**Hangar Bay Aurek**

***Nesolat* Platform**

**Arx Orbit**

Granta Prackx sprinted along her ship’s boarding ramp. The fight had been going on for some time already, and the Sith was eager to make her presence felt before things became too chaotic.

Prackx had no great love for the Brotherhood, or for the Shadow Academy, but the Collective’s hatred for all Force users was reason enough for her to take up arms. Granta had also heard that Clan Plagueis were helping to defend the *Nesolat* platform. That meant Andrelious was possibly aboard. With the rumour that Kooki, who had disappeared during the previous engagement with the Collective, had been killed, the large woman wondered if she could once again have a place in Andrelious’ life.

*Love can come later. We’re at war.* Grana thought to herself as she activated her lightsaber. For the upcoming fighting, she had donned her Imperial Purge Trooper Armour – she had never served in such a role in her brief time in the Imperial military, but she felt the heavy armour came with just the right combination of protection and intimidation.

The hangar bay hadn’t been spared from the fighting. Whilst the magnetic containment field was still able to protect the hangar from the vacuum of space, the whole area was filled with dead bodies, both Collective and Brotherhood in origin.

Granta was about to leave the hangar when she heard laboured breathing from one of the fallen Brotherhood troopers. She quickly approached the man, surprised that the Collective would leave anyone alive.

“I’m afraid I can do nothing for you. I’m a soldier. Not a medic,” Prackx explained with more compassion than she thought she was capable of.

“You need to be careful. The Collective have developed a new type of soldier,” the wounded man explained, coughing between words.

“It doesn’t matter. They’re all going to die once I get a hold of them. Nothing those bastards can develop will ever compare to the power of the Force,” Granta replied crossly.

The man coughed a few more times, a small amount of blood leaking from his mouth. “But they’re something different. Something new. They take people. They make them all the same. They make them *think* the same. It’s almost like they’re a single mind in lots of different bodies. They completely destroyed my entire unit,”

The man passed out, seemingly from the effort of explaining the situation. Prackx climbed to her feet, more than a little disturbed by what she’d just been told. Her eyes darted around the various corpses, trying to find one of the new soldiers that the man had described.

Granta was distracted from her musings by the sound of nearby blaster fire. Tightly gripping her lightsaber, the former Imperial moved towards the doorway linking the hangar bay to the rest of the platform. She could sense lots of people nearby, all firmly engaged in trying to kill each other. As she drew near to the exit, she saw hyphens of plasma flying through the air. The fight was still clearly in full swing. That was just how Prackx liked things.

The Juggernaut moved into the corridor beyond the hangar, the HUD system in her helmet quickly identifying threats on all sides. She briefly digested the information, before identifying one of the groups of troopers as members of the Iron Legion. Prackx turned her back towards her nominal allies, using her lightsaber to deflect the incoming blaster fire from the enemy. She slowly backed away, moving herself closer to the Brotherhood soldiers.

“It’s a relief to see someone with a lightsaber. Welcome to hell, sir!” one of the soldiers declared.

“We’re not in hell yet. And now I’m here, we’re not going there anytime soon!” Prackx responded as she took position behind some cargo crates that were being used as a makeshift stockade. “Someone give me a sitrep!” she ordered.

“We’re completely pinned down here. We’ve not heard anything from the rest of the station. For all we know, we’re the last ones alive. The Collective hit us hard, and fast,” the soldier explained.

“Do you know anything about these new Collective soldiers?” Granta questioned.

“Only that they’re very, very good at fighting. We heard just four of them took out a whole squad two decks up,”

Prackx sighed. “Right. Who’s in charge down here?”

“It was Sergeant Grysnar, but she got taken out right before you got here. It’s just me and a few other Privates now,”

“Very well. Consider yourselves under my command for now. If we meet up with any of your superiors, I’ll hand you over to them. You’ll be moree useful to them,” Granta declared.

“in case you haven’t noticed, sir, the enemy will tear us to pieces if we try to advance even a few metres,” one of the other soldiers, a younger, evidently more brash man, objected.

“Just wait here, Private. You’re not dying here.”

