

The conversation about bringing on the three candidates was surprisingly pretty short. While I had some worries about Vikan and Dazem's bluntness causing problems down the road, I didn't personally have an issue with it. It wasn't like we had a strict rank hierarchy, and if I was being stupid, I wanted my crew to tell me before I made a mistake. Nal even pointed out that if they managed to survive even a few short years as part of the Old Republic Navy, then they couldn't be *that* bad. There was no way they would have been able to make it without being able to bite their tongues or at least keep it civil.

Oddly enough, knowing that I could trust them to be honest and speak their minds was a positive in my book. I was mostly concerned about disruptions with the rest of the crew. So far, we had managed to stay pretty balanced, but adding more crew was the quickest way to mess that up. Thankfully, everyone who met them seemed to agree they at least seemed like a good choice. Tatnia also pointed out that it didn't need to be permanent.

"Let's give them a chance. Bring them on board, do a couple jobs, and see if they fit," She said with a shrug. "If they don't, we can always drop them off somewhere."

"Good point. Alright, I'll give them a call tomorrow and make them an offer," I agreed, leaning back with a nod, happy to have reached a decision. "The next question is, do we keep looking for more?"

"More biological crew?" Nal asked, and I nodded.

"Is there a point?" Calima asked. "The pilot and... co-pilot positions were the most important, and an Ops specialist... on the sensors is an added bonus I hadn't considered."

"It comes down to how they perform," Vaz added with a shrug. "If they cannot keep up with a droid staff, or we find the *Intervention's* performance lacking, we could find a more organic crew or find replacements."

"Alright, then that means our business on Birgis is just about done, right?" I asked, looking at Vaz and Pola. "Have you guys bought everything you need?"

"Umm, for basic temporary plates, yeah," Pola responded. "We haven't really had time to investigate proper undersuits or body sleeves."

"Could you get that done in a day?" I asked with a raised eyebrow. "They will have to move in, assuming they agree, so we should have a free day at least."

"We... yes, if we do our research tonight, we could get it done in a day," Pola assured me, Vaz nodding in agreement. "Especially if we had a hand going shopping if it comes down to it?"

"I will assist," Nal offered.

"Alright, that sounds like a plan."

When the early dinner was over, Vaz and Pola immediately headed back to their forge, clearly eager to get to their research. Julius and Tatnia headed out to do some shopping, mostly short-term food, as well as some other toiletries and general goods we needed. They took two BX units with them as protection, though I was pretty sure Tatnia was going to leave them in the Arrow when they got to whatever stores they planned on visiting.

Meanwhile, I headed directly for the enchanting room. With Pola and Vaz stuck working on temporary gear for the foreseeable future, I decided my best bet was to focus on making rings for everyone. It would make a decent first project, and Julius had gotten plenty of them when he bought me the box of trinkets I was working from.

However, before I could start that project, I had a few more bits of experimentation to do. My latest bit of testing had revealed that slowing down the life energy from a soul gem as it burned through an object I was enchanting would result in a more powerful enchantment, as long as I could mentally stay focused. This, of course, made me wonder what exactly would happen if I sped up the process, pulling more energy from the gem while maintaining my concentration.

On top of that, in my previous experiment, slowing the life energy down had increased the potency, but only by a small amount. If I had managed to stay focused on the entire soul gem's contents, the enchantment would have only been slightly more robust. The only thing I could think of that would allow me to push past that and make more potent enchantments was learning how to string multiple soul gems together. Of course, that would only be helpful if I could mentally handle holding the enchantment matrix for that long, a tall order considering I hadn't been able to handle a single full gem yet.

In the end, I decided to try and encourage the life energy transfer to go faster. This time, with the consequences of failure firmly in mind, I maintained a firm grip on the life energy being pulled from the soul gem. I slowly increased the draw over a few minutes until I hit a spot where I felt safe maintaining the flow. Of course, I was wearing my face shield, as well as my normal combat armor, as an extra precaution. If something went wrong, my hands would still get torn up, but at least a sliver of metal wouldn't punch through my heart or lungs.

