

After we split up, both our teams pushed deeper into the ship. Corvak's target was located somewhere along the back end of the starship, which meant first moving directly up and then heading backward above the hangar. This was likely going to be a meandering path, as the ship was in such bad shape that there was no way a direct route still existed. Meanwhile, we would be pushing down and forward while fighting our way through the twisted and broken ship.

Progress almost immediately slowed to a nearly complete halt, and we were forced to back track several times, walking back and forth through the ship as we tried to find a clear path to the central computer, where the data core would be stored. We were still making progress, going deeper and deeper into the ship, but it was hard to quantify how much. Ahsoka was forced to cut through a few doors and some fallen debris, but quite a few times, there was just too much to excavate. After about three hours of walking, backtracking, cutting, and making very slow progress, Vaz stopped us.

"It is getting warmer," She said. "The deeper we go, the warmer it gets."

I frowned, eyes flicking to the temperature readout on my helmet HUD. Sure enough, it was noticeably warmer than outside, considerably more than just being inside shelter would account for.

"Do we have any hint of power being online somewhere?" I asked, looking at Racer. The droid whistled mournfully, spinning his dome back and forth as a no.

"No power... it's got to be something big to be making such a large portion of the ship warmer..." I said, trailing off for a moment. "Vaz, keep an eye on the temperature readout. I'm letting Corvak know and telling the rest of the Group."

We continued to descend, our progress just as slow as before, but now we moved with added caution. Soon, we began to notice pools of water forming at corners and indents of the starship's halls, formed by a significant amount of condensation forming on just about every surface, even the floor. We were forced to turn our mag boots on to a low setting, just to keep steady on the slippery, damp surface. It was about then that the *Forward Charge* reached out with an explanation.

"We spotted several geysers and hot springs around the area during our sweep," the captain reported. "It's possible the ship landed on something like that."

"A massive ship plowing into the ground, digging a trench in a geologically unstable region? Yeah, that would do it," I agreed. "Do me a favor, fly low over some of the hotspots and let your ship's sensors take a few readings. I want to know if we're walking toward one of those lethal gas clouds or something."

After the captain confirmed, we once again started to move. The temperature continued to ramp up, to the point where our armor's environmental control clicked over towards working to cool us down. It was around that point that we stumbled across the first sign that this was not going to be as simple as a smash-and-grab.

We turned a corner, looking for a way to break down into the level below, when Julius reached out and slapped my chest, before pointing down along the floor. There, cutting across the condensation, was a long streak of black and blue. It looked like a goo, but when I nudged it with my boot, it was dried along the floor, though still slightly tacky. The long, unbroken streak came out of a slightly open door, ran along the floor, then up the wall before continuing down the hall.

"What in God's name is that?" Julius asked, sounding suitably disturbed.

"It is definitely organic," Vaz said, kneeling down and poking at it with her knife.

"A mold, maybe?" I asked, but the Shistavanen shook her head.

"It's a trail of some sort," She said, pointing down the hall. "Something made this."

I followed where she was pointing, and sure enough, the trail of thick, black, and blue slime followed the hall before sliding through a cracked open air vent, an opening about two feet wide and one tall.

"Well... at least they're small," Julius pointed out.

We spend a few minutes looking around before eventually starting our journey again. As we did, the trails became more and more frequent the deeper we went. They also got consistently fresher as well, going from being hardened and tacky to a liquid slime that stuck to the bottom of our boots. The temperature continued to go up as well, getting to the point that, without our suits, we would be dangerously hot.

Almost twenty minutes after we first spotted the black and deep blue trails, we finally saw what was leaving them. Ahsoka had just carved through some rubble, and while Tatnia and I were pushing the chunks of metal and tangled droid parts out of the way. Suddenly, as we stepped through the cleared barrier, a trio of creatures moved on the other side.

They were a dark black green color, looking like massive slugs with a goopy, less solid skin. Their faces were strange as well, with a trio of large eyes framing a heavily forward central mouth with thick, sharp-looking teeth, which glinted metallic in the glare of our flashlights.

