

When we finally dropped out of hyperspace on the far outskirts of the unnamed and supposedly lifeless system, there was a layer tension that covered the ship like a heavy blanket. Despite being surrounded by thousands of miles of nothingness, some sort of deep instinct drove everyone to walk just a bit softer and talk just a little more quietly. Even I wasn't immune, catching myself wincing when I made a bit too much noise.

When we finally arrived, I stood on the bridge behind Calima as she slowly oriented the *Chariot* around to more generally face the majority of the system. It wasn't a precise movement, the system was too large and we were too close for that, but it did make for a spectacular view. As I looked out the main bridge's forward viewport, the comms station crackled, Vikan's voice coming through.

"The scans are picking up some communication, but not much," She said, sticking to a tight beam, voice-only link. "But in a system like this, that in itself is enough. It's all coming from the fourth planet from the sun."

"We hear you *Intervention*. Sensors, anything to add?" Calima asked, not looking away from her consoles.

"There are light traces on the very limits of our sensors," The Naval B1 in charge of sensors responded. "Nothing else."

"Alright, alert me if that changes."

"Roger Roger."

"Well, Boss?" Calima asked, turning to face me. "We have a general target. What do we do?"

"What are our options?" I said, peering over a droid's shoulder to see a scan of the system. "Vikan?"

"One moment." She responded, the tell click of a closed comms coming through the speaker.

I looked at Calima, who only shrugged and turned back to her controls, tabbing through something and reading her instruments. After a few moments, the comms clicked back as we linked up again.

"I believe we could make a microjump the third planet from the sun," Vikan said confidently. "From there, our sensors should be able to pick up which side of their planet the pirates are based on."

I looked at Calima, who seemed to sense my unspoken question, turning to nod at me in agreement.

"Alright, make it happen."

The bridge was silent for a long stretch while the microjump calculations were run. When they were finished, Calima quickly fed them into the *Chariots* systems to double-check, before confirming they were set.

The jump itself was sudden, a quick thrum and lunge forward, the streaks of light passing us by for a split second before we returned to realspace, our windows suddenly full of our first destination, a red and gray planet with no discernable atmosphere. I watched as Calima pulled up and stabilized the ship, quickly setting us in orbit around the planet, the *Intervention* off to our starboard. I could see the curvature of the planet, as well as our eventual target planet far, far in the distance, barely more than a marble. I opened my mouth to say something, only to be cut off.

"Really?" Miru asked, popping into the bridge, sounding annoyed. "A microjump? We couldn't just burn sublight?"

"A microjump was the best option for remaining undetected," Vikan responded through the comms. "Traveling through realspace would have taken hours and left us vulnerable to sensors or visual scans."

"I'm going to have to spend ages realigning the capacitors now," The young engineer complained. "I just-I... I'm realizing that now probably isn't the best time to complain about this. Sorry!"

The embarrassed pink-skinned Twi'lek vanished from the doorway without any further prompting, seemingly having read my mind, or at least my expression. I would never expect full decorum like a proper military, but that didn't mean jumping in like that was alright, not when we were well into a dangerous mission. I let out a sigh and turned back to Calima.

"What was that about?" I asked with a frown.

"Microjumps are... a bit rough on hyperdrives," She explained. "A handful in a row with a well-maintained ship isn't... a problem, but more than that, or with... a junker, and it starts getting dicey."

"You could have mentioned that before," I said, shaking my head. "Wouldn't have changed anything, mind you. *Intervention*, what are your sensors picking up?"

"... Scans are coming in much more clearly," Allum responded, speaking through the comms for the first time. "The chatter and readings are definitely coming from the fourth planet."

Unfortunately, it looks like it's somewhere on this side of the planet, so a direct approach would get us spotted quick."

"What kind of information are you picking up on their planet?" I asked.

"Dense atmosphere, would be fine to breathe except it's got a lot of nasty heavier gasses too," He answered promptly. "Pretty cold, too, but not enough water for any snowfall, so we are lucky there."

"Any rotation?"

