

We quickly jogged past the smoking remains of the super battle droids, Lario pumping a few extra shots into each as we did. I didn't blame him in the slightest, they had been significantly more challenging to take down than the normal B1s, which tended to all but fall apart after the first hit or two.

By the time we made it all the way down the hall, I had re-summoned my armor, and my mana had regenerated. I was constantly feeding the armor magic to keep it at its strongest, which meant my magic was regenerating much slower than normal. To compensate, I took out my blaster pistol, sweeping down the next corridor as I stepped around the corner.

"Clear," I said, stepping around and making my way down the long hallway.

I found myself wanting to cast a steadfast ward, but the mana-intensive spell would drain me in a few seconds, with most of my magic already going to my armor. Still, my sword skills called for me to have *something* in my offhand, making me think that a thick, blaster-proof shield might actually be a decent idea. A scene from one of the early Marvel movies popped into my head, with Captain America kicking down a door with his shield in one hand and his pistol in the other. I had never been a fan of the Captain in comics or the movies, he always came off holier than thou to me, but that scene looked cool, and if I could find a metal resistant enough to blasters fire but light enough to carry around...

I shook my head to clear it of distractions. There would be time for getting creative with my load out when this was done.

I slowed down as we approached another sealed door, going past it and stopping on another side, my team coming in behind me. Racer pulled up next to it without prompting, linking to the doorway and immediately starting to slice into its controls. He gave a series of beeps, and Nal looked at me, holding up two fingers.

"Alright, take cover, guys, we need to hold here for two minutes," I prompted, pointing to the small cover that the sectioned hallway provided, Nevue and Ayme sliding into place. "We-"

The sound of machine parts whirring echoed through the space, cutting me off and prompting everyone to look around wildly. For a long second, we didn't see anything, only for two turrets to drop from the ceiling. They quickly spun around and targeted us in a blur of movement, both units relatively small and clearly designed for internal, anti-personnel purposes. Despite that, they were still obviously dangerous. The first one immediately targeted me, firing off a quick quartet of blasts that hit me square in the chest, slamming me against the door. The first three bolts cracked my bound armor easily before the third slammed into my physical armor.

The other turret swiveled further and aimed at Race, focusing on the slicer droid. Tatnia, who was standing beside the droid, wound up and kicked the smaller robot, the droid getting yanked free from the scomp connector just in time for the second turret to unleash its own

quartet of bolts. All four of them slammed into the door control panel, which exploded in a spray of sparks and melted metal.

All of this happened in a split second, which was just enough time for Nal, Ayme, Nevue, and Lario to jerk their weapons up at the descended turrets and open fire, peppering the robotic weapons with a river of red bolts. The turrets exploded in a wave of sparks and slag, one falling out of its housing and smashing to the ground.

"Fuck, that hurts," I said, pulling myself off the door and already casting two fast heals on myself simultaneously.

The double fast heal inundated my body with energy, the golden healing magic sinking into my chest and immediately healing a significant portion of the damage. I immediately repeated the double cast, the pain receding almost completely, though I could still feel pulling when I stretched. Tatnia started to immediately check on me, finding that the armor just under my left pec was cracked, blackened, and basically ruined, but that my skin underneath looked like a three or four-week-old injury.

"I'm alright, Tatnia," I assured her, looking at the rest of the team. "We need to keep moving. Race, I'm assuming this door is a bust?"

The red and black droid let out a long solemn warble that confirmed my suspicions.

"I could..." Lario started, trailing off when I shook my head.

"No, that's our backup option. I don't want to waste it when we can just use the next one down and work from there," I said, already re-casting my bound armor. "Everyone keep your eyes open for more turrets, especially at intersections, doorways, and corners."