Prackx rose from her prone position, quickly standing at her full height. As enemy blaster fire immediately began heading towards her, she expertly swung her lightsaber through the air, its crimson blade swatting every single blaster bolt away. One of the shots was even deflected straight back to its origin, knocking one of the enemy operatives off his feet. The Sith capitalised on the chance, and, leaping over the enemy stockade, plunged her lightsaber through the man’s heart, before turning and slamming another enemy hard into the nearest wall with a powerful wave of Force energy.

“For Oligard!” the two remaining enemies yelled, charging at the large woman. They threw their E-11 blasters to the ground, seemingly hoping to catch Prackx off guard and engage her in a fistfight.

“Now!” Granta commanded. The three Brotherhood soldiers leapt out from behind their stockade, peppering the area directly in front of them with blaster fire. Still, the enemies approached, either oblivious or perhaps even apathetic to the fact they were now being fired upon by the revitalised soldiers.

The surprise attack was as effective as the Sith had hoped it would be. Her trio of allies fired as though they had been fighting together for decades; each seemed to know exactly where his compatriots were going to aim.

“We’ve been pinned down for nearly twenty minutes. You just came in and completely took control of the situation in around twenty seconds,” the young soldier stated, almost in awe of Prackx.

The female smirked under her helmet. “If I wanted someone to gush at me, I’d go and find Andrelious. I was simply helping you reach your true potential, Private. That is one of the many wonders of the Force. Now, shall we show the rest of this station just what we can do?”

**Collective Forward Operating Base**

**4 floors up**

The Collective’s forward operating base on the Nesolat platform was, in reality, a hastily converted medical facility. The Collective’s forces had made a beeline for it as soon as they’d landed and easily took the area over before the station’s defenders were even fully aware that they were under attack.

Rakkas Kat, one of the Collective’s finest medics, observed as several captured enemy soldiers were brought into the room and strapped to some of the beds. Most of them were unconscious, but those that weren’t hadn’t yet given up the fight and kicked, screamed, and generally fought as hard as they could against the bonds on their beds.

“It’s amazing. You think that they’d have understood resistance is futile,” Rakkas commented as he watched his newest prisoners struggle.

“Their masters do not permit them to surrender. The Sith are known to kill subordinates who do so much as hesitate. That’s what we’re fighting, Doctor,” Nuy Vexus answered.

The Ongree sighed. “Oligard doesn’t exactly tolerate surrender, Major. That particular policy has kept me very busy since I signed up. I’ve lost count of how many death certificates I’ve had to sign. Not to mention how many cybernetics I’ve had to install,”

A Liberation Front Partisan approached the pair.

“Sir, we’ve been monitoring the hangar bays. Somebody landed in a Ghtroc-720 freighter,” the soldier began.

“Cut to the chase. What happened?” Vexus demanded sharply.

“Shortly afterwards, we lost contact with the team on that deck. We’ll know more once we’ve cracked the encryption on the holocams in that area,”

Vexus stroked his chin thoughtfully. “Get our best slicers on it. Have a recovery team go to the flight deck. And secure every single turbolift. I don’t want our new arrival to stumble upon what we’re doing.

Rakkas Kat moved away, but he could tell something had changed. Nuy Vexus was rattled.

**Turbolift**

Prackx and her team were surprised when the turbolift ground to a halt, having ascended just two levels.

“I think they know I’m here,” the female announced, getting ready for the fight that she knew was waiting on the other side of the turbolift doors.

“This level is where the Shadow Academy keep most of their more valuable artefacts. It’s also where most of our troops were sent. With luck, some may still be alive,” one of the soldiers stated.

“Let’s focus on making sure *WE* are still alive, Private,” Prackx ordered.

The large double doors of the turbolift slid open, revealing another scene of devastation, but no immediate battle.

“Keep moving. Nice and slowly. Watch the doorways. They may try and jump us. Just be ready for anything,” Granta commanded, her voice barely audible over the incessant buzz of her lightsaber.

**Collective Forward Operating Base**

Nuy Vexus watched on as Rakkus Kat operated on a captured enemy. He could barely hide his disgust at what his colleague was doing at the best of times, but to actually see the Ongree *creating* another Hive Mind Marine was well beyond anything that he had come to expect. It was particularly disturbing to watch surgical alterations to adjust one’s height; Vexus was glad that most of the captured enemies were already close to ‘standard’ height.