Despite their gelatinous nature, they darted with surprising speed, almost sliding on their trails of slime before disappearing into the dark corners of the open hallway, squelching and squirming into cracks and holes.

The moment the small creatures started to move, my team was prepared to fight. Ahsoka had her sabers out and ignited, while everyone else reached down and pulled out their Blasters. I was halfway through charging a bolt of lightning when all three of the creatures ran.

"Huh..." I said, quietly watching the gaps that they vanished through. "I kind of expected them to charge and attack us."

"There's still plenty of time for that," Tatnia pointed out. "Let's not tempt fate quite yet."

We kept moving through the ship, doing our best to avoid the slime slugs, but still ending up finding several dozen of them, all of them running, or rather sliding away when we approached.

We did discover that the little bastards were eating parts of the ship, specifically the wiring and smaller parts. They seemed to be going after softer metals, which they could break apart with their metallic teeth. I immediately called back to the starships outside to keep a lookout for anything trying to get to the ships.

We still pushed on, despite the increasing number of slime slugs and the temperature.

"If we get to the central core to find it's got a big bite missing from it, I'm ordering the BXs to clear out the entire ship," I said, watching as Racer, Tatnia, and Nal tried to get a blast door open, its controls panel busted out, and its internals eaten.

When the door was finally open, through a combination of luck and Racers' skills, we all stepped into the large central computer room. It was easily fifteen meters long and deep, with a hologram panel in the center and racks of computer banks around it. It looked quite similar to the other examples of CIS central computers we had seen, though a lot more pragmatic and straightforward.

There was also slime *everywhere*, dripping from the computer cases and down to the floor.

"Okay, let's get some minor power going so Racer can start exploring the state of the core," I said, training my flashlight around the room. "Vaz, Nal, set up a perimeter outside. Keep an eye out for more slugs, I don't want them gunking up anything or eating something while we crack stuff open."

We quickly got to work, hooking a spare power cell into the data core's systems, isolating it so that just those consoles turn on. It took a few minutes for Racer to slice in, but considering this was top-of-the-line tech, or it was twenty years ago, that was a pretty good time.

The heavily upgraded slicer droid immediately reported a significant amount of damage. The entire computer superstructure was corroded, chewed on, and filled with thick slime and gunk, which meant there was no way we could eject the core with electronic commands. We would need to do it manually.

It took us two hours to pry the systems apart, going very slowly so as to not damage our target. Eventually, we were able to slowly pull out the large, sensitive data core, carefully laying it down beside Racer. The droid was able to hook directly into it, analyzing the contained data while we all held our breaths, wondering if any of the last week and half a dozen hours had been worth it.

After about five minutes, Racer let out a long warbling whistle, which Nal was able to translate.

"He sliced through the outer security shell, and the interior is chock full of data," the older Duros explained. "There is no way to know what that data is without spending the time to slice deeper, but there is definitely something there. Something heavily protected."

The crew cheered, all of us slapping each other's backs at the news. Until we realized that we now had a very sensitive bit of electronic data storage, around half the size of Racer, to get back out to the surface, through broken, hot, damp, and slimy hallways.

"Okay, fine. Tatnia, take Nal and Julus back to the hangar bay, come back with a hover cart," I instructed, looking between each of them. "Ahsoka, Vaz, and I will stay here and make sure those slug bastards don't eat our prize."

Tatnia nodded, and in short order the three were making their way back the way we came, making as quick progress as they could, which was to say not very. Meanwhile, we settled in to wait, while I messaged Corvak to see how his mission was going. His team had only just reached their destination, the black box for the ship's navigation data. As far as they could tell, it was intact and full of records. They just needed to cut it free. I pointed out that he would soon have the same problem we did, save that his cargo was designed to be tough, whereas ours was anything but.