"...Dammit, I'm rusty," The older man said, sounding annoyed with himself. "Yes, they should be facing far enough away from us in a few hours."

"Could we close the gap with another microjump?" I asked, scratching my neck.

"No, the *Chariot* and *Intervention*... would make even low-level sensors light up dropping out of hyperspace that close," Calima explained. "Smaller ships, one modified to be stealthier might be able to, but none of ours."

"How long would it take for us to make that trip at sublight then?"

We discussed the trip for a while longer before settling on traveling at sublight speeds, but waiting two hours for the planet to rotate the source of the comms chatter away from us. Once our plan was decided, we started prepping in earnest. Final checks on the BXs were done before getting them ready to load into the *Brick*, while everyone who would be landing started getting dressed and armed up. Most importantly was the basic chest armor that Pola had put together. It was a simple plate carrier system, like we had been using before, but with the plates replaced with beskar plates. It was far from the complete protection I wanted, but it was definitely a good start.

By the time we were all prepped, including a double and triple check of gear, we were ready to pull away from our cover planet and head to our target. It was nerve-wracking pulling out into more or less open space, knowing that if we had underestimated the pirates' sensors, they would easily be able to spot us at this point.

When we finally swung around the target planet, putting it between us and the pirate camp on the other side, the ground team quickly filed down into the port hangar. Tatnia took the pilot's chair while the rest of us quickly strapped into the remaining seats, Nal claiming the seat that controlled the ventral turret. Once we were strapped in and ready, I called the BX's in, the flexible assassin droids easily fitting into the remaining space, a few of them strapping into seats and the rest locking themselves in place with the magclamps in their feet and the handlebars built into the ceiling.

"Boss?" Tatnia asked, looking back at me over her shoulder, prompting me to visually check everyone. When no one spoke up, I turned back to her and nodded.

The *Brick* slowly pulled out of the hangar, rolling away from the *Chariot* before heading straight down to the planet's surface. Of course, I could barely see any of this, as looking over the pilot's seat gave us just the barest sliver of a look at what we were doing. Still, we had all gone over the plan, so it wasn't hard to imagine what was happening.

Once we were close to the lifeless surface of the planet, Tatnia kept us as low as possible, dipping up and over mountains and valleys, attempting to stay off any sensors that the pirates might have. After about ten minutes of this, I could feel the tension leaving my body, the rising stress of going into a life or death fight dissipating as my brain, the part I had no control over, came to the realization that even with scifi tech, traveling around a planet comparable in size to Mars was going to take some time.

I let out a long breath, taking a second to let out the rest of the residual anxiety and tension, rolling my shoulders a bit before settling back against the relatively comfortable seat, the harness sitting a bit loose on me.

"Are we there yet?"

I turned to look at Julius, who was sitting along the opposite side of me, two seats to the left. He looked serious, and I could only shake my head and laugh.

"Yup, feel free to hop out," I responded with a chuckle, Julius's serious face breaking into a smirk. "What is our ETA Nia?"

"Five hours," She responded. "Might want to get in a nap or something, Boss."

"Not a bad idea."

Eventually, I did drift off into a nap, though it wasn't a very refreshing one, as the frequent dips and shifts that the shuttle's inertial dampeners couldn't handle stopped me from getting any deeper than a doze. When Tatnia finally called out a ten-minute warning, I could feel the dissatisfying sleep clinging to me. Thankfully, a quick Respite and Fast Heal combo washed that and the sore neck away in seconds.

We landed, and Tatnia immediately started shutting down the ship, keeping it on low power. After some discussion during the planning stage, we decided to keep it partially running as we could use its more powerful comms unit to connect our personal units to our support ships. It did increase the chances of it being spotted, but I wasn't about to do any of this without being able to call for backup. Should things go wrong, we would be able to call for help without having to worry about range.

As we prepared to leave, we all clipped on our face masks, ensuring they were locked on tight before we put on our helmets. Once everyone was ready, we opened up the ship and slowly filed out. The BXs left first, securing the area before the rest of us stepped out into the slightly hazy, arid landscape.

