

## Escape From Nesolat

*Nesolat Platform*

*Arx System*

*38 ABY*

The Shadow Academy's *Nesolat* Platform was under attack by The Collective. The fearsome new Hive Mind Marines stormed the platform with aid from The Liberation Front's Partisans, the Shikari Huntresses and the Capital Exchange's Agents. This is not at all what Liandry had been expecting when she was told to rendezvous with those in charge of the station and assist in transporting artefacts to Arx. The Pantoran had just arrived in a shuttle from Arx, with her IG unit Jesse, after placing an order down from one of the many stores open to members of the Brotherhood. This was Liandry's toughest mission, mostly because it was her first that wasn't taking place on Aliso.

Liandry cautiously peeked around the corner and caught sight of a squad of Hive Mind Marines. They a whole new level of man-machine synergy. They looked vaguely Human, well-built, presumably enhanced in non-visible ways. They were a frightening prospect and not one Liandry wanted to face. She slunk back behind cover as the Marines pushed further into the station. The Hand of Dread would need a plan if she was going to beat the Marines to their target.

"Jesse, we're going to need to figure out how to avoid those monsters while getting to the Administration and Observation section," Liandry spoke in hushed tones, just in case another squad of Marines were patrolling. Her eyes remained locked on the droid, eagerly awaiting a solution to her current problem. After several tense moments, the silence was broken.

"If we are to reach the quarry before our rivals, we will need to find a route that doesn't overlap with theirs. I would suggest staying off the main route, it's too predictable and we're already behind. I suggest we establish contact with the quarry and tell them of our rivals. Then we can offer to save them in return for being guided to their location. They'll be none the wiser," The droid responded, seemingly unaware that they weren't there to kill the people, but to save them and the platform's valuable artefacts.

"Jesse, I like it but we're not actually here to kill the people we want to find. We want to help them get themselves and their shiny trinkets down to the planet so we can get

paid. Worst case scenario we'll have to choose one or the other but we'll figure that out if we come to it," Liandry corrected her companion. Jesse was useful, but his programming was a bit too centred on the elimination of targets for Liandry's liking. There were situations where taking someone alive was more beneficial and she had to fight the droid's instincts to get him to stand down. EVERY. FRAKKING. TIME. The Pantoran hoped that this would not be one of those instances. The Hand of Dread began fiddling with the frequency of her comm unit, mostly hearing nothing or static, for a few moments before she came across a recurring message.

"H-h-hello? Is there anyone out there? This is the crew of the *Nesolat*, seeking any Brotherhood-aligned personnel to assist us in preparing for evacuation down to Arx. Please respond." The message repeated from there. It was clear the person sending the message was scared out of their mind.

"*Nesolat*, this is Liandry Cataa of Clan Plagueis. My droid and I just spotted a squad of Collective abominations heading your way on the main path and we need to find an alternate route to get to you before they do. Otherwise, you and the artefacts will be of no use to anyone." Liandry responded, hoping that the crew were monitoring the frequency and would be able to respond to her.

"Miss Cataa, you have no idea how relieved we are to hear from someone. We know there is a way to reach us, however, you may not like it and there is risk involved. What you'll need to do is make your way inside the ventilation system. Sections of it are old and may not be able to support the weight of you and your droid. One particular section overlooks an area that is patrolled by the Liberation Front's Partisans. If you are forced into a confrontation, try to end it quickly; we can't afford to let the Shikari Huntresses or the Hive Mind Marines know where you are. There should be a vent pretty close to where you are. From there, you'll want to follow the straightest possible path at all times." The panic could definitely be heard in the voice of the man speaking.

"Copy that. I'll stay on this frequency so that you can track me and give me any updates you feel necessary." Liandry turned to Jesse and addressed the droid, "Can you get this open? The quicker the better, those people are counting on us."

"Yes Ma'am," Jesse responded, approaching the grate that blocked access to the ventilation system. The droid crouched, pressing the joint that would be the knee onto the ground as it prepared the necessary tool for the job. Sparks flew. Liandry made sure to be at a safe distance while also checking that nobody was approaching their location. After a few tense moments, the clanging of the grate on the floor reached the

Pantoran's ears and she made her way over to Jesse. She peered inside the vents, noticing there wasn't much room to manoeuvre. It was going to be far from comfortable but this was her best shot at completing her mission. The Pantoran managed to fit into the vents and got herself oriented before she moved up to allow Jesse to follow behind her.

