GJW XIV: The Front Lines (Option 2)

Adept Seraine "Erinyes" Ténama

**Part 1**

**Mattock Station Approach**

**Arx Orbit**

It was amazing, Erinyes reflected, how getting shot could turn into a relaxing vacation.

The Adept's escape from the Nesolat platform had been far more eventful than she'd wanted. It was only by sheer luck or the will of the Force that the Collective battle group had already departed for the shield gate to follow the Administration and Observation sections to Arx's surface, allowing Erinyes to jump aboard one of the Collective's assault transports and make a clean getaway to join the rest of the Taldryan forces aboard Mattock Station. Thankfully, the commute from the remnants of the Nesolat had also given Erinyes enough time to slap a bacta patch on her gut-shot and start mending the wound with the Force--not to mention drain most of her hip flask to deal with the pain.

Despite all that, even nearly getting killed by Collective soldiers paled in comparison to the backlog of "important" messages that Erinyes knew would be waiting for her when she arrived on Mattock Station. Before the attack on Arx, it would've been administrative bantha kark like budget reports or requests from the Caelus Council. Now, it would probably be troop movements and supply status updates. Either way, they were just different forms of noise; things that Erinyes had to hear about because Consuls were supposed to know what was going on in their Clans, even though there were perfectly competent people handling everything already and she couldn't care less about the details as long as the job got done.

Erinyes sighed and drained the last of the tsiraki from her flask. It probably said something about her that she preferred the pain of a potentially-lethal blaster shot to the headache of having to read through endless not-actually-important messages. "This is why I left," she muttered to nobody in particular.

The relative calm of the transport ride evaporated the second the ship touched down in one of Mattock Station's hangars. Even as the boarding ramp extended, Zxyl was already waiting, idly tapping a datapad against his open palm. "Nice of you to join us."

"I'm glad you're not dead, too. Bring me up to speed." Erinyes descended the transport's ramp, wincing at the pain that shot through one side of her torso with every step.

Zxyl raised an eyebrow. "Are you alright?"

"It's fine, I just got a little shot." The Adept reached for her hip flask again, then grumbled when she remembered it was empty.

"Uh, okay then." Zxyl led Erinyes towards the hangar's exit. "We forced the Collective to retreat, but they gave as good as they got. They destroyed the Resurgent in drydock, plus two of our Vindicators. The Bastion will be down for repairs for at least a month."

"Frak," Erinyes muttered. "You can't speed that up?"

The Proconsul shook his head. "Not unless I want Ventus on my ass for putting Taldryan ahead of the Iron Navy."

"What about Ektrosis and Tavros, and our ground forces?" Erinyes pushed the wish for another drink out of her mind and re-focused her efforts to mend her blaster wound. At least her irritation made it a little easier to bend the Force to her will.

"Ektrosis is no worse for the wear. Tavros is fine, too, but they lost most of their Headhunters in the scrap with the Collective," Zxyl said.

"Gee, I wonder why. It's almost like they're fifty years out of date." Erinyes rolled her eyes.

Zxyl snorted. "Right? The stupid thing is, the Collective was flying them too, and there were enough mostly-functioning ones left for us to grab with the station's tractor beams. Tavros' maintenance team figures they can have ten of them operational within the next few hours. As for the army, both 2nd and 3rd Regiment are already planetside--they were on exercises with the Iron Legion when this whole thing began, remember?"

"No, but I'll take your word for it." Erinyes nodded to a couple of Taldryan Army troopers manning a security checkpoint as she and Zxyl walked past.

"Well, the Collective sent a different regiment of troops through a different shield gate to attack the Iron Legion headquarters on top of their assault on the Shadow Academy," Zxyl said. "We're the closest friendly forces to there, so the generals are redeploying everyone to counter them. Battle plans." He handed the datapad he'd been fiddling with to Erinyes.

The Consul accepted the device, but didn't bother looking over its contents. "How's everyone holding up? I imagine seeing several thousand of their comrades killed in a single battle has some of them pretty shaken."

"How should I know? You're the 'feelings' one." Zxyl shrugged.

Erinyes glared sideways at her Proconsul. "You're going to need to learn how to read people if you want to be an effective leader."

Zxyl snorted again. "You couldn't pay me enough to take your job. Enjoy reading all the 'Consul's Eyes Only' messages that came in while you were– what now?" He lifted one arm to examine his wrist comlink, which had just started chirping to mark the arrival of a high-priority transmission.

"What is it?" Erinyes' Inquisitorius-issue wrist comlink was giving off the same tone, but with one hand working the Force into her blaster wound and the other holding the datapad Zxyl had given her, she wasn't in a position to answer it.

"Oh, frak... you're going to want to read this yourself," Zxyl said, eyes still glued to the incoming message.

"I mean, that's great, but..." Erinyes waved the datapad at Zxyl, who either didn't see or ignored the motion. "Ugh, fine." Her comlink's tone changed slightly, and Erinyes lifted her arm to bump the device's controls with her chin--but when she brought the screen up to read it, the text she expected to see had been replaced with a man's face. "Uh, why'd the Voice send a recording of himself instead of a text message?"

On the other end of the transmission, Idris Adenn quirked an eyebrow. "It's not a recording, Consul. Or did you not see this call coming in?"

Erinyes felt her face flush at the question. "Er, I kind of had my hands full. What's going on?"

"I assume you're aware that the Collective breached the shield gate above the Shadow Academy. We've just received word that Evant Taelyan is leading their forces," Idris said.

The Consul frowned. "And you think that's reliable intel? I mean, there are plenty of other reasons for Taelyan to be in the same location as the Collective. Like fighting them."

Idris shrugged. "You tell me; the report came from one of your subordinates, Appius Wight. Besides, the Collective is known to experiment with mind-control techniques, and they had Taelyan in their custody for most of a standard year before he was rescued. It's entirely possible that they found a way to turn him."

"There's no chance of it being some kind of ruse or trap on Taelyan's part?" Erinyes asked.

"That isn't his style, and even if it were, he was in no shape to carry off that kind of deception when he returned to Arx. We have to consider him a threat until we can prove otherwise," Idris said.

Erinyes sighed, then winced at the pain the gesture caused. "And I assume you're not calling to give me a courtesy heads-up or compliment me on what a wonderful job my subordinate did."

"No. I'm calling because the Collective used Taelyan's knowledge of our defences to catch us off-guard." The Voice didn't quite conceal a wince with the admission. "Taelyan's leading a Collective strike force through the tunnels that connect the main Shadow Academy facility to the Dark Ascent. We need someone to stall him long enough to reinforce our garrison."

Erinyes raised an eyebrow. "Do you mean 'stall' as in let him reach the Dark Ascent alive but later, or as in stopping the threat by any means necessary? And what the frak is the Grand Master doing that's more important than smacking some sense into his apprentice?"

Idris shrugged. "Whatever he wants."

"Of course he is," Erinyes grumbled.

"As for whether Taelyan survives, at this point, he's no different than any other Collective leader. Your priority is to protect the Dark Ascent." Even as he ordered the death of a former superior, there was no hint of hesitation in Idris' voice, which the Adept couldn't help but admire.

Erinyes nodded. "Send me the tunnel schematics and any intel you have on the forces Taelyan's leading. I'll have my people deploy to the Dark Ascent ASAP."

"I'll tell them you're coming." With that, the Voice ended the transmission.

Erinyes looked up at Zxyl, who had been uncharacteristically patient while he waited for the conversation to finish. "Told you you'd want to read it yourself," he said, smirking.

"Don't get too excited. If this goes wrong, you might get my job whether you want it or not." Erinyes squinted down at her wrist comlink as she used the Force to open another channel, then turned on her heel and started back toward the hangar. "Sav, get everyone down to the Dark Ascent. We've just been asked to kill the Deputy Grand Master."

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**Taldryan Embassy**

**Dark Ascent**

Whenever someone asked whether the Dark Brotherhood's leadership truly listened to its members, the administrators at the Dark Ascent liked to remind them that each of the Clans of the Brotherhood had an embassy there, to ensure open lines of communication between the Dark Council and the Consuls. They were far less keen to announce the fact that each "embassy" amounted to a suite of offices and accommodations for each Clan's representatives, and that thanks to the Collective, most of the Clans hadn't even had representatives on Arx for the better part of a year.

Judging by the dust that made Erinyes sneeze--and left her grimacing at the lingering pain in her stomach muscles--when she walked into one of the larger conference rooms, even the Dark Ascent's cleaning droids hadn't been inside the Taldryan "embassy" in months. It was bad enough that some of the room's other occupants, all members of Taldryan's Dark Fire Brigade commando unit, had chosen to leave their helmets on for the sake of filtering the air. Luckily, their commander--one Colonel Marcus Saviri--was made of sterner stuff, and after the soldiers all came to attention to mark Erinyes' arrival, continued delivering his briefing as though the noxious cloud didn't exist.

"Taelyan was sighted at the Shadow Academy ninety minutes ago, accompanied a battalion-strength formation of Collective troops," Saviri said, once the troops had sat down again. "They proceeded to capture and board one of the repulsortrains that runs through the tunnels between the Shadow Academy and the Dark Ascent, then departed, presumably with the intent to assault the Dark Ascent when they arrive. If allowed to proceed, their ETA is between ten and eleven hours."

