

*Arx System*  
*Nesolat Platform*

Alarms were blaring, smoke was drifting through the station, and the sounds of screams and crying could be barely heard. It was chaos. The corridor leading towards the administration center of the platform was bathed in red emergency lights, but even those were muted or flickering. To those fleeing from the depths of the station, it was a terrifying trek. It was made all the more surreal at the sight of what was obviously the last line of defense erected in the hall leading up to the center's blast doors.

Barricades had been set up, little more than durasteel tables and counters that had been overturned and dragged into place. Behind them were grim-looking soldiers, some wearing station security gear, others wearing armor emblazoned with Arcona's sigil. The Clan had chosen to defend this corridor, hoping that others would do their part elsewhere. Amidst this line, like an almost comical mascot, stood a rotund Ewok in robes too big for his fuzzy body, staring resolutely forward.

Standing a few meters ahead of this line of defenses was a hulking figure in shining, chromium armor and a power hammer that lit the surrounding area with a bright blue glow.

To those fleeing, he looked like a beacon in the dark; to those pursuing, a target. Researchers and academics scurried past the imposing figure, still as a statue with hammerhead resting on the deck and shield in hand. Another was hanging down on his back. The station staffers were laden with boxes, bags, crates, whatever could be used to shove items of power and artifacts into.

Under his shining helmet, Stres'tron'garmis watched them pass, knowing that any number of the items they carried might be able to save, or destroy, the *Nesolat*. He had no time to consider or ask the frantic looking scientists and researchers about it and had little faith or trust to put into Force-powered relics. If that had been the plan to defend this place, Arcona would have sent someone else. He narrowed his glowing eyes as he stared down the corridor towards where it ended in a T-junction, seeing items spill from a box as an academy staffer fell. His urge was to assist, but the twin smoking holes in the body was a clear sign.

**"They are almost here,"** he spoke calmly over his armor's built-in modulator. **"Prepare yourselves! We shall hold this position until the withdrawal order is given. Those unable to fight, retreat back to the command center, but this line shall be held!"**

Blaster fire crossed the end of the hall, flashing back and forth as a small group of station guards stumbled around the corner, blindly firing the other direction. They dragged a robe-covered figure behind them, a lightsaber hanging limply and unlit from their hand.

“Can’t be escorting no more folks,” said the lead guard as he reached the line, looking hollow-eyed and exhausted. He smelled of burnt ozone. His guards carried the unconscious, possibly dead, Sith past the line under Strong’s watchful gaze. The trooper lowered his head, hand against his ear, nodding to himself. “Command says they need another five minutes before they can detach.”

“**Only five?**” asked Strong, loudly enough for those around to hear his dismissive tone. Morale was shaky at best; better to give them a reason to hope than to think about the time crunch. Five minutes under fire could feel like much, much longer if things went poorly. **“We are well entrenched and supplied. I have no doubt that the enemy will throw themselves upon our line, and I have no doubt that they shall break upon it!”**

There were no cheers, but some of the station’s guards did straighten up, holding their blasters a bit more firmly. The Arconan troops on the line shook their heads or chuckled. The General was a known quantity. He’d fight at the front and keep as many of them alive as he could. The sounds of weapons fire died down and rifles were placed on the top of tables, stocks shouldered as the barricades prepared for contact. The little Ewok, Bub Bub, rose to his full diminutive height and cracked his neck, reaching out to those around him through the Force. He breathed out, bolstering their courage, and prepared to help coordinate the defense.

The first of the Collective troops rounded the corner at top speed, fully expecting to find defenders waiting on them and hoping to overwhelm them with surprise and numbers. Strong’s face twisted into a distasteful expression at the sight of them: poorly armed and armored, volunteers, zealots who had been swayed by propaganda. They were also likely high on combat adrenals and having their courage bolstered from slaughtering unarmed researchers and under-trained Journeymen on their way here. They faltered under the hail of fire, a few concussion grenades tossed out as well to break up their charge.

They died in droves, trying to cover the twenty meters Strong had allowed the defensive line to be set up at. It was a conventional enough tactic when you had enough troops — someone would get through, some of the enemies would fall, and ammunition would be expended. Their firing discipline was sloppy and sporadic, scoring the tables his forces were using as cover and leaving smoking scorch marks on the ceilings, walls, and deck. A stray shot pinged across the Chiss’s armor, marring his pauldron and drawing a sigh of annoyance from the big man.