The voice on the line hadn't been lying, it was very uncomfortable for Liandry to be in such a tight space. She'd been in tight spaces before but this was by far the most cramped space she'd been in. Being a droid, Jesse wasn't having too many problems. Within a matter of minutes, the pair had arrived at the first point at which Liandry could peer down to see what was going on around them. A series of bald heads sent a chill down the Pantoran's spine. There were Hive Mind Marines right below her. Luckily, they weren't looking up into the vents or things would have been quite different. Liandry and Jesse made it past the Collective force and the Dread Hand of Tyranus let out a sigh of relief. There was no time to celebrate, she had to keep moving.

Liandry was glad she'd decided to forgo her cape, it definitely wouldn't have helped matters. Jesse was doing just fine, though he probably longed for the chance to fire off his blasters at some targets. As they advanced the pair came to a section that Liandry noticed seemed to be weaker than the vents they'd traversed before. As if on cue, the Pantoran was notified by their aid that this was indeed the weak section that ran above where a squad of Partisans had been spotted patrolling. Liandry slowly continued onward, taking care to apply as little pressure as possible to the vent in an attempt to pass through the dangerous area unscathed. Alas, the galaxy had different ideas and Liandry's trailing foot crashed into the grate. It must've been a weak one because it fell to the floor, almost taking Liandry with it save for Jesse's intervention.

"Someone is bound to have heard that and the vents are the first place they'll look. We should continue on foot. Besides, it's more comfortable that way. Lower me down to the ground then come join me. We should have time to get set up before anyone arrives." Jesse complied with Liandry's command and lowered the Pantoran to the ground shortly before joining her. There was an open room that was empty just off to the side of where the pair had exited the vent. Jesse took up a defensive position hidden behind the frame of the door while Liandry slowly ventured deeper into the room.

"Hey, anyone there? My droid and I came out of the vent-not by choice. What next?" Liandry spoke in hushed tones into her comlink, eagerly awaiting a response from anyone in the Administrative and Observation section.

“Bad news, I’m afraid. There are a dozen Partisans heading towards your location. This is more than normally sweep the area, they must’ve called for backup when they heard something suspicious. Remember, take them out quickly or they’ll call for more dangerous backup. Once you’ve done that, follow the vents on foot, it shouldn’t be too much further. When you arrive, there should be a turbolift that’ll bring you to the bridge. From there we can get out of here with our people and our artefacts intact,” the familiar voice responded.

“We have company!” Jesse notified Liandry of the arrival of the Partisans. The IG unit swivelled out from behind his cover. He fired off a few volleys of blaster fire, taking a couple of the Partisans down before he retreated back behind cover as the remaining Collective forces advanced. At this rate, they would overrun Liandry and Jesse, but at least they weren’t calling for backup. Jesse emerged from behind the wall and blasted another few Partisans, now half of the forces were down. They must have been newer recruits because their aim was off. Jesse dodged the hail of bolts headed for him with an elegance one wouldn’t expect of a droid as he continued to fire. Corpses hit the floor until there was no more firing. “Targets neutralised, Miss Liandry,” Jesse reported once he was sure the last of the Partisans had fallen.

“Alright, we have no time to lose. Let’s get to the Administration and Observation section so we can escape these Collective nuts.” Liandry didn’t wait for the droid to agree. She set off, following the ventilation system as she had been instructed. The Pantoran thought she saw a trio of Shikari Huntresses, but they had their backs to her so she was happy to continue without making herself a target.

It had taken around 15 minutes since the encounter with the Partisans, but Liandry and Jesse had arrived at the Administration and Observation section of the *Nesolat*. The pair were looking for the turbolift that had been mentioned as the quickest way to the bridge, when, suddenly, Liandry’s comm started beeping.

“Ok, so where’s this turbolift you mentioned?” Liandry asked of the individual on the other end.

“Turbolift? Oh, I see. If you keep going north it should be at the end of a short hallway you’ll find as you take the first left off the main hallway. However, there is something you should know. Doctor Trelor, the man who’s been guiding you so far, was a Collective spy. We caught him talking to Varryn Antillus, one of the Collective’s leaders. They were going to guide the platform to the Collective and hand over us, you and the artefacts. You must hurry, it may only be possible to save the artefacts or my colleagues and I.

