

Julus and Tatnia showed up about five minutes after I had confirmed we would be able to track the raiders. They pulled up in the Arrow just as I was climbing off of the C-PH, the turret spinning around as Tatnia surveyed the area. The side door of the Arrow opened without prompting, and I stuck my head.

"I can track them," I confirmed. "The only question is if we should give them time or head in now."

"Uh, why would we give them time?" Julus asked. "They might get away."

"If they escape off the planet, then that's more or less our problem solved," I explained. "And there is nowhere on this planet that I wouldn't be able to track them easily, so there's no risk of them escaping in their speeders. But I was thinking that we could wait until nighttime. Just wanted to hear what everyone thought."

"They are off center, Boss," Julus pointed out. "Better to set off while the thrusters are still hot."

Nal nodded in agreement quickly, while Tatnia seemed more on the fence.

"Ambushing them while they sleep is probably safer," She pointed out. "They will have to eventually."

"Let's go with a middle ground," I suggested. "We have to wait until they are in their base, at least. Once they stop moving, Nal and I will make a nice big loop around their base, and then we can move in and see what's going on."

The three agreed that was our best bet, which just left a bit of waiting. Both of us climbed inside the Arrow to warm up, and I basically chain-cast clairvoyance. I was waiting for the arrow to stop wobbling and shifting side to side slightly, which would mean the target had stopped flying around.

"What are the chances any of those bikes could be salvaged?" I asked, getting a raised eyebrow from Nal. "I mean, the ones they hit directly are all scrap, obviously. But some of the raiders were just knocked off their seats."

"Those might be intact," Tatnia admitted. "Why, though? We already have enough speeders, and the C-PHs are much faster than 74-Zs. Whoever was stuck with them wouldn't be able to keep up."

"Not for us. It might be nice to sell them back to the town for cheap," I responded. "Give them some defense capabilities of their own."

"...Well. Right. If any are in workable shape, they might not be there when we get back," Julius pointed out.

"After the show, we just put on?" I responded. "I think cheating us out of our promised reward is the last thing on their minds."

Tatnia and Nal nodded in agreement, the former breaking open a food package and passing out snacks to everyone.

"Aren't 74-Z's imperial tech?" Julius asked after a minute.

"They've been around since the Clone Wars," Nal explained. "They are military gear, but it's not strange to find civilians using them."

"No... he has a point," Tatnia said, a slightly confused look on her face. "One or two here or there is one thing... but more than twenty? That's a lot weirder than five busted up C-PH."

"Well... you think they are Imperials?" I asked skeptically.

"No, they wouldn't be dressed like that," Tatnia said, shaking her head with a frown. "I don't know what I'm saying, just that it's strange that some random raider gang has access to more than twenty speeder bikes, all military gear of the same model."

"Their blasters were all the same as well," I pointed out, getting a look from my companions. "I don't know the model, but they were all the same design, slung over in mostly the same way."

"So... what does that mean?" Julius asked, the rest of quiet for a moment before I spoke up.

"... It means keep your eyes open and stay in contact. I don't think this is Imperials, but *something* might be going on," I answered, Julius nodding in response.

Quietly we continued our small meal, all of us now thinking about what this information could mean, though none of us could come up with a good enough answer. When we were all finished with the food, I cast clairvoyance again, watching the arrow sit perfectly still. It had been close to an hour, meaning our targets had covered a significant amount of ground.

"Almost time to go. They've stopped," I explained, looking at Nal. "A few minutes to make sure they aren't taking a break, and then we mount up."

After a few minutes passed and the arrow didn't move as far as I could tell, Nal and I hopped back on the C-PHs and raced off, heading straight for our target. After about thirty minutes of flying around, we swung wide so we wouldn't get too close to the raider camp before

we were ready. After another thirty minutes of flying around, we had a good sense of what the surrounding area was like. We slowly tighten our circle around the camp before eventually stopping, climbing off our bikes, and continuing on foot.

As we got closer, I cast a muffle on myself, silently taking points as we approached our target. After about twenty minutes of walking, we were close enough to the camp that my arrow was pointing down into the snow. After about five minutes of scanning around, we spotted a large hole in the snow, with a lot of relatively warm air coming out of it, according to the thermal setting on my goggles.

