

Closed Circuits

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The universe is a dangerous place. Some threats are very obvious and easily avoided -- if you stay alert and are ready to take whatever steps a new situation demands. When risks to life and limb occur, people of action can move quickly and keep themselves and their loved ones safe for another day. Heroes and common folk alike are called upon to rise up against the coming of such dark times.



Unfortunately, other threats are as quiet as a whisper and as hidden as a summer breeze. By the time an ill wind blows fierce enough to be felt, its damage may long since be done. Cularin has its share of champions and their skills are certainly not in doubt, but what good are heroics when the war is already lost?

Gamma Squad moved through the complex, looking for any signs of motion. Each time a flicker appeared on their heads-up displays, a rapid burst of blaster fire put an end to it. Metal sprayed in all directions and circuits sizzled; droids lay in pieces from the facility's landing platform to its center of operations.

The latter was Gamma's goal, and it was a hard fight to get there. Gamma Three was lying in their transport; his condition was questionable at best. Clone or not, he was still a living being, and that life was hanging by a very thin thread. Every minute that passed now could be his last. Understandably, the squad wanted to get this operation over as fast as possible.

Barring their way was a tempered steel blast door and a hardened inner bunker. Gamma had already taken out the command center's automated defenses and droid guards. The hardpoint was no longer a threat, but for this mission to be a sweep, Gamma Squad had to breach the operations core and do what they came to do.

"Listen up, Gamma," came the terse voice of One, the squad's commander. "Standard breaking charges have failed, and we aren't carrying anything heavier. Power's been shut off to the doors, so slicing them open's impossible." A long pause followed, then, "I'm open to suggestions at this point."

As always, Gamma Four was the first to reply. "We waste the site with orbital fire and sift through the wreckage?" And, as always, Gamma Four's reply was violent and direct.

Gamma Two answered for his commanding officer. "We need the core intact, Four, and we have orders to make this a covert operation. How covert would a turbolaser battery be?"

Four shrugged, his heavy powered armor amplifying the gesture greatly. "Depends if we leave anyone alive to see it."

One made a sharp pass with his gauntleted hand. "Enough. This line of discussion isn't helping, and Three doesn't have time for it, anyway. I want answers, not debates."

After considering the problem (and, as usual, completely discounting Four), Gamma Five raised his hand. "Sir, if we locate the hardwire leading to the doors, I can patch my suit's system into it and manually slice them. Cutting off power means the enemy doesn't have any more control over those blast doors than we do right now."

Gamma One nodded slowly, then more vigorously. "Good. Let's make it happen." He gestured for Two to stand with Five. "You two find that line and get this done. Four, fall in behind me."

The heavily armored squad of Republic Commandos moved with a purpose, backing away from the commander center to the next nearest power junction. One and Four covered every approach angle with their modified heavy rifles, making sure their comrades could work in relative safety.

For five minutes, they cut through corridor metal and searched along tangles of identical wiring bundles. The facility was entirely run by droids, so many of the amenities of a human installation like labeled wires were absent. It made for slow going, but Gamma Five's advanced electronic training was making short work of the hunt. "I need those doors open in 30, Five."

"Right away, sir!"

As if responding to the exchange of voices, life got complicated. Wall panels down the left and right corridors slid open, disgorging unfamiliar droid models with very obvious weapons. What they lacked in finesse, they tried to make up for in firepower. Blaster arms blazing, they marched, rolled, and trundled toward the squad of commandos without a second's pause.

"Incoming!" shouted Four, needlessly.

"Less talk, more shock!" One opened up with the underslung barrel of his rifle. Ion pulses lashed out, tearing through the advancing droids. Crackling electrical arcs leapt between their robotic foes, felling several with each shot. Gamma Four followed suit, switching his rifle to its ion setting and laying down as much fire as he could.

As the teeming metal hordes closed in, it became clear their firepower and training weren't enough. For every ten droids that fell, twenty more came pouring into the complex. Four's voice pointed out the blazingly obvious, "Our position's getting overrun, sir!"

One muttered, "So glad you're here to point that out, soldier." Then he flipped a switch on his rifle and pumped off two shots in rapid succession. The streaks of light that erupted from his heavy gun propelled a pair of metal cylinders into the mass of droids ahead. "Mag burst up!"

All four commandos switched off their suits, going completely powerless even as blaster shots tore at their dense plating. Then, in a brilliant cascade of white light, the whole world went painfully silent. After roaring an all-clear without the benefit of an audio enhancer, One turned on his suit again. Even powered down, the electronics of his armor were sluggish to respond. As soon as he was up and functioning, he motioned for the others to do the same.

They were in the center of a sea of broken robots, a lifeless mass of motionless metal. The occasional spark flared in a chassis or twitch shook a steel limb, but all the droids were completely offline -- victims of a magnetic pulse grenade, compliments of weaponsmiths back on Coruscant.

"No time for gawking, men! Five, get me that line!"

The rest was more simple. They restored power to the doors, forced them open, and used close assault tactics to deal with the droids inside. The command consoles had to be captured intact, which meant no ranged fire. It was a hectic battle, but aside from some vibroblade damage to Four's chestplate and a vicious slash that pierced Two's helmet, Gamma squad took no injuries. (Later, Four would comment that the scar made Two look "all tough and masculine." Injuries *would* occur from that incident, but those were yet to come.)

Once inside, One had Five finish their mission. A command card was swapped in the main controls and cross-wired to the installation's communication system. Flipping a switch, the complex began sending out a coded core override to every droid the facility had ever constructed. Though the droids would not act differently, they were now under the covert control of the Republic.

Gamma One sent everyone back to the ship and planted the timed charge on the installation's power generator himself. Double-timing it back to their vessel, he activated its timer and shouted for immediate evac.

"One accident, ready to blow! Let's get out of here!"

"Yeah!" chimed in Four. "Let's blaze, 'cause I smell something Uffel."

Injuries would occur from this comment as well . . .

Living Force Game Notes

Effective immediately, all droids currently in possession of heroes in the **Living Force** campaign and all those purchased after this article's publish date receive a processing software update free of charge. This update has automatically been applied to all droids in the Cularin system and provides the following benefits: +2 Intelligence, 4 additional skill points.

Points can be spent on any skill the droid currently has but cannot provide new skills of any type except Knowledge skills allowed in the campaign. Skill points are spent by the owning hero and must be applied immediately. The upgrade programming has had no other visible effect on the droids of the Cularin system, nor are there any other traceable protocols inherent in the code.