“I think he’s a madman,” someone behind Vexus announced. The Pau’an glanced round; he was talking to one of the Muun that made up the Agents of Capital Enterprises.

“Pretty much all of us are madmen. But if our sanity is the price we pay to eradicate the Force from the galaxy, then so be it,” the Major responded.

“These new marines creep the rest of us out. The way they all seem to think the exact same way. Like they’re droids,”

Vexus smirked. “I’m assuming you came to me for more than just casting doubts upon the good Doctor?”

“Our techs managed to get full control of the turbolift system. Once they were disabled, the holocams picked up some enemy movement on Deck 3,” the Agent explained.

“I’ll take a look,” the Pau’an stated, making his way towards the bank of monitors.

“Show me the enemy. Let’s see if we can find out who they are,” Nuy ordered.

“This is when they stepped out of the turbolift. Looks like three of the station’s defenders, but we can’t identify the large individual. He’s in full armour,” a technician explained.

A wry smile spread across Vexus’ face. “Well, I think we know what happened on the hangar deck, at least. Let’s see if this new arrival can handle a quartet of Doctor Kat’s creations…”

**Deck 3**

Granta Prackx and her team continued to edge slowly along the corridor, coming across nothing but dead bodies belonging to both sides in the conflict. Prackx noticed that very few of the Collective’s dead seemed to have been killed by a lightsaber.

“If this is the level where they keep the most valuable items, you’d think that the Headmaster or her more senior staff would have been down here to help defend it,” the Juggernaut commented.

The three soldiers looked at each and shrugged. They’d been ordered to guard the hangar deck, they weren’t even aware of exactly what was on deck 3, just that it was apparently very important to the Shadow Academy.

Prackx stopped moving, outstretching her arms to indicate that her men needed to stop. She could sense several people in a room just ahead of her, but there was something about whoever they were that just seemed somehow..*off*. It was a though she was sensing the same person, but in several places at once.

“Right. We’re going to storm this room. And we’re going to deal with whatever’s waiting for us in there. Just follow my lead and you will all be fine,” Granta announced. Her men replied with a suitably muted cheer; they still felt somewhat connected after the initial skirmish on the hangar deck.

Prackx held three fingers high the air. As the seconds ticked by, she folded the fingers downwards, charging forwards the moment her countdown reached nought. The team followed, immediately spraying the room with blaster fire almost before they got through the door.

The four enemies inside appeared to be in the process of looting anything of possible value, but, with Granta announcing her arrival so loudly, they were quickly alerted to the danger.

“Lower your weapons. It is useless to fight us!” the four armoured enemies announced in a chilling unison. They each armed themselves with what appeared to be a modified Westar-35 blaster, and started to move around the room at high speed, trying to make it impossible for Prackx and the Brotherhood soldiers to keep track of them.

*So these are the new Collective units. If they’ve got a lot of these, the Brotherhood’s in serious trouble!* Prackx thought to herself as she tried in vain to close in one of her enemies. The air was now thick with blaster fire, forcing the Juggernaut to constantly swing her lightsaber just to neutralise the threat. She did her best to re-direct blaster bolts towards their point of origin, but with the enemy almost sprinting around the room, the diverted plasma merely slammed harmlessly into the floor or one of the walls.

The Hive Mind Marines were a little surprised by how well Prackx’s team seemed to be coordinating with each other. They’d come to find that fighting as one mind gave them a distinct advantage, but this giant Force user and the rank-and-file soldiers with were defying expectations and giving them a much greater challenge than anyone else they had encountered as they looted *Nesolat* station.

*Go for the Forcie! They’re the key!* echoed through the heads of the Marines. The quartet began to focus their fire on Prackx, who had resorted to taking cover behind an upturned desk. The three Brotherhood soldiers saw their chance and started to divert their own firepower towards a single Marine. Hyphens of super-heated plasma collided with the unfortunate target, and the remaining Marines grimaced, as if they could feel their fallen comrade’s pain themselves.

