

We entered the largest structure of the base, the interior of which was several degrees cooler than the exterior. As we did, I reached up and unsealed my helmet, with Ahsoka and Tatnia following suit. Talon was clearly trying to put his best foot forward for some reason, and while I wasn't eager to get involved with him, that deserved at least the courtesy to look him in the face.

The rest of the crew kept their helmets on, which was good, since in this moment they served better as the faceless, intimidating muscled behind me. They were also enjoying a much more comfortable experience, since the base didn't smell that great, and it was still pretty warm.

As we walked through the building, the signs of recent combat were pretty much everywhere. Blaster marks scorched the walls, quite frequently punching chunks out of whatever they hit. The furniture was a mess, with everything that could be used as cover overturned, and everything else just a general mess, including a couch that was mostly melted and burned. I opened my mouth to ask about the fight, when I spotted something more important.

Sitting in a lounge space were nearly two dozen scared people, of various species. Many of them had bruises, and all of them were nervous, though it did look like they were hopeful. Food was in the process of being distributed, as was water and blankets.

"Talon," I said as I stopped, the man turning around at my words. "Are those their victims?"

"Yes, we rescued them from one of the ships," he said with a frown. "I think we got here just-"

Before he could finish, I turned and began walking over, swallowing my anger so I didn't scare them. Behind me, I could hear Tatnia explaining what I was doing to Talon, while Ahsoka followed after me.

A few of the victims spotted me as I approached, most of them flinching and shying away. I slowed, holding my hands up to show that I was unarmed, before kneeling in front of one of the youngest members of the group, a young [Cerean](#) girl, maybe twelve years old. She had a busted lip and a large bruise around her eye.

"Hello, my name is Deacon," I said softly, making sure to keep my hand visible and far from her. "What's yours?"

"...Chyl Ci," she said quietly.

"It's nice to meet you, Chyl Ci," I said with a smile. "I'm sorry about everything you have gone through, but you are being very brave. Would you like me to help fix up your lip?"

"...It hurts."

"I know," I responded with a frown. "But I can help with that if you'll let me."

After a moment of internal debate, she nodded, and I smiled, casting Fast Heal on her, the golden healing energy sinking into her body. In a moment, her lip was healed, and her bruises faded away. The young girl looked surprised, moving carefully as if expecting pain. When there wasn't, she looked at me with wide eyes.

I gave her another smile before standing, looking around the group.

"Does anyone else need help?" I asked. "There is no cost, and it is perfectly safe."

I demonstrated by casting healing on myself, letting the golden energy sink in through my armor.

"...Are you with the Skyforged?" An older man asked. He was holding his arm carefully, watching me closely. "I've heard news of them. Clad in armor using strange magic."

"That's us," I said with a nod.

"Then I guess I'll take what help you can give," He said, shifting with a wince. "Not sure what I will do if this arm isn't fixed."

I nodded and quickly repaired the man's arms before going through the group and healing all of them, even those who were lucky enough to only have a few bruises. When I was done, I turned to Tatnia.

"Get in contact with someone, tell them to send someone gentle to talk to them about their option," I said. "The usual offer for recovered victims."

Tatnia nodded, turning away and pulling out her comms unit. Our standard offer was the opportunity to join us or be shipped anywhere we could go safely. They would also receive a chunk of credits, which we would usually recoup from our raid on their captors, though I wasn't sure that would happen this time. Talon had been the one to clear the base, and while he might be willing to hand over the smugglers-turned-slavers, a man like him couldn't pass up free ships.

Not that it mattered much, a few thousand credits to help a few people was well worth it.

With the situation handled for now, I turned to Talon, who was waiting nearby with his people. He seemed disquieted by what he saw, and when he spotted me, he looked like he was debating something. Considering his reputation, it wasn't difficult to figure out what he was thinking.

"Do you have any wounded?" I asked.

"A few of my men were injured, yes," he admitted easily. "Are you offering to heal them?"

"I am."

Talon studied my face for a moment before nodding.

We were quickly guided out of the building to one of Talon's ships, one of the largest, an [Action VI bulk transport](#). I was pretty sure it was his personal ship, the Wild Karrde, which would explain why we were quickly guided inside, then immediately guided out after I healed the four of his men from blaster burns and a broken rib.

When we once again entered the largest building in the smugglers compound, we finally sat down around a table, Karrde and another man on one side, Ahsoka, Tatnia, and myself on the other. After a moment, Talon spoke up and gestured to the man beside him.

"This is [Quelev Tapper](#)," He explained. "My second in command, and just about the only man I truly trust."

"This is Tatnia, my second in command, and Ahsoka, my trusted partner," I responded. "Now... what exactly is going on here?"

"Right, straight to the point," Talon said with a nod. "Usually I would like to offer refreshments at such a meeting, but I'm afraid there isn't much worth eating or drinking here."

"I think our appetites aren't at their strongest at the moment anyway," Ahsoka responded, drawing a wince from the smuggler.

"A fair point," he admitted, running his hand through his hair in a motion that was likely practiced until it looked casual. "During the turmoil following the death of Jabba the Hutt, I was able to take control of a few of his smuggling operations."

"Right. A few," I responded, rather sarcastically. "I assume this was one of them?"

"You would be correct," Talon responded, shaking his head. "It was inspected by one of my subordinates, who swears there was no trace of sentient trafficking. What I have gathered supports that this was a new aspect of the base. One I do *not* approve of. When we learned of it, we set out immediately. The results speak for themselves."

"How exactly did you find out?" I asked, leaning back in my chair. "I can't imagine they were eager to rat themselves out."

"You would be surprised, but ultimately correct. The mayor of the settlement and I had an agreement," He explained. "He turned a blind eye to the fact that my group was siphoning fuel from official deliveries made by the company that owns the outpost, among other things, and I kept him stocked with several luxuries he wouldn't otherwise be able to afford."

