

“What about this one?” Tatnia asked, looking down. “A bounty for a smuggler who stiffed a trader and caused three deaths when he ran. Five thousand credits alive so he can stand trial, two and a half if he is dead, with proof. Last seen on Ilos.”

She turned her datapad to me, showing off a humanoid of a species I didn’t recognize. I shook my head in a negative.

“Seems like not enough to make it worth heading out there,” I said.

“If we don’t join the bounty hunters guild, this is about all we can expect, bounty-wise,” She pointed out, but still pulled the datapad back, continuing to look through the listings.

It had been just under two days since we had taken off of Terr’skiar. Since then, we have been working on preparing and finding our next mission. While we still had a buffer in terms of credits and were doing very well in terms of materials and equipment, we would definitely need to keep making money.

“I’ve got something,” Nal said, reading his datapad. “A small mining center on a planet not far from here has been getting hit by a raider gang.”

“That... sounds pretty good. What’s the pay?”

“Ten thousand, fifteen if we can recover what they have stolen. We also get salvage rights to anything that doesn’t belong to the town.” Nal responded.

“What kind of info do they have on their numbers and equipment?”

“The report claims between fifteen and twenty strong,” He answered. “With speeders, blasters, and other movable equipment.”

“And the camp?”

“They don’t know. They sweep in, steal what they want and leave just as quickly. The town doesn’t have the equipment to do anything about it, especially as the raiders made sure to destroy any defenses they had in the first few raids.”

“Alright, how far away is it?”

“Are you sure?” Tatnia asked. “Twenty is a lot of people to fight at once.”

“You’re right. It would be,” I responded with a smirk. “If we were going let it be a fair fight in any way. Nal?”

“Three systems away, ten hours.”

“Alright, send them a message that we are on our way.”

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Ten hours later, we were landing on the outskirts of a decent-sized town on the planet of Itander, a mostly rocky, snow-covered planet that had a band of more hospitable space around its equator. The town, Solinda, had a similar aesthetic to Mos Eisley, with ferrocrete buildings making up the vast majority of structures, with prefab metal and polymer structures sprinkled around throughout.

As we landed on the outskirts, I could see that some of the citizens were clearing out as fast as they could, mostly parents leading their children indoors away from the newcomers, while others made their way out of their homes to get a better look at what was going on. Calima landed us smoothly, flipping a handful of switches once we were securely on the ground.

“Keep her warmed up, if the raiders come by while we are talking, take off and provide air support,” I told the Tholothian, standing up from comms control. “Julus, help Miru unload the Arrow and two C-PHs. Nal and Tatnia, let's go say hello.”

I got a series of confirmations, which I expected since I was really just repeating our already set plan before everyone but Calima left the bridge behind. Nal, Tatnia, and I headed out to the forward cargo bay, passing by Miru as she moved our bikes into position.

“You guys all set?” I asked as we stepped into the expedition room airlock, going through my own pat down to make sure I had everything.

“All set.”

“Ready to go.”

I nodded and opened the exterior door, my two teammates stepping through before I sealed it after us. I tapped the exterior intercom system to activate it, all three of us heading down the access ramp, stepping down onto the rocky planet. A cold breeze carried through, making me glad I had brought my jacket. A quick look around showed one person standing ahead of the small crowd that had formed about a hundred feet from the *Talos Chariot*. It was a [Besalisk](#), a four-armed behemoth with a boney skull and a large mouth. They were wearing considerably fewer layers than everyone around it, seemingly comfortable in a simple tunic and shorts.

The three of us crossed the distance slowly, eventually stopping in front of the four-armed humanoid. He was a full head taller than me and built like a brick house.

“Hello, my name's Deacon. We are here for the mercenary work you posted,” I said, holding a hand out toward the large brown and maroon-skinned alien. “I’m hoping you got our response.”

“Aye, we did,” He said in a gruff voice, looking up past me at the *Chariot*. “You certainly seem to have the tonnage to take care of some raiders. Names Rabben Corgug, the head foreman of the town claim.”

One of Rabben’s massive hands swallowed mine, shaking it roughly.