"Alright, the target is at least a mile that way," I said in a hushed voice, gesturing to the direction the *Brick* had been flying. "We aren't sure what the camp looks like or how many of them there are, so we take this slow and quiet. BX-1 through BX-5 you stay to our left, BX-6 through 10, you're to our right. Everyone stays close; the commandos are going to be focused on looking for traps or anything suspicious. It should only be an hour's hike, but that could change since we don't have a detailed map of the area. Any questions?"

At this point, I was basically just repeating what we had already gone over, so it wasn't surprising that no one had anything to add or ask. When no one spoke up, I nodded and turned towards our target. With a silent gesture, the BXs began fanning out on either side of the group, scanning the rocky expanse for any sign of danger.

The hike was slow, but uneventful, the rocky ground occasionally switching to a dense, chalky sand, though never for long. The landscape was pockmarked with ravines and massive spires and plateaus of stone. The spires showed off some impressive striation and reminded me of some of the [rocky desert formations](#) from home.

After an hour and a half of hiking, one of the BXs motioned for us to stop, stepping closer to speak quietly. Its volume dialed down until I could barely hear it.

"Our scans are picking up life signs just over the next ridge," It said. "What are our orders?"

"Hold back, I'll take a look," I responded, signing the same to the rest of the group before casting Muffle on myself.

I slowly made my way up the ridge, the sounds of my footsteps and a significant portion of any other sound silenced by my spell as I climbed. Once I reached the top, I dropped down to crawl, just peaking my head over the ridge.

Beyond the high point I had just climbed, the ground sank down a bit before flattening out into a rather large plateau, spanning almost as much as a football field. Around that plateau were several other flat spots, most of them higher, but a few lower, all of them with ladders and rocky stairs leading to them. Scattered around all of those relatively flat spots were [nearly a dozen structures](#) of various designs, styles, and sizes. From where I was, I could see nearly a dozen people walking around, some of them near the structures themselves, but most of them around the various ships that were interspersed between the structures. All of the ships and a few of the buildings were slathered in the pirate gang symbol, some sort of edgy, dangerous animal I didn't recognize.

A quick tally showed eight starfighters, only three of which I recognized as [Z-95 Headhunters](#), the remaining five were made up of [two](#) different types, neither of which I recognized. There was also a [single freighter](#), a variant of the YT that I didn't recognize but showed enough of the signs that I could identify the overall series. Most of the starfighters had people moving around them, repairing or doing maintenance, and as I watched, I could see the freighter had its boarding ramp down, with people climbing up and down. The longer I watched, the higher my estimate for the total number of people went up.

After observing for another minute or so, I slowly shifted to make sure my hand was covered before casting Clairvoyance, specifically the trail version, focusing on my mental image of one of the three leaders. I smirked as the glowing, pale blue guiding trail led into the camp, trailing down between the two closest structures and disappearing out of sight.

I smirked and slowly crawled backward, having confirmed that we were at the right place, not that we weren't sure already. As I slowly made my way back down, I stood back up and re-cast Muffle to make sure I stayed quiet. When I got back to the rest of the group, I nodded in confirmation.

"It's them," I said quietly. "A lot more of them than I thought."

"Too many?" Nal asked, and I shook my head.

"No, as long as we have the element of surprise and keep anyone from getting on board any of their ships," I explained. "Unfortunately, everything is to spread out to cut them off from their ships in one ambush."

"So... what do we do?" Julius asked.

"We split up," Tatnia suggested. "Three groups, each responsible for locking down a different section."

"Solid plan. What are the groups?" Nal asked.

"Three groups of five," I answered. "Two BX teams and the five of us."

We spent a few more minutes coming up with a general plan, before we split up into groups. The BX teams left immediately, walking around, silently sneaking around to their target area. We waited three minutes, the tension rising as we listened closely for any sign of the droids being discovered. When none came, all five of us slowly made our way up to the ridge before slinking over the top to the base below.