A quick message later, and Julius and Tatnia were on their way, both of them leaving the air speeder to join us. Once they arrived, we headed to the hole, slowly making our way to and then down the obviously artificial hole into the snow and ice. The tunnel led down a few dozen feet before opening up to a large, open space. It was a low, circular dome carved into the ice, maybe fifty feet under the top layer of snow. From what I could see, it was at least sixty meters in diameter, with metal supports added into the middle.

I was getting some serious Empire Strikes Back vibes.

The camp itself was extensive, with several temporary structures that looked collapsible but still relatively sturdy. There was a lot of equipment and cargo around, though tarps covered most of it, probably protecting it from water damage. In all, everything was much better quality and much better organized than any raider camp should have been, just adding more evidence that *something* was going on here.

By the entrance tunnel into the underground camp were two speeder bikes, the surviving raiders' rides. They seemed in excellent condition and, more importantly, completely unattended. I held up two fingers and gestured to the left, Tatnia and Julius sharing a look and a nod before breaking off and going to the left. I was thrilled they understood what I meant, considering we hadn't discussed hand signals at all yet.

As Nal and I moved to the right, I quickly summoned my bound armor and cast muffle again, dumping all of my leftover mana into my armor. When I was adequately protected and silent, I pulled out my blaster, holding it up and ready. With a look over my shoulder at Nal, I slowly took point, both of us making our way around the right side of the dugout camp. Almost immediately, the sound of voices reached our ears, though we had to walk in further to hear them, and even then, their hushed tones barely reached us.

"-ust gone... all of them..."

"-ission statement... call for evac-"

"-on't come... no reason we-"

I nodded towards the talking and started walking closer, following the sounds as best I could. Both of us were moving slowly because even though I was magically silent, I could still make noise if I fucked up hard enough. A few seconds after following the voices, we stepped out from behind a stack of crates to find a small clearing. Not wanting to be seen just yet, we pulled back and stood to the shadow cast by the crates.

In the clearing were several tables, each lined with chairs, like some sort of public mess hall or gathering space. Sitting in those seats were five individuals. Two of them dressed as the raiders had been, in piecemeal winter gear, though most of that had been stripped off. They sat in their chairs like they had lost all energy and collapsed into themselves. The other three looked at them in disbelief, their faces pale or the nonhuman equivalent. Those three were dressed in what looked like a basic uniform, though not any that I recognized.

"The information said they didn't have enough money to hire anyone like that!" One of the three uniformed individuals shouted. "Where the fuck did that ship come from?"

"Does it matter?" One of the "raiders" asked with a hollow. "It's here, it wiped us out. We need to call this mission off."

At that, most of the group looked at a blue-skinned [Pantoran](#), whose forehead was marked by a yellow symbol I couldn't quite make out. He was sitting heavily on the table behind him, taking several seconds to respond to the looks.

"We... will call for extraction," He finally said, the two "raiders" sagging in relief. "Seron, to establish a connection, I'll-"

Hearing that they were going to get in contact with someone off-planet, I quickly stepped out of the crate stack's shadow. Several steps later, I was entering the clearing, my pistol raised, Nal right behind me.

"Hey! Hands up! Put your hands up where I can see them!" I called out, startling all five of the "raiders."

One of the raiders who had survived their encounter with the *Chariot* stood up and whirled to face us, raising his [blaster carbine](#), which had been hidden from my view. Showing surprising skill, he had his weapon up and aimed at me in seconds, firing a quick burst of lethal red energy. Two of the beams hit my bound armor, almost shattering it before Nal fired twice in return, each shot hitting the "raider" in his center of mass. The now very dead man fell to the ground, two charred holes in his torso.

I poured more mana into my bound armor, its damage slowly repairing itself as I held my pistol up, recovering from the force of the bolts quickly. Just as I was doing that, Julius and Tatnia came around a different building, both of them training weapons on the remaining "raiders."

"Hands in the air, or we will kill you!" I shouted again, this time getting a response, a Rodian raising his hand immediately.

