

I looked over at Ahsoka, who nodded and pulled out her comms, trying to reach anyone on the outside. She turned away from us to listen more closely to her device while I focused on who was talking to us.

"Who are you? What's going on?" I called out.

*"You may call me Faudi,"* The voice said. *"I am the commander of this base and now your captor."*

"Why? Why did you let us land? There are enough ships here to wipe out all the forces we have on hand."

*"Because, I needed a bargaining chip,"* The voice explained. *"If I had destroyed your fleet, all I would have was scrap. Now I have three Jedi to trade with."*

"What do you want?"

*"The unconditional surrender of all ships you arrived with,"* The voice demanded, its electronic accent sparking for a moment before settling. *"Once they have surrendered, I will negotiate further with your superiors for your release."*

"And what makes you so sure that they will negotiate with you?" I asked, focusing on where I thought the sound was coming from. "Why would they negotiate with someone stuck in the past?"

*"Please, and risk losing three Jedi?"* The masculine voice asked. *"It is improbable that the Galactic Republic will not be willing to meet my demands. Now, if you will excuse me, I must begin negotiating."*

I looked at Ahsoka, who was no longer talking to her communicator. She shook her head when she saw me checking in with her.

"Nothing?" I asked, despite already guessing the answer.

"Just static. Pretty sure they are jamming us somehow," She responded, shaking her head.

"Could you reach out with the Force? Maybe somehow communicate that we are fine?" I asked. "Just enough to keep them from surrendering?"

"Maybe?" She responded. "It's hard to communicate without a bond already in place..."

"Try your best. It doesn't matter in the long run. Whoever that was seems to have overlooked a rather critical bit of information," I said, looking over at the speakers that the voice had just spoken through.

"And what would that be?" Ahsoka asked, her arms crossed, an eyebrow raised.

"We may be locked in here with them... but that just means they are locked in here with us."

I chuckled at the predatory look that Vaz made when they realized that, despite being tricked, we were in essentially the perfect position to attack our captor. Not far from us, once shocked free of their surprise by Lieutenant Soran, the troopers finished setting up their defenses and arming their weapons.

When Lieutenant Soran was confident they were ready to hold the position themselves, the strike team regrouped around the large doorway leading further into the base.

"I think the mission parameters have shifted slightly," I said, getting a nod from Ahsoka. "The only question is, how much?"

"We need to find whoever is in charge," Ahsoka pointed out. "Then, we can force *them* to surrender. They will most likely be in the central control room."

"Which is where exactly?" Nevue asked. "We didn't really go over that in the briefing."

"It is right outside the central computer core," Ahsoka said, pulling out a small holoprojector, a map popping up and slowly rotating in place. "We will need to fight our way down. It will likely be the base's most heavily fortified part, as was discussed in the briefing."

"Well, we can handle it," I said, nodding to my team, noting their confidence. "Should we still be clearing rooms, or are we blitzing?"

"We will get overrun if we skip past a room that contains too many droids," Ahsoka said, shaking her head. "We need to clear room by room."

I nodded before working with the ex-Jedi Padawan to come up with a group strategy. She and I would lead the teams, with Luke and Vaz as our direct support. The rest of the teams would clear the rooms we came across as we kept watch over the hallways. We would also provide backup as needed.

With our strategy set and plans adjusted, we notified the Lieutenant that we were heading out to enact a modified stage three, and he bid us good luck. Before we left, I stopped and caught his attention.

"Line up some detpacks here," I said, pointing at the doorways. "You're going to want something big in case any droideka show up."

The soldier nodded in agreement, turning to one of his subordinates, who I was pretty sure was his second in command. I didn't see what they were doing, though, as I was too busy leading the team in, Ahsoka standing beside me, her lightsabers out and ready.

As we stepped into the hallway, which was big enough for a small speeder to fit in, I summoned a new batch of conjured armor and finally conjured my bow. Ahsoka actually stopped when I stretched and tested the translucent, magically charged purple bow. She opened her mouth to say something but closed it without asking whatever she wanted, instead electing to continue moving forward.

As we reached the first intersection, I got a chance to really study the makeup of the base around us. The hangar had primarily been carved stone, with metal brackets and pieces bolted and attached when an anchor or part was needed. The hallway, however, was almost the complete opposite. The ceiling was plated metal, seemingly held up by frequent beams that connected to both the floors and ceilings. I couldn't tell if they were a reinforcement or a design choice. Behind those was some sort of artificial stone, probably a duracrete of some kind, but was accented by crenulations that seemed to just be stamped into the material.

