

The Admiral led us out of the main bridge, though we didn't go far. I'm sure he had other rooms around the ship, but the one he led us to was just off the bridge, tucked along the main corridor. Julius and Vaz stood by outside the doors, while Tatnia, Ahsoka, and Ackbar's aide stepped inside. It was a bit muggy inside the Admiral's private room, even more so than the rest of the ship, but that wasn't all that surprising considering the Mon Calamari population.

As we all sat down, Admiral Ackbar leaned forward, resting his chin on his steepled webbed hands.

"A rather interesting opportunity has presented itself in the form of an industrial accident," the Rebel leader explained. "According to our intelligence, a rather large explosion occurred at one of the Empire's largest Mid Rim fuel stations, and has left the facility damaged. It is undergoing repairs, but in the meantime, it is vulnerable. According to a trusted agent, its shields are down, and will remain down for at least another week, perhaps more."

"Making it an easy target," I nodded in understanding, but frowned after a moment. "But the Empire must know that."

"They do, and they have gathered a sizable force to defend it," Ackbar admitted, leaning back in his chair. "Intelligence states four Star destroyers now guard the damaged station, as well as nearly a dozen other ships, including a pair of Victory-class."

"That... is a hefty fighting force," I said, my eyes going a bit wide. "Do you really have enough firepower to take that on?"

"To the end? No," he shook his head. "But I believe we do have enough to punch through, destroy the fuel station, and leave. A rapid hit and run, where even their superior numbers do not have time to stop us."

"That... is an incredible risk."

"Yes, but you must understand. By destroying this fuel station, we significantly hamper the Empire's ability to do business in nearly a dozen surrounding quadrants," he explained. "With no large-scale fuel options in the area, their patrols will be heavily restricted in size. Larger ships will not be able to be refueled anywhere within this area, meaning most will either pull out completely, or station themselves above a single planet."

"Making it much easier to ambush patrols and hit other planets," I said, nodding in understanding. "That... that is an important prize."

"But that is not all we stand to gain. Not only would that enable us to hit their patrols and military bases with near impunity, but it would take the pressure off nearly two dozen populated planets," Ackbar explained, tapping his desk with a single finger. "Several of these planets support the Rebellion, and giving them room to breathe would allow them to drastically increase that support and allow them to recover."

"Okay, what are you looking for?"

"The plan is to rotate our ships to absorb incoming damage, giving us time to punch through and destroy the station, before pulling out and jumping to lightspeed," he explained. "Any sufficiently hearty ship will make coming out the other end undamaged all that much easier."

I frowned, considering my options. Not only would this be an interesting and potentially potent blow to the Imperials, but it would also be a significant opportunity for my group. Small to mid-sized patrols were our specialty at the moment, and being able to ambush them as we wanted, forcing them to surrender, or just destroying them would be a fantastic use of our time.

"And you're certain there are no other close fuel stations?" I asked.

"Not within a considerable distance," he confirmed. "It will likely take close to half a year to replace it, potentially longer. Until then, their patrols will be handicapped. At least in that area."

"And what evidence do you have that this isn't an ambush?" I asked.

"Our agent has been in deep cover for quite some time. This is the first major piece of information they passed on, as they immediately recognized the importance," Admiral Ackbar explained. "The accident hasn't been publicly revealed, which means the mole is the only leak."

"So long as they aren't compromised, the information is good," I said with a nod. "Alright. I'm willing to lend you our strength."

I looked over at Tatnia, who rolled her eyes but looked down at her comms, reviewing what had been sent to her since we left the *Hope*.

"The 4th Fleet returned two days after we left, and can jump in an hour," She said after a moment. "On top of that, 3rd Fleet's current mission has turned into a purely ground mission, and will not require the *Light of Kanan*, the *Anvil*, or the *Wonder*."

"That's... more than I expected," I admitted. "Tell 3rd Fleet to keep the *Anvil* just in case, but ready the *Wonder* and *Kanan* to depart. Tell 4th Fleet to prepare the *Gimel Staff*, *Andor's Resolve*, and *Erso's Call*."

