

Leading from the Front (Option 1)

***Nesolat* Platform High orbit over Arx**

Lucine, Tabriss and the remaining members of the AEF squad made it back to the Administration section of the *Nesolat* platform moments before it detached and began its descent to Arx. The mood on the platform was sober as they dropped into the atmosphere over Eos City. Wrapped in an illusion to hide her own injuries, Lucine went from one man to the next, talking quietly to each in turn.

After seeing to the duties of leadership and ensuring that the medics had seen to the AEF soldiers, Lucine found a quiet corner away from the others and closed her eyes. Though maintaining her illusion took little concentration, drawing upon the Force to heal herself took significantly more effort.

She took a deep breath, feeling the currents of fear and anxiety that swirled around her. She drew upon the energy of the emotions and focused them upon the aches and pains all over her body. A cool, tingling sensation spread over her various cuts and wounds, reducing the time it took them to heal from days to minutes.

Tabriss stood nearby, observing her and making sure that no one drew near enough to interrupt her. She could feel his irritation hidden beneath his stoic expression. In truth, she felt a similar irritation over the events that had transpired earlier. These new Collective weapons, these Hive Mind Marines, had rendered her and her powers utterly useless. As a result, she had nearly been seriously injured. If Tabriss had not intervened, she could have been killed.

It was not the fact that he'd had to rescue her that was the source of her irritation. It was the fact that it was yet another of a long series of rescues. She was a Force-user who could enslave the minds of others. More than that, she was the leader of a Clan whose military and financial might controlled an entire system. And yet she had been nearly helpless before a group of clarified computer-controlled puppets, so much so that she had needed to be rescued by her butler.

"Feeling better, my lady?" Tabriss asked when she finally opened her eyes.

"Well enough," Lucine replied carefully.

At her words, the slender Chiss nodded. He reached into his pack and retrieved an insulated thermos and a carefully wrapped teacup. A delicate cloud of steam wafted from the thermos as he poured tea into the cup before presenting it to her. She accepted it gratefully and lifted the cup to inhale the delicate floral scent. "So, I imagine that you have something to say to me regarding my performance earlier?"

Tabriss raised his eyebrows at her words. “Your performance? Are you referring to your growing tendency to become over reliant on your Force powers, which is causing you to foolishly place yourself in life-threatening situations with alarming regularity?”

“It sounds as if you disapprove,” Lucine said evenly as she watched Tabriss steadily over the rim of her teacup. By all appearances, their relationship was simply that of a butler and his employer. Some whispered that it might run deeper than that, given Lucine’s overt preference for Chiss. While it was true that both got more out of it than a simple master-servant relationship, there was nothing sexual about it.

She found him invaluable, not just in his talent for serving but also for his honest and perceptive appraisal of any given situation. In the Ascendancy, he had served some of the most powerful Chiss families, observing the rise and fall of their fortunes that accompanied good decisions and bad. But his experience would be worthless if he was not allowed to speak with candor. When they were alone, he was permitted to speak the truth. It was helpful, even if she sometimes found his tone a little too acidic.

“That is a word for it, my lady,” Tabriss replied dryly. “While I understand your preference for seeing to tasks yourself, might I remind you that you have a literal army to obey your will? For example, there was no reason for us to accompany the Sergeant on his mission to retrieve artifacts.”

“You know how I feel about delegation,” the redhead replied. “If you want something done right, and all that.”

“If we are exchanging old adages, my lady, might I remind you about the one concerning what happens to the body of a snake when you cut off the head?” Lucine bristled at his comment, but Tabriss pressed on. “Your power is impressive, but it is ill-suited for direct combat. I think you will find the way easier if you focus your talents upon the things you are best suited for, and delegate the rest.”

Lucine sipped her cooling tea, taking a moment to savor its clean, earthy taste as she willed away her growing annoyance. She did not like taking constructive criticism, even if it was well-intended. But, whether she liked it or not, there was truth to his words. Much as she wanted to be seen as a leader that ‘led from the front’, so to speak, it was becoming more and more clear to her that she was poorly suited to it. “I will take your words under advisement,” she finally allowed grudgingly.

