GJW XIV: In Opposition (Option 1)

Adept Seraine “Erinyes” Ténama

**Shadow Academy Platform *Nesolat***

**38 ABY**

“*Proximity warning. Hostile ships approaching. ETA ten minutes.*”

Erinyes sat up on the synthleather couch and rubbed her eyes as her sleep-fogged brain tried to parse the announcement that had just come over the public-address system. The klaxons that blared up and down the station’s halls had certainly shaken the Adept from her slumber, but they weren’t making it any easier for her to figure out what was going on.

“*Proximity warning. Hostile ships approaching. ETA ten minutes.*”

*Saying the same thing over again doesn’t make it clearer,* Erinyes thought. She shuffled to the desk terminal and thumbed a button to hail *Nesolat*’s control centre. “This is Erinyes. Status report.”

A moment later, a male voice came over the line. “This is who?”

“Erinyes. The Con–” She stopped and frowned for a moment as she recalibrated her brain. “Ciara’s new Praetor.”

“Sorry, ma’am. A Collective battle group is on approach. They’re launching troop transports,” the watch officer reported.

Erinyes frowned. “Doesn’t the Iron Navy have some kind of reaction force?” And if not, what the hell was the Grand Master doing with all his credits?

“They’ve been deployed elsewhere,” the watch officer said, not quite able to keep the bitterness out of his voice. “Clan forces are en route, but the Collective will arrive first. We’re moving the most valuable cargo into the A&O section now.” The *Nesolat*’s personnel had a habit of lumping the Administration and Observation sections into a single unit, probably because they were located right next to each other, in the most defensible part of the platform.

“How long is that going to take?”

A telling moment of silence passed. “Longer than we have.”

Erinyes sighed. Her first visit to the Shadow Academy’s largest subsidiary campus as Praetor, and it was already going to kark. “Send a map with the cargo transfer routes to my wrist comlink. I’ll hold them off for as long as I can.” The Adept pushed herself up from the couch and strode towards the office door.

A ripple in the Force touched her mind, and when the door slid open a split-second later, Erinyes was greeted with a raven-haired vision. “Now I *know* I’m still dreaming,” she said, smirking.

“Not the time.” The Headmistress of the Shadow Academy pushed past her deputy without so much as a smile. “I’m sure you’ve already gotten the status reports.”

“I was just on my way down to make sure the Collective doesn’t storm A&O,” Erinyes said.

Ciara shook her head. “There’s something else that’s more important. I need you to–” The Headmistress paused when she saw Erinyes’ curtly arched eyebrow, and reminded herself that while she was a Dark Council member and the Zeltron was her Praetor, she was also an Equite speaking to an Elder. “I would *appreciate* it if you looked after this yourself.”

“Alright, let’s hear it.” Erinyes plopped down on the couch and retrieved her flask of tsiraki from a pocket. Caf would’ve been better, but even with a miniature caf brewer sitting on a side table, Erinyes suspected she wouldn’t have time to wait for it.

“One of the isolation labs contains a set of crystals very similar to ones the Collective has been gathering.” Ciara leaned against the office desk, arms folded, and rolled her eyes when Erinyes’ gaze flickered downward. “We can’t afford to let them or the researchers studying them fall into enemy hands before their reports are complete. Retrieve both the crystals and the researchers and get them back to the A&O section so we can concentrate our defences here.”

“What do you mean, ‘concentrate our defences’? We should launch for Arx as soon as everything we need is aboard. There’s only so long I can hold them off, even with help.” Erinyes knew that the Shadow Academy maintained its own garrison—or at least, she *hoped* it maintained its own garrison—but given that the *Nesolat* was never meant to see front-line combat, she didn’t trust the garrison’s ability to hold out for long against a full Collective assault.

Ciara shook her head. “The A&O section doesn’t have a hyperdrive. If we evacuate, Arx would have to open the shield gate to allow us through. The Grand Master has made it clear that the safety of Arx is more important than anything on this platform, including us.”

Erinyes snorted. “Yeah, he’s kind of a dick, isn’t he?” The Adept squeezed her eyes shut and rubbed the bridge of her nose as she returned her flask to her pocket. “Let me guess: it’s called an ‘isolation lab’ because it’s way the frak off on the other side of the platform.”

“The spherical section on the far end, yes. You should have enough time to get there before the Collective boarding parties arrive.”