Tatnia nodded, and I turned back to ask for more specific information from Ackbar so we could better plan, but he cut me off.

"My apologies, but what sort of ships are these?" Admiral Ackbar asked. "We know you have been growing in strength..."

"The *Light of Kanan* is a Gladiator, the *Wonder* is a Lancer, the *Gimel Staff* is a Vindicator, while the *Erso* and the *Andor* are modern Imperial Arquitens," I explained. "And of course, we will bring the *Hope* and the *Liberty Rush* as well, our Venator and Pelta."

"That... is an impressive spread," He admitted, blinking with his large, wet eyes. "We underestimate your growth."

"Well, we weren't exactly advertising it, Admiral," I responded with a shrug. "I need to know specific locations so that we can orchestrate a meet-up if you want the other ships."

The admiral nodded, and after a moment, we returned to the bridge, connecting to the *Hope* so we could get a more accurate read on what our fleets were doing. Eventually, we selected a secondary staging point, where we would meet up with our ships as well as a few more Rebel capital ships, and integrate them into our formations before making the final jump. Once the coordinates were shared and confirmed, we shook hands with Ackbar and traveled back to the *Hope*. Once we were on board, I made my way back to the bridge, Tatnia and Ahsoka following with me.

"Contact our people, come up with a secondary staging point, somewhere closer to the actual target, but far from their scanner range," I said to my second in command. "Have the remaining ships from 4th Fleet head there, that's where the *Storms Edge*, *Loyal Hound*, and *Triumph of Fives* are going. I want their hangars loaded to the absolute max with Heavy ARCs as well."

"Why?" Tatnia asked, raising an eyebrow.

"They are our last-ditch backup plan," I said with a frown. "It's a stretch, and we won't call them in unless they can actually help, but that many ships, with all of their starfighters, are just about able to take on a Star Destroyer, which could be the key between life and death for someone. For us. I want them as close as possible, just in case we need them."

Tatnia nodded, and the captain of the *Hope* did as well, the latter getting my orders out as our ships started to shift, breaking up into two formations. One of our Heavy ARC squadrons also left the starship, landing inside the *Triumph of Five's* hangar bay, as they would be able to deploy them, whereas we would likely be under too much fire to spare the effort.

After about twenty minutes, we had organized as much as we could, and we finally made the jump to light speed. We had a three-day trip ahead of us, in which there wasn't much we could do. I might have been able to learn a spell, but with the importance and danger of what we were about to step into, I didn't want to risk being even slightly off.

To keep busy, all of my ships continued to do system checks, especially in the shield and power systems, since they would be a significant part of Ackbar's strategy. Only our point-defense weaponry would still be active, used to intercept incoming missiles, which there would likely be quite a few. The two Victory-class Star Destroyers alone held a barrage of missiles, just ready to be launched at us.

With a lack of activity came a prevailing tension that settled over my crew. Most of my people could feel that this was different, that this was not one of our cherry-picked, optimal conditions missions. Yes, Ackbar had a strategy, and with our help and participation, we both had a solid chance to come out of it unscathed. But the Imperial forces we would be facing were not small patrols or the defence forces of a minor planet. This was a large Imperial fleet, and if we got gummed up in our blitzkrieg...

It would not go well.

And, of course, there was the still difficult fact that a good portion of our people didn't much care for fighting the Empire.

As our jump progressed, the Jedi on board our ships reported nothing, even with them going deep into their meditations, trying to pick up anything that might signify an ambush. All of us were concerned about what happened on our mission to rescue Vi Galti, the fact that simply waiting to jump into the system was enough to fool our Jedi was concerning. Still, we had the time, the plan, and a force large enough to deploy it.

Part of me wanted to take solace in the fact that I knew Ackbar had to survive, which meant this mission couldn't be a complete disaster. Unfortunately, I knew that, in reality, I had already changed the timeline too much. There was no way to predict what the results from this mission would be, and pretending that it would be fine because of my knowledge would be nothing but an illusion, a lie.

When three days finally passed, the *Hope* and the *Liberty Rush* dropped out of hyperspace, with the rest of the Rebels arriving moments later. The rest of 1st Fleet would be meeting up with the rest of the 4th Fleet, even closer to the target.

