

We slowly made our way down the slope, quickly crossing the distance between it and the nearest structure, following the same general path that my Clairvoyance had highlighted only a few minutes ago. I was in the lead, with Tatnia and Julus right behind me, Nal behind them, and Vaz, in her heavy armor and her [Z-6 cannon](#) strapped to her back, was just behind him. We were a dangerous-looking bunch, and I couldn't be happier about it. I fed a primal part of myself that, up until this new chance at life, I had no idea I had.

As we finally reached the back of the closest, blocky, prefabricated-looking structure, I quickly conjured my armor, dumping all of my magicka into it so it could replenish as my crew caught up to me. Tatnia settled on the other side of the gap between my cover and the next structure, darting across the space with Julus hot on her heels. We shared a look, and I nodded, both of us getting low and slowly stepping through the gap.

The two prefab structures, which were placed at different angles, formed a sort of angular alleyway, which the pirates had partially filled with crates and boxes. Most of them were in terrible shape, corroded and broken from misuse and time, but they still provided plenty of cover. At least from sight, they didn't look even close to sturdy enough to hold back blaster bolts. As we reached the other end of the junk-filled alley, we both slowed and peeked out over the crates, taking in the immediate area.

The structures we were using as cover were two out of three buildings tucked into this corner of the large rocky plateau. They framed one side of a crude landing pad, which held all three of the Headhunters I had counted before. As we watched, around a half dozen pirates worked on the starfighters, ranging from a casual inspection to what seemed like a relatively invasive repair, a mask-wearing pirate elbow deep in one of the thrusters.

For a while, we continued to watch and make a note of the people working around the starfighters. My first instinct was to attack immediately and clear out anyone working on the ships, but I held back. Instead, I turned back to the rest of the crew, instructing them to spread out around the cover of the structures.

"Spread out and wait for my signal," I whispered. "Once the starfighters are cleared, breach and clear the buildings, then focus on keeping people off the starfighters."

Vaz nodded and quickly hefted her rotary cannon, heading around to the building to the far right, while Julus and Nal went the other direction, to the third structure. While they moved into position, I took my comms unit and clicked it twice, the signal for the BX teams that we were about to begin. As I slid my comms unit away, I glanced at Tatnia, who nodded in return, gripping her blaster rifle. I took and let out a long, deep breath before focusing on the targets. I pulled on my magic and leaned forward, casting Ice Spike, one for each hand, targeting the two closest pirates.

My attack flew across the gap and impaled the two pirates with a muffled, meaty punch. One of the pirates didn't even have time to blink as the large spear of magical ice punched

through his brain, killing him nearly instantly. The second was hit in the lower stomach, knocking him off the top of the starfighter he was working on and cracking his skull open on the S-foil on the way down.

The sound of a hard skull getting into and subsequently losing a fight with an unyielding metal corner resonated through the space for a moment, causing everyone else within hearing range to stop and look over. Before the resonating sound even stopped, however, the rest of my team opened up, easily targeting and taking down everyone else around the landing pad area and then everyone standing around the buildings.

"Go!" I shouted and rushed around the corner, already casting greater ward while conjuring my sword.

Ignoring the sounds of more distant fighting as the BX kicked off their own battles, I rushed up the metal grate steps to the door of my target structure, holding my ward in front of me. The door opened with woosh, air pushing at me as I stepped inside. Immediately, half a dozen blaster bolts bounced off my ward, ricocheting away and slamming into the walls and furniture of the room.

The nearest threat was a Twi'lek male covered in tattoos and scars. His blaster pistol was already trained on me, his eyes wide in shock when his shots just bounced off my ward. Before he could recover, I stepped forward, slashing my sword out and catching him in his shoulder, cutting his arm clean off before finishing him off with a secondary slash. Another quartet of energy bolts slammed into my ward, draining my magicka dangerously low as I turned to see a Rodian and a Weequay, both of them firing at me.