“To get *there*, maybe. There’s a snowball’s chance on Mustafar that I’ll get back here with the targets by then.” Erinyes stood up from the couch again.

Ciara shrugged. “I’m sure there’s a repulsorcart you can use, instead of running to the other end of the station.”

“Fine. Do me a favour and use that Headmistress-y authority of yours to get the garrison deployed into…” The Adept tapped her wrist comlink’s controls to bring up the map the watch officer had sent her. “… sections Besh through Esk. Have them plant whatever charges they can in Grek and Jenth, then seal off the other half of the platform between A&O and Isolation. When the Collective tries to board that side of the platform, we can vent the whole thing and kill anyone the explosives didn’t get.”

“You would sacrifice that much of the platform’s contents so easily?” Ciara raised an eyebrow.

Erinyes rolled her eyes. “What, are you worried Atra will garnish your pay to recoup the losses? That gives us half as many chokepoints to defend, and anyone still inside when the Collective arrives is dead anyway.”

“Very well.” The Headmistress followed her Praetor into the corridor, then turned into the opposite direction from where Erinyes was headed. “Oh, and one other thing: if I come back and find any of my Spice Runner missing, I’m sending Taldryan the bill.”

“If that’s what it takes for you to let me buy you a drink…” Erinyes winked at Ciara, earning herself another eye-roll. She suspected it would be the last moment of levity either of them would have until the mission was complete.

As luck would have it, a squad of garrison troops was about to depart for the isolation section at the same time Erinyes exited A&O. One conveniently short ride later, the Adept waved to a trooper wearing sergeant’s armour as she hopped off the repulsorcart. “Who’s in command here?”

“Lieutenant Dafren, ma’am. He’s in the security station, just beyond those blast doors.”

“Thank you, Sergeant. Carry on.” Erinyes strode through the archway without waiting for a response. Inside, an Iron Legion trooper wearing a red officer’s pauldron stepped down from the raised control platform to greet her. “I assume you’re Dafren.”

The lieutenant saluted. “Yes, ma’am. I take it you’re the Headmistress’ new Praetor. If you could just insert your code cylinder into the dataport…” He gestured to the console beside him.

Erinyes raised an eyebrow, then sighed and began fishing through her belt pouches when it became clear that Dafren wasn’t joking. A few seconds later, she extracted the requisite cylinder and inserted it into the console. Various identification data promptly appeared on the console’s display, proving that she was who she claimed to be.

“Thank you, ma’am.” The lieutenant gestured for Erinyes to reclaim her code cylinder. “Everything except the artifacts in Block 3 is ready for transport. Once the items from Block 3 are loaded and we’ve mounted riot shields on the carts, we’ll be ready to depart.”

The Adept frowned. “What’s special about Block 3?”

Dafren shifted from one foot to the other in the solder-addressing-a-superior equivalent of a shrug. “The Headmistress told us to leave those artifacts until you’d had a chance to inspect them. I think she’s hoping you’ll find something useful in there.”

Erinyes blinked in disbelief, then looked at the ceiling. “Fraking Krath and their fraking holocron fetishes are going to get us all killed… Fine, make it quick.”

Thankfully, the doors to Block 3 were only a few strides away. Erinyes glanced at the technicians milling about the room, nearly fixing them with a glare for their idleness before realising that they were waiting for her “inspection”.

Sighing, Erinyes reached out with the Force and slowed her pace enough to inspect the artifacts as she walked through the room. Each of the trinkets put out an aura of oppressive darkness that could give a Sith Lord a run for their money. Between them, they were immeasurably powerful, easily enough to wipe out the Collective troops aboard the platform. Yes, it was an impressive collection of pyramids, cubes, and the occasional sphere... but to Erinyes, that's all they were. She was no artificer. She didn't speak ancient Sith. She had no idea how to tell a translation talisman from a miniature thought bomb, let alone how to use either of them without them killing her or eating her soul.

“Who does she think I am, Alanna?” Erinyes muttered to herself, then turned to Dafren. “Pack it up, there’s nothing useful.” Nothing useful to *her*, anyway; as far as she was concerned, the only Sith technology she needed to take on the Collective was her lightsaber. The rest of it was about as useful as wasting time that could’ve been spent saving their own lives on ooh-ing and ahh-ing over creepy tchotchkes.

