

*Aliso Cave System, Entrance*  
*Aliso City*

Ronovi lit a cigarra.

"I don't understand why you're not coming with us," grunted a...well, grunt as he tucked his blaster rifle under his arm. "You're the brawn we need to deal with these pests. What good are you staying outside?"

The Epicanthix exhaled a plume of ash, which seemed to freeze in separate gritty particles in the cold evening air. More and more now, she was both smoking and drinking. Trying to play general again was adding much unneeded stress on her. The unit that the Dread Throne had provided her was the equivalent of being offered a bag of jerked bantha meat when one really wanted a Kommerken steak. Non-Force sensitives, most of them: Wraiths, ground under the boot of the Dread Lord until they were reshaped into perfect soldiers. Others were low-ranking Plagueians, almost fresh out of the Shadow Academy. The Geonosian and droid attack was, to them, an opportunity to snag some recognition from higher-ups. It was enough to make Ronovi retch.

"First off," she replied, "I'm six foot seven. Expecting me to navigate cramped, narrow caverns and tunnels is like trying to fit a Wampa through an ale funnel. There's no way I can possibly be useful as a combatant if I have little to no room to maneuver."

"Some of us are bulky, too!" growled a nameless Dark Jedi. A Neophyte? No, maybe an Acolyte. He blurred into one big gray blob in Ronovi's vision. "And besides, maybe the caves are quite spacious!"

"I'm also not someone who stoops low enough to do simple reconnaissance," smirked Ronovi as the stump of her stogie burned between her teeth. "I'm done with my Journeymen days. My orders are that you all spread out and carve out the most sizable, accessible paths through the caves. Any clues you get regarding the numbers of Geonosians, you report back to me using your commlink. I'll come in when the fighting gets hot."

The Dark Jedi in the unit grumbled, but the Wraiths were obedient to the end. They had to be - years of indoctrination and torture had made them into these golems, and the leaders of Plagueis breathed appropriate mantras into their noses and mouths. They slipped into the entrance of the cave network without complaint, while the lower ranking Journeymen were quick to cast chilled glares in their de facto commander's direction as they descended into the darkness. As for Ronovi, she found a rock to perch on, scrubbed out her cigarra into one of her stony seat's fissures, unlatched her obligatory hip flask of Whyren's from her belt, and unscrewed the cap.

It had been a long time since she led anybody, and while it had practically been in her blood to maintain some sort of military or unit position, it now simply felt odd. Before the droid attack, Ronovi was supposed to meet with Selika again - alone, as usual. Their conversations had been cryptic and vague, but the sheer act of speaking with the Dread Lord, as a former Dread Lord herself, was practically invigorating to Ronovi. Every time she was summoned to Selika's quarters, she could feel her heart scream to be let out of its ivory cage. She had waited each day to see what official capacity Selika may have requested of her, without receiving much of an answer. The captivating Sith lady, with her dark hair and olive skin and faint smile, could have just as easily chatted about the price of salt on Arkanis, and Ronovi would have listened, rapt, forgetting why she was even in the room to begin with.

The directive to lead a small party of soldiers into the caves had, in fact, been passed down to the Epicanthix by Abadeer Taasii, the Wrath of Plagueis. Ronovi had only seen the Togruta in passing, usually walking through the upper levels of the Pinnacle, his expression almost an invitation to meet him down in a place where blades could be drawn. Due to her heritage, the Warlord could not exactly read Abadeer's mind, but she could read his body language. Cocky, confident. Someone she may wish to meet in an arena, were he to become bold enough to challenge *her*.

Ronovi was halfway through her flask of whiskey when the commlink at her side started acting up. She heard crackling at first, as though listening to static. Then, staccato breathing: "Tavisaen. We've managed to find an accessible route to the core of the network. It's difficult to backtrack - we're trying to make sense of this maze."

She smiled. She thought she had heard a fable once of a man who had made his way out of a maze with a golden thread. This seemed no different. "Copy. Any sign of droids or Geonosians?"

