

It took us about fifteen minutes to locate the abandoned and stripped-clean CIS base again, then another five to land both ships down onto it. We emptied out our airlock, letting the Imperial corpses burn up in the atmosphere as we made our way around the planet. The landing pad outside the hangars was big enough for both of our ships, but we parked close together so equipment could be more easily transferred between the two. Upon touching down, we exited the new ship, meeting Miru as she lowered the repair droid crew down on the cargo lift of the *Chariot*. She waved as the Leddy led the repair droids to the *Consular*-class ship.

"Nice job, Boss!" She called out as she got closer, her voice partially muffled by her mask. "That went a lot better than expected."

"It was a little close at the end, but we made it through," I agreed with a nod. "Not gonna feel completely satisfied until we can confirm that there aren't any trackers on it, though."

"That's our first task, Boss," The young Twi'lek agreed. "How does it look on the inside?"

"In good condition as far as I can tell," I responded. "There are three droids in their droid bay: two repair droids and a protocol droid. I want Racer to go over them byte by byte before we even think about turning them on."

"I agree, the Empire does all sorts of messy things to their droids," Miru added, nodding in agreement. "Anything else?"

"Yeah, get the droids going and then head to the second deck lounge. I want to have a meeting and discuss the heist and what we do next."

"Sure thing, Boss!"

As Miru jogged back to her repair droid team, I made my way into the *Chariot*, finding Calima and informing her of the meeting as well. About ten minutes later, I had Racer unseal Tarsi's room. The door opened to reveal the young Ensign lying on the bed. He quickly sat up and stood, almost standing at attention before visibly restraining himself.

"C'mon, that meeting I talked about is starting," I said, the nervous ex-imperial nodding and following behind me as I led him to the second deck lounge.

As I walked into the relatively open space, most of the crew simply nodded at the additional person. Calima was the only one completely caught off guard, as no one had told her what was happening.

"Alright, everyone, this is Tarsi. He was on board when we first took the ship, and later, instead of leaving or attacking us, he helped us fight off the rest of the Imperials," I explained. "Because of that, and I'm not about to start killing off unarmed and non-hostile people because it would be a bit easier, we need to figure out what we are going to do with him."

“Umm... could I...?” The nervous engineer started to say, looking at me and stepping closer when I gestured him forward. “So my name is Pola Tarsi. I grew up on Ruan, an Agriworld. I joined the Imperial Navy because... well, I was hoping to gain some experience fixing things other than labor droids and harvesters. I... I wish I had never left, but... when you join, you join for life...”

The young naval engineer seemed to grow distant for a moment before shaking his head and focusing on the moment.

“Before you discuss what happens next... I need to get something off my chest. I... I was using you to fake my own death,” He admitted, sounding apologetic. “If the Empire thinks I’m dead, my family back home will get a small payout, but more importantly, they won’t be punished for me... for me going AWOL.”

From where I was standing, I could see Nal and Tatnia nodding in understanding, the former leaning back, a barely noticeable tension seeming to fade away. I had to admit, it was a much more believable reason for sticking with us than “it felt like the right thing to do.”

“I hated working for the Empire. They lied every step of the way during training, but all that stops when you leave the academy. The Empire is bad. You can see it in everything they do. The rules are cruel, and the standard procedures are mean. Even the things we were shown as positives, like seeing the galaxy and protecting people, it exists on a layer of cruelty and... twisted corruption that-”

He suddenly stopped and took a deep breath, letting it out after a moment, a bit more calm.

“Well... If playing alibi for someone looking to escape the Empire is the cost of you getting that gun for Vaz, I’d say it was money well spent,” I said, putting my hand on his shoulder. “I think once we are done here, we could spare a trip to an Outer Rim world for you to hide out at.”

“Thank you... I can pull my weight in the meantime... I’m not sure how...”

Pola sat down on a couch by himself, still clutching at his hat, which was now a wrinkled and twisted mess. When Pola sat down, I turned to face the rest of the crew, smiling big.

“Alright everyone, that was fantastically done. I’m not sure how that could have gone any better, if I’m honest,” I admitted. “You should all be thrilled with your performances. In one day, we more than doubled the strength of our fleet.”

“Assuming we can staff it,” Nal pointed out, and I nodded.

"That is definitely on the list of things to get done after we are done here," I admitted, pointing to the Duros. "I think that we focus on hiring enough people to fill the crew, which is what, ten people? Then, when we join up, we can ask the rebels to provide the strike team. Basically, if we have to go our separate ways for any unforeseen reason, I don't want there to be any issues with us packing up and leaving."