Erinyes had barely made it back into the corridor when another delay presented itself, this time in the form of an Iktotchi woman clad in researcher’s robes. “Someone help me get Ondreta out of the office block!” The researcher jogged towards Erinyes. “You’re the person the Headmistress sent, right? Doctor Ondreta’s one of my colleagues on the Ordu Aspectu team, the one she mentioned to you. He said he isn’t leaving his station until he’s finished his research report. He even took a swing at Bredar just now!” She pointed at yet another researcher, this one a Human male, sitting on a nearby repulsorcart and nursing a black eye.

“Show me.” Erinyes held back a sigh and took a gulp her flask of tsiraki, wishing she was almost anywhere else, then followed the Iktotchi woman. A dozen or so metres down the hall, they came to another door, this one marked “Office Block 5”.

“He’s in here,” the Iktotchi researcher said, tapping her access code into a keypad. The door slid open, and she stepped back and gestured for the Adept to go ahead.

Doctor Ondreta turned out to be an elderly Elomin male so consumed in his attempts to manipulate a computer terminal that he didn’t hear Erinyes’ approach, even after she’d come within arm’s reach of him. Erinyes narrowed her eyes, irritated. “*Doctor.*”

“Augh!” The researcher started upright so violently that his feet nearly left the ground. It took a few solid seconds of frantic searching before he finally saw the Adept. “What do you want?! The Headmistress ordered this report finished immediately!”

“If we don’t leave *right now*, you’re going to be either a prisoner or a corpse. You can finish it in A&O.” Through a nearby window, Erinyes could see engine trails glowing behind transport-sized ships. The orange bolts they fired at the platform’s complement of TIE fighters proved that the ships carried the Collective assault force.

Ondreta turned back to the terminal, shaking his head without really looking at Erinyes. “I can’t work there. Too disorganised. Too *chaotic*. If you people would just stop interrupting me, it would be done that much faster…” He once again attempted to use the device, but Erinyes quickly saw that the scientist’s hands were shaking too badly to press the keys with any accuracy.

Erinyes growled and slipped her Bryar pistol out of its holster, thumbing the fire selector to “stun” and releasing the safety. Ondreta was already too immersed in his attempts to work to notice the movement, which left him hopelessly incapable of dodging the two electric blue rings before they slammed into his back and dropped him to the deck plates. Two nearby garrison troopers turned when they heard the *fwip-fwip* of the Bryar firing, and Erinyes sensed them beginning to draw a bead on her before they realised what had happened. By the time she turned around, the troopers had wisely lowered their weapons.

“Cuff him and throw him on a repulsorcart—nicely. The Headmistress will be upset if he gets hurt.” The troopers quickly obliged, and Erinyes left them to it as she exited the office block. She knew Ciara would probably have preferred she talk or mind-trick the Elomin into coming along peacefully, but she didn’t want to risk those gentler forms of influence wearing off during the inevitable firefight with the Collective. With that problem solved, Erinyes produced her flask of tsiraki for another slug, then went off to locate Dafren. She found him a few minutes later, seeming to stare off into space as he held a conversation through his headset comlink.

“The artifacts from Block 3 are loaded. I’ve just advised Control that we’re ready to move,” Dafren said when the transmission ended. “Collective landing parties have docked with the platform and are breaching the hull with plasma cutters. We have two or three minutes at most before they break through.”

“Let’s go, then.” Dafren nodded and turned to issue orders to his platoon, and Erinyes climbed on to the front-most repulsorcart.

The sight of the *Nesolat*’s makeshift armoured convoy was absurd enough that even in the face of mortal danger, Erinyes couldn’t help but laugh. The trio of repulsorcarts—the same kind that civilian space stations used to shuttle passengers between terminals—moved barely faster than a jog, probably due to being overloaded by the riot shields fastened to the outsides of the beds and the Iron Legion gunners with FWMB-10K repeating blasters riding in each vehicle, not to mention the researchers and their pallets of cargo. At least some of the troopers seemed as amused by the whole thing as Erinyes was, instead of all being bundles of nerves. That cool-headedness would go a long way to making sure that as many of them as possible survived long enough to reach the Administration & Observation section and escape the platform.