"Not yet," huffed the soldier. "We've got Wraiths scoping out different pockets of the cave for clusters. Damn buggy bastards thought they could get the best of us, but - "

"Oh. Oh, geez. Oh, *geez, no!*"

"Train your blasters on it! No, on *that one!*"

"*Ah, kriff, they're everywhere!*"

"Have I ever mentioned to any of you how much *I hate bugs?!*"

The chorus of voices erupted from the commlink like crying banshees, their cries almost ghoulish as the faint echoes of blaster fire and - buzzing? - could be heard. Ronovi tried to make sense of the running commentary, her brow furrowed while the suspected carnage continued.

Then she heard a clatter, as if the commlink on the other side had been dropped. Then a loud hum. Then...nothing.

She sighed. Nothing seemed to work in her favor these days, did it? Tucking her commlink back into her coat, she checked for her saberstaff and JSP-14 pistol before stepping into the gaping mouth of the cave.

To her relief, the passages were quite wide and accommodating to her stature, though at times she would have to squeeze through the parts that narrowed and threatened to pinch her body between two jaws of stone. Ronovi used her Force senses to follow the chaos - after all, if everyone in her unit was dead, then she could at least *sense* that death. A most useful, if not morbid, skill - and braved the coming chill as she descended farther and farther underground. After a while, she ignited one end of her saber like a torch, as it had become too dark for her to see even with Force aid. The cerulean glow guided her down winding paths and tight tunnels, leaving deep scars in the stone whenever the blade touched the walls or corners by accident.

Ronovi felt her shoulders ache as she pressed her body through another constrictive gap. She began to understand what her subordinate meant by trying to find their way back up to surface. Of course, in her mind, she was asking all the pertinent questions: Why not just pack the caverns up with explosives and detonators and blow them all to kingdom come? Sure, maybe it would upset the foundations of the earth that held up the city above her, but hey - better than a swarm of Geosians invading the space like locusts, right?

Thoughts like these reminded her of why she wasn't in charge of military tactics anymore; four years in cryo-cycle stasis was a lot of lost time when it came to studies. Ronovi felt her breath nearly freeze in her throat as she approached what must have been the deepest part of the cave network. Sure enough, she couldn't just sense death - she could smell it. Fresh charred bones paired with burnt circuits. She heard clicking as if an insect's mandibles were snapping open and closed. Geosians.

Ronovi stumbled into the first Wraith corpse without intending to. It lay in a huddled mass on the cave floor, torn apart as if from a large cannon blast. A sonic blaster, most likely. Her ears picked up something different from Geosian speech then - the sliding of metal, slippery, like a sword. Then a dull, meaty thud, as if said sword had embedded itself into something soft and fleshy. There was no scream or yelp from the victim. There was only a muted gurgling, as if one of Ronovi's men was choking on his own blood.

From her position by the wall, the Warlord caught the shadow of the blade that had been used for the kill. She recognized it immediately: A scimitar? Now that was some artistry she could get behind.

She let one foot fall in front of the other, and within the next few seconds, she was standing in front of a bloody scene. Every member of her unit was dead - bodies ripped apart, heads burst,

mouths (or what remained of them) dangling open as if in shock. Arms wrenched from their sockets as what remained of their weapons lay crushed by some sort of invisible weight. Ronovi ran a dry hand across her very wet mouth. She could still taste the whiskey, but the odors of the dead were nearly overpowering. She had had no connection on a personal level with these minions, so now she was left to simply stare at their mangled carcasses.

Sure, her assigned unit had destroyed some B1 droids in the process, but that didn't mean the cluster of Geonosians had been done away with. All of them were hideous: Bulbous eyes protruding outward, protruding chin and mandibles, glassy wings bursting from pronged and hooked backs. One of the Geonosians gripped the scimitar still, its blade touched with brownish red. They clicked and whirred as if droids themselves as they swiveled around to look at the intruder - a nearly Amazonian woman in minimal armor with a blue eyepatch like some sort of cheap space pirate.

And they were not alone. A hooded figure - how appropriate, that image - clanked its way toward the center of the circle of violence. His silver arms dangled from the hem of his robe.

Someone had awakened these Geonosians for a reason. Ronovi let the second blade of her saberstaff ignite. She readied her weapon in front of her, stepping into her Broken Gate stance, to the sound of metallic laughter.

"Very cute," the stranger thrummed as if speaking from a machine. "The Plagueians think they have one more trick up their sleeve."

Then, to his horde of insects: "Fly, my pretties. *Fly.*"