

Dropping out of hyperspace in distant reaches of the system turned out to be right on the money, as the plant we were looking for was not a station as we had assumed. As soon as we arrived, we began sending out subtle, low-energy scans, looking for any activity around the large gas giant. We scanned for two hours like that, before finally expanding the scans to include the surrounding area, which would have been difficult if we had been closer. It was only then that we finally picked up a signal from one of the planet's moons. The moon was basically a frozen water world, not dissimilar to [Europa](#) from home, though this moon was significantly larger. It took us a moment to carefully focus our scans, eventually revealing a large facility on the surface.

Unfortunately, the fact that we picked up on the fuel plant from so far away could only mean that the site was active, which meant recovering an abandoned fuel station was no longer in the cards.

Thankfully, with a general location, we could slowly position ourselves in the base's blind spot, namely directly behind the moon it was set on. The process was slow, since we didn't want to show up on any scans, but eventually we were sufficiently hidden, closing in on the ice moon from "behind."

"According to the low-level scans, this is not a small facility," Tatnia revealed, scrolling through the readout on the holoprojector. "It's at least as big as the refining station we bought, probably significantly larger."

"That's good news," I said with a nod. "Any hints as to who got here first?"

"Not particularly," she responded with a shake of her head. "Not enough detail in the scan. All we can see is that the facility is giving off energy readings and some heat."

"Perhaps we should monitor them?" Nal suggested. "Reconnaissance will give us a better idea of what we are up against."

"I think that's a good idea. We can land the *Brick* an hour's hike away to keep from showing up on their sensors," Ahsoka pointed out. "Though we should pack extra power packs, since our suits will be running hot, keeping us warm."

"A solid plan," I agreed with a nod. "Let's get suited up and head in. I'm curious to see who arrived first and how they stumbled on it."

We quickly split up, everyone putting their armor on and strapping on their weapons. About ten minutes after we set the plan, we were all climbing into the *Brick*, with Nal already at the controls, running pre-flight checks.

"Boss... When the *Chariot* is retired, what do you plan on doing with the *Brick*?" Julius asked as we strapped ourselves into our seats.

"Unless someone has a specific idea, I planned on putting it on board our new ship," I responded, leaning back until my helmet tapped the headrest. "The Marauder-class has room

for a bunch of ships in its hangar. I'm hoping to fit at least a squadron and a half, plus the Brick and another transport, one specifically for cargo."

"Miru will be sad to hear that," Tatnia said with a smirk. "She liked tinkering with the Brick almost as much as she did the *Chariot*."

"I'm already giving the girl an entire ship to play with," I pointed out, rolling my eyes. "I can't give her two. That would just spoil her."

We chuckled for a moment before Nal cut us off, warning us that we would be taking off shortly. A few seconds later, the ship shook as it lifted off from the hangar bay and slowly flew out into space, which we could barely see over Nal's shoulders. The journey down to the surface of the frozen moon took about twenty minutes, with a deliberately slow pace to minimize thruster emissions as much as possible. Still, even with the decreased thrust, it didn't take long until we were flying above the ice, the relatively flat landscape meaning we could fly nice and low.

Eventually, we began to close in on the fuel station, so Nal carefully landed us on the far side of a slight rise in the ice and snow. While the ground was relatively flat, there were still places where ice buckled against its own shifting, rising up along the impact line.

Once we had landed, we quickly disembarked. Immediately, our suit's power systems clicked on as the internal heating system shifted to keep us warm, despite the plunging temperature change. At this level of consumption, we had five hours of charge, although that didn't matter much since we all carried a spare power pack normally and were now carrying a second spare, just in case.

We would run out of air long before we ran out of power.

"Alright, people, keep an eye on your suit metrics, report any issues," I said, before giving everyone a nod. "Let's get moving."

Slowly but surely, we hiked across the frozen waste, our suits' directional system the only way we had any idea where we were going. It also let us see in thermal, which was the best way to keep track of everyone in the blinding white snow, which just so happened to be a similar color to our armor.