The first wave barely made it halfway up the corridor before it fell, either dead or wounded, but it was enough for the more conventional Collective units to set up at the intersection. A screech of metal on metal could be heard as benches and tables were dragged into their final position, able to array their own makeshift barricade while their irregulars had charged. Weapons and helmeted heads peeked out from behind this new cover to take potshots at the defenders. Cybernetically adorned soldiers rushed from cover to cover until they had armed troops arrayed on either side of the corridor’s end. The fire picked up between the twenty-meter gap, the

Arconan and station defenders pouring blaster bolts and slugs down the hall towards the growing number of enemies.

Strong glowered from behind his helm, lifting his shield to stop the occasional bolt himself. Such ranged battles were not where his talents lied. A mental urging from his comrade, Bub Bub, prompted him to reach back and grasp his other riot shield, a grim smile on his face. The Ewok had recognized quickly what would happen, that if the Collective assault forces were allowed to continue to build up in the back and forth firefight, the defenders would find themselves overwhelmed.

“Bub!” shouted the Ewok, pointing forward. Guiding the defensive line through the Force, his spoken words didn’t need to be known. The troopers understood, even as they watched their General lean forward, both riot shields before him, shoulders hunched. A smattering of grenades were tossed from the defender’s line, bouncing across the metal deck. Many of the Collective troops ducked behind their tables as they waited for the explosions that never came. They looked back up to see the corridor filling with smoke instead.

Several shouted in shock when the noise came, a roar of engines, and then the armored figure that had stood stoically before them exploded from the haze. He held two shields in front of him, their frames nearly touching, while his rocket pack propelled him forward at a dangerous speed. Strong slammed into their hastily-constructed cover, knocking a table and those cowering behind it back into the nearby wall with a meaty crunch. He recovered quickly, as did many of the troops he’d charged. In close, he still had an advantage over those wielding rifles and carbines, swinging his shields out like wide clubs. The metal frames slammed into soldiers and zealots with little regard for tactics; there were too many for the General to need to pick and choose targets. The shields’ built-in energy fields flashed and flickered, causing those struck to fly back with sparks spraying.

The Chiss’s voice modulator volume was as high as he could tune it, thankful that the helmet muffled his own voice as he shouted challenges at those he had charged into.

**“YOU FACE A NOBLE SON OF GARMIS! THESE SHIELD TACTICS HAVE BEEN PASSED DOWN MY FAMILY LINE FOR GENERATIONS! HAVE AT THEE! YOU WILL FIND ME MORE TROUBLE THAN THOSE WHO YOU HAVE BEEN CUTTING DOWN THIS DAY!”**

Some of them broke, some ran, some fell, but there were more, always more, coming to join the fray. Others charged in now with vibroblades and riot batons, forcing the Arconan to slow his rampage and actually fight with some semblance of thought. In the corridor, the air filtration system chugged along, clearing smoke as quickly as the overworked vents could manage. Arconan soldiers did their best to pick off Collective troopers as the smoke began to clear, careful of their commanding officer.

“BUH!” shouted the Ewok down the hall through cupped hands. Strong looked up to see troops closing in from both halls that intersected with his own choke point. He had little time to consider how different they looked, but they were more uniformly armored and armed than those he’d dealt with thus far.

*This bodes poorly*, thought Garmis, smashing his shield into the face of an enemy who’d strayed too near. His armor was scarred and scratched but seemed to be holding up. With a growl, he heeded Bub Bub’s direction and fired his rocket pack, scattering those around him as it lifted him from the deck, before turning and thrusting his way back towards his own line.

He was only a few meters from his barricades when a pair of the armored troopers, stepping around opposite corners of the corridor, lifted their weapons and fired in unison. Their accuracy was astounding to those able to pay attention, shots hitting both of the Chiss’s rocket pack’s nozzles. The pack cut out, sending him sprawling across the deck with skidding and screeching noises of armor on durasteel.

More of the fresh Collective troops stepped into the hall, ignoring much of the small arms fire headed their way as they formed up into a line. They stepped as one, carbines up and shooting concentrated bursts at the defenders. Strong lifted his head in time to see half a dozen blaster bolts hit the same spot on a barricade, burning through and blasting the soldier behind it. The scream of pain resonated with the General, who turned to glare over his shoulder at the new threat.

“**Bub!**” shouted Strong, forcing himself to his feet even as a barrage of perfectly coordinated bolts slammed into his personal energy shield, the generator on his hip sparking as it fought to not overload.

“Bub bub!” spoke the Ewok, retreating from the network he’d managed with the defenders to instead project a field of energy across much of the hall. The troopers’ carbine fire struck a singular spot again, just inches from the Arconan General’s chest as he turned to face them. It stopped on the barrier, the energy dispersing across the field with waves of rippling light.