The floor was what stood out the most. It was a polished stone floor that I was pretty confident was the natural stone of the mountain that the base was carved into. It was dark, maybe a basalt or granite, speckled with dark green spots. As we passed a T-intersection, I could see it was decorated by an inlay of some sort of silver metal with a distracting amount of detail. I shook my head as we continued on straight, passing the offshoot quickly, focused on our target.

After walking for nearly a minute, we arrived at the second intersection and immediately turned right, focusing on our target. Unfortunately, the CIS forces had another idea in mind, as a trio of B2s with a dozen or so B1s opened fire on us from down the other hallway, coming around the far corner at a jog.

Luke, who had already had his lightsaber out, managed to keep Tatnia and one of Nevue's crew from getting shot, deflecting blaster bolts into the floor and ceiling. Very aware that he wouldn't be able to keep that up for very long, both Ahsoka and I stepped forward, drawing fire and punishing the droids for their ambush.

I pulled back my bow and let my first arrow fly, the ethereal arrow slamming into a B2's hand, destroying the blaster there in an explosion of sparks. I couldn't help but smirk, pulling out a second arrow and putting it through the red sensor on its chest. It shuddered, before a whole chunk of it exploded, showering the B1s behind it in shrapnel. While I was happy to have taken down the heavily armored super battle droid, I had also cleared room for the B1s behind it to open fire.

Determined to solve the problem I had caused, I charged a Chain Lighting and thrust my hand out, a barrage of electricity slamming through the gap, shocking the fuck out of one droid before jumping to the next. I cast it twice more, decimating the B1s while Ahsoka and Vaz took down the remaining super battle droids. When the last one had fallen, I stood up straight and checked around me to see if there were any wounded.

Nal held his side while one of Nevue's crew had a hand on his shoulder. I quickly made my way to both of them, healing them completely.

"Alright, that could have gone better," I admitted, standing back from Nal, his wound faded completely. "Nice job covering us, though, Luke."

He nodded, eyes focused down the hallway that the small squad of droids had come from, before looking around the hallway. Having spotted something, he smirked, taking a few steps forward before looking up, around, and finally at one of the walls. He walked over, and after toying with the wall for a second, he accessed a panel. A few button taps later, a blast door shut about a foot or so away from him. When it completely sealed up, he raised his lightsaber like he was going to slash the controls to disable them.

"Wait!" I called out, the young Force-sensitive stopping mid-swing. "Great idea, good job spotting it, but maybe Fostar can slice it shut rather than destroying the controls. That way, the path isn't cut off completely if we need to retreat."

He nodded, and the Twi'lek man at Nevue's side stepped forward and pulled out a data pad. He saddled up to the control panel before using a knife to pop off the controls, revealing the interior electronics. He quickly plugged his datapad in and got to work. About a minute later, the door controls went dark, and he pulled his pad away, sliding it back into a pouch.

"I turned it off and set a simple key," He explained. "It won't open for anyone but us, and you'll have to plug in my pad to turn it on."

"My question is, if they have these doors, why aren't they blocking us in?" Julius asked. "They would be perfect for slowing us down."

"They aren't connected to the security system," Fostar explained. "Each of them is on a closed control loop."

"...They were worried about experiments with the AI going bad," Tatnia said after a long moment. "If the doors aren't on the security controls, a droid can't get in and slam them all shut if it takes control."

"Huh... is that the normal level of paranoia for an AI development lab?" I asked, looking back at my crew member.

"Depends on what you're working on. If you just editing exterior programming, not really. But if you're editing the programming inside the cognitive processor, the intelligent part of a droid, then yes," Fostar responded. "Errors there can make a droid's programming spiral, which often has horrible, dangerous side effects."

Another minute of catching our breath, we moved out, following the directions of the map Ahsoka had. We had barely gone a dozen meters before we came across a set of large doors, one on each side of the hallway. We took a moment to get into position before Nal activated the controls on one side, opening it. Tatnia and Julius both peered into the room, mainly finding empty storage space, save a few crates along the back wall. Julius looked deeper into the room before stepping inside slowly. When nothing happened, he stepped back out, shaking his head.

"Seems clear, nothing but a few crates."

We repeated the process on the other side, this time with Nevue's team peeking inside. Once again, we found a storage room with a ton of crates this time, but not any active droids.

We continued to travel the halls, heading deeper into the facility. Twice more we ran into groups of droids, but having been ambushed once, we made sure to prepare for it now, and they failed to catch us off guard. Rather than attacking, I double-cast a Greater Ward, providing cover and letting the rest of the team take down the droids. Between Ahsoka deflecting blaster bolts and me playing human shield, we made quick work of the attempted ambushes.