We had been waiting for about fifteen minutes when a pair of slugs, probably getting brave because we weren't making as much noise, pushed out from the cracks in the walls and started slithering around.

Somehow, they seemed to immediately recognize that something had changed, that we had torn apart the socket for the data core. They must have been able to detect the exposed "food" and immediately began moving towards it, one for the hole and one towards the core.

Vaz moved to intercept the blobs, shouting and jumping at them, trying to scare them both off. Unfortunately, with food on the table, the previously skittish blobs suddenly became much more brave. Worse still, when Vaz kicked the one getting closer to the data core, the reaction was instantaneous.

The entire room seemed to vibrate, a screeching noise emanating from the walls, seeming to vibrate through it. A moment later, it stopped, and after a long, forboding pause, slime slugs began to pour into the room, slow at first, but picking up speed. All of them charged at us, with a good amount charging at Vaz.

"Jesus!" I shouted, raising my hands and firing Sparks that danced along the wall and terminals, zapping the slugs.

Vaz pulled out her pistol and dagger, stabbing the slimes that got too close and shooting those that didn't. Ahsoka, seeing the danger to our prize, ignited her sabers and stood by it, poking any slugs that got close. Meanwhile, my sparks were doing nothing, the slow but steady slugs shrugging off the basic electric spell. Rather than ramping it up and risk damaging our prize, I switched to Frostbite, dual-casting it at nearby targets.

Where the electricity did next to nothing, frost magic was highly effective, causing the slugs to lose their grip on the ground, harden up, and die rather quickly. Soon, I was using that to our advantage, spotting the little bastards as they oozed and squirmed out of their hidey holes and freezing them solid before they could emerge, blocking the path for others.

We must have killed hundreds of the bastards, half frozen piles of them accumulating in the doorway before they began to slow, though they never really stopped coming. Even when Tatnia and the others returned and we quickly loaded the data core onto the hover cart, we were still killing them by the dozens.

As we pushed the cart out of the central computer room, the constant stream finally trailed off, leaving whatever nest we had stumbled into behind. Of course, that only lasted for a few minutes, until we accidentally wandered into another one and the deluge continued. The pattern repeated several times, each time the squishy, disgusting horde slowing down before suddenly spiking again as we moved.

Then, as suddenly as it had all begun, the streams stopped completely. We must have crossed into an area cold enough that they couldn't survive, as the numbers dropped the further we got away from the hypothetical hot springs that were warming up the bottom layers of the crashed starship.

After a few tense minutes, moving through the ship, waiting for the horde to return, we finally unclenched. All that was left was getting the data core back up to the hangar bay. This was a task easier said than done, as we now had to hoist the core up through a few holes we descended through, but at least we weren't being attacked by the slime horde and more.

By the time we reached the hangar, Corvak's team was waiting for us, as was a speeder for our precious cargo. We loaded the cargo up, and the speeder took it back down to the ground. When the area was clear, we jumped off the edge of the starship and landed in the snow and gravel far below. Our two prizes were waiting for us as we landed, as I hadn't wanted them loaded onto ships yet.

"Before anyone or anything gets on any ship, including the data core, black box, us, and the battle droids, everything is going through a full depth decontamination," I said, Julius understandably groaning, since it would likely take a few hours. "I am *not* risking letting those slugs get to Nirn. For all we know, they reproduce by mitosis, and a stray glob of guts is all it takes for them to spread. I want the landing struts for the ships scanned as well, in case... well, honestly, I don't know, but I want it done anyway."

We spent the next three hours being scoured, scanned, and re-scoured for any possible contaminants. With each plate seam of our armor representing a potential spot for gunk to get caught, each cleaning was an extensive process. The landing struts were scanned for any biological contaminant as well, before being blasted clean.

Finally, when I was satisfied that we weren't about to release the slimy version of [tribbles](#) onto Nirn, we finally left the planet behind. A quick trip to space later, and we made our first jump to deep space for our usual scan and inspection. Then we could finally go home.

