

Tilnes

By Morrie Mullins

What follows is an excerpt of a research team's report from beneath the surface of Tilnes. The signal, which should have been scrambled and broadcast on a private channel, was disrupted by the electromagnetic pulses so common on Tilnes and further scrambled by the events that followed. The company that seems to have hired the research team, Restimar Mining, has denied having a group on Tilnes (perhaps predictably, since admitting it would mean admitting to violating their trade agreement with Verga Mer Mining Corporation). All the same, the transmission has a number of individuals concerned about the state of affairs on, and beneath, the moon.



A black screen. Something sizzles in the background, a sound like fatty meat on a hot griddle. The blackness seems to waver, and then coalesces into a humanoid shape.

Person: . . . repeat, sensor disruption has been extensive. Communications were temporarily lost, and we believe they have been restored, but we need confirmation. The team is functioning at 60 percent; medical services are required that are out of our hands. Restimar, do you copy?

The holorecorder finally auto-adjusts to the lighting levels, and we see that the speaker is a Human male of middle years, a scar tugging the left corner of his mouth into a perpetual half-frown. The hair on the right side of his head is matted with blood. Behind him, other Human shapes move past, just out of the range within which the holorecorder could focus on their faces.

Scarred Man (sighing): Restimar, this is team 1044, Operation Cracked Crystal. Please respond. Team 1044 requires immediate evacuation --

The signal shudders and breaks up, but instead of going black, a crackling, white-grey snow covers the projection field. It rattles like a bag of chance cubes hung in a windstorm for almost ten seconds. Then the field clears and the scarred man is back, still talking.

Scarred Man: -- is not provided, he will not survive. This is a very real problem, Restimar. Please confirm. Over.

He sits, impatient, staring at something just to one side of the holorecorder. After a few seconds, a figure stumbles into view behind him and begins to lunge toward him.

Voice off-camera: Sir, the droid!

Scarred man turns as the droid -- a modified protocol droid with burnished plates that have begun to crack and corrode -- takes a swing at his head. He ducks, and the droid's fist passes inches from the holorecorder. The droid stares at the recorder.

Droid: Hello! I am --

It pauses and takes another swing at the scarred man, who again ducks.

Droid: -- C4K0, programmed for etiquette and protocol.

It takes another swing at the scarred man, who doesn't quite duck in time and gets clipped atop his head. He tumbles to the ground.

C4K0: It is my regretful duty to inform you that you are in violation of a number of matters of both etiquette and protocol, and that I must therefore ask you to immediately cease and desist all activities beneath Tilnes.

Someone else -- another Human -- runs up behind C4K0 and attempts to tackle the droid and drag him away from the holorecorder. C4K0 nonchalantly brings a fist up beneath the man's jaw, sending him crumpling to the ground.

The screen again goes to grey-white snow, and this time in the background, we can hear other noises. Shouting and banging and a rather disturbing "crunch" all occur before the screen is again clear, and scarred man is seated at the holorecorder. Blood oozes from the area where C4K0 connected.

Scarred Man: The EMPs have damaged the circuitry of everything mechanical. The droids are erratic. Our guide droid seems to have developed an attitude problem --

He ducks another swing, and another Human male rushes across behind him to tackle the rogue droid.

Scarred Man: This makes it even more vital that you get us out of here soon. Restimar, please confirm, or we will be forced to switch to a non-secure channel to broadcast a distress call. We do not, repeat, do not wish to break communication silence in that manner. Operation Cracked Crystal is incomplete, repeat, incomplete. We need more time, but first, we need assistance. Over.

No sooner does he say the word than C4K0 is back again, bantha-rushing him from the left and sending them both to the floor. With the scarred man out of the way, we see that he's sitting in a cavern of some kind, with a low ceiling and rough-hewn walls. A body -- not moving, not breathing -- lies on the ground behind where he'd been seated. Two more bodies -- scarred man and the protocol droid -- roll into view. A woman rushes into view and tries to attach a restraining bolt to the back of the droid's head, but it swats her away, sending the bolt skittering across the floor. As it holds the scarred man down, the droid pivots its head and glares at the woman.

