

Hak's Hideout
Aliso City
35 ABY
Three Ales In...

"I've just been feeling really vulnerable lately, y'know?" sniffled the Kiffar as he buried his tattooed face into the sweaty crooks of his arms. He had spilled quite a bit of Corellian wine down the front of his tunic, and he reeked of both alcohol, body odor, and surprisingly, pickled onions and olives.

Ronovi sighed and gave Kevleen Nasos a limp, half-hearted pat on the left shoulder before she returned to her obligatory third glass of whiskey. The atmosphere of the hideout was stuffier than usual; humidity caused her hair to lie flat on her head, and she had to breathe sharply to unclog one or both of her nostrils at random intervals. It didn't help that it was busy tonight - weirdly busy. Normally, only seven or eight patrons frequented the small cantina that could house about three dozen people. Tonight was different: Every table was filled, every chair occupied, every wall accompanied by the shadows of men drinking straight from pitchers and women trying desperately to hold their own liquor in response. It was uncomfortable - claustrophobic, even. And now here the Epicanthix was, listening to the sad saga of Kevos' downfall from some Kiffex clan or other. Or was it Kiffu? Ah, kriff it. If there was one thing Ronovi was good at, it was pretending to care while in truth giving not one iota of a damn.

Naesc, always the trusty bartender he was, fetched another bottle of Whyren's from the shelf as soon as he caught sight of the Plagueian's pained expression. As Kevleen wept over the once pristine wooden sheen of the bar, the trickle of his tears were accompanied by the slosh of amber liquid slipping into Ronovi's highball. She took a large sip, coughed, hiccuped, and wiped her mouth with the back of her gauntleted hand.

"You know what it's like, right?" gurgled Kevleen, lifted his head up to reveal his salt-streaked face. "Being on top of the world, and then crashing down into a big mess of hopelessness and despair?"

Yes, Ronovi thought. And being literally frozen for almost half a decade. Can people please stop reminding me of that?

"You just need to take it easy for now, all right?" was what she actually said. "Stop obsessing over the past. No one's stopping you from kicking ass, so why wallow in your own sorrow now?"

She was mid-sentence when a brush of movement made the hairs on her neck stand on end. The Force opened up around her like someone had turned on the lights in a very dark room; someone was here, someone familiar. Someone who she perhaps had been trying to avoid for quite some time now. Her fingers seized up against the glass. Her back tensed as what felt like a static shock zipped up her spine like a landspeeder thrown off course.

“Thanks, lady,” moaned Kevleen, nodding as he attempted to clean his face up with his already stained shirt. “I feel a little better.”

“Good,” Ronovi replied, though not really meaning it. Not only was she apathetic, but she was also distracted. “Now get yourself another glass of Corellian wine and practice some deep breaths.”

She wasn't thinking about the drunk, miserable Kiffar anymore. Instead, she let her right hand drop to her side, where her saberstaff sat beneath the fold of her coat, and used her left hand to tilt the rest of the Whyren's into her mouth. Before the burn of the booze subsided, she was up and walking, eyes scanning each table, looking for whichever Force sensitive was disturbing her night out now.

It wasn't Selika - that she knew for sure. She was disappointed, come to think of it. Selika's presence had become less terrifying to her and more like receiving a rush of fresh air. She had no interest in tamping that feeling down. Not this time. Not after so many years of being lost to the world.

She was about to reach the farthest corner when she heard the first squeal of a blaster bolt outside. Instantly, she felt the presence of a familiar individual - *inside the cantina*. She thought she heard him speak to Naesc, before she saw a flicker of movement by the door that led to the back alley. Something was going down, and now Naesc, his furry face sullen, was trying to direct traffic.

As the screams began, Ronovi threw herself past the now crazed cantina crowd, pushing past an alarmed Ryn waitress as she hurtled toward the back door before the rest of the patrons could block access. She was going to catch up to this person - who she now knew was a fellow Plagueian - before she got trampled in the stampede.

“Wait!” she thought she heard Kevleen howl from behind her. “Let me come with you!”

The clanking of B1 Battle Droids marching, and the sizzle of brain matter after a shot to forehead, was all Ronovi heard after she slipped outside the hideout and hopped up the ladder that led her to the roof.

“Pinnacle command, this is the Overseer. Hostile droids in city sectors Esk, Besh, and Forn. Likely breach point in Grid Esk-6 near my current position.”

A monotone voice came through the comlink a couple seconds later. “Acknowledged, Overseer. Strength of enemy in your sector?”

Before he answered, Arden lined up a shot on a droid approaching the Hideout and fired a single shot, felling it with his trademark precision. Once done, he picked the comlink back up.

“A kriffload, but I’m working on it.”

“Being a hero, I take it?” Ronovi snapped behind him.

Arden Karn, Overseer of Clan Plagueis, nearly fired off a stray shot before whipping his head back and fixing his gaze on the Epicanthix. This time, there was no dramatic doubletake. He looked Ronovi up and down, noticing that the amber in her one organic eye had only subdued somewhat. There was fire in her, an ache to fight in her body.