Everyone nodded, and again, we were on the move, quickly jogging down hallways. We eventually found the alternative doorway, which Racer cracked easily. Two more turrets dropped down from the ceiling, but this time we were ready and blasted them the second they came down. Once Racer opened the door itself, it immediately revealed six B1s on the other side of the doorway. Thankfully I had seen that coming, so we had all dropped into cover. Considering they were just standing in the middle of the hallway while we were safely protected by the door frame, we made quick work of them.

Slowly but surely, we made it down two more floors like this, blasting the occasional patrol of droids and taking out any turrets that dropped from the ceiling. We even managed to stamp out another trio of super droids, a much less daunting task now that we were prepared for them and weren't stuck in the open like the first time. I simply summoned a flame atronach and ordered it to charge at them. The conjured elemental managed to make it within a few feet of the first one before it was finally taken down. It stumbled and fell to the ground at their feet... only to detonate like a small grenade, staggering two of the more advanced droids and knocking

the third on its ass. All of us popped around the corner at the sound of the explosion, having been waiting for it, and immediately opened fire on the now unfocused robots. It took a few seconds of sustained fire, but they went down eventually.

From the third floor down, the defenses became more and more intense. Soon we were facing down dozens of droids at once, both B1s and B2s, all determined to keep us from getting any lower. Luckily, in true CIS fashion, they just continued stacking the numbers, trying to overwhelm us with disposable droids. Not only did it barely slow us down, it actually, occasionally, made things easier for us. The droids would collapse when destroyed, blocking the path and sometimes causing the droids behind them to stumble as they tried to advance toward us. We went through a lot of ammo, but between spamming my flame atronach and the whole crew's firepower, we took down all of the threats in relatively quick succession.

When we finally entered the last floor, and Racer scrambled the security door behind us to give us time to work in peace, we immediately took a minute to take stock of the situation. According to Racer and Arthree, the droid forces had started breaking down doors to follow us, using whatever tools, and even their blasters, to get through. They were currently on the third floor, doing their best to break into the stairwell leading to the fourth. By Arthree's estimation, we had about thirty to forty minutes before they could reach us.

Once we had all gathered our wits, reloaded our weapons, and caught our breath, we started making our way to the center of the sixth floor, which according to Arthree, was where the direct access to the central computer access would be. As we moved deeper, it was clear that this floor was very different from the others in terms of defenses. Where the past few floors had been a near-constant cacophony of droids, blaster fire, and shouting, this floor was nearly silent, a low hum of high-energy conduits and coolant systems the only real noise.

When we finally found the main entrance to the central room, Arthree hooked themselves into the scomp port, slowly unlocking the door while we looked around nervously. We were so close to our goal, and the fact that this floor had, so far, been entirely unprotected left us all feeling on edge.

"Maybe droids aren't allowed down here?" Lario suggested. "Wouldn't want them to have access to their own systems... right?"

Before I could say anything to his guess, Arthree whistled a happy tune, the door opening up with a near-silent whoosh of air, a sign that the pressure had been different inside than out. With a victorious whistle, Arthree rolled around the door frame and into the room, making a beeline for the center.

"No! Wait!" I called out, taking a half step into the room and looking around quickly.

The room was cold, clean, and utilitarian, with a large holoprojector in the center. All around the room were what looked like server banks and computer equipment, each marked

with blinking lights. As Arthree headed straight for the center console, his scomp link already extended, I extended my arm to keep Racer from rushing forward. The dome-headed droid managed to reach the center console, only for two hatches to open on opposite sides of the room, revealing just about the last thing I wanted to see.

"Get to cover!" I shouted as two [droideka](#) waddled out of their hiding place, their shields already deployed. "Arthree, watch out!"

The astromechs dome spun around and locked onto one of the dangerous battle bots, letting out a screech of terror as it tried to swivel around and run out, only to be blasted into smithereens by the combined effort of both droideka.

"Fuck, get to cover!" I shouted again, sliding against the door frame as the destroyer droids turned around and started walking toward the door, rapidly firing their blasters.