Before we confronted him, we heard the Doctor ask Antillus to dispatch some Shikari Huntresses to aid him in ensuring his mission was successful.” Liandry could tell that whoever was speaking to her now was incredibly worried, it would’ve taken a really good actor to fake that level of desperation.

“Very well, you all need to sit tight and prepare whatever defences you can because we’re going to need them,” Liandry responded, panting as she ran. The Quaestor followed the instructions given by the mysterious female voice on the other side. As promised, the first left did lead to a short hallway with a turbolift at the end. It was a clear run but Liandry was starting to show signs of fatigue; there’d been little time to rest since the Partisans were defeated. Jesse helped his friend to the turbolift, taking some of the pressure off her. The pair entered the turbolift and set it to take them to the bridge.

Liandry’s mind was racing, wondering what she would do if the woman’s warning was true and she could only save the artefacts or the people who had been entrusted with protecting them. On one hand, the artefacts were incredibly valuable and likely irreplaceable. On the other, there were lives at stake. It was a tough decision but Liandry had made up her mind; she’d deal with the consequences of it when she set foot on Arx. Someone would be mad for sure, but there was a significant upside to her choice too.

The turbolift doors opened and Liandry was feeling much better, physically and about the choice she had made on the way up. Along with Jesse, she strode confidently on to the bridge, noticing the corpse of a middle-aged man who she suspected was the traitorous doctor she’d been told about. A woman, likely around her late 30s, potentially early 40s, approached her.

“I’m so glad that the Ascendant Clan was able to spare you to help the academy in our time of need. I’ve always admired the purity of their convictions. Your Dread Lord was once Headmaster of this institution and though her reign was controversial, the fact you’re here shows she still deeply respects the institution.” Liandry wasn’t used to this level of deference, but she liked it.

“Indeed. Now, how many people do we have to work with? Can they all capably use a blaster? We need to get set up quickly because I’m sure it won’t take those Huntresses long to show up,” Liandry warned the woman, who seemed to have taken over from the deceased Doctor Trelor.

“There are fifteen of us, myself included. We’ve moved the artefacts to a secure location.”

“Alright, I want four people set up on each side of the hallway, behind cover. From what I’ve heard these Huntresses aren’t going to just come at us, they’ll want to make sure we don’t see them coming and try to pick us off while we can’t see them. The rest of you, set up in the alcoves along the hallway. They’re going to take a few of us down, but we have the numbers advantage and should manage,” Liandry briefed the Shadow Academy staff. Liandry pointed to where she wanted Jesse set up, he could match the Collective’s forces and had proved it, but she didn’t want to risk him if she didn’t need to. The Pantoran herself took up a position behind one of the large consoles that did something, she didn’t know what.

*PING*

The turbolift’s doors opened again and out came a trio of Shikari Huntresses. One of the Shadow Academy staff emerged too soon and was incapacitated by a brutal strike from a stun baton. Seeing their comrade fall ensured the rest of the initial force was frozen in fear, making them easy prey for such established killers. It looked like Jesse would be needed after all. The Huntresses continued their advance. The remaining forces stood still until their foes had passed them. Then they pounced. A couple of them died almost instantly, but took down one of the Collective’s assassins. A round object hit the floor and the remaining Huntresses retreated just before the device detonated, rendering those caught in its radius concussed. It was going to be hard for the remaining representatives of the Shadow Academy to survive, but Jesse provided covering fire, making sure they’d at least have the opportunity to recover. A bolt of energy like nothing Liandry had seen before flew past the device she was hiding behind.

Jesse advanced to find new cover from which to attack the menace that was facing the *Nesloat*. Smoke filled the corridor as one of the remaining targets had deployed a smoke grenade. The IG unit blind fired a few bolts from each of his blasters, moving his arm between each shot to cover as wide an area as possible. A lone target emerged from the cloud of smoke-that was good news. The lone Huntress wasn’t ready to die just yet, though. She threw a suspicious-looking vial at the *Nesloat*’s remaining crew. With one final barrage, Jesse took down the Huntress but was unable to prevent the vial from shattering in the middle of the crew, its former contents seeping onto each of them. Liandry had emerged from her position in time to see the final moments of the confrontation.

“Jesse put them out of their misery and clean up the mess. We have a delivery to make.” The coldness of her word belied how conflicted Liandry was now that she saw her choice play out, but it was the best she could do. People could be replaced, artefacts couldn't.