Feeling my ward flicker, I threw my sword at them, causing them both to flinch as it cut the Rodian along his chest, but it failed to take him down. I pull the stored mana from my ring, using it to cast Sparks at the Weequay while pulling my blaster pistol and firing a trio of blaster bolts into the Rodian. The Weequay, with his thick skin, recovered quickly from the blast of Sparks, firing twice at me, both hitting me center off mass but neither breaking through my conjured armor. The armored alien's eye went wide, even as I rushed him, conjuring a dagger and stabbing him in the stomach, then finishing him off by cutting his throat.

I stopped then, looking around the room for a moment. I quickly refilled my conjured armor with mana before rushing back outside, the door opening for me and closing behind me. I looked over to the structure next to the one I had just cleared to see Tatnia stepping out into the poisonous air.

"All clear," She said, vaulting over the railing to drop down to the ground, an action I mimicked.

I verbally confirmed my building was clear as well, and soon we were joined by the rest of the team, their buildings cleared or already empty.

Taking the lead, I pushed closer to the starfighters, double checking there wasn't anyone hiding away, before pushing past and up to a second level of the nearest plateau, where there was another structure, this one much larger than the three we had already cleared.

"Nal, Vaz, stay outside, find some cover, and keep an eye out. Your main priority is to keep people away from the Headhunters," I said, gesturing to Tatnia and Julius. "You guys are-"

Before I could start to explain the general plan for clearing the much larger building, the entrance we had stopped at suddenly opened. From the angle we were at, I couldn't see anyone standing just inside, but I could see some movement further in, hidden by shadows. A flash of metal caught the light, and the door resealed. I had no idea what was going on, but thankfully Nal spotted what I had missed.

"Grenade!"

Even as he shouted, the Duros dove behind a stack of crates, grabbing and pulling Julius with him. Vaz, who had already been moving to get to a better vantage point, dove behind a shallow pile of rocks, leaving her rotary cannon behind as she moved without thinking. Unfortunately, Tatnia and I were standing in the open, with nowhere to jump and no barrier to hide behind.

As the rest of the crew dove to cover, I stepped forward, deliberately putting myself between Tatnia and the grenade, which I had finally spotted. The world seemed to slow down as I raised my hands and dual-cast Greater Ward. The protective magic barrier seemed to deploy at a snail's pace, opening up and spreading out in front of me. Before it could even fully form, the grenade detonated, a shock wave of explosive force expanding outwards, slamming into the ward and knocking it out instantly. The force continued on, reduced but still powerful, driving itself against me and my conjured armor. Chunks of shrapnel and stone hammered into the conjured construct surrounding me, destroying it in moments.

As the shockwave slammed into me, it lifted me off my feet. I could feel myself being thrown at Tatnia, before being driven up and over her, spinning twice like a ragdoll before impacting the ground with a bone-rattling impact. It knocked my thoughts for a loop and replaced all sound with a high-pitched whining, though if the movies were anything to go off of, the explosion did that, not the heavy impact on the ground.

For a moment, I struggled to think, my brain rattled and my senses overwhelmed. Suddenly, Vaz rolled me over and grabbed my armor, already gripping Tatnia's. She dragged us both simultaneously, pulling us behind a large rock before dropping down into cover with us.

It took a second, but I shook my head and reached out, dumping a Heal Other into Tatnia, hopefully stabilizing her enough that if she was wounded in a way I couldn't see, she would keep long enough for me to heal myself a bit.

Quickly, I dumped the rest of my magicka into a series of Fast Heals, not stopping until the ringing in my ear snapped back to normal hearing.

"Fucking goddammit," I cursed, rolling over despite my still protesting body, casting another Heal Other on Tatnia, whose eyes were fluttering. "Fuck! Everyone okay?"

Vaz simply nodded, while Nal and Julius both shouted they were fine. My magicka slowly refilled, and I dumped it all into Tatnia, who gasped and coughed, cursing under her breath as she rolled over and got to a crouch, pulling out her pistol. There was blood leaking from her ears, chest, and leg. As she looked at me, I could see her left eye was also red with blood.

As she moved, I put two more Heal Other into her before looking over at the large structure, trying to figure out how we would get inside and-

"Grenade!"

This time Julius called it out, giving us enough time to fully duck behind the large boulder Vaz had dragged us to. The explosive went off, and it felt like we were being slapped in the chest by a Wookiee, my ears popping again, forcing me to bite off a curse.