Meanwhile, the *Wonder*, *Light of Kanan*, *Gimel Staff*, *Erso's Call*, and *Andor's Resolve* were waiting for us to arrive, floating in deep space in a vague formation, quite a bit of distance ahead of us. Not far from them were five more Rebel ships, two [Dreadnoughts](#), a pair of [MC40](#) light cruisers, and a single [MC75 Star cruiser](#), an impressive group of ships even by themselves.

Once everyone had a chance to communicate and link up, we started to move into formation. My ships were thankfully kept together, forming a unit with the MC75 and the two Dreadnoughts. Meanwhile, the Rebel forces pulled together, creating two more groups, with the Home One at the tip of the larger one.

It was an impressive number of ships they had managed to gather, which made me feel safe against the odds that this was all a setup, with a much larger Imperial fleet waiting for us on the other side. This was likely the largest gathering of Rebel capital ships in quite some time, and there was no way they would dedicate this many assets if they weren't certain.

Comparing my ships to the Rebels gave me a proud feeling, and not just because my ships were certainly in better repair. The Skyforged Vanguard was a tiny fraction of the size of the Rebellion, with none of its backers. And yet, we had managed to build four substantial fleets, even if our square footage was considerably lower.

It made me wonder what we could be capable of given more time.

Eventually, finally, all of the ships were in position and slightly spread out for the jump. Once we arrived, we would pull together as we moved, compensating for any imperfections in the short hyperspace trip. The final countdown came down from *Home One*, before we finally jumped. We had just under five minutes until we arrived.

"Comms... link me up to all of our ships," I ordered, looking out into the hyperspace tunnel. "Give me a countdown."

My comms officer nodded, and after a moment, he held his hand up, lowering a finger down every second until he finally gave me a thumbs up."

"Crews of the Skyforged Vanguard, this is Admiral Deacon," I started, pausing for a moment before the words began to come out in a flow. "In just a few minutes, we will be dropping out of hyperspace and engaging in combat with the Empire. This mission may fall outside of why many of you joined us, as we are striking them to destroy an asset, not steal it. But I ask you, for a moment, to think about what the Skyforged Vanguard is at its very core. And to think of why you fight."

I paused for a moment, turning away from the viewports, no longer addressing the void, but the crew of the *Hope*.

"We may be mercenary in many of our actions, but the Skyforged has been, and always will be, a force against those who would hurt or take advantage of the innocent. We fight against those who would kill, maim, and enslave the vulnerable for their own benefit. We fight them because when the cruel gain power, the strong must rise to stop them."

I scanned the crew pit, the sunken portion of the bridge where my people manned their stations, though they now looked up at me.

"My crew. My brother and sisters, the Emperor is a poison, burning this galaxy from its very heart. He has spread his hate, his rhetoric, his fear into the galaxy, and now he rules it with an iron fist, gripped around our throats."

I stopped, scanning the crew again before looking back out to the void, watching the hyperspace tunnel as it spun out past the tip of the ship and all around us.

"I know many of you did not join to fight the Emperor, but the truth is, you have all fought against his principles. We *already* fight against those who would kill, maim, and enslave the innocent. We *already* stand against those who would take advantage of the vulnerable. The Emperor wields his cruelty like a weapon, burning and pillaging entire worlds to build his Empire. And now we must stand against his cruelty. Before his power overwhelms the galaxy. Before no one is strong enough to fight it.

I let out a long breath, feeling my pulse throbbing, the anxiety, fear, and tension bleeding out of me.

"It will not be easy. It will not be clean. It will carry a price that none of us wants to pay. That all of us will carry. But today, now, as we travel to a battle that we cannot run from, cannot twist until the danger is gone, we take another step on our path, and we take it together, steadfast, unbroken, and unwilling to let the galaxy fall to a cruel tyrant."

I took one last look at my crew, eyes trailing over Tatnia and Ashoka, who stood at the far end of the bridge, waiting by the holoprojector. I gave them both a nod before turning back out to the viewports.

"Trust your fellows, stick to the plan, and may the Force be with you. Good luck."