With the increased rate of transfer, I managed to drain the soul gem in an hour and a half, nearly half the time my original attempt took. I quickly examined the ring and found that it contained noticeably less space for magicka than my first or second attempt. However, while the enchantment was less potent, it wasn't as low as I would have expected for how much time was shaved off.

Eventually, after a few minutes of thinking, I realized that if I could chain soul gems together, pulling life force through faster would mean I could make a more powerful

enchantment quicker, at the cost of extra life force being used up. This would make focusing and maintaining that focus much easier, at the cost of resources.

On the opposite side, if I slowed the process down, I would have to remain focused much longer, but I would get much more bang for my buck. Unfortunately, both of those led back to using multiple soul gems in a row, or maybe together, which the grimoire did not tell me how to do.

By the time I was done with my experimentation, it was starting to get late. Still, between the frustration of not having a clear route of progress ahead of myself and the excitement of what I might eventually be able to do with enchantment, sleep was out of the question.

Eventually, I sealed up the enchantment room and went to my bedroom, pulling out my grimoire and going over the enchantment section, trying to find any nugget of information that would help. While I didn't find the solution I was hoping for, I did get a hint at the next step in enchantment. It seemed like some of the enchantments could be modified somehow, the method and result hidden until I had mastered the specific enchantment to some degree. After a few hours of trying to find more information, the time finally caught up with me and I headed to bed.

The following morning, the crew had a quick and simple breakfast together before everyone went their separate ways. While I was tempted to try my enchantment research again, I knew I needed to be on hand for Dazem, Vakim, and Allum, and preferably not distracted. An hour or so after I woke up, I called the comms link that Vakim had given me, the connection locking in almost immediately.

"Good Morning, Deacon Roy," Vakim said. "Thank you for contacting us again."

"It's not a problem," I responded. "The team and I discussed it, and we would like to invite you, your brother, and your spouse to join our crew."

"We accept," She responded immediately. "We require transport."

"Well... if there is a place to land nearby, we can handle that."

Ten minutes later, Nal and I were on the *Brick*, a hover cart strapped down in the passenger bay as we made our way to the small apartment our new crew members were sharing. It didn't take long for us to arrive at the designated landing pad, which was honestly more like a speeder parking lot than a landing pad. After we landed, Nal spotted Allum by the edge of the pad. We quickly disembarked and joined him, shaking his hand firmly. The scared cyborg was seemingly impressed by our newly upgraded landing craft.

"I recognize the make, but she is not stock," He said, looking over the *Brick* with a critical eye. "What upgrades does she have? I can see the top cannon is different..."

"Most of it has been tuned and cleaned up, with many of the major components modernized," I explained. "Shields, power, weapons, all the good stuff. If you want more specifics, you should talk to Miru. I know she has an updated blueprint scan somewhere."

As we talked, Allum led me inside, pushing the hover cart while Nal stayed out on the pad with the ship.

"So... that young girl is really your lead mechanic?" He asked, sounding skeptical. "She can handle that?"

"So far, I've only been impressed with what she has managed," I responded with a shrug, pushing aside my instinct to get defensive about the young Twi'lek. I needed to keep in mind that it *was* weird to have such a young person in the position she was. "I know it's strange, but she's been a pivotal part of our success so far. If it makes you uncomfortable, don't worry. Pola will be the one in charge of ship maintenance and repair on the *Intervention*."

"It's fine, just might just take some time to adjust," He admitted. "She isn't the first young adult I've had to work with."

We arrived at the apartment and quickly loaded their stuff onto the hover cart, two boxes and three bags in total, before heading back out to the ship. Loading up was easy, and before long, we had taken off, heading directly back to the *Chariot* and *Intervention*. Once we arrived we landed on the pad first, offloading our new crew and their belongings before Nal slid the *Brick* back into the port hangar, the exterior hatch resealing when it was properly landed.

"That's an impressive modification," Vikan said as we watched the *Brick* vanish into the *Chariot*. "It makes an already flexible ship much more effective."

"Thank you, Miru is the one who designed it. She turned the *Chariot* into a pocket carrier, even better than what the Imperial *Gozanti's* are doing," I explained.