“We would have taken care of this ourselves, but the karking my nock bastards sabotaged our defensive turrets,” He explained, getting to a nearby pile of rubble. “Now we have to deal with them raiders *and* roving beasts, and too few of us are prepared for a fight.” “And when you try and get more...”

“They blow those up, too,” He finished, nodding in confirmation. “Don’t even know where they set up, so we can’t go out and take them ourselves. Tried the surrounding area, but too far out, and folks stop coming back.”

“Well, rest assured, we can solve your raider problem,” I said confidently, gesturing back to the ship, where Julius was just flying the *Arrow* out of the starboard hangar. “We are going to do some patrols around the area while the *Talos Chariot* goes a bit higher and runs some scans.”

“That's not gonna do ya any good,” The Besalisk said, shaking his head. “Smart money is on them digging down into the snow. Go down deep enough, and a normal sensor reading won't penetrate well enough to pick them out.”

“Maybe not, but it will give us plenty of warning when they start getting close,” I explained, the larger humanoid reluctantly nodding.

Once we had responded to the work posting, the crew and I spent a few hours spitballing what the best way to complete the job was. Obviously, being able to use the *Chariot* to take them down, with no risk to ourselves, was ideal, but Calima had pointed out what Rabben just had about the snow and ice, which meant if we wanted to locate their camp, we would have to get a little tricky. As far as Calima knew, the plan was to keep track of any raiders who ran when we ambushed them, as they would have little choice but to return to their base. In reality, once I spotted them, my clairvoyance spell would be able to track them. I was getting pretty good at it by this point, so seeing the raiders in person should be enough for me to track them, even if they weren't close to me.

“Boss,” Nal said to get my attention before stepping forward and facing Rabben. “What have they been taking?”

“Food and supplies mostly,” He answered. “We don’t keep large amounts of credits on the planet, our profits get stored in a bank and we purchase new things on the holonet.”

“How frequently are the raids?”

“Every two weeks or so,” The large male humanoid responded. “What are ya getting at?”

“They might be relying on your supplies to survive,” I answered when I caught on, Nal nodding in confirmation. “Which means it's going to be a lot easier to trick them into attacking.”

“Trick? No need to trick, they come on their own!” A human man said from behind Rabben.

“Well, if they do, we can take them out and then track them back to where they’ve set up camp,” I explained, happy our original plan would work. “The point is that if they need what you have, they are coming back if they think they have a chance.”

I pulled out my comms unit and turned back to the ship, looking up where I knew Calima was sitting and watching. I made sure to hold it up to my face, covering my mouth.

“Alright, Calima, when Miru and Julus are done offloading the speeders, the plan is a go,” I said.

She sent back a confirmation, and I slid my comm back into my jacket, watching Julus and Miru work. Once they were done, Julus stayed in the Arrow, and Miru made her way over to us.

“And now, in case someone is watching...” I said, reaching into my jacket, pulling out a small sack of credits, and putting them in the young Twi’leks hands. “We pretend to pay you, shake on it...”

We shook hands, and Miru nodded, clearly working to keep from smiling at the act. When we were done, she quickly made her way back to the ship before Calima lifted off from the rocky surface, kicking up all sorts of dust as she flew away into the sky.

“Why... why are they leaving!?” One of the people behind Rabben said, sounding shocked and scared.

“They aren’t,” Rabben responded, shaking his head as he looked over his shoulder and then back at us. “They are setting a trap. And we are bait.”

“Yes... technically that is true,” I admitted, rubbing the back of my head. “But we should have an early enough warning to keep everyone safe. And we are still going to be here, meaning that they won’t be able to just roll through town unimpeded.”

"I don't like it... but we don't have much of a choice," Rabben said, giving me a hard look before turning back to the crowd. "Alright, people, back to work. None of ya have enough time free to be sitting around doing nothing!"

The larger humanoid started walking behind the leaving crowd, and I turned to Nal and Tatnia.

"Start running patrols with the speeders," I said, nodding toward the leaving foreman. "I want to talk to the big guy some more. If the cold starts getting to you, rotate through the Arrow. I'll find you or call for a pickup when I'm done chatting."