"That long?" Erinyes' brow furrowed.

The colonel nodded. "The Shadow Academy's main facility is almost seven thousand kilometres away. According to the intel the Regent's Office provided, the train has a maximum sustainable speed of five hundred kilometres per hour. They estimate that the Collective's technicians could redline that to an average of seven hundred at most without the repulsorlift drive burning out."

When Erinyes didn't move to stop him with more questions, Saviri turned back to the assembled troopers and tapped a button on his datapad. The portable holoprojector behind him lit up with an image captured by the Shadow Academy's security systems, showing the Deputy Grand Master boarding a repulsortrain at the head of a column of Collective troops. "Enemy force composition," Saviri continued. "Besides Taelyan, the Collective forces are comprised of two cyborg Jedi-hunter companies of a composition similar to our own, but replacing the scout lances with close-combat specialists carrying CR-1 scatterblasters; one cyborg heavy weapons company, armed with FWMB-10 repeating blasters and electrostaves; and one company-strength formation of Hive Mind Marines, whose standard loadout appears to include rapid-fire blaster carbines, MM-9 wrist rockets, and a variety of grenades, according to the images we pulled of the attack on the Nesolat platform."

A few murmurs rippled through the gathered soldiers. Erinyes' brow furrowed as she tallied up the hostile units Saviri had listed. If her math was right, they'd be outnumbered four to one. That was a lot of firepower, especially in an enclosed space with no easy way to maneuver. Just then, the possibility that the rogue Dark Jedi Master wouldn't be the greatest threat left a knot in Erinyes' stomach, right beside remnants of her blaster wound.

Saviri pressed another button, and the holoprojector image changed to a close-up of the Hive Mind Marines, with oddly-shaped rifles slung over their backs in addition to their standard combat gear. Several carried devices that looked like a cross between an E-Web repeating blaster and one of the Shadow Academy's mass-produced lightsabers. "The last feed we were able to capture before the Shadow Academy went dark showed that each Hive Mind Marine was also carrying a man-portable plasma cutter, and that their company is equipped with several tripod-mounted beamdrills. We assume they intend to use those to breach the Dark Ascent from below."

Saviri tapped his datapad again, and a schematic of the tunnels beneath the Dark Ascent appeared, highlighting several evenly-spaced points within the quarter of the tunnel closest to the Dark Ascent. "To prevent Taelyan and the Collective forces from reaching the Dark Ascent, we're going to make the tunnel impassable. We'll use plasma cutters to honeycomb the tunnel floor, then set off detonite charges to create a pit trap that halts the repulsortrain without collapsing the tunnel on our heads. Once the train's stopped, one team will ambush the Collective forces and destroy any breaching equipment they're carrying, then fall back towards the Dark Ascent before we get stuck fighting in the tunnel." The holoprojector image changed again, adding a simply-rendered red train to the tracks that was suddenly beset by a cartoon explosion and a swarm of blue arrows. Erinyes wondered how Saviri had managed to put the briefing together on the ride down from Mattock Station, but quickly dismissed it as something he must've learned in commando training.

"At that point, the Collective will have to choose whether and how to proceed," Saviri said. "If they follow us through the tunnels, we can set traps to slow them down. If not, they'll have to backtrack to the nearest maintenance access point and continue their advance on the surface, where we or whatever allied support the Consul can scrounge up be waiting for them." The colonel looked to Erinyes.

"I'll talk to the brass once we're done here," she said.

"Thank you, ma'am. In the meantime, our scout lances will recon the area to confirm that the locations are suitable for placing charges." Saviri tapped yet another button on his datapad, but this time the holoprojector's image remained static, and the colonel read from the device's screen. "Teams for this operation will be..."

Erinyes tuned out and focused on repairing her blaster wound while Saviri spent several minutes reading off the company's team assignments. She'd been nursing the thing constantly for hours now, and while it was still a lot faster than a bacta tank would've been, the need for her to maintain her concentration for that long was starting to take its toll on her attention span. Maybe I'll sneak off for a nap while they're making the charges, she thought.

"... if we engage Taelyan," Erinyes half-heard Saviri say, bringing her focus back to the briefing. "Never forget that he's an Elder Dark Jedi who is far more dangerous than most of the Taldryan members we've faced in training. Taelyan's Inquisitorius dossier states that he's a Marauder whose Force abilities are geared toward enhancing lightsaber combat. I'm sure the Consul can give us a better idea of what that means" Saviri turned to Erinyes.

"I have no idea what's in his Inquisitorius file," Erinyes said, face flushing a little. She was certain that she'd seen the dossier Saviri mentioned; it had been attached to one of the messages that she'd received and ignored on the trip down to Arx. "But if he's anything like me, don't think your chances are good just because you've got one of those new electrobatons. That won't prevent him from throwing you around with the Force, or deflecting your own blaster bolts into your face. I'll be wherever he's most likely to show up, but if he pops up somewhere I'm not and you don't have at least three people able to engage him, retreat and call for backup." A hint of relief rippled through the Force, and Erinyes saw several of the commandos nod.

"You all know your jobs. The transport with our detonite and plasma cutters is scheduled to arrive in thirty minutes; you've got until then to prepare. Dismissed." The soldiers all rose from their chairs and filed out, some chatting amongst themselves. When they'd gone, Saviri turned to Erinyes. "Are you sure should be deploying with us, ma'am?"

Erinyes raised an eyebrow. "Is it that obvious that I'm injured?"

"You've been holding your right side since you got here, and that sneeze looked like it hurt. With all due respect, that might not have happened if you'd let me send a team with you to the Shadow Academy." As rebukes went, it was gentle; Erinyes knew that Saviri had spent too long in uniform to really unload on someone he saw as a superior officer, even if they deserved it.

"Why, so they could prevent the Collective from landing two entire battlegroups on Arx's front doorstep?" Erinyes snorted. "Even people who actually can see the future don't always get it right. I'd rather blame the Collective for attacking us, or Mav for not telling anyone it was coming."

Saviri's eyebrows shot up. "The Grand Master knew?"

"I've worked for enough Grand Masters that it wouldn't surprise me if he did. He probably just sat there cackling to himself about how it would be a great opportunity to see which of the Clans was the strongest." Erinyes reached for her flask, grateful that she kept a few spare bottles aboard her Decimator for the times she needed a refill.

"Fair enough. Still, I'm surprised you came yourself instead of sending someone else," the colonel said.

"Why would I send someone else? This'll be healed up before the transport gets here." Erinyes frowned when she heard Saviri hesitate and sensed discomfort behind his eyes. "Let me guess, you want to give me another 'you can't keep going on missions like you did before you were Consul' lecture."

Saviri winced. "I wouldn't put it that way, ma'am." The re-framing came too late, though; Erinyes had already begun her tirade.

"We have the opportunity to deal the Collective a serious blow and get some payback for how they tried to bully us in our own homes. I'm not going to sit back and let other people do all the fighting, especially when the rest of you can do your jobs just fine without me looking over your shoulder. Besides, it's been a Consul's duty to lead their Clan from the front lines for as long as the Brotherhood has existed."

"With all due respect, it's also been dangerous for as long as the Brotherhood has existed. I assume you heard about Elincia Rei, General Zentru'la's daughter--she was the Consul of Scholae Palatinae until she died in the Lyra-3K incident last year. You've seen the effect that losing a Consul and an Elder has had on that Clan," Saviri warned.

Erinyes rolled her eyes. "Taldryan's stronger than that. The professionals who actually run things have such a good handle on it that I'm practically a figurehead."

Saviri shook his head and tapped a button on his datapad to shut off the holoprojector. "Your presence or absence has an impact beyond the tasks you complete yourself, ma'am. Knowing that there's someone in the chair who has their backs is reassuring to a lot of people, and if the Clan didn't have confidence in you, someone would've given you the Sith retirement package by now."

"Yeah, well, you all managed just fine without me for the last decade." Erinyes sighed. "I'm going to find somewhere I can finish dealing with this wound. Call me when we're ready to go."

"Yes, ma'am." Saviri came to attention as Erinyes turned to leave.

The next few hours passed in a blur of pain, sleep, and glowing terminal screens. One of the smaller offices in the Taldryan "embassy" suite had a comfortable enough chair that, after a call to the administrators to get the cleaning droid sent through, Erinyes was able to curl up and finish dealing with her blaster wound once and for all. By the time she was finished, the weariness that had built up through hours of channelling the Force--not to mention her misadventures aboard the Nesolat platform--left Erinyes in desperate need of a nap.

The roiling Dark Side energies that suffused the Brotherhood fortress were hardly soothing, though, and left Erinyes too on edge for her sleep to be truly restful. The chrono built into her wrist comlink said she hadn't quite managed to doze for a full hour before she gave up and went in search of strong caf instead.