Fuck this, I was done playing nice. I was gonna kill the fuck out of these assholes.

"Vaz, give me a boost!"

I called out, standing up out of cover and running to the side of the central dome-shaped structure. Vaz followed behind me and folded her hands like a platform, letting me put one foot on them and helping me climb up the side. The first four or five feet were too steep to climb by myself, but beyond that, I managed to grab a cable and haul myself up, my sore, damaged muscles protesting as I climbed.

"Cover me!" I shouted as I pulled myself up.

I continued to climb, only stopping when the dome surface was slanted shallow enough for me to stand. I got to my feet, wobbling slightly before managing to catch my balance. With a tight grimace, I reached along my back and grabbed a tool I had brought just in case we ran into something that absolutely needed to be cut.

I ignited the Inquisitor lightsaber with a flick of my thumb and drove it into the roof, the ominous red blade punching through the material easily, a hiss and spray of molten metal and plastic almost burning me as I broke the pressure seal. I took a step, testing the give of the material, quickly realizing that whatever the roof was made of, it was no match for the lightsaber.

So I ran.

I circled the large domed structure at the center of this prefab building, cutting the roof off like a domed can. I was barely even past the halfway point when it started to struggle, and when I had run around about two-thirds of the dome, it finally went. The large roof cracked along the curve I had cut, snapping free under the weight of the already disconnected roof. The building shook as it went, hard enough to cause me to stumble back, forcing me to grab onto a wire and hang on. I quickly shut off the lightsaber and clipped it behind my back, hidden under the armor plate carrier.

I watched as the center of the structure completely collapsed inwards, sending up a cloud of dust. I could hear screaming and cursing coming from inside as it fell onto the pirates below. Carefully, I pulled myself up, dragging myself to the broken edge, and looked over, peering through the dust. As I carefully checked for anyone still putting up a fight, I handily dispatched two pirates who had taken cover in one of the connected branches, firing bolts of electricity down at them.

Over the next fifteen minutes, the rest of the crew and I cleared the remaining portions of the structure, dispatching several more pirates in the process. Once we cleared the buildings, I connected the BX teams, both of them responded promptly.

"Team one, reporting mission success," BX-1 said. "Light Freighter and two surrounding structures cleared and under our control, minimal casualties, light damage to BX-3."

"Team Two reporting mission success," BX-6 reported next. "Starfighters cleared and nearby structure cleared, light casualties, damage to BX-7 and BX-9"

"Confirmed. Break up into teams of two and patrol the camp. Look for anyone hiding and anyone coming in," I ordered.

"Roger Roger," They both responded together.

Once the building was cleared, I fully healed Tatnia and myself before dumping a few heals into Vaz, Nal, and Julius, just in case. We were double-checking that our buildings were clear when I noticed Nal frowning as he looked at an empty plateau.

"What's up?" I asked, looking out in the direction he was.

"This space is cleared like the rest, but empty?" He asked.

I frowned and studied the space he had been looking over. Sure enough, three large extra spaces had been cleared out, with all of the loose stones removed and piled out of the way. There was even a set of stairs built for the spots that needed them. Suddenly, a worrying thought wormed into the back of my mind. Quickly, I recast Clairvoyance, going through all three of the pirate leaders. The first one pointed under the rubble I had made while collapsing the

large dome structure. The second pointed to one of the buildings the BXs cleared out. The third, however, pointed up.

Off planet.

"They are out on a mission!" I said, biting back a shout. "Goddammit, I should have checked for all three earlier! Son of a bitch!"

"Boss, you need to warn Calima and Vakim!" Tatnia called out, and I cursed again, tearing through my pack to grab my comms unit.

"*Talos Chariot* and *Intervention*, this is Deacon! We cleared out the pirate base, but one of the landing pads is empty, and one of the leaders isn't here!" I said, nearly shouting. "You need to get ready for the company in case they come back! *Chariot*, *Intervention*, are you there?"

The silence was deafening, one second turning into two, turning into three... Fifteen gut-dropping seconds went by before my comms finally crackled with a response.

"Copy that, Boss," Calima said, Julius making a sound of relief from beside me. "Thanks for the warning. Could have used it a bit earlier."