Nal nodded, but Tatnia looked hesitant to leave me alone. I gave her a raised eyebrow, and she reluctantly headed to where the Arrow and the C-PHs were parked. I turned back to the town, jogging to catch up with Rabben.

"Foreman Corgug could-" I started to say when I caught up with him.

"I don't sign your paychecks, boy, you don't gotta call me that," He said, not slowing down as he moved through the streets of the mining town.

"Technically, I think you'll be signing at least one of them, but fine. Rabben, mind answering a few questions?"

"As long as they pertain to the job we hired you for," He responded.

"Do the raiders usually attack from one direction, or is it random?"

"They come from the east more, but not by much."

"Huh. Okay, what are you guys mining here?"

"Platinum."

"How big is your claim?"

"The planet."

"You guys own the planet?" I asked, surprise leaking into my voice.

"No. As the first settlers, we have the first claim. Just means people wanting to mine or settle on the planet need to come through us. We can sell them claims or ask for a portion of their profits."

“That seems...”

“Strange? Corrupt? Easily abusable?” He listed off with a snort. “That's because that's how they want it. It's usually how mining corpos keep a grip on the best mining claims. They scan a hundred planets before we can even leave the docking bay, settle all the good ones, and leave the rest of us claims that barely profit. We got lucky finding this, but we won't ever be rich. Better than being slaves in all but name, though.”

“I'd have to agree,” I said, looking up to see the Arrow flying over the town, a lot of other people stopping to do the same. “When did the raiders show up?”

“Three months ago, after the melt,” He answered, waving to someone as we passed a shop, continuing to answer my next question before I could ask it. “The planet's orbit is slightly elliptical, there's a two-month time when it's a few degrees warmer. Most of it stays frozen, but the clear, livable strip around the equator expands by a good distance on each side.”

“Interesting. Any chances they have someone in the town, a contact or informant?”

That question finally got him to look at me, reading my face for a long moment before finally grunting and shrugging.

“It's possible, but no one comes to mind.”

I pulled out my comm unit and relayed that information to my team, telling them to keep an eye out for anyone behaving suspiciously. They confirmed it and reported that they had made a few loops around the town and couldn't see anyone on the outskirts.

“Do a few more wider loops around and then land for a while,” I responded. “We need to look like hired guards.”

“So lazy, cheap, and useless?” Tatnia asked, getting a laugh from Rabben.

Despite her joke, I could hear the sound of the airspeed and bikes getting more distant as they expanded their patrol. I talked a bit more with Rabben, mostly about when supply drops came by, how often their ore was picked up, and what their general profit levels were. He was getting a bit annoyed with my pestering but answered everything I asked to at least some extent. Eventually, I split up and headed to where my team had landed.

“Spot anything?” I asked when I got close enough, stopping by Tatnia, who was sitting on one of the C-PHs.

“Saw a few bits of trash, some animal carcasses, and one speeder wreck, but that wasn't very far out.” She responded. “Beyond that, nothing.”

“Alright. I’m going to do a few loops to get a sense for the town, you and Nal warm in the Arrow,” I said, nodding towards the air speeder. “When I get back, we can trade, and I’ll ride in the back. Oh, and shift over to the east side, that’s where most of the attacks have been coming from.”

They both hopped off their bikes, and I climbed onto one, turning it on and spending a minute getting used to the controls before zipping away. The truth was I needed a bit of time to familiarize myself with this speeder as I was just barely able to fly it. We spent some time going over the controls on the way to this frozen rock, but I needed some time to work it all out.

After a few trips out into the rocky tundra and five or six trips around the town, I was feeling pretty confident with the more complicated controls, including the forward-facing blaster cannon, which actually seemed to pack a pretty serious punch, at least it did when the target was the rocks and boulders out in the tundra.

When I was finally satisfied with my flying, I flew around the town again, slowly stopping at the Arrow. Nal was already outside, sitting on his C-PH. As I came to a stop beside him, I turned the speeder down to idle.

For a long moment, we sat there, staring out into the white and brown expanse. After a while, I sagged a bit and cursed.

“Dammit. I should have realized how boring this would be.”