Finally, with wake-up juice in hand and no other way to pass the time, the Adept activated her datapad and sifted through the pile of messages she'd been ignoring. One of them was from the Iron Legion's operations staff, informing her that with only a few hours' notice, all they could move into position for her operation without leaving themselves vulnerable somewhere else was a pair of infantry companies. Erinyes forwarded that message to Saviri, then dug through the electronic stack to find the Inquisitorius dossier on Evant Taelyan. Even this bit of research, something that could literally save her life in a battle with a nearly-equal foe, felt like pointless busy work.

Annoyed at her baser impulses, Erinyes grumbled and pushed the thoughts aside, then opened Evant's dossier. There had to be something that would make it worth the effort of reading, she told herself. Luckily, it wasn't long before she came across those very tidbits. The Deputy Grand Master was a Soresu practitioner, the file noted; an odd choice for a Dark Jedi, in Erinyes' mind. He also favoured staying mobile during battle, even indulging in acrobatics like vaulting over obstacles and attacking his opponents from the air; tactics Erinyes would've expected from an Ataru or Sokan stylist, not someone who prioritised efficient defence and precise counter-attacks. He didn't seem to use the Force as a weapon in itself, but according to the Inquisitorius' notes, he had perceptiveness and a sense for danger that was nearly unrivalled in the Brotherhood.

Frowning, Erinyes reached out with the Force and floated her carafe of caf over to her appropriated desk for a refill. For someone like her, who relied on overwhelming their opponents' defences to kill them before she herself ran out of steam, sabreurs like Evant were some of the most difficult--and least fun--enemies to fight. Besides him employing one of the few styles that could actually hold off her assault, Erinyes could see from the recordings of Evant's battles that she wouldn't be able to eke out a victory on skill and experience alone, the way she often did when fighting Equites who used similar strategies to his. She needed another edge, and for that, she had to delve into Evant's mind--or at least, what the Inquisitorius had recorded of it, before the Collective got their hooks into him.

The Deputy Grand Master's psych profile offered Erinyes a few more useful gems. Evant was methodical, rational-minded; traits to which Erinyes could barely relate. His arrogance, however, was far more familiar to her. When the Consul's eyes flitted across a note about Evant's tenure as Regent, the pieces began to fall together. Evant fought the same way he ran a business: combining a steady foundation with the ability to make rapid changes, to make sure he was always in control of his situation. His arrogance probably came from knowing that his plan, whatever it was, was correct and that anyone who disagreed with him was simply wrong. That, Erinyes reflected, was something she could use against him. If that wasn't enough, she had other tricks up her sleeve, too, not to mention the Dark Fire Brigade at her back. Maybe being Consul wasn't all bad.

With a strategy forming in her mind, Erinyes felt accomplished enough to justify trying to go back to sleep, until her comlink warbled and started her awake. "Consul, it's Dark Fire Six. We're ready to proceed."

"Of course you are. I'll be right there." Erinyes polished off the rest of her caf, chased it with a swig of tsiraki, and set off for the repulsortrain terminal beneath the Dark Ascent.

**Part 2**

**Repulsortrain Tunnel**

**Approx. 1700km East of the Dark Ascent**

If there was one thing Erinyes had in common with the other passengers in the armoured personnel carrier, it was that she could sleep almost anywhere. Unfortunately, "almost" and "anywhere" weren't the same thing, and the Consul's attempts to catch a nap in one of the APC's gunnery stations were as futile as her attempts to do so in the Taldryan Embassy had been. The Dark Side energies didn't saturate the tunnels quite as much as they did the Dark Ascent, but something about the literal darkness kept Erinyes' mind on edge.

Thanks to one of the blurbs she'd half-read while inspecting the schematics, Erinyes knew that Grand Master Pravus had overseen the construction of the tunnels beneath the Dark Council's headquarters. Rumour had it that in his omniscient wisdom--or paranoid dickishness, depending on who you asked--Telaris' predecessor had filled the passages beneath the Dark Ascent with all manner of cruel, devious traps for the unwary. Normally, Erinyes wouldn't pay any mind to such absurd claims, but something about these mutterings had stuck in her mind. Maybe it was the fact that she could imagine any of the three Grand Masters she'd served doing the same thing, or the stakes of this mission being so high that she couldn't afford to not have the rumours amount to nothing.

Agitated, Erinyes retrieved her datapad and brought up the schematics from Saviri's briefing. Besides the main transport tunnel where the Dark Fire Brigade intended to ambush Evant and the Collective, the drawings showed dozens of smaller chambers branching off from the main tunnel. When Erinyes zoomed in on them, a tooltip dutifully noted that the chambers had been built as "research and storage areas" on Pravus' orders. Erinyes tapped on one of the rooms to see if the datapad had any information on its contents.

No data.

"Figures," Erinyes muttered. None of the dozen other chambers she tried produced any useful information, either, which did nothing to assuage Erinyes' concerns that she and her commandos might encounter something more dangerous than Collective troops in the Dark Ascent's tunnels.

Those concerns intruded into Erinyes' mind for the rest of the hours-long trip to the Dark Fire Brigade's planned demolition site. Even the periodic reports from the company's scout lances that they hadn't spotted any threats wasn't quite enough to reassure Erinyes that no threats were in fact present. When they arrived at the target site and the soldiers began cutting holes into the tunnel floor to plant their demolition charges, Erinyes paced around the area, keeping her senses extended as far down the half-lit tunnels as she possibly could.

More hours passed while the Dark Fire Brigade prepared their trap. By the time they were finished, there were hundreds of holes bored into an area half again the length of Evant and co.'s captured repulsortrain. Each hole was a metre deep but no wider than Erinyes' finger, and all were packed with small wads of high-grade detonite. When the commandos detonated the charges, the blast would excavate the weakened area and drop anything on top of it--like the captured repulsortrain--into a metre-deep pit. That, Saviri had explained, would make the Collective into easy targets for the Dark Fire Brigade's repeating blasters and thermal detonators. All they had to do then was make sure the Collective's beamdrills were destroyed in the ambush, while Erinyes dealt with Evant.

Right, because that's nothing to worry about, the Adept groused to herself.

"Something wrong, Consul?" Saviri asked, after the next circle Erinyes paced around the APC.

"No, I'm just restless. The Dark Ascent isn't exactly a relaxing place to spend time," Erinyes said.

Saviri's facial expression was hidden behind his mask, but Erinyes sensed his puzzlement. He took a step closer to the Adept and lowered his voice so that the other commandos wouldn't hear. "Are you still mission-capable? If we have to change our plan, we have to do it now."

"I'm fine," Erinyes insisted, her voice equally low. "It's just nerves."

The emotions behind Saviri's mask shifted from puzzlement to skepticism, and Erinyes imagined him frowning. "I've never known you to get jitters," he said.

The Adept opened her mouth to answer, but shut it again when Saviri's observation sank into her mind. She wasn't the type to get jitters, even in the face of life-threatening danger, so why was she getting so riled up just by being in these tunnels?

"Have the scouts start inspecting the catacombs in this area to make sure the doors are all powered and sealed. If they find any that aren't, they're to report it and stay clear until I arrive," Erinyes said.

"Hoo-ah." Saviri turned to issue his orders.

Erinyes left him to it and resumed pacing. Focus on Evant, she reminded herself, pushing her anxieties out of her mind. Truth be told, now that she'd evened the field by tending to her wound and getting at least a little bit of rest, the Adept was excited at the prospect of facing off against a Dark Jedi Master. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had a truly no-holds-barred lightsaber duel with an opponent whose skills matched her own. Her anticipation ran so high that her pacing transformed into an impromptu lightsaber drill, as she varied her footwork and gestured in ways that reflected a battle against an imaginary opponent--one who could just as easily have been an embodiment of Erinyes' own worries as a mental stand-in for Evant.

Sadly, after an indeterminate amount of time, Saviri's voice cut through Erinyes' reverie. "Consul, one of the scout lances reports a damaged chamber door about thirty kilometres ahead. Power to the main locking mechanism is offline, and there's something big and presumably hostile inside."

Erinyes stopped in her tracks. "How the kriff do they know that? Did they open it?"

"Negative. They advised that the entire door is shaking, like something's trying to batter it down."

Oh, that's not good. "Send me the grid reference, I'll meet you there." Erinyes hustled towards the nearest APC. Once she'd relayed the coordinates to the pilot, the vehicle took off at full speed.

Thanks to the APC's high-powered repulsorlift drive, the twenty-kilometre journey flew past in a few short minutes. When Erinyes arrived, she spotted Saviri and half a dozen other commandos arranged in a L-shaped formation, with the open end several dozen metres back from the troublesome chamber doors. The problem immediately revealed itself when something slammed into the other side of the doors and sent a boom echoing down the tunnel.

"Well, that's worrying," Erinyes said as she stepped up beside Saviri. "Do we have any idea what's inside?"

"Negative. The chamber's scan-shielded," the colonel reported. "But if the doors are as sturdy as the ones in the above-ground research chambers, I can't think of any sentient species strong enough to break it down without injuring themselves in the process. Whatever it is, it probably won't listen to reason."

