***Nesolat* Platform**

**Arx System**

*What the frak did I get myself into?* Hades shook his head as he tries to catch his breath. His place is on a bridge leading the Clan’s forces into battle. So, what in name of all that is unholy is he doing in the thick of battle out of breath and sweating? In short? Friends. His former Consul, Ciara Tarentae is the new Headmistress and while she doesn’t need saving (says her), she does need a clean exit route. That is where Clan Naga Sadow is stepping up to help.

The clan has made a strong foothold in the shuttle bay that is closest to the Clan’s fleet. While Admiral Pel keeps the Collective from cutting us off from space, the clan’s Consul, Bentre Sadow, requested Hades join this fight on the ground since he has known Ciara for a long time. How could he say no? That leads us to where we are now, fighting some sort of Marines with a hive mind. A third of the clan is fighting 10 Collective Marines and it’s an even match so far. But he knows he needs to link up with Ciara and whatever resistance forces she has brought along for the ride.

Currently, Hades is on the right flank of the battle. The clan is arrayed across a wide hallway with overturned tables, chairs, crates, planters and whatever they can use for cover and desperately attempting to not be overrun by 10 fraking Marines of the Collective. “Where’s Muz when you need him?” he says to himself. Hades is tucking himself into a small cut out along the wall. In it is a locked door that Hades’ team is trying to open. Two of the four soldiers were former soldiers of Tarentum that had escaped with Hades when the clan was destroyed by the Collective, with a little help from Grand Master Pravus, as the Tarenti had found out later.

The first was Master Sargent Tobias MacIan, or just simply Mac if you’ve known him long enough. Mac was the head of Hades’ starship defense forces since he was given command of a medium cruiser in the Tarentum Navy 15 years ago. He is a professional soldier and one of the best Hades has ever seen. He is all business when required but can crack a joke when appropriate. He is also a great leader.

Next to him is the other soldier from Tarentum, Staff Sargent Mariem Banitez. She’s the team’s medic, but that’s almost an insult by now. Hades has seen her perform surgery on the bridge of starships before. Her success rate at saving wounded soldiers and crewman is well over 90%. She is short but fearless. She can drink most others under the table and she’s a soldier’s soldier through and through and her squadmates are fiercely protective of their “little sister”. The other two soldiers occupying this cut out are two of Clan Naga Sadow’s ground forces that just happened to make it to this side of the hallway as the ambush unfolded.

“This is Banthapoodo. I could have had us in by now.” That is Bob, Hades’ KX-Series security droid. He’s handy in a fight and can access a lot of hardware and software but he has not managed to install a droidbrain/voice box filter quite successfully.

“You wanna try you hunk of scrap?” Mariem yells out as she continues to work on the slice. “Obviously.” Bob replies, deadpan. The SSG was working on the doorway due to not enough space to move around without being shot by the Marines pinning down the entire clan.

“Almost have it! Slow your roll, astromech reject.” Mariem replied sternly. Hades holds up his hand to silence Bob’s reply before it comes. Look towards the Marine’s left flank, one of the soldiers extends to the wall before the line starts to advance. A slow but steady advance that will have Hades’ position overrun in three minutes. *Frak.*

“I’m in!” SSG Banitez yells out as the door swoosh’s open. MSG MacIan takes point and clears the hallway. It’s a small access hallway that bypasses most of the main hallways with minimal security checkpoints.

“Clear!” he calls out. The rest of the squad takes positions inside with Bob in the middle. Hades holds up one finger. Lifting up his DE-21 and takes a bead where the Collective Marine on the far-left flank will be in 10 seconds, careful not to let the barrel of his silenced slug thrower extend beyond the edge of the cutout so the other Marines can’t see it. The Marine enters Hades’ view and he takes quick aim at the man’s neck and fires. The projectile piercing the non-armored neck and exiting the other side with the reward of a red splatter against the wall. Hades then quickly moves into the access hallway.

“Shut it!” Hades orders. The two CNS troopers secure the doorway while Bob locks it. “Grab a thermal and place it above the door and secure a boobytrap line to the door. If the Marines come in after us, they will get a surprise.” The two CNS troopers nodded and set to it.

“Bob, bring up the schematics of this station.” He orders.

“Accessing. Go ahead.” Bob replies.

“From our current position, plot a route to the Command and Control area. That is the last place Headmistress Ciara was.” Hades wipes a bit of sweat off of his brow with the sleeve of his Inquisitor Armor.

“Route plotted. If we do not run into any trouble, we can be there in 10 minutes.” Bob replies.

“Excellent. Pick a soldier and take point.”