“Very good, my lady,” Tabriss replied with his usual cool air of professionalism. “Your orders?”

“Bring me the status updates and assemble the field leaders. Once I have all the updated intel, we will begin updating our strategy.”

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As it turned out, the news was not good. The Administration platform was rapidly descending toward Eos City, where the Collective had already gained a foothold. A sizable force of enemy soldiers had overrun the city and was busily slaughtering helpless citizens and just generally making a mess. Though all seven Clans and the Iron Legion were present, it would take time to take back the city.

“Charming,” Lucine said dryly as she studied the holographic map that depicted rough estimates of the enemy positions. “It appears that we will be setting down right in the middle of that mess.”

“We will be!” General Stres’tron’garmis replied in his usual booming baritone. **“We shall take the fight to them! It will be a battle whose tale will be passed down the Garmis line for generations!”**

Lucine hid a smile as she noted more than one of the military leadership roll their eyes. “Your enthusiasm is appreciated, darling,” she replied. “But what about specific tactics?”

“We will divide into four squads, and push out on all four compass points,” Aiden put in. “Laser turrets are effectively handling their air support, leaving us to deal with their ground forces. Once we have secured positions at these four positions,” he gestured, and four buildings became highlighted in blue, “we will continue to push outward.”

“That seems reasonable,” Lucine said as she studied the map. “Who will be commanding the four squads?”

“General Garmis, Tali, Junazee, and myself,” Aiden replied.

Lucine lifted her eyebrows at the selections. “And where will I be during all this?”

“It is best if you remain here, with Sergeant Thor and his squad,” Aiden replied.

“Nice and safe, hmm?” the Shadow Lady said in an acidic tone. She could feel a wave of discomfort settle over the table like a heavy blanket.

“This area is the most secure, yes,” Aiden said.

Lucine’s eyes narrowed as she stared at the map. She was being asked to stay behind. Nice and safe and unseen, while others gathered all of the glory and adoration for themselves. She *hated* feeling coddled. All her life, she had struggled and fought to get to where she was, and now she was expected to simply sit back and allow others to do the work. To trust that they

would do it right. "And if I were to order you to allow me onto one of the strike teams?" she asked.

"If that's your will, then it will be done," Aiden replied with that same infuriating even tone he had been using throughout the conversation.

"Please, my lady. We cannot risk losing you," Strong said, though his tone of voice made it clear that his words were just as much personal sentiment as they were out of duty.

The Shadow Lady took a long, deep breath as she tried to fight down her rising temper. Strong meant well, but he did not understand. None of them did. To ask her to stay behind was like a slap in the face. It implied that they had no faith in her abilities. In the past, Consuls had been allowed into combat, but she was deemed too inept? Useless... worse than useless because she needed to be protected.

She opened her mouth to give the command, but before she could say anything, Tabriss cleared his throat as he placed a teacup in her hands. She stared down at it as their earlier conversation came flooding back to her. Not just that, but the twin sensations of humiliation and helplessness under the onslaught of the Hive Mind Marines. She was no fighter. Out there, she would be a liability.

She set her jaw and glared at Aiden. "Well. I suppose the Administration tower's height will provide an adequate vantage point to direct those in the field."

The Proconsul raised his eyebrows at her sudden change in tactics. "I suppose it would."

"Then it is settled. I shall stay here and provide updates on the positions of the enemy," Lucine said lightly, expertly hiding frustration. The palpable feeling of discomfort quickly vanished, with some of those present even having the poor taste to breathe sighs of relief. It did little to improve her mood.

The leadership meeting adjourned a few minutes later. The Administration deck would be landing in a few minutes, and the four teams planned to depart as soon as landfall was achieved. Each of the four squad leaders went to begin preparing their teams, leaving Lucine to her own devices.

