viewports, when my crew called out that we would be dropping in ten seconds. As the streaks of blue outside the viewport coalesced into a recognizable image, the crew member behind the sensor console called out that they were starting their scans.

Even without the sensors, though, I could see our targets in the distance.

Floating in orbit above a dead, dull planet were two stations. They were mostly built the same, both marked with separatist colors, a light navy blue. Each station was a thick cylinder, though just how long they were was hard to judge at a distance. Along one side of each cylinder was a wedge, attached by its wider side and running the length of the station. This gave them a side profile of a pointed teardrop shape.

On the point of the wedge of both stations extended a ship bay scaffolding. This was the only difference between the two stations, with one set up with smaller scaffolding, while the other was nearly twice as large.

Of course, the stations were not alone. Mixed around them was a small fleet of four ships. A single [Munificent-class](#), followed by a pair of [Captor-class heavy cruisers](#), which I only recognized because of all the research I had done on Separatist ships. Finally, there was a single [Recusant-class light destroyer](#), by far the most significant threat of the group.

"Sir, we are picking up definite activity on one of the stations... as well as all four ships," sensors called out. "Life supports, shields, gravity, it's all on, Sir. It-"

"Sir! We are being hailed!" the comms officer called out, cutting off the sensors officer. "It's coming from the recusant, Sir!"

"Put it up on the projector," I said, turning to walk back, standing ready in front of the battle table, my helmet clipped to my hip.

The image took a moment to actualize, but when it did, it revealed a serious-looking Sullastan male.

"Unknown fleet, this is Interim Fleet Commander Qeduk Erba. Identify yourself immediately," they demanded, their voice grinding and rough. "Identify yourself immediately, or we will be forced to defend ourselves."

"Greetings! I am Admiral Deacon, leader of the Skyforged Vanguard," I responded clearly. "We come in peace, repeat, we come in peace."

"And yet you come armed with warships," he pointed out, his expression shifting to questioning. "Why are you here, Admiral Deacon?"

"Well, that's a bit of a story," I admitted. "We are searching for lost CIS assets to bolster our forces. We came searching for what we hoped would be abandoned ships or stations."

"You've come to claim what is ours?" He asked, a tension spreading through his alien face. "You will not take them without a fight!"

"Whoa, no, we have no intention of stealing anything," I assured him, holding my hands up, as if to show they were empty. "As I said, we were hoping to find the assets abandoned, not occupied. After the shutdown code was sent out to all Separatist forces, their ships and droids shut down."

"I am aware. Getting the systems to reboot was a long process," The Separatist leader admitted, an annoyed grumble leaking into his words.

"So you are a Separatist remnants group then?" I asked. "I know we are using a Republic ship, but we are not from the Republic."

"We can tell, your formation is nothing like theirs, and your transmission signatures are completely different," He responded with a frown. "You fly that ship, all of your ships, under a different banner. I assume your aforementioned Skyforged Vanguard."

"That's correct," I explained with a smile and a nod. "We are looking for CIS ships and infrastructure, as it is by the most efficiently automated systems available, even twenty years later."

For a long moment, the Sullastan male was silent, seemingly studying the projected version of me on his bridge. After a moment, he nodded, seemingly satisfied with what he saw.

"If what you say is true, we are still at an impasse," he explained, his words oddly eloquent for a species whose native language was very different from basic. "Our obscurity was

our greatest protection, and now you have shattered that. If we allow you to leave, we are putting ourselves at risk."

I considered calling his bluff, as we were plenty far outside their reach. We could make the jump to lightspeed far before they could catch us. Instead, I simply shook my head.

"I would very much prefer we didn't have to fight," I responded. "While I believe we would come out on top, I do not wish to throw away my men in a pointless battle. Instead... perhaps we make your obscurity our priority as well? Then we have a vested interest in keeping your location a secret."

"What do you propose?"

"Perhaps a trade?" I suggested. "We have access to fresh food, resources, and even materials for repair. I wouldn't betray a profitable business partner, after all."

"What could we give in return?" he asked, raising an eyebrow. "We do not have credits, the Separatist funds were drained long ago."

"Services, of course," I responded. "You have to be what looks like two ship service stations, something we desperately need access to. If we bring supplies, parts, and materials, could you offer ship repair?"

Again, Commander Erba was silent, examining me closely. After a moment, he nodded, leaning back slightly as if settling into a chair on his bridge.

"Look, perhaps this might be better done face to face?" I suggested. "Talking business is better done when you can actually gauge your potential associate."

"...Very well. Let us meet, we can discuss the possibility of trade," Commander Erba agreed. "We shall each take a ship, meeting half way between our forces."

"A sound compromise," I agreed with a nod. "Our ship will host, and in exchange, you are allowed guard services of your discretion, be it biological or droid."

"... Agreed," He responded simply. "We will approach within one hour."

The holoprojector went blank, and the bridge went quiet. I let out a long breath, shaking my head before turning to address my crew.

"Alright, I want the *Triumph of Fives* to clear some space out of its hangar, land the extras in the *Hope*, just in case," I ordered. "I want Frost's men armored and hidden, so we don't set off our potential allies before we have a chance to explain the situation. I want fresh food prepared, something varied enough that there will be something for a variety of species."

I received a series of confirmations, comms reaching out to the Fives. Meanwhile, Ahsoka stepped onto the bridge, having clearly been told that this wasn't going to be an immediate fight.

"Another occupied spot?" She asked as she approached.

"Yeah, but these guys have an even stronger claim over everything," I said, before giving her a brief rundown of the situation.

"Why are we negotiating?" She asked after I was done. "This seems like too much, like it's something we can't rely on. I'm all for making friends, but we need infrastructure under our control. Otherwise, it's no different from shipping things off to Mon Cal."

"Because I'm hoping we can angle for more than just friends," I explained. "He reacted pretty positively to being offered food, supplies, and materials. After twenty years, how much do you wanna bet they are running low on everything?"

"That... you're looking to recruit them?" She asked. "This is just an in then."

"Exactly, I have to at least see if it's possible," I responded with a shrug. "Depending on how many people they have on board, we could absorb them pretty easily, gain quite a few ships, and the expertise on how to use them, all at once. Plus, who knows where negotiations might go?"

"Alright... so am I going to be part of the meeting?" She asked, looking out at the CIS fleet through the viewport.

"A well-known war hero?" I asked, raising an eyebrow. "Let's hold off on that, it's a miracle enough that they didn't open fire on the *Hope* immediately."