Finally, as we crested a large swell in the ice, we had arrived at the fuel station. As we lay down on the ice, looking out over the facility, it was immediately apparent that yes, this was a CIS installation. Thick duracrete barriers and [structures](#) dotted the exterior of the area, with several different types of laser turrets mounted on top. None of them appeared to be activated, but it was a decent bit of firepower.

Past the outer defenses was a [massive industrial complex](#). Huge tanks for storage, large [machines hooked](#) alongside them, with pipes criss-crossing the facility. This was an enormous production plant, capable of producing a significant amount of fuel when it was operational. It was at least twice the size of our current facilities.

As I looked through my electrobinoculars, I felt someone's hand jostle my shoulder and connect to my direct comms system. I turned to see who it was, only to feel the hand connect to my comms directly through my shoulder.

"I'm going to take Vaz and Julus and scout around this rise," Tatnia said, standing above me but crouched low. "It curves around in a few hundred meters and should give us another angle of the facility."

"Good idea," I said with a quick nod. "Use clicks to keep us updated, two for safe and three for danger."

"Roger that."

My second in command stood up slightly taller as she walked down the slope of the ice rise, motioning for Julus and Vaz to follow her. As they walked, Tatnia connected to their comms by putting her hands on their shoulders, filling them in on their task. After watching them walk for a moment or two, I focused back on the large facility, scanning over it, looking for clues about what was going on.

The facility was at least partially activated, as low-level lighting was visible in various buildings and along several walkways. On top of that, there was a good amount of pathways cleared of snow, especially along the ground, frequently carving into and through snow drifts feet tall. Even more telling, three of the buildings, all of which were right next to each other, were warm enough that their roofs were clear of snow and ice, all of it having completely melted.

"Someone is definitely home," Nal said, his hand on my shoulder. "But there is hardly any activity."

"It is pretty early in the morning for this moon," Ahsoka pointed out. "They may be sleeping?"

"That... I mean, it's possible," I admitted. "But no guards? No patrol? Not even someone keeping watch from the roof?"

"Only shocking for criminals or military," Nal pointed out. "Not for civilians confident in their hidden home."

I frowned while watching the heated buildings, trying to figure out just what was going on inside. We watched for another fifteen minutes before Tatnia came back and filled me in on what they saw.

"Just over these tanks is a large warehouse, half buried in the snow, on the other side of that is a partially cleared landing pad," She explained. There are four medium-scale starships, the smallest being forty meters long and the largest being sixty meters long. There are also half a dozen large fuel transport ships, which are bigger than the other ships. Only one of the fuel transports is uncovered.

"Any of the ships combat-ready?" I asked, still peering at the fuel production facility.

"No, all are armed with standard civilian loadouts. Some even less," She responded. "These are not pirates. They may be smugglers, but I doubt that as well."

"Looks like Nal might have been right," I said with a frown. "I think these are civilians. Any criminal worth their salt would have gotten the weapons up and running the second they landed. Hell, they would have stripped the rest of the plant to do it."

"So... what do we do?" Tatnia asked. "They got here first. To anyone but the Empire, this is theirs."

"We act like reasonable neighbors and knock," I responded, smirking inside my helmet. "But first, we need to leave. Showing up this close, unannounced, would only freak them out."

"You're going to try diplomacy, aren't you?" Tatnia asked, following me as I led the group down the ice swell.

"You say that like I don't know how," I asked, looking over my shoulder at her. "I've done it before."

"Yeah, and you usually end up overpaying or giving things away for free," she responded.

"It seems to have worked so far," I responded with a shrug.

I led the group all the way back to the *Brick*, Nal quickly climbing on board and starting the combat-capable shuttle up. Before long, we were pushing through the thin, cold atmosphere on the way to the vacuum of space. Once on board the *Chariot*, we had a quick meeting with the rest of the Group, the lounge holoprojector allowing us to communicate with the captains and Corvak to explain the situation.

"Civilians?" Corvak asked, looking troubled. "Any civilian living out here like this... they aren't going to be easy to deal with."