Erinyes snorted. "Good thing I'm not one of those Jedi dweebs who tries to talk people down from fights, then." Meanwhile, the APC she'd arrived in rose from the ground and pivoted so its blaster cannons covered the chamber door, which gave off another threatening boom, followed by the sound of pebbles falling against the tunnel floor. "Can we make it regret trying to break out? Frag mine, something like that?"

"I wouldn't risk it. Using explosives or incendiaries in this environment is likely to collapse the tunnel or burn up any breathable oxygen," Saviri said, a pang of apprehension in his voice.

"Fine, we'll do it the old-fashioned way." The Adept slipped one of her lightsabers from its wrist sling. "Would you like to tell me I'm being too reckless now, or wait until after we've killed whatever this thing is?"

Saviri only had time to sigh--at least, Erinyes assumed that's why his shoulders drooped--before another boom echoed through the tunnels. This time, it was followed immediately by a sharp crack and a large piece of stone shattering against the ground. Erinyes ignited her lightsaber and jogged over until she was across from one line of troops, changing the L to a K, with the open end facing the now-collapsing door. In unison, the Dark Fire Brigade commandos raised their rifles at the opening gap, and Erinyes heard the shrill whine of repeater rifles powering up.

With a final crash, shards of metal and stone exploded into the tunnel, followed by a stench of rotting flesh that left Erinyes gagging. The repeater rifles' spin-up came to an abrupt halt as a furious blur of something barrelled out from the chamber, and the soldiers at the back of the formation threw themselves to one side. By the time they clambered to their feet, the spherical aggressor had bounced off the far wall of the tunnel, and pivoted to face them in a way that a creature without joints shouldn't have been able to pivot--then unfurled its tentacles to reveal a gaping maw filled with many, many teeth.

"They have a rathtar," Saviri said, sourly.

The Dark Fire Brigade didn't need any further encouragement to loose blaster bolts into the would-be predator's rubbery hide. To their dismay, even the high-powered shots from their E-11 rifles didn't seem to faze the rathtar as its tentacles whipped out to seize the two nearest commandos and drag them down its waiting gullet. Saviri's more powerful E-22 fared slightly better, forcing the creature to flinch when a bolt struck one of its feeding tentacles and buying Erinyes a split-second to hurl her lightsaber towards the beast. A touch of the Force turned the violet lance into a spinning disc that cleaved through the rathtar's tentacles like a glowing buzzsaw and prompted the rathtar to let out an ear-splitting shriek of pain. The two ensnared commandos struggled to break free as the creatures still-writhing severed appendages hit the ground with a clank.

Erinyes stopped when she heard the noise, head tilted to one side in confusion. She hadn't encountered a rathtar in person before, but she knew people who had, and none of them had ever mentioned hearing one clank--but there was no mistaking the violet glint that reflected from the severed tentacle as Erinyes' lightsaber returned to her hand. Somehow, this rathtar had had armour plates attached to its body. Judging by how one commando crumpled when a tentacle slammed into his stomach, the effect was the uglier, toothier equivalent to giving a Dowutin durasteel knuckles.

Then a warning screamed through the Force, and Erinyes didn't have time to contemplate the situation any further before she saw all the teeth lunging towards her and was forced to throw herself out of the way. As she rolled to a stand, she sensed a fusillade of well-intentioned but unhelpful blaster bolts peppering the ground around her, no doubt fired by Dark Fire Brigade members who'd been trying to hit the rathtar. One of the bolts passed close enough for Erinyes to swat at it with her lightsaber, and she took the opportunity to redirect it into one of the rathtar's far-too-many eyes, or whatever the light-sensitive organs technically were. The creature howled in pain, but the injury didn't prevent it from slamming one of its tentacles down on a second Dark Fire Brigade trooper with enough force to shatter the man's helmet.

When the rathtar reoriented itself to face Erinyes again, it became clear that the constant barrage of blaster fire was taking its toll on the creature. Many of its sensory organs were charred and oozing where the Dark Fire Brigade had hit their targets. Even as the rathtar flung another commando into the tunnel wall with enough force to crack it, the beast's movements were noticeably slower--slow enough, in fact, for the APCs' turret gunners to track it properly. The smaller bolts from the commandos' E-11s were quickly supplemented by much larger shots from the blaster cannons and E-Web repeaters mounted on the vehicles. With a final screech and swipe from its armour-plated tentacles, the rathtar half-exploded, half-deflated into a charred, gelatinous mass on the tunnel floor.

"Well, that was exciting." Erinyes deactivated her lightsaber and, now that adrenaline wasn't overriding her sense of smell, tried to cover her nose against the rotten-flesh stench before it made her gag again. "Who the frak looks at a rathtar and thinks, 'this isn't dangerous enough, I should put armour on it'?"

"You'd know better than I would, ma'am." Saviri glanced Erinyes over to make sure she wasn't visibly injured, then turned to two nearby commandos. "Get the wounded into an APC and send them back to the medics. The rest of you, as you were."

With the commandos setting about their duties and the immediate crisis over, Erinyes checked her wrist chrono. There was still at least an hour until Evant and the Collective arrived, and to her pleasant surprise, the foreboding feeling that had plagued her seemed to have died along with the armoured rathtar. Maybe I can finally get some sleep, she thought as she climbed into one of the APCs.

#

Evant Taelyan muttered to himself as he brushed an imaginary speck of dust from his robes. After spending months in the filthy rags the Collective had forced him to wear, well-made clothing seemed like a luxury, and he was determined to preserve it for as long as possible. It annoyed him that the Collective troops with whom he travelled didn't show the same care in their grooming; sloppy dress was a sign of a sloppy mind, and the renegade Master would've thought that troops with so much of their brains connected to computers would be more orderly. Maybe he'd talk to the Collective leadership about tweaking the hive mind's priorities when the Brotherhood was dealt with. For now, he had bigger problems to worry about.

For Evant, the last few months--the better part of a year, really--had passed by in a blur. He remembered how the Collective had staged an attack against the Severian Principate at Lyra-3K-a, how they'd captured him and the representatives of the Brotherhood's Clans and shipped them all off to a hellish prison in some forgotten corner of the galaxy. He remembered the torture, the drugs, the attempts to extract any useful piece of intelligence from Telaris Cantor's right hand. The Grand Master's name had come up often in those early days, and like any good apprentice, Evant had dutifully resisted the enemy's attempts to pry his master's secrets from his mind. Eventually, they'd relented with the questions, and Evant felt like he'd won. It was just a matter of waiting until the Brotherhood found him. Just a matter of waiting.

Waiting.

And waiting.

And waiting.

Some of the Collective guards had jeered at the Master while he waited, asking whether Great High Lord Grand Master Telaris was ever going to come collect his apprentice--their emphasis, not his. They never dared say it to Evant's face, but they were always within earshot, too frequently to be a coincidence. The mewing of his inferiors wouldn't normally have bothered Evant, but the Collective had proven very persistent. Maybe they'd spiked the sedatives that kept him from breaking out of the prison with a mind-altering chemical that made him more open to suggestion. Maybe he'd gotten worn down by the endless combat exercises they'd put him through--the training lightsaber they'd somehow acquired for him was a nice touch, making him feel like a third-rate Novitiate again--while they developed their Hive Mind Marines, or the fact that he was never able to rest for more than a few hours before they dragged him out of his cell and tortured him again. They only ever did that when he was asleep, so Evant had started sleeping less and less, because a conscious willingness to endure pain didn't negate the unconscious desire to avoid it.

In the end, though, the Collective hadn't forced Evant to turn on the Brotherhood; it had been his own decision, as he'd been reminding himself ever since he set foot on the Shadow Academy's main campus. The final straw had been the realisation that if Telaris had left Evant languishing in the Collective's clutches this long, he had no intention of coming to his apprentice's rescue. It would've been just like the Grand Master to decide that Evant's ability (or lack thereof) to escape his captors was just another test of his fitness to lead the Brotherhood--a test that, so far, the Master had failed. Evant had hated himself for that, both his failure and his inability to see such obvious circumstances.

And so, Evant had done what he always did when he wished to impose his will on the galaxy: he planned. He planned for how Oligard and his cronies, blinded by their hate, would never trust him unless they thought he was under their control. He planned how he'd let his jealousy of the Grand Master's power bubble to the surface just long enough to convince the Collective that their goals were aligned, and how he would offer them just enough information to make an attack on the heart of the Brotherhood an opportunity too good to pass up, even as it was too good to be true. And then, he planned how he would use the Collective's own might to break them after they had broken the Brotherhood, and seize the Iron Throne for himself. He'd planned for when Telaris inevitably delved into his mind upon his return to Arx, ironically by not making any plans specific enough for Telaris to counter until after that meeting.

He'd even planned for the danger that rippled through the Force as the repulsortrain sped toward its destination.

"Stop," Evant ordered. The pilot immediately pulled the throttle lever, and Evant relaxed back in his seat as the train slowed, waiting for the insistent voice in his mind to fade away.

It didn't.

The Master bolted up from his chair. "Stop the train, now!" The pilot slapped the emergency brake controls, and the train lurched, throwing Evant forward into the control console--and kept moving. Evant turned to the pilot, irritation rising in his voice. "Why haven't we stopped?"

