

The sparse, rocky, dry landscape made making our way to the stronghold a simple, if lengthy, process. The droids took turns pulling themselves for the most part, their wheels easily handling the dry, relatively stable ground. We did occasionally have to load them both onto the cargo loader and guide them ourselves, but that only happened a handful of times throughout the whole hike.

Unfortunately, simple does not necessarily mean easy, as when Nova said the atmosphere was barely breathable, she was being generous. The air was so dry that it hurt to breathe once your heart rate picked up and you started to breathe heavier. There was also a prevalent metallic taste in the air, which made me think there was something in it that humans probably shouldn't be breathing. We ended up taking light breathing masks from the ship's survival kit and turning them on their lowest setting, filtering out the more dangerous particulates and gasses while also trapping the moisture from our own breathing, meaning it was a lot more comfortable to do so. The low setting also meant that the breathing masks would last up to fifteen hours instead of eight.

With the major issues solved, the hike just took time, crossing massive plains of stone and gravel. We took several breaks to keep up our energy, during which I spent most of my time berating myself for not learning the respite spell. I was in decent shape, but hiking four hours through a planet-sized rocky desert was pushing me a lot harder than I wanted to admit. I made a note to put effort into building endurance after this was all over. If I was going to be fighting a lot, I needed to be able to keep up.

My only solace was that only the two rebel soldiers seemed to be easily handling the workout, as everyone but them was showing at least signs of fatigue. When we were about thirty minutes out, I called for a final rest, gathering everyone around.

"Alright, from here on out, we need to be careful about making noise. From the footage we have of the stronghold, it seems like approaching from the south is our best bet. West would provide us with better cover, but I'm worried about getting the astromechs through those steep cliffs. Plus, our target building is closer to the south."

As I talked, we all slowly recovered from the last hour-long leg of the hike. I was mostly repeating what we had already gone over during the planning session, but everyone listened closely regardless.

"Arthree and Race, stick with the group until we start taking fire. Hopefully, we will already be in the main building by then, but either way, once bolts start flying, I want you to play it safe. You two are the keys to this operation being more than a one-time find, so I don't want you to get hit by stray fire. Everyone understands the game plan?" I got a series of nods and a low tone of confirmation from both of the droids, prompting me to nod back.

"Alright. Ten minutes to check your gear and get everything prepared, then we head in. Leave your packs here, Lario is carrying everything we might need in his."

Because we wanted to try and race to the central computer, we wanted to be as quick as possible. Lario was a good head taller than me and built like a brick, so he volunteered to carry the essentials while the rest of us traveled as lightly as possible. He nodded when I mentioned his burden before joining everyone else in checking their gear.

The soldiers had their blaster rifles and a spare pistol on their hips, as well as some basic armor that was definitely just stripped-down stormtrooper armor, painted black and green. Everyone else was using the blaster rifles we had bought on Nar Shaddaa, with Nevue reluctantly leaving the proton rifle behind. I was running light, with my blaster pistol on my hip being my only physical weapon. My magic was going to be my primary weapon for this adventure.

After ten minutes were up, everyone but Lario lined up their packs, and we covered them with a tan camo blanket. Once we were set and everyone double-checked they were ready, we started the last chunk of our hike, making our way to the outskirts, the southern side of the stronghold. With the rising tension and anticipation, this thirty-minute hike seemed to stretch on for a lot longer than anyone appreciated. When we finally arrived on the outskirts, we took cover behind along a slight ridge, Nal scanning the base with our electrobinoculars. After a few minutes, he handed them to me.

"We've got a problem, Boss," He said softly, prompting me to peek over the ridge.

The issue was immediately apparent. What was supposed to be an abandoned base, with the only immediate danger being the auto turret emplacements, was actually fully active. Dozens of battle droids patrolled the landing pad while others stood at sentry points, actively scanning the surroundings. Every doorway had at least two guard droids posted beside it, and there were several droids walking around, carrying things and completing tasks. A few repair droids were even working on one of the transports that Nova claimed.