“Sir! They’re calling for us to fall back, it looks like they’re ready to launch!” came a shout from a nearby station guard.

“**Good. These foes are dangerous,**” he murmured, looking down at one of his mangled and shattered shields. He dropped it and reached over instead to grasp the shaft of his hammer, turning the repulsor generator on with a thrum of power. “**Begin an orderly retreat. Bub Bub and I will cover you. Fall back to the blast doors and prepare to lay down covering fire, soldier.**”

The Chiss weighed his options, and his hammer, bouncing the haft in one hand while firmly gripping it with the other. He nodded to himself and glanced down at the Ewok. The little Mystic

looked strained, eyes closed and jaw set. Strong sighed and mentally wished his hammer well before pivoting, spinning his body and hurling the weapon at the still advancing troopers beyond the barrier. He scooped up his remaining shield and began to run, triggering the injectors in his armor to fire off a dosage of stimulants into his body. With a roar, fresh and artificial adrenaline coursing through him, he grabbed Bub Bub by his robes and held the Ewok close, turning and holding his shield up behind them as he ran.

The Chiss didn't see his hammer hit its target, but he saw the look of surprise on his soldiers' faces as they poured suppressive fire down the corridor from the blast doors. He was about to ask what had happened when the explosion came, pushing him the last few meters past the door. Only luck kept him from pitching over and crushing his Ewok friend. Shaking his head, the Arconan pulled his helmet off, blinking and staring as his head swam. Bub reached out and touched his temples, the tired little fuzzball focusing.

Strong sighed as his vision steadied, the ringing in his ears dying down, and saw his companion fall to the floor with a sigh.

"Bub..." spoke the Ewok, weakly.

The General turned to look beyond the blast door, seeing several of his own troops that had been defending the entryway struggling to stand. The corridor beyond had flaming bits of armor and body parts scattered over it, though the armored foes appeared to be getting back to their feet with mechanical efficiency.

"One ya hit," started a trooper, coughing as acrid smoke filled the entryway, "it blew up. Was bloody crazy, your hammer musta caved in the thing's chest and then it just went boom, Sir."

**"Suicide troopers of some kind," growled Strong. "Dishonorable. Get this door closed."**

"Yes, Sir, right away."

Said troopers reformed into a line, though less in number, and began marching forward again. They lifted carbines anew and drew a tired sigh from the Chiss, who reached for his belt and tossed a flash grenade down the hall.

**"Flash out!"** he bellowed for the benefit of his allies. Before he looked away he noted that a single enemy trooper did an about-face, presenting his back to the flashbang. Strong looked back after the bright explosion, squinting through the spots forming on his vision, and noticed that the enemy had stopped firing...until the singular trooper turned back to face them. They began shooting once more, picking off individual troopers or trying to keep them away from the door controls as they advanced.

*Curious. Alarming as well. VERY WELL!*

Strong disdained the use of ranged weapons for the most part. He believed the most honorable, and satisfying, method of fighting your enemy was to be able to look them in the eye. So he wasn't very happy when he drew the oddly shaped blaster from its holster and leveled it towards the approaching soldiers. Gritting his teeth, he set his feet and pulled the trigger, the weapon's recoil noticeable even to him. A pulse of sonic energy washed out, blasting back several of the nearest Collective soldiers. Another shot and he pushed them back once more before the blast door slammed shut.

A tired-looking station security officer leaned against the controls and sighed, "Door shut, sir."

Strong was about to congratulate the man on a job well done before a hissing sound came from the heavy durasteel door. A plasma blade appeared, pushing through the metal and slowly dragging its way down.

"Bub!" shouted the wobbly Ewok from near Strong's feet, grabbing at his leg and pointing towards the next set of doors. Several technicians were there, looking frantic.

"You need to pull your people back, big man! This whole section you're in is gonna be outdoors when we detach," shouted one of them.

The defenders needed little prompting, stumbling and dragging themselves, and their wounded, towards the next egress. Even as the blast doors began to close, they saw the Collective troopers cut through the last set and began stepping through, firing towards the retreating forces. More shots were heard as the security doors sealed, and alarms began going off anew, signaling a loss of pressure on the outside. The station shuddered as the command center detached itself. Strong tiredly stepped to one of the viewports lining the wall, looking back at the door that his troops had defended, many with their lives, to see the armor-clad enemies spinning into space.

"**A most ignoble end,**" he sighed, sliding down to the deck and leaning his head against the bulkhead. Bub Bub sat next to him, the Ewok looking exhausted.

"Bub Bub."

"Indeed, my little friend, indeed," he sighed, gently patting the Mystic on his head.