"Too much mass, sir," the pilot said as she struggled with the controls, trying to wrestle the train into submission. "Can't stop these on a decicred like you can a speeder."

Stunned, Evant whipped his head around, searching for something he could do to stave off the threat looming in his mind. He considered trying to push against the tunnel walls with the Force, but such applications were far from his strong suit. Trapped by his own plans, all the Master could do was watch as the tracks in front of him erupted into a cloud of dust and the train's deck fell away beneath his feet.

"Target has stopped. I say again, target has stopped," the Dark Fire Brigade demolitionist reported over the comm.

You don't say, Erinyes thought, seeing the nose of the front train car crumpled against the edge of the metre-deep depression in the tunnel floor. The rest of the train fared better, having only been sank far enough to partially block their passenger exits, but it was clear that none of the cars--or their occupants--would be going anywhere anytime soon. That suited Erinyes and the Dark Fire Brigade just fine, since it gave them time to seek out their new primary targets: the Collective's beamdrills. Without those, they would never be able to breach the Dark Ascent, and their mission was as good as over.

The problem, Erinyes noted as she and an group of commandos rappelled down from the tunnel ceiling, was that it was hard to distinguish a generator attached to a beamdrill from one attached to a repeating blaster without actually seeing it. The Taldryan forces' scanners made it easy enough to tell where the generators themselves were, but with nearly thirty generators and only four of them being attached to beamdrills, it would take precious time for the commandos to verify their targets before destroying them. Luckily, when Erinyes activated her scanner, the car she'd landed on only seemed to contain one power source large enough to be a generator. Two of the commandos who'd rappelled down with her unslung their plasma cutters and set to work creating a hatch in the car's roof, while the rest covered the sides of the conveyance, ready to play whack-a-grunt with any Collective soldier who dared stick their head out.

Unfortunately, it only took a few moments for Erinyes to sense another presence in the Force and hear the crinkle of a lightsaber cutting through metal. Several commandos rushed for the other end of the train car as the glowing orange circle appeared between them. The plating fell into the car below with a clang, and Erinyes ignited her main-hand lightsaber as a figure leapt through the opening.

"Ah, good. I was worried Telaris would send some nameless Equite to stop me," Evant Taelyan said, his tone affable yet incredibly grating as he unclipped his lightsaber from his belt. "I don't believe we've met. Seraine, wasn't it?"

"Maybe if you're my mother." The world fell into slow motion as Erinyes lunged forward, drawing on her Marauder's agility to strike at Evant before the renegade Master could assume his guard. Evant was having none of it, however, and flicked his lightsaber up to meet the first blow with the same alacrity as his attacker. The parry left the tip of his blade in the perfect position to jab at Erinyes' face, forcing the Adept to twist to one side and let her momentum carry her past. Erinyes twisted her wrist in a tight circle in an attempt to sneak her blade past her opponent's, but Evant skipped backward and caught the second strike as easily as he did the first.

The evasion brought the two combatants out of each other's lightsaber range, and Erinyes paused for a moment, waiting to see if the renegade Master would go on the offence. He didn't, so she launched herself forward with another flurry of strikes. Evant met each attack with precision, his lightsaber barely shifting to parry each blow, cutting muted scarlet lines through the air in contrast to Erinyes' wild violet arcs. If any of the Taldryan or Collective troops had had time to watch the exchange, they surely would've been impressed by the display of skill and athleticism that only a pair of Elder Marauders could present.

Erinyes smirked when she saw Evant deflect a blaster bolt fired by an optimistic Dark Fire commando, then leapt back to avoid the stroke that followed. "Was that supposed to be a Deflecting Slash? All that time at Club Oligard must've dulled your skills."

"Enduring what I did made me stronger, not weaker. Can you say the same for the decade you spent running from responsibility in the Core Worlds?" Evant darted forward, countering Erinyes' next attack with an attack of his own. The Adept took to the air to avoid the low slash, and Evant continued his charge, lightsaber raised to strike Dark Fire Brigade member who had just armed a thermal detonator.

"Ooh, you've–" Erinyes made a yanking motion with her free hand, and Evant sailed backward and past her before his attack could land. "–done your homework. Sav would like you."

"Good for him." Evant rose from where he'd landed on one knee, irritation plain on his face. Just then, a pair of explosions shook the train and nearly threw both Elders off their feet. Smoke rose from the hole the Taldryan commandos had cut in the train car's roof, and the shouting from the Collective troops inside reached fever pitch. A moment later, a pair of reports came through Erinyes' earpiece.

"Beamdrill 1 destroyed."

"Beamdrill 2 destroyed."

Erinyes smirked, as much to annoy Evant as to express her own satisfaction. "Score two for the... right bad guys." Encouraged by the news, she took a deep breath to banish her growing fatigue and pressed the attack again. Strike after strike after strike crashed against the renegade Master's defences, and he weathered each one of them with the tenacity of stone. And yet, his cautious counterattacks found no more success than his opponent had. At best, they forced Erinyes to change the angle from which she attacked. It was only through a combination of determined bladework and the Force's whispered warnings that Evant was able to fend off the Adept's assault.

Seconds stretched into a minute, and a minute stretched into two; nearly an eternity, by the standards of a lightsaber duel. Erinyes began to wonder why the Taldryan commandos were taking so long to set off their third and fourth charges. Finally, Saviri's voice came over the comm. "Consul, they regrouped too fast for us to break through to Beamdrills 3 and 4."

Erinyes scowled, a gesture she was sure Evant would pick up on. "Fall back. We'll find another way."

"Your troops seem to be having trouble, Consul. Maybe they weren't as prepared to handle the Collective's latest invention as you thought." It was the renegade Master's turn to smirk.

"Shut up, Darth Logistics. Weaponised kark-talking is my gimmick." Erinyes knew she would have to slow Evant down somehow, or her retreat would just give him free shots at her back. Drawing on the Force to soothe the burning in her muscles, the Adept charged again, lightsaber raised to take Evant's head off at the shoulders. As he had several other times in their duel, the renegade Master shifted a half-step back and raised his lightsaber just far enough to intercept the stroke. Instead of pivoting around Evant's return strike, Erinyes hooked Evant's lightsaber with her own and swept her free hand across her own body. The Force mimicked the Adept's motion, yanking Evant's leg far enough forward that the renegade Master nearly dropped into a front split--and more importantly, was frozen in place just long enough for Erinyes to draw her second lightsaber.

The curved-hilt Sith weapon ignited with a combination of the characteristic snap-hiss and the shriek of a blaster bolt. Evant grunted in pain as a shot from the lightsaber's pistol phase burned across the top of his exposed thigh. It wasn't an excellent shot by any means--or even a particularly good one, given that Erinyes had been aiming for the middle of Evant's leg--but it had torn up the renegade Master's leg muscles enough that simply blocking the pain of the injury wouldn't allow him to pursue Erinyes.

Out of spite as much as anything, Erinyes smashed the butt of her off-hand lightsaber into the bridge of Evant's nose, prompting a stream of vicious cursing. A part of her wanted to finish the bastard off right here, but doing so was likely to get an entire company of Hive Mind Marines on her, and Saviri was already shouting for her to get into one of the APCs before she got left behind. Reluctantly, Erinyes disentangled herself from her opponent and took off, leaping on wobbly legs from the train car to the open door of one of Taldryan's vehicles. Armoured hands dragged her inside, and the hatch sealed shut with a hiss as the commandos sped off toward the Dark Ascent.

**Part 3**

Thirty minutes later, Evant slammed his fist into the repulsortrain's ruined control console. He'd stubbornly insisted on planting himself in the same jump seat in which he'd spent the rest of the trip, never mind that it was now a window seat and the pilot and co-pilot who'd sat in front of him were bloody smears on the console and windscreen. He'd also been determined not to use the Force to dull the pain while the Collective medic cleaned and treated the wound that Seraine Ténama had inflicted on him. The pain fuelled his anger, after all, and he planned to convert that anger into power; his first encounter with his newest opponent had shown him that she was likely to prove a thorn in his side, and he had no intention of leaving her to fester.

Fortunately, as he revisited his plans with adrenaline-sharpened attention, Evant had plenty about which to be angry. He'd anticipated that one Brotherhood force or another would try to block his advance by train, but he'd expected them to simply collapse the tunnel--an easy enough problem to solve with the beamdrills the Collective forces carried--rather than attack both the train and the beamdrills themselves. The added time it would take to secure other means of transportation and proceed to the Dark Ascent at a slower pace would give the Brotherhood that much more opportunity to prepare and make his job significantly harder. The Brotherhood ambush also left him with fewer troops to deploy against the Brotherhood's defences. He'd only had slightly more than the minimum number he thought he would need to breach the Dark Ascent in the first place, so the losses had left him with no margin for error. Then, of course, there was the threat of a Brotherhood leader who could hold Evant to a draw in a battle fought on his terms.