"Maybe, but we won't know unless we try," I pointed out. "I suggest we wait until it's daytime, so we aren't spooking anyone out of their sleep, then we reach out openly. We offer to land a ways away, then approach on speeders or on one ship, whatever makes them more comfortable."

"What's the end goal, though?" Julius asked. "Gonna ask them to leave?"

"Unless we uncover something disturbing, no," I responded, shaking my head. "From what we could see, the majority of the plant is not being used. They have some emergency power going, and some of the central buildings are on. Depending on what their shtick is, we might be able to pay them a finder's fee and clear out whatever they aren't using."

"Or they turn on their defense because they are too scared to think straight," Tatnia countered. "We get blasted out of the sky for trying to be nice."

"The defenses seemed decent, but they weren't enough to take down the whole group," I responded, shaking my head. "If they activate them, we will see a spike in energy before any of the weapons are ready to fire. We can toast any shield projectors before they can have time to activate, and without shields, they wouldn't stand a chance."

That seemed to mollify Tatnia slightly, and after a moment she nodded. With everyone in agreement, we settled in to wait, most of our crew heading to their rooms to catch a nap, since it would likely be several hours before those at the fuel production plant were active, assuming all of our assumptions were correct.

After four hours had passed, the moon spinning under us, orbiting around the massive gas giant, the crew finally convened in the lounge while I made my way to the bridge. A quick peek over the communication droid's shoulder showed that everyone in the Group was connected and listening in.

"Alright, fingers crossed this doesn't spiral," I said to nobody in particular. "Comms, open a wide spectrum communication, directed down at the production facility. No encryption, please."

The comms droid taps at his console for a few moments before looking over at me and nodding. I take a long breath before letting it out slowly.

"Fuel Production Plant, this is Admiral Deacon Roy of the Skyforged Vanguard, on board the *Talos Chariot*," I explained. "We wish to talk peacefully about a potentially lucrative business deal. If you can hear us, please respond."

I signaled to the droid to cut the message, and he tapped at his console again. When I was no longer being broadcast, I let out a cough.

"Repeat that again in ten minutes, then again ten minutes after that," I instructed. "After that... we can get within visual range before trying again."

I barely had time to step out of the bridge and into the lounge before I could hear the comms activate. There was a burst of static as we connected to whoever was responding. A flicker of movement from the comms console caught my eye, and as I turned to look, I could see that the person reaching out had included a visual feed, despite us not having one. An elderly human woman, at least ninety years old, appeared on the screen, looking angry.

"Go away!" she said simply, her voice weathered and mad. "We ain't interested in no bussiness deal!"

"Ma'am, while I appreciate a healthy dose of distrust, I promise-"

"Yer promises aren't worth the air you send 'em through!" She shouted back. "We ain't ever trustin' you Republic bastards! This is our plant and you can pry it from our cold, dead-"

Before she could finish, or I could assure her that we weren't the Republic, I could see someone else step into the room through a door, the room lighting up slightly. A man, older than me but nowhere near the age of the elderly woman, stepped closer.

"Mother, who are you talking to?" He asked, his eyes focusing on the woman. "Is the comm station- Mother, what are you doing?"

The older woman turned and waved the younger man off.

"It's the Republic, but I'm telling 'em to screw off!" she assured him. "Those clone bastards won't get nothin from us!"

"What? Mother, I told you the Republic fell... Oh gods, you're actually linked to someone!"

"Hello, Sir! My name is Deacon Roy. We are here with an offer!" I called through, hoping we had just found a less hostile ear. "We come in peace!"

"Oh gods!" The man said, his face dropping in shock.

When the man recovered, he shouted back out the door, and soon, more people rushed in. The elderly woman was half forced, half convinced to give up her position at the comms. After a few minutes of conversing with the group, I was finally given permission to land outside the plant so that we could meet in person.

They didn't exactly seem happy about the idea, but when they realized how many ships we had, they reluctantly agreed. I hated how they immediately assumed they had no choice, but hopefully, I could convince them that we meant no harm when we were talking face-to-face.