"What do we do?" Tatnia called out, leaning against the other side of the door frame, shouting to be heard over the constant barrage of laser bolts.

"Don't shoot them!" I shouted, seeing Ayme preparing to lean out and shoot back at the robots. "We can't risk a ricochet!"

Ayme cursed and leaned back around to cover, a pair of red energy bolts sparking where she had just been leaning. I peeked around the corner, trusting my armor to hold for at least one shot, desperate to get a look at what the large droids were doing. I pulled my head back immediately, looking up and down the hallway before finally coming up with an idea.

"Pull back!" I shouted, motioning everyone to move back the way we came. "We can't handle that kind of firepower! We need to leave! Pull back!"

Everyone looked at me like I was crazy until I grabbed Lario and spun him around, and started digging through his backpack, pulling out our two backup plans. Tatnia smirked and nodded, turning and walking away.

"You hear him! Retreat!" She shouted, prompting everyone on the left side of the door, the side we had come from, to run down the hallway towards the stairs we had taken down.

After a few seconds, Lario and I followed, with me holding a dual cast ward up to cover us both as we crossed the doorway. We continued to move, the whole team retreating partially up into the stairwell. While they did that, I stopped around the first corner, peeking around it to watch the door. I kept watch for a few seconds, until I finally saw the droideka leave the room, following behind us and making their way into the hallway. I pulled back and leaned against the wall, counting to five, before looking back to Lario, who was waiting for my signal.

"Now!"

The soldier squeezed the detonator he was holding, and the explosive charges that I had dropped on either side of the doorway as we "retreated" both went off simultaneously. The explosion shook the structure around us, scattering chunks of ferrocrete all the way down the hall to bounce around the corner. When the debris finally stopped, I turned to peek around the corner, pumping my fist when I saw that the droideka were both smoking piles of scrap.

I stepped around the corner and jogged back to the door to inspect the damage more closely. I was glad to see that the positioning of the explosives around the corner had directed the explosive force away from the entrance but still had enough power to destroy the destroyer droids.

We rushed back to the serving room, Racer following behind, giving the destroyed remains of his compatriot a wide berth before connecting to the mainframe. The droid whistled a slow tune, and Nal frowned.

"He believes he can crack the system in three to five minutes," The Duros explained.

I nodded and directed everyone to move around the room, to spread out and find a cover around the room, but to stay focused on the doorway. While they were moving into position, I walked to the entrance and stayed there, listening for the sounds of company.

Three and a half nerve-wracking minutes went by before Racer let out a triumphant series of whistles. Immediately the whole room went dark, every light, control pad, and sensor blinker going out before almost immediately coming back a split second later. The room lights clicked on first before the central core slowly came back online. The little astromech continued to beep whistle and warble, his scomp still spinning inside the connector.

"The base is completely locked down," Nal informed us. "All surviving battle droids are returning to their charging stations and storage racks. Even the super battle droids are shutting down. Apparently, they don't need the central computer to function but still follow its commands."

All of us cheered at the news, Tatnia slugging me in the shoulder as we gathered together by the computer's holoprojector.

"Racer, was Miru right that the comms were completely busted?" I asked, getting a warble that I could tell was a confirmation, but I still looked to Nal, who nodded.

"Alright, well, lock everything down. We need to head back up to the surface," I said. "I doubt the comm unit we packed is going to be able to get through all this ferrocrete."

Again the little robot warbled a confirmation and, after a few minutes, pulled away from the access port. Together we slowly made our way back through the building, climbing over the

wrecked droids we had taken down along the way. As we got higher, we had to climb through several destroyed security doors, warped and scored with blaster fire and small-scale explosives.

As we stepped out into the harsh, dry exterior, all of us clipped our masks back on. Lario started to unpack his comm equipment with Ayme's help, quickly setting it up on the ground. Once it was done, I called up to Nova on our agreed-upon coms band. A few minutes and a short conversation later, Nova and her team were on the way down.