"And when people started to disappear?"

"He ignored it at first, after all, he had ignored worse when Jabba's men ran the ring. When it was clear they were being taken as slaves, not disappeared for seeing too much or something similar, he contacted me. Seeing an opportunity, I had him contact you as well."

"Why not just reach out on your own?"

"I couldn't be sure how you would respond, of course," he explained. "Your efforts on Tatooine to keep the peace have made it clear you have very little tolerance for criminals."

"I have very little tolerance for certain *types* of criminals," I corrected. "I have the normal level of tolerance for smugglers. Which is admittedly still not a lot, but I wouldn't have outright acted against you."

"Would you have responded?" He asked, with his eyebrow raised.

"Perhaps, if the reason was good enough," I assured him. "What exactly is the reason?"

Talon seemed to take a moment to consider my response, as if cataloging it away for future plans.

"I am still in the process of clearing out the detritus that clogged Jabba's smuggling groups," He explained, tapping the table idly as he talked. "As one might imagine, there is quite a lot of corruption in an organization such as his. I can proudly say, however, that slaves are not common in what I took over. Believe it or not, most smugglers are not eager to become slavers."

"That's good to hear," I explained. "I would hate to find out that you are encouraging it."

"Just so," He confirmed, deciding to ignore the implied threat of what would happen if I did. "In the process of the takeover, I have uncovered several interesting bits of information. Quite a few of them pertain to the slavery rings, both those that have broken off and those that have combined together to form larger groups."

"That is certainly some interesting information."

"It is. and I'm sure you could use this information quite well," he stated, prodding me for a response.

"We likely could," I responded, eyeing him closely. "I am simply curious about your cost."

"That is simple enough. You are welcome to any bounties, ships, or supplies the slavers are using," He answered. "I simply ask that you leave their bases alone. Quite a few of them would be very useful to me."

"You want access to their bases?" I said with a frown. "To set up your own, I assume."

"Exactly," He explained. "While I would prefer to have everything, most smugglers come with their own ships, so hiring more people will likely solve that issue. On top of that, most are self-sufficient enough that they can bridge their own supplies, so that is also not an issue. The bounties are self-explanatory, of course. The only vital part I truly need are places where they can set up, do repairs, transfer cargo, and store it."

I watched him as he explained what he wanted, something tickling at the back of my mind. It took me a moment to put it together.

"Smuggler bases are only worth their time if no one knows where they are," I said with a frown. "Why would you invest time and money preparing a base that someone like me already knows the location of? Not only will we know their location, but if you invest money in any of them, they become a liability we can hold over your head."

"You seem like a reasonable person," Talon explained smoothly, adding a sigh at the end. "I'm relatively certain you will not take advantage of that knowledge, considering what we are offering in return."

"Or, you don't actually care about the bases," Tatnia pointed out, catching our attention. "You care about what's in them."

"And if you are fine handing over everything but the base itself, you are confident we won't find it," Ahsoka added. "Meaning it's well hidden."

"Considering who owned the bases before you... You think Jabba hid something, don't you?" I guessed, smirking when Talon Karrde let out a long breath.

"I suppose this is what I get for underestimating you," He admitted, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a credit chit, passing it to his second in command.

"Betting against us is hardly a good sign, Talon," I pointed out, crossing my arms.

"Yes, well, I have already been punished for my hubris, haven't I?" He pointed out, gesturing to Tapper. "I suspect you won't agree until I reveal the truth?"

"Of course."

"Very well. While going over some of our secured assets, we uncovered rather serious proof of a cache of stored treasures. Something sizable enough that Jabba only told a few people, most of whom were killed, both by Jabba and during the mysterious raid that killed him," Talon explained. "I have ascertained that it is hidden well enough that none of the people working at this location knew it existed."

"How much is it worth?" I asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Somewhere around fifteen million credits," Talon explained. "But the base is too active, and not at all amicable to me coming to visit. Nor would I be able to get away with the treasure once I was there."

"So all of this was just an attempt to get us to do your dirty work?"

"I would have kept up my side of the bargain," Talon responded, sounding honest as far as I could tell. "I would be all too happy to see the slavers removed, I assure you. I was just interested in making money in the process. You would have been happy with taking down slavers and making a bit of money in the process."

I frowned, considering his words. In truth, I was interested enough in the offer of information that if he had refused to reveal the truth, there was a non-zero chance I would have

agreed anyway. Killing Jabba had made a considerable dent in the slave trade, but that had closed significantly in the months after, as the fleets of slavers recovered enough from the chaos to get back to work.

Getting the chance to cut them down was an opportunity I was hard-pressed to give up, even knowing that Talon would be getting one up on me.

Sure, the slavery rings we removed would eventually come back, the idea cleared territory, and lack of constant pressure was too tempting to the bastards, but until we could take down the source, namely the Hutt cartels and a few other groups, trimming them back was all we could do. Eventually, likely after the Emperor was dead, we could focus on them.

"How about this. You feed us information about the slave bases, we raid them one by one, razing them to the ground in the process to keep new groups from moving in," I said, holding up my hand to cut off his response. "Then, when you've run out of information, we take down the last base, the one with the cache, and we split the loot thirty-seventy. You get around ten million credits just for revealing some information to us, and we get the rest for actually putting in the hours."

Talon sat there for a long moment, having listened to my offer silently. After what felt like a full minute, Tapper leaned over and whispered into his ear. Talon nodded after a moment and smiled.

"You drive a hard bargain," Talon finally responded. "But, I would be hard pressed to make ten million credits so easily, while also ridding the galaxy of scum. You have yourself a deal."