C4K0: I must say, that was particularly rude. Please do not attempt such things again --

It lifts the scarred man up by his collar, then slams him into the stone floor. His head bounces. He moans.

C4K0: -- or I may be forced to take action against you. I would prefer that our working arrangement remain pleasant, and not degenerate --

Another lift, slam, head-bounce.

C4K0: -- into mindless violence. There have been violations of protocol by your tour group, and it is my responsibility to offer a stern rebuke --

He punches scarred man in the mouth, splitting both lips.

C4K0: -- for such violations. Please understand that this is in everyone's best interests, since if we lack etiquette and protocol, we become uncivilized. And no one --

Punch.

C4K0: -- wants to --

Punch, slam.

C4K0: -- be uncivilized, do they?

The woman backs out of the frame, leaving the droid to attend to the scarred man. He's still moaning, bleeding from a half-dozen new wounds on his face, and looks every bit like a man who's had a droid use him for a practice bag which, in reality, he has.

A blue-white blast from an ion gun crackles through the air and envelopes the droid, sending it twitching to the floor. It doesn't seem to be shutting down -- just twitching, more or less uncontrollably. The scarred man pulls himself into a sitting position and attempts to wipe blood from his forehead. He only succeeds in creating a somewhat thinner smear before rising and coming back to the holorecorder.

Scarred Man: Restimar, it is impossible to predict how long our equipment will hold out. We've jury-rigged the transmitter twice already -- although *somebody* thought it would be a bad idea to dismantle the droid and use its circuits and gears for the last fix, a decision we now regret.

Thick drops of blood drip from his eyebrow to his cheek.

Scarred Man: Progress report, then, since it's unlikely that our life support will hold out much longer if there are further EMPs. Operation Cracked Crystal is --

C4K0 stands, still twitching, behind the scarred man. Someone off-camera shouts as the protocol droid leaps, both hands slamming into the sides of the scarred man's neck. His eyes go wide for a moment, and then roll back in his head. The droid shoves him aside and sits before the recorder.

C4K0: In matters of etiquette, it is generally accepted that when an individual has committed a social error, we must give him the opportunity to correct this error prior to -- prior to -- prior to -- prior to -- prior to -- prior to offering to correct it for him. If one were to correct the errors made by those around one with relative impunity, one would have little time for other activities. Furthermore, it is often regarded as rude to point out minor breaches of etiquette without giving the person every chance to

correct such on his own.

Its left arm straightens and catches an attacker coming in, tossing him idly out of the holorecorder's view.

C4K0: As a tour guide, I am well-versed in the norms of the -- of the -- of the -- of the environment through which I lead my charges. These norms do not now include, nor have they ever included, the taking of souvenirs from the mines. All mineral deposits beneath Tilnes are the sole property of Verga Mer Mining Corporation -- Corporation -- Corporation, and attempted removal of any naturally occurring minerals from Tilnes is both improper and illegal.

Having apparently exhausted all other avenues of attack, someone off-camera throws a rock at C4K0. It bounces off the droid's head, leaving a sizable dent.

C4K0: I say, that is quite rude!

The droid tries to stand and is pelted by more rocks, coming from both sides. It tries to swat the rocks away, but there are too many, and they come too fast. Within seconds, sparks begin to pop in its eyes, and as the dents multiply, the droid simply falls over. As it falls, a bloody hand reaches up from beneath the recorder's view, and the scarred man pulls himself back into a sitting position.

Scarred Man: Restimar, Operation Cracked Crystal requires extraction. Another EMP and we will lose transmission capability. Status report as fol --

Another crackle-burst of energy, and the grey-white snow follows. This time, though, there is silence over the snow. Slowly, the grey-white fades to black. The signal is gone.