"Was that little performance planned ahead of time?" she asked Tabriss as she stalked up the stairs to the higher levels. "It sounded as if it had been rehearsed."

"Merely a happy accident, I assure you," Tabriss said brightly as he followed behind, lugging a satchel filled with communications equipment. "For what it is worth, I commend you for your wise decision making."

Lucine grumbled under her breath as she rounded the stairwell and started up another flight. "How many more levels until we reach the Observation deck?"

"Four more, my lady."

Lucine growled under her breath. "This would be so much faster if I were allowed to use the turbolifts."

"But alas, you are not, my lady," Tabriss replied. "I am told that it became protocol shortly after Atyiru's accident during battle."

Lucine remembered the incident all too well. Atyiru had become seriously injured after a turbolift collapsed during a battle. She had been presumed dead for a long time, and during that time, people had genuinely mourned her. Of course, if a similar thing happened to her, she would receive no such commemoration. In all likelihood, her enemies would dance in the streets.

"I suppose I can see the wisdom, even if it is quite inconvenient," she sniffed at last.

"Quite. Given recent history, it seems that Arconan Consuls do not do well during wars," Tabriss said.

Lucine cast an icy glance back at him but did not respond. In truth, he was not wrong, though it did little to ease her foul mood.

They passed the rest of the trip in silence, before arriving at last on the Observation deck. The transparisteel walls allowed for almost 360-degree visibility, providing a marvelous vantage point of the city. In the center of the room stood a large holo-table, surrounded by screens that allowed a closer view of selected areas within the map.

As the Administration section of the *Nesolat* slowly descended into its docking platform, Lucine had a marvelous view of the cityscape. All around, Collective aircraft wheeled and spun, too busy being harassed by the emplaced laser turrets to be able to attack effectively. Below, she could see the movements of civilians and squads of both the Collective and the Iron Legion. It almost looked like a marvelous game board spread before her, with the pieces already in place.

As Tabriss bent to the task of setting up the communications equipment, Lucine powered up the table and brought up a tactical map of their surroundings. She studied it, comparing it to the map containing their battleplan.

"Well, it appears that we have our work cut out for us," she murmured as she accepted the headset that the butler offered to her. She settled the headphones over her ears, being careful to make sure that it did not mess up her hairstyle.

Over the comm-link, she could hear the chatter as the team leaders prepared to depart. She felt the heavy thud as the Administration section docked into place, and the repulsors throttled down. It was time.

“Doors are opening,” she heard the tech announce over the comm-link.

“Good luck, darlings, and happy hunting,” she said into the mouthpiece with more chipperness than she felt. She crossed the room to one of the transparisteel walls and looked out over the landscape. Below, she could see the Arconan groups stream out of the doors and onto the field of battle.

Though the Arconans practiced radio discipline, the cacophony of battle was readily apparent even through the comm-link. Apparently, communication would be limited. She listened as the field commander rattled off instructions as she studied the holo-table, observing as the four teams spread out along the cardinal directions toward their designated positions.

Abruptly, harsh static filled the line, causing Lucine to flinch and tear the headset from her head. “What in the hells was that?”

“It appears the Collective are jamming our signal,” Tabriss replied as he turned dials and pushed buttons on the communication bay. “I am trying to re-establish contact.”

Lucine looked back at the holo-table. She could see Team Aurek, Aiden’s team, moving along their assigned route. However, a few blocks ahead of them swarmed a squad of Collective, though their position would be obscured by a building.

She took a deep breath and drew upon the Force, touching Aiden’s mind with her own. *Heads up, darling. There are enemy combatants two blocks ahead on the right.* Through the telepathic link, she could sense Aiden acknowledge her words. Still, she maintained the link as she watched the group slow down but continue to approach the group of red dots that represented the Collective. She could feel the Grey Jedi’s stress levels heighten, even as her hand instinctively closed into a fist as if holding a lightsaber. She could almost hear the blaster fire, the shouts and cries, the thud as the enemy combatants fell. One by one, the red dots faded from existence, but none of the markers that represented the Arconan squad.