Unfortunately, the Collective was determined to put the garrison’s resolve to the test. The convoy was only halfway to their destination when the orange-hot lines carved by the plasma cutters joined into crude rectangles and sent pieces of the station’s armour tumbling to the deck plating. A moment later, black-armoured Collective troops swarmed through the station’s newest entrances, and the shrill whine of blaster fire filled the air. “*Get down!*” the garrison troops shouted nearly in unison, trying to keep their scientist charges out of the Collective’s line of fire, even tackling them to the repulsorcarts’ beds so they wouldn’t eat a stray blaster bolt.

The heavy gunners’ FWMB-10Ks, affectionately nicknamed “tens”, spewed fist-sized orange bolts that forced the Collective troops to duck for cover in their makeshift docking tubes—until all three of the soldiers crewing the repeaters crumpled under perfectly-synchronised sets of headshots, so quickly that Erinyes could only blink in surprise. Any further thought she might’ve given the issue was cut off by another barrage of blaster fire, this time from two different sides. Blue-white sparks flew as the riot shields attached to the cart shorted out, and several Brotherhood troopers dropped after taking the same eerily precise and concentrated fire as their repeater-wielding comrades.

“How much longer?” Erinyes shouted over her shoulder, ducking to avoid another series of shots.

“Two minutes,” Dafren said, prompting Erinyes to realise that the cart’s original driver had also become a casualty. “Entering Section Cresh now– frak!” The repulsorcart’s engine coughed as a blaster bolt struck its undercarriage, and the vehicle slowed from a leisurely jog to a brisk walk. “We need cover fire!”

“Working on it.” Erinyes toggled her wrist comlink. “Ciara, it’s Erinyes. Shut the blast doors between Cresh and Dorn.”

Even with the comlink right next to Erinyes’ ear, the Headmistress’ voice barely carried over the cacophony of blaster fire. “Sensors are showing two vehicles still in Dorn, including the artifacts from Isolation Block 3. Hold your position until those get through,” she instructed.

“If those doors don’t close, none of us are going to make it!” The Adept peeked over the edge of the repulsorcart’s bed and reached out with the Force. A durasteel panel, left over from the Collective’s forced entry, rose from the floor and sailed between the rear end of the cart and the waves of blaster fire coming from the Collective troops. The *pang-pang-pang* of high-energy bolts hitting armour plating seemed loud enough to rattle the repulsorcart—even if it hadn’t already been shaking itself under the strain of going faster than it was designed to go—but for the moment, the makeshift barricade held.

“The knowledge contained in those holocrons is irreplaceable. If there’s any chance at all we can save them, we have to take it,” Ciara insisted.

“It won’t do frak all if we’re dead,” Erinyes shot back. “Close the fraking doors, before–”

Whatever the Adept intended to say next was interrupted by a warning from the Force. Erinyes’ eyes widened in horror when she saw a pair of grenades bounce beneath her makeshift shield to land directly under the repulsorcart’s drive unit. “*Grenade!*” she shouted over her shoulder, yanking her hand downward to maneuver her telekinetically-controlled shield between herself and the blasts.

The attempt was only partly successful. The durasteel plate prevented the two grenades—concussion models, it turned out—from turning Erinyes and the rest of the repulsorcart’s passengers into paste, but the twin blasts slammed the plating into the underside of the cart with enough force to launch the vehicle forward, at much greater speed than it could travel under its own power. Erinyes channelled the Force into a leap that carried her atop an overhead support beam, while the remains of the repulsorcart skidded down the corridor.

As Erinyes recovered her footing, she spotted a pair of large bonfires nearby: the remnants of the other two repulsorcarts. She lifted her comlink again. “Close the fraking doors or I’ll do it myself!” More of the black-armoured Collective troopers were inbound, now. Desperate to hold them off, Erinyes searched around for a makeshift weapon, until her gaze landed on a fallen Iron Legion trooper—or more accurately, the unused thermal detonators attached to his utility belt.

“Section Cresh is overrun. We can seal Section Besh, but if we do that you’ll be stuck with the Collective,” Ciara warned.

Erinyes reached out to grasp the fallen trooper’s thermal detonator with the Force. With a twitch of a finger, the arming switch moved, revealing a menacing red LED below. “I can handle myself. Seal the doors while you still can.” With a flick of her wrist, she tossed the thermal detonator directly into the middle of the Collective troopers, who all scrambled for cover.

“Acknowledged. See you on the other side.” The crackle and whoosh of the thermal detonator going off and vaporising everything within a handful of metres—including the Collective troops—was soon drowned out by the clanking of blast doors slamming shut.