“Great. Thanks.” Bob says as he points at one of the CNS soldiers and makes a forward motion.

“Thanks for being a nice big shield.” SSG Banitez says. Hades can almost see Bob straining against a retort.

“Shut up. Light and noise discipline from here on out. Bob, watch out for any tricks or traps our side might have laid out for the Collective.” MSG MacIan orders.

“Or that the Collective might have laid for us.” Bob counters.

“Right.” Mac nods in agreement.

The next 8 minutes is uneventful. Two built in Brotherhood traps Bob had the security clearance to bypass. The third is taking more finesse. An explosion erupts behind them at a distance, likely at the door to the hallway.

“OK. We have to move.” Says Mac.

“Finished.” Says Bob and the begins moving towards the C&C area. Hades takes up rear guard with both his unignited lightsaber and silence slug thrower at the ready. The door at the end of the hallway is within a meter of the entrance to the C&C. Holstering his slug thrower, Hades pulls out his personal comm unit. He punches in Ciara’s personal code. Finally, it connects.

“Who is this?!” Ciara orders. “I do not have time to chat.” Says the Headmistress sternly.

“It’s Hades. We are at the doorway to the access hallway outside your starboard entrance to the C&C. Is that still your current position?”

“Yes. But a lot of luck that will do us. According to the holos CNS is still holding its relative position except their line had fallen back thirty meters. Your way out is now behind enemy lines.” Ciara came back, almost yelling.

“Perfect. We can deal with whatever is in the access hallway then come out behind the Marines and catch them in the crossfire.” Ciara just laughs.

“You wish. I’ll blow this entire station up before I let it fall into the Collective’s hands.” The Headmistress spits back.

“This is the best way to get you and the artifacts off this station. Not to mention the rest of the members of the Brotherhood we will need to help battle these zealots.” Hades replies. When his old friend doesn’t reply immediately, he knew she didn’t have a better alternative.

“Fine.” She replies sternly.

“OK. Before you join us, turn off every light in the access, we need all the advantage we can get against whomever is in this access hallway.” Hades requests.

“Fine but get your team in here. The collective still hasn’t gotten through that hallway’s outer blast doors.” Ciara responds.

Bob opens the hallway door and steps out with the rest of the squad following. Hades is the last out. He shuts the door as Bob steps around to lock it once more. The blastdoor to the C&C opens. The squad runs inside before it closes. Hades comes face to face with an annoyed Ciara Tarentae.

“I TOLD you I do not need rescuing!!” she insisted. Hades holds his hands up in mock defeat. “I am not here to rescue; I am here to facilitate an extraction route for anyone that should want it.” Hades counters. Ciara scowls at him before going back to whatever she was doing. Hades takes a breath and moves to the holo monitors.

“Where is our people, Mac?” Hades asks.
“One second, sir.” He says as he pulls up the holo feed of the outer hallway near the shuttle bay that they made their landing in. Hades points to the monitor.

“What’s that the clan is using for cover? Is that a partially closed blast door?” Hades asks.

“Yes sir, I think it is.” Mac replies. Hades can feel Ciara move up next to him and look at the monitors. Hades points to a transparisteel viewport slightly behind where the Collective Marines are now.

“Is that viewport equipped with a small blast shield or Macon field if it’s punctured?” Hades inquires.

“Actually, yes. Macon field.” Ciara replies. Suddenly the two turn to each other with wide eyes and exclaim simultaneously “I have an idea!”

“What?” Hades replies. That’s the only opening Ciara needs to explain her idea (the same idea Hades has, actually). Once she’s finishes, Hades steps over to the comm unit with Bob.

“Bob, patch in the *Perdition* and Admiral Pel.” Hades orders. Without a reply, Bob works on the channels. Five seconds later he nods and flips a switch.

“Admiral Pel, this is Hades.” A second or two ticks by very slowly before Ciara chimes in.

“Pel! Wake up!” she yells.

“I am awake, Headmistress. I am just busy. What do you need, Hades?” Came the cool and calm reply from the redheaded warrior.

“Pel, detach one of the DP20 Gunships. We are sending you coordinates to target on the station. It’s a small target and they need to get it right the first time. They need to hit that with a laser cannon barrage in exactly one minute. Do you copy?” Hades askes. A second later, Pel responds.

“Affirmative. Dispatching the *Spectre* now. Transmitting coordinates to them. You have 60 seconds. Admiral Pel, out.” And with that the channel went dead. Hades turns to Bob.

“Can you get that large blast door closed by then?” he asks.

“Yes, but it needs to cycle all the way open first. The clan will be exposed.” Hades pauses for a moment, but Ciara responds.