“Enough of this!” the remaining trio cried out, using their jetpacks to instantly close down the gap between themselves and Prackx. One of the Marines started to shove the desk, seemingly intent on crushing the Sith between it and the nearest wall, but Granta immediately pushed back, her powerful arms completely nullifying the Marine’s attempt. With two opposing forces pushing hard, the desk needed to go somewhere and it started to lift, exposing Prackx’s feet.

The other two Marines saw their chance. They quickly holstered their blasters and drew their vibrodaggers. Wordlessly, they moved in, stabbing their daggers towards their enemy’s feet. Granta anticipated the attack just in time and stepped back, leaving the Marines to stab their daggers into the durasteel deck. Her backward movement, however, allowed the Marine pushing the desk to gain a few inches of traction. They took the opportunity to hurl the desk towards the Brotherhood soldiers, who were forced to move out of cover to avoid the thrown furniture.

Now exposed to three Hive Mind Marines that wanted her dead, Prackx desperately swung her lightsaber at her opponents. The crimson blade made contact, the sheer force of the slash allowing it to cleanly behead a Marine, again drawing a pained expression from the survivors.

The remaining two Marines attacked as though they were two arms from a single body.

Things went black for Granta Prackx.

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Prackx awoke to find herself strapped to a medical bed. She turned her head to both sides, quickly establishing that she was in some kind of medical facility.

“Ah. Ms. Prackx. You made a rather large mess of things down on deck 3. Even managed to kill two of my Marines,” an alien stated coldly, marching over to the female. His expression was a mix of hatred and contempt.

“You’re insane. Turning people into little more than combat droids. It’s disgusting,” Prackx spat back.

“But when you strip out one’s emotions, one’s individuality, they are so much more effective in the field. The two you killed are the only ones you’ve managed to kill. Well, other than in the first skirmish in the hangar,” the alien said, rather smugly.

“You’re wrong. Emotion makes me more powerful. Without it, I’d be some kind of useless Jedi,” Granta answered. “And look at you. You’ve not stripped away your own emotions. You’re a hypocrite. What the hell are you, anyway? Your head’s upside down,”

“I’m Rakkas Kat. You will soon regret your comments, Ms. Prackx. Anyway, now we know who you are, we’ve been doing quite a bit of digging. Our files have told us that you’ve got a rather soft spot for a Mr. Mimosa-Inahj,” the Doctor declared.

“Forget it. You’ll never get through  the crazy Alderaanian that he married. Surely you’re aware that he is basically her slave?”

“That would be Kookimarissia. She disappeared during our fight with the Severian Principate over Thuvis. Or at least, that’s what he thinks. We can confirm that Kookimarissia Mimosa-Inahj did not survive Thuvis,” Rakkas responded.

Granta did not trust the Ongree, but the idea that Kooki was indeed dead did not escape her notice. That meant Andrelious was available…and vulnerable without his dangerous wife to protect him.

“Of course, next time you see Andrelious, you won’t care. You’ll just want to kill him. In fact, you won’t be feeling yourself at all. You see, Ms. Prackx, I’ve wanted to capture a powerful Force user to see if I can induce aspects of Force sensitivity into my Marines. Nothing too drastic, of course, that would go against Oligard’s principles, but I saw the way you and your team were fighting. You created your own hive mind through the Force,” the Ongree continued.

Prackx, meanwhile, had stopped listening. She strained as hard as she could against the bed’s restraints, but they held firm.

“Doctor, you’re taking a massive risk with this. What if the Force sensitivity allows the Marines to regain some of their own thoughts? We could face mutiny,” Nuy Vexus interrupted, having taken an interest in what the Ongree was doing.

“Don’t forget about the kill switch I build into the Marines. If that happens, we can just remove her influence at the push of a button.” Katt answered, turning to face his colleague.

Granta continued to push against the straps, her mind focusing on what she was going to do anyone who threatened her beloved Andrelious. The Force tightened her muscles, giving her even more strength. The restrains began to rattle as the Juggernaut continued her relentless assault.