"How will... we pay for these new crew members?" Calima asked. "And how will we continue to make money once we join the Rebellion? While I will enjoy... fighting the Empire, I would still like to make some money."

"At first, I think we will sell the *Dark Blade* since it really doesn't have a place in our fleet quite yet, and having a big chunk of credits on hand will be very useful," I explained, getting a few nods of understanding in return. "I want to invest a significant portion of that money upgrading the *Chariot* and this ship, up to two-thirds of it. Past that, I think we can negotiate a way to keep ourselves funded, even if it's claiming a portion of the equipment salvaged from our missions."

"Are you sure they will let us do that?" Miru asked.

"No, but I think there is a significant chance that when they see this ship, their first question will be if we can get them more," I pointed out. "They desperately need ships, and if we can prove that we are a steady source of them, I don't think they will argue if we add the caveat that they slip us some extra funding. I also... have a few ideas on how to make some more money, one of which I want to investigate after we finish here."

The crew nodded along, accepting the circumspect talk because of Pola, who looked interested but understanding of the secrecy.

We continued to discuss our options and eventually settled on a general schedule. We would spend around two days at the CIS base, letting the repair droids and Miru go over every inch of the ship. We would then head for Point Thirteen to drop off the yet-to-be-renamed *Consular-class*. On the way, we would contact Nevue to see if he would be interested in buying the *Blade*.

Assuming he was, we would make a trade before heading off to do some shopping, which was also when we would drop Pola off somewhere. Nal and Tatnia assured me that if we were willing to pay out a couple extra thousand credits and wait an extra few days, we could get whatever we needed delivered to whatever Outer Rim world we wanted. That meant we could pick up our upgrades and drop off Pola at the same place.

We might even be able to do a little recruiting while we are there, depending on where we landed.

Once we had everything we needed, I planned on returning to Point Thirteen, grabbing the *Consular*-class, and returning to the abandoned CIS base, or maybe some other empty planet, since wearing masks would get annoying. We would then split the crew, leaving most of the people with the *Consular*-class to help Miru work on the upgrades while we go off to check out if one of my “hunches” would turn out to be profitable.

It was a whole lot of traveling back and forth across the galaxy, but making sure our ships were the best they could be and then some was important enough that I was willing to add quite a few extra steps to the next few weeks. A quick vote showed that the crew agreed on the schedule, so I closed the meeting.

Over the next two days, the crew kept themselves as busy as they could. Miru and repair droids did end up going over the ship from aft to fore, looking under hundreds of panels, peeking inside hatches, and scanning every inch of the ship. Racer spent almost forty-eight hours in a row slicing and analyzing the code for the Clone Wars era ship, looking for anything left behind by Imperial security. He stumbled on a few things, including an automatic hailing program that would connect the ship to Imperial IFF if we got close to any Imperial systems. He also informed us that her ship's name was the *Harsh Penance*, which Pola apologized for not telling us already. It wasn't nearly as bad as "*Dark Blade*," but we would definitely be renaming it when we were done upgrading everything.

While Miru and the droids worked on the *Penance*, most of the remaining crew did light maintenance on whatever other equipment required it. Tatnia did some work on the *Arrow*, mostly cleaning, while Julius and Vaz cleaned and maintained everyone's weapons and most of the backup weapons. Pola volunteered to do maintenance on the labor droids, which Miru admitted was probably a good idea since she had just given them a basic once-over when we first got them. Pola was very familiar with the droids, having grown up on a farm that employed hundreds of them. Nal agreed to help him, though everyone involved knew it was mostly to keep an eye on the ex-Imperial.

While everyone was working hard, I was sitting in my room for twelve hours straight, two days in a row, working on my magic. My first priority was the process of learning the advanced version of Clairvoyance. It wasn't exactly a new spell. Instead, it was the first spell with a half dozen small additions. It wasn't technically a secondary matrix, but it did help the spell be more open to my inputs and what it was capable of searching for. According to the grimoire, it was only taught after a user was very familiar with the base spell because, without that base mastery, it wouldn't be precise enough to work through the more broad allowances.

That only took a few hours to learn, and I immediately tested it, unable to resist cheering when the illusory arrow snapped to a seemingly random direction as it latched on to what I was imagining in my head. I then spent about half an hour focusing on a few dozen random things, from Luke and Leia to Yoda and Ahsoka. Each time, the arrow pointed off the planet. I did notice that Luke, Leia and Ahsoka seemed to be vaguely in the same part of the galaxy, though honestly, even a minute shift in the arrow could mean entirely different systems.