"It has a starfighter contingent as well?" Dazem asked with a surprised tone. "It must be something small to fit more than one in a hangar..."

The conversation soon turned into a full tour of the *Talos Chariot*, with Miru joining us to explain some of the modifications and show off her blueprints. I happily let the young engineer show off. She deserved the opportunity to brag, considering what she had achieved.

"You really turned this ship into a carrier..." Vikan said, her surprise managing to shine through her usual stoic tone. "Do you have plans for what will reside in the starboard Hangar?"

"We have general ideas, but I want to hold off until the *Intervention* has a proper crew, specifically a pilot and co-pilot," I explained. "I'm considering finding a small starfighter and

bringing on a few pilots. I'm also considering going full robotic and finding more tri-fighters to convert or purchasing another CEC shuttle like the *Brick* and upgrading it. For now, though, I'm content waiting to see if any more opportunities find their way to us."

When we were done with the tour, Nal escorted the new crew members back to the *Intervention* so they could start unloading and setting up their rooms. Allum and Vikan set up in one of the statesrooms, since they had a bed big enough for two people, while Dazem claimed a normal crew bed in the crew area, near Pola's room. While they were moving in, Tatnia and Julius returned with their shopping, offloading everything and parking the *Arrow* inside the *Chariot* cargo bay.

When everyone was settled, I called a meeting in the lounge. The usually large and empty room was starting to feel a bit tight with our new members, but it wasn't anything to be worried about. I quickly re-introduced our new crewmates, despite them having met everyone at this point. They introduced themselves briefly, including their experience with piloting ships, with the Rebellion, and in the Republic Navy during the Clone Wars.

When introductions were over, we started discussing what our next step would be. I was about to ask Nal if he had gotten around to talking to Rabben yet about securing some precious metals when Julius spoke up.

"So, umm... when I was looking for bounties yesterday, I stumbled on something I think we should consider," He explained, pulling out his Datapad and handing it to me.

The screen was filled with three separate mugshots, one of a Twi'lek male, one of a Weequay and a final one of a human female. I frowned as I read some of the crimes they had committed, which was a surprisingly long list.

"What's so special about them?" I asked, handing the pad back to Julius.

"They are the leaders of a nearby band of pirates who prey on this system and several others," He explained. "There's a bounty on these three for ten thousand credits each, as well as another seventy-five thousand credits for the rest of their pirate friends."

"That's a substantial bounty," I said, leaning forward in interest. "What the hell have they been doing?"

"Well, Boss, they've been around for a couple of years now. Dozens of missing merchant ships, a couple of private vessels, even a group hired to deal with them have all disappeared. Only a few people have managed to escape them so far. The authorities have no idea where they are living, which means that even though they have taken out a few of their ships, more just start raiding a few months later. The problem is, the authorities have no idea where they are based."

"And they know for a fact it's the same group?" I asked with a frown. "Not multiple attacks of opportunity?"

"They leave a calling card, Boss," He explained, looking more than a little off-put. "When they are finished taking what they want, they space the survivors. While they are still alive."

Everyone was quiet for a long moment as we considered what we had just heard before continuing.

"As horrifying as that is, how would we be able to help?" Allum asked. "Unless you plan on playing bait?"

"What kind of equipment do they have?" I asked, giving Allum a nod to show I had heard him

"They have a variety of snubfighters and a few medium freighters that are clearly upgraded to be more effective in combat," Julius responded. "The groups change frequently from what the bounty says."

"Hmmm... Sounds like a good way to make some money," I said with a smirk. "Especially if we can take them off guard."

"I'm not sure playing bait is catching them off guard," Vakim correctly pointed out. "I should also point out that when baiting out an enemy, the bait rarely escapes unscathed."

"We won't be offering them bait," I said confidently. "We are going to ambush them wherever they call home."

Dazem and Vakin shared a look, both of them looking at me with confusion on their faces. Allum seemed to be more suspicious, almost as if he was trying to guess what sort of trick I had up my sleeve.

"You know how to track them." He stated after a moment, no question in his voice.

"I do," I responded simply with a smile, leaning forward. "Do any of you three happen to believe in magic?"