“I still don’t think it’s a good idea. I think we should just kill her. The three men that were with her are already being converted. Is that not enough for you, Doctor?” Vexus demanded. “And why did you clear the area of most of our men? Are you afraid that they’ll think your stance on the Force is weakening?”

Rakkas raised a finger and started to respond, but the two men were shaken from their conversation by multiple snapping sounds. They looked over in horror to see Prackx climbing to her feet. The female extended her right arm, summoning her lightsaber from a nearby table.

“Get down, Doctor! I’ll deal with her!” the Pau’an cried, grabbing his Arg’garok. Prackx, however, moved towards a group of the Liberation Front’s Partisans, her lightsaber slicing through their bodies before they were even able to react.

Nuy closed in and attacked, swinging his axe directly at the female’s throat. Granta was forced to step back, unable to get her lightsaber close enough to cut through the axe’s long handle. The sheer length of the Gamorrean weapon allowed Vexus to keep a healthy distance between himself and the Sith, but Prackx’s skill with a lightsaber prevented him from landing a blow on the furious female.

Rakkas Kat observed the fight from a distance, but he was never going to accept a backseat role. Granta Prackx was a Force user. Now that it was clear that she would not be converted to a Marine, she had to die. Arming himself with his Twin vibroblades, he sprinted over and joined the fray, doubling the danger for the Sith.

Prackx seemed beleaguered in the face of two opponents at once, and her lightsaber moves quickly became defensive and a little desperate.

“This is my kill, Major!” Rakkas shouted, trying his best to bypass the female’s defences.

“We just need to kill her!” Vexus replied, noticeably frustrated at his colleague’s attitude.

Putting his weight on his front foot, the Pau’an leant in, every last ounce of strength invested in a swing of his axe that would hopefully decapitate Prackx. Instead, he watched in horror as the Sith’s lightsaber finally made contact with his weapon’s weak-point, slicing the blade from its handle. Vexus cursed and reached for his sidearm.

With the odds briefly increased in her favour, Granta capitalised and, evading another lunge from the so-called Doctor, countered with a low slash. The Ongree screamed as the crimson blade sliced straight through his knees, robbing him of his lower legs, and, more importantly, his feet.

Ignoring his comrade’s plight completely, Nuy Vexus fired his blaster, hitting Prackx in the left shoulder. The female roared in pain, but her armour cushioned the blow enough to allow her to stay in the fight. Extending her right hand, the Juggernaut grabbed Vexus’ blaster with the Force, wresting it from its owners grasp and hurling it to the far side of the room.

The Pau’an was not to be defeated and unholstered another, larger weapon. He started to squeeze the trigger, but Prackx, noticing that the new weapon was a modified grenade launcher, charged the Major, her uninjured shoulder slamming powerfully into Vexus’ face.

Unable to draw any other weapons with Granta virtually on top of him, the Liberation Front commander aimed a sharp uppercut to the woman’s face, the force of the blow enough to knock Prackx off of him. Her grip on her lightsaber was released, the hilt of the weapon rolling away as the crimson blade winked out of existence.

“One hell of a punch you’ve got there. We’re going to settle this like men?” Granta questioned.

“But you’re not…” Vexus began, but his reply was cut short by a powerful punch in the stomach.

“I might not be a man, but I assure you, there’s nothing woman about the way I fight,” Prackx snapped, following her punch with a diagonal strike focused on Vexus’ right arm.

The Pau’an, noticing that Granta was beginning to tire, attempted to go on the offensive, but his fist smashed into his opponent’s armour. Before he could recoil, Prackx grabbed his arm, twisting it so hard that the bone snapped with an audible crack. The Major yelled in pain, but his enemy had not let go of his now useless limb.

Throwing Vexus to the ground, the Sith placed her left foot firmly on her fallen opponent’s chest. Drawing a Westar-M5, Prackx placed the end of the barrel on Vexus’ forehead. The last thing that Nuy Vexus saw was a broad smile from the woman who killed him.

Rakkas Kat watched on as his colleague died, knowing that he was next. In spite of Granta’s comments, it seemed that there was indeed no fury like a woman scorned.

Once again, Rakkas Kat had tried to experiment with life. He had failed. And without him, so would the Collective.