“Tavisaen,” he said with a smile. “I should have known you’d be here.”

“Been a long time.”

“Five years now?”

“Four.” Ronovi shifted her weight from one foot to the other, gazing over the roof. While some of the droids had infiltrated the hideout, it looked like a few of the patrons were armed and pushing back. She caught a glimpse of Naesc lobbing a shot from a pistol and knocking one of the skeletal metal bastards onto its back before slamming the front door of the establishment.

“What’s it look like here?”

“What does it look like to you?”

The woman smiled and looked over the lip of the roof. “Like someone let loose his prized collection of vintage battle droids.”

“Cute,” Arden spat. “I didn’t realize you liked Hak’s.”

“You want me to do something or not?”

The Overseer blinked and ran a thumb across his mouth. He returned his attention to his F11D, lobbing two precise shots at another swarm of incoming battle droids. He and Naesc, together, might be able to protect this one bar. It didn’t mean they could hold off an entire insurgency, though.

“That depends,” he suddenly muttered as his fingers stiffened against the grip of his rifle. “You still good at Juyo?”

Ronovi grinned. “Nice of you to remember.”

"I remember everything, Tavisæn," said Arden, maintaining an air of formality. "Even the things I care to forget."

The Epicanthix snorted. Karn was not one to forgive those who he felt had wronged him. Her short-lived allegiance to Xander Drax would remain a thorn in his side for quite some time. That didn't bother her. For now, there was some fun to be had. She folded her arms, smiled, and calmly awaited the man's orders like a good Subjugate would do.

Arden noticed the sass in Ronovi's posture and sighed. "Hop to it. I need this entire vicinity cleared so we can move forward in the sector."

The saberstaff was in Ronovi's hand before he even finished his sentence, and she approached the edge of the roof with a blatant eagerness. Below, the battle droids all looked like praying mantises with blasters. It was time to rip some heads off.

"I'll get you a brandy next time," she announced to Arden before leaping off the roof with all the grace of a master swordsman. She felt the rush before her saber hit the first unsuspecting droid. It was party time.

The first B1 battle droid fell apart like butter against a hot knife. The next convulsed at a singular blast of Force lightning. One by one, Ronovi Tavisæn - Warlord, General, Prince, Dread Lord - cleaved her way through the scattering battalion, dismembering limbs and separating circuits. The smell of melted metal and burnt wires was like the aroma of a homecooked meal to the warrior. She was at home.

She had not been able to fight like this for years. *Years*. And now, she was making mincemeat out of B1s and serving up charred robot carcasses for dinner. She spun her saberstaff in front of her, and both blades hit something. They seared, scorched, and severed. Pure artistry.

From the nearby cantina, Arden supported Ronovi's brutal melee tactics with shot after shot, taking out whichever droids tried to sneak up on his Plagueian ally. As much as they were certainly not friends anymore, they had worked together (and drunk together, but that was a story for another time), and they knew each other's choreography. As Ronovi danced, Arden let his rifle create the percussion - the rhythm, the beat that accompanied the scene. Endless, endless carnage.

And then it was over - or at least, it seemed over. Taking down one nest of hornets didn't mean there weren't others ready to unleash Hell. Ronovi let the blades of her saberstaffs wind down with a sputtering hiss. The cerulean glow subsided around her. Blood dribbled slightly from a cut

in her exposed left bicep - flying droid shrapnel incidentally striking her as one enemy exploded by Arden's markmanship.

"Where to now?" she bellowed from where she stood. Things were quiet by Hak's Hideout. Every patron was dead, wounded, or far away.

Ronovi looked up to see Arden scratch his nose. His eyes were blazing - he, too, was feeling the adrenaline. He grabbed his comlink and spoke into it.

"I need an update on all other sectors. Do you copy?"

Static. A moment passed - already far too long. Arden scowled and tucked his comlink away.

"Come, Tavisaen," he ordered. "You'll be working with me."

The Epicanthix stared. "I take orders from the Dread Lord, Karn. Not from you."

"I am the Overseer. Roh's orders come from me as well," snapped Arden. "Let's go."

Exhaling, Ronovi set her gaze on the cantina, where she now noticed the Bothan bartender standing in the doorway. His blaster hung loosely from his fingers, his arm stiff and unyielding. Beside him, the Ryn server was buried into his chest, clinging to his tunic. His look gave his feelings away. *Get rid of the bastards*, he seemed to say to her without words. *Now*.

She let her shoulders relax. Every chemical in her body was bubbling like the contents of a cauldron. Slowly but surely, in her combat-oriented mind, she began to become more adjusted to this environment again. Being part of the clan. Having allies. She was reminded of her first two years in Tarentum, when she could feel her strength growing, her body overcome hindrances, and her connections to others hold strong. She could never return to that original feeling - she knew that. But maybe she could come close. Maybe, once again, she could gain power without burning any more bridges along the way.

Ronovi Tavisaen was a member of Plagueis once again. And she would revel in it.

Snapping her saberstaff back onto her belt, the Epicanthix nodded to Arden and waited for him to descend from the roof.