As the minutes ticked past, Lucine maintained her vantage point. With the help of the holo-table, she could monitor the positions of the individual squads as they wove their way through the streets toward their intended targets. Aiden reached his position first, with Tali and Junazee’s squads reaching their designated positions a few minutes later. That left only Strong’s team.

Lucine studied the table, and saw that the massive Chiss had very nearly reached the building that was his intended location. But it appeared that not one, but two squads of Collective soldiers had taken positions near the building.

Lucine crossed the room to the transparisteel with a pair of field binoculars in her hand. She squinted through the lenses and took a closer look at the Collective soldiers that flanked the approach to the building. A group of partisans led by a single Huntress were to the south. To the north stood a group of four Hive Mind Marines.

In his typical fashion, Strong was barreling toward his objective, and it was unknown if he was even aware of the enemies that awaited up ahead.

"Do we have comms back?" she asked as she focused her sights on the Huntress that led the partisans.

"Not yet," Tabriss replied regretfully. "We have yet to locate the jamming device."

"Lovely," the redhead muttered. She took a deep breath, and focused all her will upon the green-haired woman. Through the Force, she could sense the woman's mind, even as she saw the look of confusion spread on the Huntress's face.

Hello, darling. Command your troops to attack the Marines.

She accompanied the telepathic words with the Force, lending weight to the suggestion and making it an irresistible command. The long distance made the task more difficult, but she felt the Huntress's will begin to give way against her own.

The redhead saw the Huntress's face turn into a snarl as she fought against the compulsion.
No! Get out of my kriffing head!

In response, Lucine ground her teeth and brought all of her will to bear against the Huntress. She felt a wave of dizziness and a headache begin to bloom behind her eyes, but she pushed past the pain to focus all of her power upon the woman. *Do it. Attack the Marines. Now.*

Black pinpricks danced in front of her eyes. It felt as if the room was spinning as the power flowed from her to the Huntress though the tenuous link. Just as she felt her link to the Force begin to ebb, she saw the Huntress's expression go slack. Her lips moved, even as she lifted her bowcaster and took aim at the Hive Mind Marine nearest to her. Lucine almost cried with relief as she saw the partisans obey the command, and also took aim at the Marines.

She started toward the holo-table, but her knees gave out from underneath her.

"My lady!" Unaware of the struggle that had just taken place, Tabriss left the communications station and went to her side. He helped her to one of the chairs, and she sank into it gratefully. As she watched, the two groups of red dots drew together, many of them winking out before Strong's group converged on them.

She closed her eyes, hoping to open a telepathic link with Strong. But just the act of thinking sent bolts of electric pain through her. She had done all she could; she was spent. She propped her elbow on the armrest and rested her chin on her hand. As she watched, the remainder of the red dots flickered out, along with a few of the blue ones. A few minutes later, the blue dots continued on, converging on the building.

One by one, the Collective forces fell. Eventually, someone even managed to take out that damned jamming device, allowing them to re-establish contact with the other Arconans. To her relief, none of the squad leaders had been injured in the initial assault, and even losses to the rank and file soldiers had been minimal.

“It seems that many are acknowledging the assistance you provided,” Tabriss commented as he offered Lucine a steaming cup of tea and a couple of pain tabs.

“Lovely,” the redhead replied, her neutral tone hiding the surge of pride that she felt in being able to provide such assistance.

But despite her efforts, Tabriss’s lips quirked upward in a wry smile. It was getting to be impossible to hide things from him. “I daresay, it is likely that you will be asked to serve in a similar role in the future. In all likelihood, you may never be allowed to visit the front lines again.”

“Just as well,” Lucine said with a wave of her hand. “As you have said, in the past Arconan Consuls have had bad luck in wars. Perhaps it is time to end that pattern. Besides, someone very wise once instructed me to focus my talents and delegate the rest.”

“He does sound very wise, my lady,” Tabriss replied with a smirk. “Very wise indeed.”