The fist Evant had pounded against the console unfurled, and he began tapping a finger against the cracked transparisteel, as though keeping time for his thoughts. Ténama was both a problem to be solved and an opponent to be defeated. Her jibes had been annoying, and her Clan's interference with his plans infuriating, but her refusal to stand and let the duel between them play out--and in Evant's mind, her robbing him of his rightful victory--was a greater insult than he was willing to forgive. There would be a reckoning for that, even if he had to wait until after Telaris and the rest of the Dark Council were dealt with.

For now, though, his priority was to get his forces underway. The Master lifted his comlink to his mouth. "Status report."

"Aurek and Besh companies are at seventy-five percent strength. Cresh Company is at fifty percent strength. Dorn Company is at ninety percent strength," the Hive Mind Marine tasked as Evant's second-in-command replied, voice as monotone as ever. "Hostile company-strength force positioned at exit from maintenance lift."

Evant nodded to himself. As expected, the heavy weapons company had taken significant losses when the Brotherhood tried to destroy the beamdrills, but both the Jedi-hunter cyborgs and the Hive Mind Marines were largely intact. "Divert– no, request that some of the squadrons tasked for Eos City be diverted to close air support," he ordered, unused to and annoyed by the requirement that he "request" anything. "Have them strike at the hostiles, then send Dorn Company in to finish them off. Once they're dead, secure the area and order our secondary transport to deploy." He bit back a hiss of pain as the medic prodded the bacta patch to ensure it was in place.

"Acknowledged." The Hive Mind Marine ended the transmission, and Evant scowled at the medic, who quickly made himself scarce.

Alone with his thoughts, Evant couldn't help but become aware of the lingering fatigue that permeated his body. He considered and quickly rejected the idea that a single, relatively brief duel had left him so wearied, but a creeping doubt remained at the back of his mind. He had seen the kind of damage that prolonged physical abuse inflicted on others, and though he'd been functional enough since his return to Arx to play the role of the dutiful Deputy Grand Master while waiting for his chance to strike, he hadn't faced anything truly strenuous until his duel with the Taldryan Consul. Maybe her mockery of his time spent imprisoned was more insightful than he had given her credit for, a possibility which only stoked Evant's anger further.

The Deputy Grand Master channelled that anger into the Dark Side and pressed his open hand against the freshly-applied bacta patch. Searing pain shot through the wound, offering Evant a cruel reminder that--at least for a Force-user like him, who didn't specialise in the healing arts--compressing days and weeks of the body's natural healing process into mere hours also compressed the pain that he would've suffered during those days and weeks. And yet, the intensity of the pain shocked him. He'd suffered worse than this at the Collective's hands... hadn't he?

"All that time at Club Oligard must've dulled your skills."

Evant growled at whatever rebellious part of his mind had dragged the jibe back into his conscious awareness, and his free hand curled into a fist. He was stronger than this. A little pain--or even a lot of pain--wasn't going to prevent him from seeing his plans through.

#

**Repulsortrain Tunnel**

**Approx. 900km East of the Dark Ascent**

Curled up in the gunner's seat of one of the Dark Fire Brigade's APCs, Erinyes rubbed the bridge of her nose and took a slug from her flask. They'd stopped the immediate danger posed by the Collective's subterranean advance, but the threat was far from extinguished. The enemy still possessed two of the beamdrills that would allow them to bypass the Dark Ascent's static defences, and enough troops to give themselves the opportunity to use them. Worse, the battle in the tunnels had left between a quarter and a third of the Dark Fire Brigade's commandos out of action, and consternation over the loss of their brothers-in-arms--the largest such loss in the unit's history--was eating away at the survivors' morale. Erinyes could sense the waves of discontent rolling off the APC's other occupants, and the tension as they fought to keep their minds on the mission.

In an effort to block the commandos' gnawing disquiet out of her mind--curse her Zeltron empathy--Erinyes had resorted to skimming her messages for updates on the Clan's performance. Several Taldryanites had sent emergency broadcasts from various locations within Eos City, as they held the line against a Collective assault that threatened to overwhelm them. There were also a number of messages from the Inquisitorius, expressing concern over how other Taldryan members had been seen using the chaos of the invasion as an opportunity to wreak some havoc of their own.

Erinyes sighed. This was exactly the sort of thing she hated about being Consul: being dragged over the coals by agents of a distant nominal ruler because they perceived her to have insufficient control over the members of an independent Clan. Her first instinct was to reply to the Inquisitorius' complaints with some variant of "not my problem". After all, it wasn't like every member of Taldryan marched in lockstep with the Consul's orders. On the contrary, the system she'd worked so hard to put in place was designed to give Taldryanites as much freedom as possible. It wasn't Erinyes' fault if they used that freedom to do things the Inquisitorius didn't like, the same way it wasn't her problem if they got themselves hurt or killed in the process.

Then, Erinyes came across a message from Nihlus Vexrii--the head of one of the Clan's intelligence services--marked "urgent" but with a blank subject. She frowned and opened it.

Had a vision of you fighting an alchemically-altered rathtar. If you win, bring the corpse back for me.

–N

Erinyes stared at the message for a moment, then threw one hand up in exasperation. What kind of idiot savant would manage to scry her fighting one particular rathtar, while completely missing something as major as the entire attack on Arx? Then again, knowing Nihlus, he probably had seen it--and dismissed it as being uninteresting, or at least not his problem. Grumbling, Erinyes replied to the message.

Get it yourself. Grid reference is attached.

–E

Irritated, Erinyes tapped the "send" button and took another slug of tsiraki, as much from boredom as anything else. Then, she keyed her comlink to Saviri's frequency. "Sav, what's our next step?"

"It's likely that Taelyan's forces are on the surface and at least partially mobilised, as well as having air support," the colonel reported. "Comm traffic says that a Brotherhood infantry company at Maintenance Station 17 was wiped out by an attack from unknown Collective forces. They reported being engaged by hostile Z-95s before we lost contact with them. Assuming the vehicles they captured are being used by Taelyan and his Hive Mind Marines, the best course of action is to cut them off at the approach to the Dark Ascent."

"Alright, how?" Erinyes asked.

A map appeared on Erinyes' datapad as Saviri continued. "Ground access is limited to a single road that enters the mountains at Maintenance Lift 1. The Brotherhood troops would've deployed in K79s, and those are slow enough that we can cut them off. Larger numbers won't help them in that kind of terrain, so it should be relatively easy to hold them off long enough for allied air to engage, if we can get it. The biggest problem will be their Z-95s."

Erinyes quirked an eyebrow. "Those were old when I was a teenager, Sav."

"Old weapons can still kill, especially when they won't have to worry about whether the tunnel collapses on their own troops," Saviri reminded her.

"Well, yeah, but..." The Adept sighed when the more substantial argument she'd intended to bring up refused to be found. "I'll make sure we've got air cover. If the Iron Legion doesn't have their own fighters that close to the Dark Ascent, we're kriffed anyway."

"Acknowledged," Saviri chuckled. "ETA to Maintenance Lift 1 is two standard hours."

"Call me back at thirty minutes." Erinyes cut the transmission, then opened another channel to the Taldryan officers commanding the Clan's efforts on Arx. "Banner, this is Hellcat. I need Hyperion Flight on station at Maintenance Lift 1 within the next two standard hours. Keep Dark Fire Six advised of their status."

The response came back almost immediately. "Copy, Hellcat. Out." The transmission ended, and Erinyes wondered why she'd bothered asking the Brotherhood for help in ambushing the Collective in the first place, instead of ordering her own troops to do it. At least it hadn't been her people who had gotten wiped out.

Except the Dark Fire boys, a voice in her head pointed out.

Erinyes did her best to ignore it, but the intrusive thought seemed to ride on the waves of discontent that came from the other commandos in the vehicle. The Adept re-opened her messages, hoping for the first time in her tenure that there was more busy work she could do to silence the uncomfortable thoughts--but alas, the rest of the Clan was being irritatingly self-sufficient. Even the drone of the APC's repulsorlift drive was too steady to serve as anything more than background noise, thanks to Taldryan's excellent mechanics.

When she turned back to her messages a third time, the Adept's eyes lingered on the Inquisitorius' complaints about Taldryan's misbehaving membership. It was easy for her to believe that she wasn't responsible for anything that happened to the more free-spirited members of the Clan, but what about the Dark Fire commandos she'd ordered left behind? How much of the survivors' agitation was resentment that she'd made them abandon their comrades? For that matter, weren't those losses her fault? The Collective had been the ones who fired the fatal blaster bolts, but the unit had been in those tunnels on her orders.

I really need to stop drinking during ops, Erinyes thought, shaking her head--but a part of her wanted to believe that she was responsible. Anything less would be to admit that the Collective had forced her hand, and Sith Elders weren't in the business of believing that others held power over them. No, she'd have to remind both the Collective and the rest of the Brotherhood that she was was stronger than that, especially with Taldryan behind her.

"Knowing there's someone in the chair who has their backs is reassuring to a lot of people."

"Dammit, Sav," Erinyes sighed. Saviri had been right, though; if she wanted Taldryan to support her, she'd have to support them, too. At least the upcoming battles would give her plenty of opportunities to do that.