After making it down a floor, we started running into more rooms, these ones clearly labs and testing facilities. There were droid parts and computers, testing apparatus and everything in between, anything you might need to experiment on droid programming and then see how it worked. As we continued to explore we were forced to ignore several more branches, focusing on our target

On the third floor, we ran into something worrying when clearing the first side room along our path. Just as before, Nal activated the door while Julius and Tatnia prepared to peek in. This time, Julius turned to look at me.

"Uhh... you're gonna wanna see this, boss."

With a frown, I stepped closer, peering into the room as he stepped back to give me space. It was a lounge area, with tables set up and what looked to be a food dispenser system along the far wall. Everything was caked in dust, even the half dozen or so skeletons that littered the room.

"Huh... well that's concerning," I said, "Ahsoka?"

After looking inside, she frowned, stepping closer and into the room, bending over to examine the remains.

"Some of these are Neimoidian, but I don't recognize the others..." She trailed off, squinting at one of the skeletons slumped over the table. She reached out and, with the Force, pulled out a tag of some sort. "It looks like a name tag, some sort of security badge, maybe?"

Nal held out his hand, and Ahsoka passed the badge to him. He quickly turned it over and looked it over, nodding in agreement.

"Security badge, worked in facility," He explained, shrugging when I looked at him. "Neimoidians are decedents of Duros, [Pak-Pak](#) is derived from [Durese](#)."

"So why are they dead?" Lario, who was staying by the door with Nevue's slicer. "Also, why were they just left here."

"If they are dead, then who was speaking over the intercom?" Tatnia added.

We slowly made our way out of the room as we talked, but before we could dive into any possible explanations, a familiar sound echoed in from the hall. My eyes went down toward the noise, cursing as I spotted the threat.

"Droidekas!" Tatnia called out, pulling out one of her grenades and tossing it down the hall.

Eight of the lethal droids were rolling down the hallway towards us when Tatnia's grenade went off, exploding three of them before they could deploy. Two more were taken out by the hail of blaster fire that followed, whizzing around Ahsoka and me.

Three managed to deploy, their purple and blue shields wrapping them up in a protective bubble.

Half of the combined team dove into the break room we had just come from while Ahsoka, Luke, and the rest tried to take cover in the opposite room. The heavy firepower of the feared droids pummeled the wall, floor, and door frame as they did their best to rush in.

As red blasts of energy sent sparks and chips of floor scattering around the room, I flinched, covering my eyes. When I looked back, I could see Ahsoka dragging Luke further into the room, a blaster wound on his leg.

I pulled one of my grenades from my belt and activated it, double-checking my armor charge before swinging out around the edge of the door and rolling the tube-shaped grenade down the hall. It rolled and skipped across the divot-riddled floor. Before it could reach its target,

I ducked back inside, the grenade going off a second later. Pushing more mana into my armor, I peeked out to see I had managed to take down another Destroyer droid, leaving two left.

"Boss!" Tatnia said. "Try that lighting mine thing!"

I looked at her for a second before suddenly realizing that I did indeed know the Lightning Rune spell. I charged one in each hand before leaning out around the corner and casting it, my first attempt missing slightly, the spell fizzling on the closest droideka's shields. I tried the second rune, tagging the floor just in front of the tripod droid, the rune forming with a significant portion *under* the shield. Almost instantly, it went off, lighting exploding from the electric blue rune, traveling up the droid's legs, smoke and sparks jumping off of it from every exposed wire and seam.

Seeing me take out two of its kin, the droideka focuses all its fire on me and my doorway, forcing me to jump back inside, my armor just barely surviving the barrage. Fortunately for us, with its attention focused solely on me, Nal was able to pull one of his own grenades from his hip and toss it down the hall, the explosive just barely rolling inside of the glowing shield, completely eviscerating the bottom half of the advanced combat droid.

The second I saw the coast was clear, I rushed across the hallway and dumped a dual-cast healing spell into Luke, letting my armor dissipate so my magic would refill faster. The hole in his pants, just around his thigh, showed the burnt flesh quickly healing, fading faster after a second dual cast.

"Well... That was exciting," I said with a smirk while offering him my hand. "First time getting shot?"

"Been grazed before," Luke admitted, standing up with my help, testing his leg, shaking his head when he didn't feel a thing. "Woah... that is incredible..."

"Everyone okay?" I asked, looking around at everyone else. When no one else spoke up, I nodded. "Good, let's get a move on before more show up."