I bit back a curse and slid back fully into full cover, passing the binoculars to Tatnia, who slid up to look.

"The whole base is active," I whispered, giving Nevue a look as he softly cursed. "The last alert must have brought the base online. There are at least fifty active battle droids, including on guard and sentries."

"Which means whatever is in the hanger might be active as well," Tatnia said, sliding back into cover next to me, handing the binoculars to Nevue. "If they have armor vehicles in there, we are fucked."

"We have two options. We push forward, or we bug out. Chances are the base will go back into shutdown if we give it enough time," I pointed out.

"But we have no idea how long that will take," Ayme pointed out. "If we get inside, any armor they have will be useless, there is no way they will shoot at the building continuing their central computer, not at anything that could put it at risk."

"I say we still push forward, Boss," Tatnia said.

"I agree, I just wanted everyone to understand the options," I explained. "Okay, the plan stays the same, but now instead of trying to beat the alert, the alert is most likely going to happen immediately. I'm going to lead the charge, then slow down and switch to following behind, trying to draw fire. Everyone else's goal is to get into the central building. Arthree, Race, once you have the door open, I need you to get ready to slam it closed again. Once everyone is inside, including me, slam the door shut and scramble it as best you can. Then it's a race to the central computer system."

The droids both bounced a bit, which I took as them understanding what I had just said. I took one long breath before slowly sliding around to the edge of our cover, peaking around to watch the patrols. As they moved, I could see that there were a few small gaps, but nothing that even came close to being big enough for us to slip through. The entrance to the central building was about two hundred meters, and it was doubtful that we would make it even half that distance without getting spotted. As I watched, I cast the upper and lower bound armor on myself, filling them completely to keep them around as long as possible. After a few minutes of watching the droid patrols, I saw an opening and took it.

"Go!" I whispered urgently, stepping out from behind the cover and running.

I could hear the rest of the team following behind me as we crossed the first fifty meters without anyone spotting us. At about the seventy-five-meter mark, I saw a patrol turning towards us, about fifteen battle droids, all armed with blaster rifles. I peeled off a bit and slowed down, watching the rest of the team keep moving past me, making a beeline for the central structure. As they passed, I started walking backward, my eyes on the patrol. All of them suddenly came to attention at once.

"Intruders!" One of the droids shouted, the call echoing across the entire landing structure, all of the robots spinning at once to look in our direction.

"Well... here we go!" I said, before dual casting steadfast ward, holding it out in front of myself.

The first few blaster bolts whizzed by me, not even getting close. Some of them weren't even aimed at me but at the rest of my team. I was about to tell them to get to cover since my

distraction wasn't working until the first bolt hit the ward, draining about a tenth of its power and bouncing off. The bolt of red energy harmlessly slammed into the ground about ten meters away

"JEDI!"

Another call went out, this one even louder than the first. Suddenly all of the attention was on me, which was exactly what I wanted. As thirty or so droids opened fire on me at once, I was seriously starting to question my previous thought process.

"We are at the door, Boss!" Tatnia said, "Thirty seconds!"

Three more bolts hit my ward, all bouncing off wildly. One even crossed the gap between me and the nearest patrol to slam into one of the droids, drilling through its chest casing. I started moving backward as fast as I could, keeping the ward up and juking back and forth, trying my best to keep moving erratically. A fifth bolt hit the ward, and I could feel it weakening, my mana quickly running out.

I was backpedaling at full tilt now, red bolts slamming into the ground around me, whizzing past and occasionally hitting my ward. I could feel it get closer and closer to failing, my hands going numb from the impacts.

"It's open!" Tatnia called out. "RUN!"