#

**Maintenance Lift 1**

**100km East of the Dark Ascent**

To the Taldryan forces' relief, Hyperion Squadron's pilots reported that the Collective's appropriated troop transports were still some distance away when the APCs reached the underground lift. It took several trips for the Dark Fire Brigade vehicles to reach Arx's surface, where they began building their roadblock. A pair of repulsortrucks parked in the garage beside the maintenance lift, normally used for repair work in the tunnel below, made a convenient foundation for the barricade when parked horizontally to block the road. They also provided some cover for the company's APCs; the vehicles' blaster cannon turrets could fire over the repulsortrucks' beds without fear of hitting the vehicles themselves.

"Hellcat, this is Hype One. Hostile fighters on sensors, scanning as two-four Headhunters," Hyperion Flight's leader reported. Despite the name, the unit was a full squadron of TIE/D Defenders, more than capable of handling twice their own number of near-obsolete enemy craft.

"Hype One, you're clear to engage at your discretion." If the Collective air cover was inbound, the troop transports couldn't be far behind. Sure enough, when Erinyes switched her scanner on, the device revealed a convoy of vehicles racing up the highway toward the Dark Fire blockade.

"Copy, Hellcat. Engaging hostiles."

Erinyes turned to Saviri, who had been overseeing the construction of the barricade. "Sensors say ten minutes until contact, Sav."

"Acknowledged. They'll probably be slower than that; SOP is to disembark from the transports when they get within two klicks of us, to avoid presenting an easy target for our gunners. Whether they'll actually do that, who knows." The colonel shrugged.

"What's left for us to do?" Erinyes felt the urge to pace again, and wished she was already in the battle instead of waiting for it to start.

"Nothing; we're as prepared as we can be. The snipers are on the rock face with clear lines of fire to the road, and the rest of the boys have dug in." Saviri lifted his chin toward the scrubby, lightly-forested ground where the Dark Fire Brigade assaulters and heavy gunners had dug makeshift trenches, forming shallow convex lines on either side of the road.

Erinyes jerked a thumb over her shoulder, toward the rear-most APC. "In that case, I'll just wait back there until Taelyan shows up. There's no point in me charging in first and getting myself shot again."

"Of course, Consul." Surprise radiated from behind Saviri's mask at the unusually responsible decision. "I'd better get in position."

"Go." The Adept shooed Saviri off, then trudged back to her hiding spot--that was what it felt like, tactical soundness be damned--at the rear of the barricade. There, she opened her senses to the Force, and waited for Evant's Force presence to appear in her consciousness.

She was still waiting when the croom of a vehicle-mounted blaster cannon being fired rang off the nearby rock face. When she turned to see what was going on, she saw what looked like a solid sheet of orange light racing towards a convoy of troop carriers, painted in Brotherhood livery but disgorging Collective cyborg troopers. Erinyes looked on in astonishment as the hostile soldiers were cut down almost the instant they emerged from their hijacked vehicles. What the kriff are they thinking? It seemed that the Collective were making exactly the mistake that Saviri had brought up: disembarking close enough to Taldryan's guns that the commandos could pick them off with ease.

Yet, Erinyes still didn't sense Evant. Maybe he's using the cyborgs as cannon fodder to distract us, she thought. If so, it would only be another few moments before the renegade Master revealed himself. Erinyes drew her lightsaber in anticipation, but left the blade deactivated, not wanting to give her position away.

A few of the Collective soldiers made it past Taldryan's initial salvo and charged toward the barricade, only to be cut down by the APCs' blaster cannons within five steps. Behind them, cyborg sharpshooters peppered the Taldryan trenches with pulse-mode blasts from their DLT-2oA rifles, offering the first real resistance of the engagement. The storm of blaster fire abated slightly as the commandos ducked for cover, but the Dark Fire snipers were still able to pick off a few overconfident cyborgs when they poked their heads out from behind their transports. Meanwhile, the APC gunners shifted targets from the hostile soldiers to the transports themselves. Blazing bolts gouged massive holes in the Collective carriers' flimsy armour. The front-most transports in the column squeezed off a few laser cannon blasts in return, striking one of the Taldryan APCs and shearing its turret off, but the concentration of fire from the APC platoon turned the four hijacked vehicles into slag in short order.

Yet, Erinyes still didn't sense Evant, even as the pile of Collective bodies stacked around the hijacked transports grew large enough for Erinyes to guess that the Collective company and the Dark Fire Brigade now had roughly even numbers--and the commandos were dug in, better-armed, and hungry for revenge. Erinyes frowned. The opportunity to use the Collective soldiers as meat shields had passed; at this rate, Evant's arrival would be a rescue attempt, and maybe not even a successful one. That decision seemed far too reckless for the renegade Master... unless, the Adept realised with a knot in her stomach, there was something she'd overlooked.

The knot in Erinyes' stomach only grew as the number of hostile soldiers dwindled. The engagement wasn't a battle so much as a slaughter. Scores of Collective troops fell to Taldryan fire with barely any resistance, and pieces of Collective Z-95s rained down on her as Hyperion Flight shredded its opponents with ease--but the closer Taldryan came to complete victory, the more the Adept doubted that it was really a victory at all. She keyed her comlink. "Sav, something's wrong. Taelyan isn't here."

"Then where is he?" The fact that Saviri had time to carry on a conversation despite the pitched battle did nothing to reassure the Adept.

Erinyes sighed. "I don't know, but I think we made a huge mistake."

Before Saviri could answer, another voice emerged over the comm frequency. "Taldryan forces, this is Dark Ascent Tower. We have suspicious activity from a group of transports at Six-Sierra-Delta-Tango Five. IFF is friendly, but they've deviated from their flight path and are not responding to hails. Request Hyperion Flight intercept and investigate."

"Negative, Tower, Hyperion is–" Erinyes' eyes widened as the pieces fell into place in her mind. "Tower, those transports are hostile! Don't let them land!"

"Copy, Hellcat," came the control tower's reply. Apparently, whoever was in charge wasn't in the mood to take risks. Erinyes looked up, searching for the flashes of laser cannon fire from the Dark Ascent's defensive batteries... but the guns remained stubbornly silent. "Hellcat, AA batteries are offline. Request you scramble Hyperion."

"Acknowledged, Tower. Hype One, break off and haul ass. Dark Fire Six, finish those hostiles off right fraking now and advance to the Dark Ascent." Not waiting for responses, Erinyes leapt into the nearest APC and hammered on the wall between the troop compartment and the cockpit. "Move it!"

**Part 4**

**Mountain Approach**

**Dark Ascent**

The battle outside the Dark Ascent's ground-level entrance proceeded at a fever pitch. Thanks to the air support Evant had requisitioned, the hostile fighters that had been circling the Brotherhood's headquarters were too distracted to put up much more resistance than the Collective's commandeered LAAT/i gunships could handle. The hostiles only managed to down one transport and damage another before the LAAT/is' return fire forced the aggressors to break off, and gave Evant's forces enough time to descend to their landing zone.

The anti-infantry turrets mounted atop the Ascent's walls had been the first casualties, targeted with the Deputy Grand Master's knowledge of the fortress' defences and blown to slag by the transports' laser cannons as shots designed to kill soldiers in betaplast armour spattered uselessly against durasteel hulls. After that, it had been a simple matter for the Hive Mind Marines to bottle the Brotherhood defenders up behind the one accessible ground entrance, turning the Ascent's fortified walls into a cage. With the threat of resistance neutralised, the cyborgs had ample opportunity to deploy the two beamdrills that the Taldryan ambush hadn't destroyed.

Evant paced back and forth behind his heavily-armed excavation teams, hands clasped behind his back in a manner that seemed far too relaxed for his circumstances. The company of cyborg Jedi-hunters--so willing to die for their cause that the Deputy Grand Master felt compelled to oblige them--had performed their job admirably, drawing the enemy's attention for long enough to allow the real strike force to board the LAAT/is stolen from the Iron Legion years earlier. He couldn't help but smile as he watched the Hive Mind Marines gun down Brotherhood troops in the fatal funnel of their own front door. The irony of turning the Brotherhood's greatest fortress into a tomb was something to be relished., though judging by how few Brotherhood defenders he could sense in the Force, it was a pleasure he wouldn't be able to enjoy for long. Pity.

Within minutes, the blaster fire coming from the Dark Ascent's front doors had slowed to a languid pace, then stopped. Evant sensed the Iron Legion troops moving away, probably ordered to withdraw to the Antechamber and set up a second line of defence there. That suited Evant just fine; the fewer Brotherhood troops tried to interfere with him boring holes in the Dark Ascent's walls, the better. After several more minutes had passed, the Deputy Grand Master was greeted by a crash as a slab of the Dark Ascent's exterior wall fell inward. Without so much as a word--the AI controller made verbal commands unnecessary, a fact which still caught Evant off-guard at times--the Hive Mind Marines advanced into the newly-carved entrances.

What Evant hadn't expected was the torrent of blaster fire that greeted the Collective soldiers as they stepped into the Brotherhood headquarters. His head snapped around, and his lightsaber ignited in his hand before he realised he'd grasped it. It took only a moment for the muzzle flashes from the Brotherhood's blasters to illuminate the problem: battle droids. Dozens of battle droids, of a type that the Deputy Grand Master had never seen before, invisible to Evant's Force senses and every bit as coordinated as the AI-controlled Hive Mind Marines.

