

The meal that the crew of the *Triumph of Fives* managed to put together was simple, but delicious, no small part due to the freshness of the ingredients. Most of the Skyforged Vaguard ships shipped out with a week or two's worth of fresh, simple foodstuffs, from meats and grains to fresh greens and fruits. A lot of it was native to Nirn, and others, like the easy-to-grow grains, were staples that had been around the galaxy for hundreds of years.

In my mind, it was a great way to save on purchasing mass amounts of shelf-stable food, as most starships relied on. Not only did it give us about a two-week window when we didn't need to rely on food purchased off-planet, but it was also significantly cheaper because we produced it in-house. It required a slight shift in infrastructure, as transporting that amount of food around between the farms planet-side, up to our ships, took time and energy. Not to mention that storing it in our galleys was very different from stuffing crates of MRE-like food pouches into temperature-controlled cargo holds.

Despite the simple fare, our guests enthusiastically enjoyed the food. I took this as further proof that they must be *struggling* with supplies. With how many ships they had, they must have had dozens of years of extra food, though that still didn't add up. I eventually found my curiosity getting the best of me.

"I have to ask, how have you managed to survive this long?" I asked, continuing as Commander Erba raised a hairless brow. "While I know the amount of biological crew was low for the CIS, the stations must have had at least several dozen each... even with emergency rations, how have you managed to feed yourselves for so long?"

For a moment, Commander Erba clearly considered whether to respond or not. Eventually, he put his fork down, finishing his bite of food before finally responding.

"When it became clear that hiding was our best option, we also knew that supplies would be a growing issue," he responded. "Rather than wait until it became a crisis, we diverted half our remaining fleet to search a handful of... locations for supplies. We were moderately successful, though your food and the credits to purchase more are certainly going to help."

"I see, yes, that explains it," I responded with a nod, my thoughts lingering. If they knew about other locations that had been skipped over by the Empire, they may come in handy.

Eventually, dessert came, and they served one of my favorites. When we had first arrived on Nirn, I almost immediately fell in love with a double fist-sized fruit that was pulled from the heart of a flower. Despite its size, the large fruit tasted and chewed like a large, perfectly ripe cherry. It was usually now called a cherry flower, and it had more or less become our national fruit. This meant that our chefs loved cooking with it and had used it in everything from sorbet equivalents to pastries.

One of my more frequent cafes back home on Nirn had overheard me describing some pastries from my world, and had decided to surprise me. With rather masterful skill, they managed to combine a cherry flower pie with a fruity cheese danish, creating a rather incredible

Cherry Cheese Pie. It was honestly incredibly delicious, even if the pie crust had a blue tint because of the blue butter.

Thankfully, I wasn't the only one who seemed to like it, as both our guests and my crew enjoyed it. Of course, I knew my crew enjoyed the desert because they had definitely eaten it with me before, but it was still good to see.

When dessert was over, we returned to the negotiation room, refreshed and ready to discuss our potential trade.

"First, before we begin, if I'm going to make any proper offers, I'm going to need to know how many people you have on board," I said as we settled in. "I need to know exactly what I'm agreeing to for food deliveries."

"... we currently have one hundred and thirty-two residents," the fleet commander responded. "They mostly live on the repair station, with some crew remaining on each of the ships."

As he answered my question, I nodded, looking down at my tablet to review my information. While we were enjoying our meals, I had one of *Fives'* crew pass on a list of questions to Quartermaster Finder via the hyperwave. That way, I would have a better idea of what I could offer when negotiations started.

"One hundred and thirty-two..." I repeated, trailing off as I tapped my chin. "At the moment, we have a stockpile of shelf-stable food, exactly what you've already been eating. It has recovered from various groups we have taken down of bounties or from Imperial forces. It's not what I would call luxury food, but it works, and we can get you a whole lot of it within a week."

"Scraps and recovered leftovers? That is what you wish to sell us?" Commander Erba asked, his voice carrying more than a hint of an insult in it.

"It has all been heavily inspected and scanned. It's what I use to keep my ships stocked," I assured him truthfully. "We usually sell our surplus to the Rebels as they always pay well for it, but I'm happy to sell it to you instead. The Imperial rations aren't the greatest, but they are food, and that's what you need."

"And just how much of this can you get us?" Sal, the civilian leader, asked, getting a look from Commander Erba. "We need more than just one bulk delivery."

"We can get you enough to feed your people two meals a day, three weeks out of a month," I said, glancing down at the numbers to confirm. "The rest will be filled with fresh food, at the same rate."

"Two meals a day?" Sal Horuna asked, a frown forming on his face. "I do not think rationing is acceptable in this circumstance."

"It's not, but these are military meals, so two a day is most likely more than your civilians will need unless they are performing heavy manual labor," I explained confidently. "In fact, my people have made a habit of pooling multiple similar meals together, then splitting them back up. Done right, you can feed four people healthily on three meals. Or the meals can be partially eaten, then finished later for a snack."

"So to be clear, your offer is three weeks of shelf-stable meals, ranging in quality, as well as one week of fresh food," Commander Erba suggested. "For how long can you offer this?"

"Eight months, which is when we will have to re-negotiate, as by that point we will have delivered around eight million credits worth of food," I said. "As much as I want to help, I can't just give out food for free."

"What else would accompany this trade?" Kar Gerol, the lead engineer, asked. "You mentioned materials and credits?"

"I did. We are also offering three million in credits, four freighters from our selection, and two million credits in raw materials, the latter of which would be delivered over the course of the six months. That's around fourteen million credits worth of trade."