My ward gave out just as she shouted, and I turned to run. I was about fifty meters from the doorway and could see the team taking cover inside, now returning fire, red bolts of lethal energy now whipping by me in both directions. I was moving as erratically as I could, but it was only a matter of time before-

The impact almost spun me around as a blaster bolt slammed into my shoulder. I could feel that my upper bound armor almost immediately gave out under the blast, but by some miracle it held. I fed it as much magic as I could, reinforcing it slightly, but focused on running as fast as I could. Luckily the reinforcement stabilized the armor just enough that when the second bolt hit me, this time in the small of my back, the armor shattered but still stopped any energy from reaching me. Unfortunately, the impact and subsequent shattering armor knocked me off my feet, throwing me to the ground, where I tumbled and rolled...

...Right through the doorway of the central structure.

The doors slammed shut just a few feet behind me, cutting off the exterior light. I quickly stood back up, my hand dipping to my hip to grab my blaster pistol, pulling it out even as I breathed heavily.

The interior of the structure was simple and utilitarian, though there was a *lot* of dust along the floor. The hallway that I had tumbled into was a three-way intersection, with open halls

leading to the left and right but a sealed door towards the center of the building. The door was covered in carbonized blaster marks, but a cursory glance told me it was superficial damage. The hall was clear in both directions, prompting me to stand up straight and lower my pistol to my side. I looked at my team, checking out each of them before pulling off my mask and clipping it onto my hip.

"Anyone hurt?" I asked. "Everyone good?"

"Yeah, Boss, you kept them off us long enough to get the door open and into cover," Tatnia answered. "You okay? You took a few hits...."

"I think armor held up, and the rest got deflected by the ward," I assured her before turning around. "My back alright?"

"Yeah, you're good," She responded, her hand dusting off my back. "Nothing got through."

"Right, okay, step one was a success then," I said, facing the rest of the team. "Arthree, Race, how goes it?"

Arthree spun around, and Racer pulled away from the door after a few seconds, their [comp](#) link retracting back into their chassis, Racer letting out a long series of bleeps and bloops. I stared at the droid for a long moment before Nal spoke up.

"They scrambled exterior access," He explained. "Will take two hours, or destruction of the door to get in. Internal security is the last threat."

"They get a map in that process?" I asked, Arthree whistling before shifting slightly, his projector lighting up to display a holographic map.

The pale blue, 3D representation of the building spun around slightly and showed a blinking green light several floors down in a central chamber. It marked a route as well.

"Alright, that looks like a good path, lets-"

Before I could finish, the sound of heavy metallic footsteps came from the left hall. With barely a second to think of anything, the large frames of three battle droids came around the corner. Unlike the droids outside, however, these were not B1's. Instead of the tan cannon fodder the Separatists threw at their problems by the thousands, there were three beefed-up B2 Super battle droids.

The second they stepped around the corner, they opened fire, prompting us to do the same. Laser fire stitched down the walls and floor, and I had just enough time to call up another steadfast ward deflecting a handful of blaster bolts.

"Go! Get back to some cover!" I called out, holding the ward out in front of myself before charging my newest destruction spell.

An ark of lightning shot out from my hand, my lightning bolt spell slamming into the lead droid even as we all retreated. The electricity sank into the droid's arm, causing it to spark and swing out, spasming slightly before going limp. As I followed my team back down the hallway, I fired a second time, then a third and fourth, the battle droid finally going down, electricity sparking off its body as it spasmed to the ground.

The two other droids just stepped over their compatriot, their wrist-mounted blasters firing another chain of bolts. Lario and Nal leaned around the corner as I dove around it, laying down and covering the fire. As I dove, I barely managed to avoid a blast of red energy, my ward failing as my Magicka reserve was utterly depleted.

Tatnia quickly joined the other two, firing around the corner and taking down the two super battle droids with multiple volleys of mass fire, several shots finding weak points to drill into the metal of the droid, finally causing enough severe damage to drop them. When the two remaining droids collapsed, we all breathed a sigh of relief.

"Alright... let's keep moving," I said. "The sooner we can take down the central computer, the better."