“Do it.” Bob looks to Hades who just nods. Hades pulls up the main CNS comm channel and transmits.

“If you’re hiding behind that blast door then take better cover and get ready! 45 seconds!” The next 40 some seconds ticks away slowly. Bob finally cycles the blast door fully open with 8 seconds left. The Marines wasted no time in picking off two of the clan’s force users who did not heed the call for cover. The blast door cycles shut with two seconds to spare.

Laser fire erupts into the hallway from the transparisteel viewport. Normally, the Macon field would automatically activate to prevent depressurization. But with a slight modification it is held offline until Ciara activates it herself. The result was chaos. The viewport is 2.6 meters wide and 1.5 meters tall and all of it disintegrates under the laser fire. Suddenly the air rushes out the viewport that is now open to the cold vacuum of space. Everything is being sucked out into space. Tables, chairs, bodies, and six Collective Marines that are very much alive. And, since the access hallway door was the site of an explosion, its door was not sealed. Ten seconds later, three more Marines were pulled from the access hallway and into the black maw that awaits them.

“Get off my station.” Ciara says bitterly before activating the Macon field, cutting off the station from space.

“Give it two minutes for the life support to resupply air to the affected section, then we are good to go. The blast door on the other side is shut, so the Collective will not be a problem for the immediate future. At least not in that section.” Says the Headmistress of the Shadow Academy.

“Yes, but maybe not for here. I suspect that the collective will have the outer blast door open leading to the hallway right outside in possibly less than two minutes” Bob says to the room. Ciara screams angrily, annoyed at the Collective for coming to HER station!

“Set self-destruct! 8 minutes! No visual or audible countdown!” Ciara orders her staff, which obey immediately. She turns to Hades and his squad.

“Grab every artifact we have here and move into that access hallway! DO IT NOW!” ordered the Dark Councilor. “We’ll just have to deal with thin air for a minute. Let’s go!”

As everyone obeyed their orders, Ciara moves just past the access hallway, gripping her lightsaber tightly in her hand, almost wishing the Collective would dare come at her right now. She stares intently at the outer blast door.

Hades grabs an impact grenade from his backpack and ties a translucent wire to its arming pin. He hangs the impact grenade a few inches from the blast door on the ceiling then runs the other end of the wire to the bottom section of the blast door and affixes it so when the blast door opens, the pin will be pulled and the grenade will drop to the deck and detonate. Once he is done, he runs to Ciara, who’s eyes are almost red with rage.

“Time to go!” He yells, gripping her arm. Her face spins towards him and glares. He softens his grip and his eyes.

“For Tarentum.” He says. She blinks a few times and nods. She looks behind her at the sealed C&C, knowing that a few tricks lay in store for the enemy there, too. They both move into the access hallway and shut the door. Bob locks the door behind them.

The entire squad and fourteen SA support staff race down the hallway, most carrying artifacts in bags or however they can. Ciara is on point with Hades bringing up the rear. A minute rolls by before they hear the muted impact of the grenade explosion. Since they are moving on the run, they make it back to the outer hallway in three minutes. Ciara pulls up her datapad and opens the blastdoor where Clan Naga Sadow was fighting. As it opens, members of the clan rush through, first among them was the Consul, Bentre Sadow.

“Headmistress. It is good to see you. It’s unfortunate that is during a time such as this. We have secured your exfil. A Decimator of the Clan’s inventory await your departure.” The Consul bows to the Headmistress. Ciara nods, but absently.
“Thank you, Consul. But we all must leave.” Ciara says.

“Headmistress?” Bentre inquires.

“I set a self-destruct. I will not have this station fall into their dirty hands. We have 4 minutes left. Evacuate your people and signal any other Brotherhood forces to do the same. They will not reach Arx’s surface with MY station!” With that, the Headmistress moves into the shuttle bay nearby with her staff. Bentre turns to Hades.

“Good work. Please escort the Headmistress to the *Perdition*. We will be on your heels.

“This is not a request.” Without another word, Bentre Sadow moves off to direct his forces to retreat. Hades boards the Decimator as the ramp closes, his squad preceding him. He finds a seat by Ciara as the ship lifts up and rushes out of the shuttle bay. He looks at her, hatred and anger still apparent on her face.

“You did the right thing, Ciara.” Hades said. She twists her head towards him and scowls. “Yeah. You explain that to the Grand Master. You explain that out of hundreds of artifacts collected over decades you’ve managed to only save, what 30? 35? Just leave me alone.” The Tarentae jumps to her feet and walks towards the bridge.

Hades takes a deep breath and slowly exhales. *What the frack DID I get myself into?*