All three of them seemed to lean back and consider the offer, chewing it over in their minds. They shared a look, and before I could offer them some time to discuss it between themselves, Commander Erba nodded, seeming to come to a conclusion.

"We will accept your offer for the large shipyard station and all that it contains, despite the fact that we are vastly undercutting the actual price of the station and its contents," he agreed, though he was unable to do so without pointing out how good a deal we were getting. "I assume you will want to investigate the interior before officially agreeing?"

"That is correct," I agreed with a nod. "We can provide our own transport if you give us the activation codes."

We discussed the various bits of information we would need to successfully start the station up again, as well as integrate our systems with their security. The plan was to bring our fleet a bit closer, and as we activated the station, we would direct it into the fleet, where we could run basic scans and prepare it for the journey home.

Before we started to say goodbye to our newest trade partners, I brought up something that they mentioned during our dinner.

"As we were sharing our meal, you mentioned heading out and raiding separate CIS locations," I brought up. "Tell me... what sort of locations would these be? Would any of them be of interest to us, and would you be willing to sell their location?"

A frown colored Commander Erba's face, but Kar and Sal seemed much more interested in the idea. It seemed that the commander was a lot less interested in selling CIS secrets, at least more than necessary, than his fellow leaders. It was Kar who prompted him to speak.

"Surely the station would mean nothing," He said. "We need every credit we can get, and what use is an extra station to us?"

Erba turned to see what Sal thought, the human simply nodding in agreement. Erba let out a whine, which, if I interpreted it correctly, was the Sullastan equivalent of a defeated sigh.

"We raided a few places, but one in particular that you would be interested in. A supply station locked in orbit around a moon, not far from the old battle lines," He finally said. "Its primary purpose was distributing food, but it had plenty of hangar space and internal storage, and could function as any number of purposes."

"Did you leave any supplies behind? Things that weren't food? What sort of dimensions are we talking about?"

"There wasn't much beyond food," Commander Erba explained, shaking his head. "We did not dive too deeply into the station, but it was mostly a food distribution station, as I said. As for the station's dimensions, it was about half the size of one of the shipyard stations here."

"How much hangar space was there? How tall was it?" I asked, working hard to not seem too excited. "We need it to be large enough to land some of our larger ships. That's the only way it's going to be worth anything to us."

"We landed a variety of ships, including Gozanti's, and there were no remarks about running low on room."

"Hmm... in that case, I can offer... four hundred thousand credits as a finder's fee," I offered, raising my hand when his eyes went wide, and his mouth opened to potentially shout. "I understand that sounds low, but the reason we are paying so well for this station is that it is undeniably *yours*. I will not pay out the nose for a station that you tangentially know the location of, but have no real claim to. It would be like asking you to pay a tax on everything you transport with the freighter we are giving you."

He seemed frustrated by the low-ball offer, but my explanation seemed to at least sort of reach him. Before he could respond, however, I countered my own offer.

"That said, four hundred is still on the low side, so let's say... five fifty," I counteroffered against myself. "A pretty good chunk of credits for doing absolutely nothing but telling me the location of something."

Again, I was prepared to give them some space to discuss my offer, but the three seemed to reach an accord without talking. After sharing a few looks, Commander Ebra nodded.

"Very well, you have a deal."

"Good, we will transfer half of the credits, you can share the data with my crew, and then once they verify the condition and dimensions of the station, you will get the other half."

A whole new round of information passing began, and once it was over, the CIS leaders left rather unceremoniously. After that, we set to work, with my people transferring back to the *Hope*. I immediately sent the *Liberty Rush* and the *Loyal Hound*, with Corvak as the lead, to check out our newly located station.

If what they were saying was true, this mission had just become just a bit more successful. A large station could be a huge boon, depending on its capabilities, but just having hangar space was a good thing. Besides, if it all turned out to be junk, we would just leverage the food deliveries against them until they returned our money.

They would have sold us bad information, at which point most of my sympathy would have been thrown out the airlock.

Once the two ships left, heading off on a multi-day journey of their own, we started the process of inspecting what was tentatively the newest addition to our permanent presence above Nirn.

It had been a bit more costly than the price of free that we had been hoping to get it for, but considering similar ship stations could go for forty or fifty million credits, getting one for less than a third of that was a freaking steal, especially when most of the stuff we would be either generating ourselves or gathering in the process of completing bounties.

In reality, only the actual credits would be costing us directly, while everything else we would be getting for free or at a considerable discount. Yes, the lack of surplus food would cut into some of our profits, but it was worth the cost.

Both my team and Commander Frost's team armored up and rode transports over to the shipyard station, using security pass codes to pass the still mostly sleeping security. We made our way to the station control hub, an internal control room through which most of the station's systems ran.

Once we were linked up with that, Racer and a few other slicer droids cut into the system to finish scanning and inserting us into the security systems, which would make inspecting every nook and cranny much easier.

True to their word, there were a few things scavenged for parts from the station, but in all honesty, it was still in excellent condition. I was sure we could source the parts, and beyond that, the station was in near-perfect working order.

It was armed with an array of point defense weapons, as well as some heavier weapons along its core frame, but I wouldn't call it anything near combat-ready. It also had an insignificant internal droid security force, as well as a massive amount of repair and construction droids, ready and waiting to get to work.

According to its records, it had worked on a variety of ships, including a Providence-Class, though that seemed to be pushing it to its limits. Still, it was encouraging to see that it could handle even the *Hope* if we needed it to.

We continued to investigate the station for five hours before finally coming to the conclusion that Commander Erba had kept his side of the bargain. We immediately transferred the credits to him, and after a quick message back home, the first wave of deliveries were on their way.