With one of their companions having surrendered, the remaining three quickly followed, raising their hands in the air. I stepped closer, keeping my gun trained on them.

"Julus, Tatnia, disarm them," I said, not taking my eyes off of them as the two humans quickly went to work, checking each survivor for weapons, finding two hold-out blasters and more vibroblades.

"Good. Now slowly sit down at the table, putting your hands on the tabletop," I ordered when Tatnia stepped back and gave me a nod. "Any of you take your hands off, and my friend here will put a crispy hole through your chest."

Slowly the now disarmed "raiders" moved to sit at the table, carefully keeping their hands visible and on the blue polymer surface. Once all three were sitting, I slid my pistol into my holster and dismissed my bound armor.

"Fantastic. Now, my name is Deacon, and I was hired by the good people of Solinda to stop the raider attacking their town," I explained, taking the opportunity to study and meet each of our prisoners' eyes. "Now, I could just put a bolt into each of you and collect my pay. In fact, I'm kinda tempted to do just that."

The four tensed when I mentioned just killing them, and two of them started looking around rapidly, trying desperately to find a way out of the situation.

"Fortunately for you, I am a sucker for a good mystery," I admitted. "So I'm going to give you all a single, thirty-second chance. You tell me what the fuck is going on here, because your clearly not really raiders, and I won't kill you."

"Bantha shit!" The Pantoran said, still pale and shaken but clearly not broken. "And risk your payment?"

"I was paid to stop the raids," I explained. "I clearly did that. Now I want to know *why* you were pretending to be raiders in the first place. Your chance starts now."

I said, slowly counting down in my head. After about fifteen seconds, all of them were sweating, despite the relatively low temperatures. At the five-second mark, I pulled out my pistol again and took a step closer.

"W-we were hired to scare the miners off!" The last remaining speeder pilots shouted, finally cracking under the threat. "We-"

"Seron, will you shut-!" The Pantoran started to say, turning and reaching out with his hands, like he was going to strangle the confessing "raider."

Without a word, Nal raised his pistol and fired, the red bolt slamming into the shouting Pantoran, who collapsed forward heavily onto the table, dead before the impact. I turned to look at Nal, who was slowly lowering his pistol.

"You were saying?" I asked after turning back towards the remaining conscious mercenaries.

"W-we were hired by the mining guild!" The human, Seron, continued. "We were supposed to drive the miners away by slowly starving them out, and in between raids, we were supposed to scan the planet!"

"What for?"

"[Vonium](#) and [Varium](#)!" He answered quickly. "We melt holes in the snow and scan down into the planet!"

"No, why were you scanning it in the first place?" I asked, clarifying what I meant.

"I... I don't know..."

"The initial survey came back negative, but someone at the Miners Guild realized that the snow would have messed with the scans," One of the other mercenaries explained, seemingly happy to have some useful knowledge. "They came back later when the snow receded some, during the planet's warm period, and they scanned it again from orbit. It came back positive for Vonium and Varium!"

"B-But they need to know how much is here, and they need Solinda gone so they can claim the planet!" The third mercenary explained, not wanting to be the only one who wasn't helpful.

"So you guys have been killing people, slowly starving them at the behest of the Mining Guild, trying to scare them off so they could swoop in and mine the Vonium and Varium?" I asked, getting some nods in confirmation. "Jesus, it's like an 'R' rated Scooby-Doo mystery."

I shook my head and let out a short and slightly manic laugh at the absurdity and the horror. I rubbed my face, pulling off my gloves, before looking over at Nal.

"Knock them out, please."

He nodded and pulled up his pistol again, ignoring the shouts and pumping the three remaining mercenaries with blue stun energy. I let out a long sigh, shaking my head.

"Alright, let's get these guys tied up, I want to hand them over to Rabben," I explained before turning to Julius. "Call the *Chariot* for me, let them know everything is good, and I want Calima to fly over here to transport stuff back to the town."

"You realize they are just going to kill them?" Tatnia asked, sliding her weapon into her holster.

"I know, but then it's on them," I said with a shrug. "They can do what they want with them, it's their right, not ours."