When I was done learning the next level of Clairvoyance, I spent the rest of the day on Heal Other, which was an equivalent and then upgrade of the Fast Heal spell, but specifically for other people. This would let me heal people in tense situations without having to sit down and hold Healing Hands on them. Because I had already burnt a few hours learning the Clairvoyance upgrade, I resigned myself to a very long and late night, even with my inherent Restoration affinity.

The next day, I tackled another spell, once again secluding myself in my room. I still felt bad that I was essentially sitting on my ass while everyone was outside working, but I did my best to focus on the good what I was learning would do for everyone later.

With another healing spell under my belt, my next priority was defense, meaning Greater Ward was next on my list. I sat down after breakfast with everyone, and everyone was already sleeping when I was finally done. Still, having a more powerful way to protect myself and my crew was worth the all-day, brain-melting process.

I was both excited and terrified of what the expert and master process would be like. The following day, Miru sat down with me at breakfast and went over everything that she and her droid team had found.

"It's in pretty good shape, especially for its age," She commented, tapping through a hologram that Racer was projecting. "It's relatively new, meaning it was made at the tail end of the Clone Wars, and was retrofitted with more modern systems about three years ago, meaning it's surprisingly up to date. That said, it is still an older ship. The power systems are a little under what they would be optimally for a modern ship this size, though the shield system wouldn't be able to handle much more power regardless. My suggestion is that any upgrades we get focus on those two things first."

"What about the engines?"

"They aren't the fastest, but it's pretty maneuverable for its size. Its hyperdrive is also twice as fast as the *Chariots*."

"Sounds like we should remember that when upgrading the *Chariot*," I said, Miru nodding in agreement. "And no signs of a tracker?"

"None," She said confidently. "Racer didn't find anything in the computers, and I didn't find anything inside the ship's guts. Scans came up empty as well. This ship is clean."

"Alright, good enough for me," I said with a smile. "Let's get everything packed away then. The quicker we can get the next few weeks started, the quicker we can get back to it."

We spent the next hour or so getting everyone back together and packing all of Miru's equipment away. Miru also spent a few minutes reviewing Pola's work, which she seemed satisfied with.

"I'm glad you approve," The ex-imperial said, helping a repair droid into its charging station. "Because I'd like to join your crew."

Miru stopped and looked over her shoulder, first at the ex-Imperial, then at me. She shrugged and returned to the labor droid she was checking over, snapping the central chest plate back into place.

"If he works on ships like he does these droids, he is passable, Boss," She said, turning back to me, dusting off her hands. "It's up to you."

"You realize that we are going to fight the Empire directly soon," I explained, turning to face the young man. "This is all in preparation for joining the Rebellion. What happened to wanting to leave so your parents would be safe?"

"Well... I could change my face?" He offered with a shrug. "And I don't have much combat training beyond light gunner experience. I wouldn't be showing my face all that much, to begin with... right?"

For a moment, I studied him, meeting his gaze and holding it. I was surprised when he didn't look away since so far, he had been quite nervous and timid.

"Turn around and close your eyes," I instructed, getting a strange look before he slowly turned to face the repair droid he had just been working with.

I charged up a Calm spell and hit him square in the back, the energy swirling around him for a moment.

"Pola, can you turn around for me?" I asked, the now slightly dazed engineer turning to look at me with a big grin. "Why do you really want to join us?"

"Well... you guys seem nice, and working with people who actually like each other could be fun," He admitted with a shrug. "Also... Starting over on a small, backward rim planet doesn't sound very fun. I also want to make up for all the time I spent helping the Empire. I might not stick around forever, but I could help for a while..."

He blinked for a moment, his dopey grin fading as he shook himself, suddenly aware that he had been acting strange.

"What... what was that?" He asked, looking from me to Miru. "Did... did you guys just drug me?"

“Nope, maybe you’re overheating,” I suggested, looking concerned. “Why don’t you go sit down for a while, drink some water, and rest. We can talk about you wanting to join before we leave.”

For a moment, he looked confused before he eventually nodded and turned around, leaving the *Chariot* cargo hold behind. Miru looked at me with a raised eyebrow.

“You’ve never done that to me, have you?”

“Of course not!” I assured her, her face softening a bit before I added. “I didn’t know how to when you joined after all.”

She picked up a stray screw and threw it at me, the small chip of metal bouncing off my back as I left the cargo bay, laughing as I went.