Evant's knuckles went white around his lightsaber. He was the Deputy Grand Master. It was his job to stay informed about major developments in the Brotherhood. The installation of a key defensive system at the Dark Ascent certainly qualified, but Telaris hadn't told him, nor had the Fist of the Brotherhood included that information in the reports Evant had read upon his return. The only explanation was that Telaris had been too preoccupied with keeping his Sith secrets to let Evant do his job. Telaris had set him up to fail. Worse, Telaris had set him up to look like a failure. Damn that manipulative bastard of a Grand Master!

Face flushed with anger, Evant let out a roar and charged into the fray. His lightsaber burned a scarlet whirlwind around him as he deflected a swarm of blaster bolts, sending each projectile back to its origin with fearsome accuracy and felling half a dozen battle droids before they even came within reach of his glowing blade. When they did, the Deputy Grand Master's reliance on a "defensive" lightsaber form did nothing to prevent him from unleashing a series of strikes so fast that the battle droids' photoreceptors almost couldn't track them, and their heavy metallic bodies certainly couldn't evade them. One, two, five, ten... the piles of broken, useless machinery would've blurred together even if Evant had cared about counting them, but right now, all he wanted was to create as many of them as possible.

With the Hive Mind Marines at his back, the Deputy Grand Master carved a path from one side of the Dark Ascent's front facade to another, clearing the waves of battle droids so that his troops could advance. The corridors inside the Brotherhood fortress were thick with the stench of heat and ozone as blaster bolts lanced through the air, but Evant paid them no mind as he strode almost casually down the corridor to the Ascent's single elevator bank. His lightsaber swirled in front of him, forming a glowing barrier that reflected any incoming attack back to its source and turning the Brotherhood defenders into the architects of their own demise. The company of Hive Mind Marines saturating the air with their own blaster bolts, along with the occasional grenade blast, certainly didn't help the defenders' circumstances.

Finally, Evant reached the bank of elevators, and casually swatted another pair of blaster bolts aside as he reached out to push the lift button. As his fingers touched the controls, a presence in the Force emerged in his emerged from the haze of Dark Side energies that enveloped the Ascent, followed by perhaps a hundred other sentients. Ténama, no doubt, and her Taldryan hunting dogs. Evant pressed the call button, then raised his hand to speak into his comlink. "Hold this position. Do not allow the Brotherhood past you," he ordered. The lift arrived a moment later, as the Hive Mind Marines took up defensive positions around the lobby. Evant stepped inside the lift car and pressed the button for the Antechamber. The sight of Seraine Ténama, charging too late through one of the holes in the Dark Ascent's walls, brought a smile to his lips as the doors slid shut.

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"Taelyan!" Erinyes couldn't help but scream as she saw the smirking renegade Master's face disappear behind the elevator doors. For a moment, she simply stood, trembling with fury at Evant for playing her like a fool and herself for letting it happen. Then, the Force reminded her that several dozen hostile troops had weapons trained on her, and she leapt sideways and out of the fatal funnel before the Hive Mind Marines turned her into a blaster sponge. A moment later, Saviri moved into position at the other side of the corridor's entrance, and the Dark Fire Brigade laid down cover fire as they stacked up behind the two leaders.

The tactic was nearly the Dark Fire Brigade's second grave mistake, as Erinyes' battlefield senses--there were perks to being a Marauder--informed her that a trio of grenades was sailing down the hall. Growling, Erinyes poked her head out just far enough to spot the ordnance with her own eyes, then reached out with the Force and grasped the three blocky weapons the way other Sith Elders might grasp a trio of lightsabers. Directed by a hand gesture and the Adept's will, the three grenades reversed course and shot towards the elevator. They didn't quite reach the Hive Mind Marines who'd thrown them before a boom rattled the corridor, but fortunately for Erinyes, "close" counted where hand grenades were concerned.

"Frag out!" Adding insult to injury, the Dark Fire Brigade contributed a few grenades of their own to the effort. Those ones travelled far enough to ricochet off the lift doors and tumble down the corridors on either side before detonating. When the second set of booms reverberated down the halls, Erinyes felt imprints of life being snuffed out in the Force.

After counting to three, Saviri waved for two pairs of commandos to proceed down the hall; there was no sense in having the entire company trapped in the same corridor if a Collective survivor tossed another grenade. Erinyes went with them, and was pleased to see that the Hive Mind Marines who hadn't been transformed into chunky red slop were in no shape to fight. One of them tried, but a flick of Erinyes' wrist buried her lightsaber in his forehead and ended the attempt before it became a true threat.

Unfortunately, the grenade blasts had also created a problem for the commandos: the doors of the lift had been blown wide open, and the one car that remained in place had been reduced to little more than shrapnel. Saviri's voice emerged from Erinyes' comlink. "Is there any other way up to the Antechamber?"

"No, and whoever designed this place needs to be shot," Erinyes sighed. Then an idea occurred to her, and she extended her free hand out to the Hive Mind Marine she'd just killed. The corpse obligingly sailed through the air, and when it landed at her feet, the Adept began wrestling the jetpack off the fallen enemy's shoulders. "Secure the lower floors, then meet me in the Antechamber. I'm going after Taelyan."

"Copy that." For once, Saviri didn't try to argue as Erinyes hastily buckled the jetpack in place.

**Antechamber**

**Dark Ascent**

A brief but terrifying flight later, Erinyes used the Force to wrench the elevator shaft doors open, then emerged into the Dark Ascent's antechamber. As she shrugged out of the jetpack's harness, she saw and sensed a figure in the middle of the cavernous room. "You waited just for me? I'm touched."

Evant shrugged and slid his right foot back, raising his lightsaber and extending his free hand out for balance. "I can't have you distracting me when I face Telaris."

"I love that you think you'll get that far. How's the leg, by the way? I hope it doesn't slow you down too much." Erinyes' grin was about as good-natured as a hungry vornskr stalking its prey.

"Not enough to keep me from dealing with a dilettante like you."

"We'll see." Erinyes' lightsaber sprang to life, and the room sank into slow motion as she charged toward the renegade Master. Showers of yellow sparks erupted in a halo around the two Elders as Evant met the Adept blow for blow, their lightsabers crashing into each other at the pace an electrified drumroll. This time, Erinyes didn't wait to ignite her second lightsaber, weaving it into any gap into Evant's guard that she could find.

At first, his preternaturally sharp senses prevented the renegade Master from being skewered by Erinyes' twin violet blades, but Evant quickly realised that being able to detect his opponent's attacks was no help when his lightsaber had to be in two places at once to defend himself. Rather than continue to play Erinyes' game, he leapt backwards to stay out of her reach, then sprang off a nearby wall and landed on one of the beskar decorations that adorned the Antechamber's walls. After the Adept's stunt in yanking him away from a target atop the repulsortrain, he wasn't about to give her the chance to fling him around.

"Get down here, you kriffing coward," Erinyes shouted from the Antechamber floor. "Or are you afraid you'll lose to me again?" She sensed the indignation rolling off Evant at the insult, but he remained stubbornly atop his perch, so the Adept reached into the Force and wrapped it around the ornament. The massive decoration rattled the Antechamber's walls as it shook, and Evant leapt clear before the object broke free of the wall and crashed to the floor. "Keep running like that and you'll just give me a chance to catch my breath."

"Not if you keep yapping like that," Evant snorted.

Erinyes was silent for a moment, then burst out laughing. "Nice. Real master of Dun Möch, you are. What are you going to do next, tell Mav he's the worst?"

"Enough!" The renegade Master launched himself towards Erinyes, lightning-quick even to the Adept's Force-enhanced eyes. One of the dangers of Dun Möch was that a resilient opponent could fly into a frenzy rather than allowing themselves to become dispirited. Judging by how the normally-defence-conscious Master slammed his lightsaber into Erinyes' defences with reckless abandon, this was one of those situations. The dangerous part, though, was the possibility that Evant was better at attacking than Erinyes was at defending. The Adept adopted much the same strategy as she usually did, avoiding her opponent's attacks with body movement rather than parrying them with her blades, but the effort was rapidly wearing her out. She had to stop Evant, though. If she didn't, and he somehow managed to evict Telaris from the Iron Throne and lead the Collective to victory, there was nothing to stop him from razing the Clans--including Taldryan. The mere thought seemed to create a terrible dark presence in the Force.

And so, gritting her teeth with determination, Erinyes forced herself to stand her ground the next time Evant lunged forward. Pain shot through her body when the scarlet lightsaber pierced her stomach in nearly the same place as the Hive Mind Marines had shot her, no less. The world sped up again, and Evant let out a bark of triumph as one of Erinyes' lightsabers clattered to the floor.

His expression changed rapidly when the Adept grabbed his lightsaber arm , channelling the Force into her grip and clinging with all her might. The renegade Master tried to yank his arm away, but he wasn't fast enough to leap back before Erinyes' other lightsaber pierced his throat.

"Suck it, Darth Logistics."