

Arden Karn di Plagia (represented by [Kz'set](#)) - Orange
[Ronovi Tavisæn](#) - Blue

Principate Research Station
Moon of Thillon

“Well, that was easy.”

Kz'set muttered as he stared at the crystal that was the object of their mission. The Verpine knew those were words that would invite a later challenge; they always did. But so far, the mission to infiltrate the research station had been surprisingly simple. It probably helped that they had managed to beat the Collective forces to the surface. That gave the pair a chance to find an alternative entrance. When the Collective troops arrived they ended up being somewhat less subtle than they probably wanted to be. Based on the Principate transmissions Kz'set had tapped into, the Collective attack had attracted the full attention of the station's security, allowing Kz'set and Ronovi to slip in through some side doors and back corridors, with only minor opposition. That was the good news. The bad news was that things weren't going well for the defenders, and it was probable the Collective would still have much of their strength when they inevitably ran into them.

“Why'd you have to say that?! Why do people always have to say that?”

Ronovi was as keenly aware as anyone that if getting in was easy, than getting out wasn't going to be fun - at least, what normal people would call fun. That was the nature of the universe. Whether the Verpine and Epicanthix would find it fun, well, that remained to be seen. For the moment, though, Kz'set couldn't help but stare intently at the crystal. Based on the intelligence they had, it was highly intriguing to someone to someone trained in the arts of Mechu Deru. Its scintillating facets, the secrets he was going to pry from it. It was all so fascinating.

“Hey, bug brain, stop staring at the shiny rock!” Ronovi shouted as she waved a hand between Kz'set and the crystal. “Bad guys coming, remember?”

“Right,” Kz'set replied as Ronovi grabbed and stowed the crystal. The insectoid did get the look of a disappointed bug-puppy for a moment before putting his comlink to his ear while looking at the datapad on his wrist to which he'd loaded the base schematics. After a couple of seconds, he started speaking.

“Soundszzz like the action is in Sector 2. Lots of blaster fire, pained screams, all the usual mayhem. Thus, our best route out iszzz...” Kz'set stopped a moment to get his bearings and then pointed to a door on the far side of the room. “Out that way, hang a left, and make a right at the third hallway.”

"You sure?" Ronovi asked.

Kz'set shrugged and headed for the door. They made their way down the hallway as they could hear the sounds of blaster fire getting closer to the room that they had just left. The first 50 meters of their exit seemed to go well, but when they passed the second hallway Kz'set had mentioned, a door opened revealing a pair of Collective Huntresses and a quartet of ordinary looking soldiers. Kz'set simply shook his head and pulled out his lightsaber. Ronovi, however, was less calm.

"Nope. Nope. Not today, Oblivion. *Nope.*"

She then extended her right hand out and promptly zapped one of the Huntresses in the face.

As the woman toppled over, skin cooked from the sudden bout of Force lightning, her compatriot was far from enthused. Readying her Nightsister energy bow, she lobbed a fierce plasma arrow through the air, the sound of sizzling rivalling only that of her writhing identical Shikari. When that missed, she fired again, and this time, it was fended off by a swing of the Verpine's saber.

"Can you go into Berserker mode now, please?" he demanded of the Epicanthix, who was already sweating profusely from her forehead.

"Right. On it."

She ripped her saberstaff off her utility belt, cerulean bursting from both ends, and proceeded to make mincemeat of the grunts who tried and failed to serve as a proper entourage for the Huntress. One was sliced and diced, one split evenly in two, the other two still simply decapitated. There wasn't exactly an art to it: just a whirlwind of blue and black and primal screaming as the Dread Lord of Plagueis butchered the remaining Huntress, leaving cauterized wounds to match her experimental tattoos.

When it was over, Ronovi, huffing and puffing, turned and glared at Kz'set. She had never been fond of insectoids, and now, more than ever, she was not thrilled to be working with him.

"I could be playing sabacc right now," she snapped. "I could be playing sabacc right now on the *Ascendancy* and drinking whiskey and smoking a cigarilla without *goaaaack!*"

Her rant was cut short as a metal dart caught her in the neck, and she pitched forward, landing hard on her ribcage. As the bones cracked around her sternum, she groaned loudly, attempting to right herself while healing at the same time. Ronovi watched as Kz'set sprung into offensive mode again, the orange blade of his saber fending off another plasma arrow from yet another pair of Shikari coming from the same door - then remembered to yank the offending dart out of her skin and toss it aside, right as the wooziness began to set in.

“Aren’t you supposed to be the wise former Headmaster?” Kz’set asked, as he separated one of the Huntresses’ arms from her torso; he was not a fan of killing, preferring to maim or dismember instead. “What’s gotten into you?”

“Shut up!” Ronovi snarled. “I’m a bit rusty on the sneaky sneak mission, okay?!”

It was easy for those around the Epicanthix to question her intellect, despite her being, quite objectively, an utterly brilliant tactician and scholar. But it didn’t help that emotionally, she was equivalent to a tense wire ready to electrocute whoever dared even look at it. That, and the consistent inebriation didn’t help matters. Managing to clear whatever poisons had settled into her veins and mending her cracked ribs, Ronovi was finally able to push herself off the floor, retrieving her saberstaff and promptly jabbing it behind her so that one of the blades sank deftly into the stomach of a Huntress.

“Can we start running now?” she growled in frustration.

Kz’set nodded as he replied. “Workszzz for me.”

Checking his map once more, he proceeded down the originally planned escape route. Ronovi was clearly in some pain as she followed the Verpine, but he knew better than to offer any kind of assistance. The newly minted Dread Lord could take care of herself, and she appeared to be functioning more or less normally as her healing continued. As they moved down the corridor, a loud thud could be heard in the direction they had come from.

“That isn’t good,” Kz’set muttered as he glanced around.

“What the kriff was that?! And why are you stopping?” The annoyance in Ronovi’s voice was clear.

“Breaching charge. Probably on the main door we avoided when sneaking into the lab where the rock was.” Kz’set started fiddling with his datapad, trying to slice further into the base’s security systems.

Ronovi glared at the Verpine. “So what you’re saying is that all those Collective nerfheads just figured out the glowy rock they’re after isn’t there, and it won’t take them long to figure out where to find it.”

“Pretty much.” Kz’set’s answer was direct but strangely unconcerned, his antenna twitching as he stared at his datapad..

“*And*,” Ronovi snapped, “you’re just standing here?”

“That would imply I’m not making a productive use of my time.” Kz’set continued to punch keys.

“And what exactly would be more productive than running right now?” the Epicanthix growled.

Almost on cue, klaxons started blaring, and blast doors could be heard closing behind them. Kz’set smugly stowed his datapad and gave what must have passed for a smug buzzing chuckle among Verpine. “Initiating a basewide lockdown, which for some reason the Princpate didn’t. Come on, let’s move.”

Ronovi said nothing as the pair took off down the corridor as more and more blast doors closed behind them. It seemed like a cunning plan, as long as they could keep moving fast enough to keep from getting blocked in themselves. The plan seems to be working until they rounded a corner and ran into another fireteam of the Technocrats’ so-called “perfect” soldiers. Kz’set instinctively raised his hand and shot a stream of lightning into the clustered soldiers. Despite this, one of the lesser affected soldiers in the line managed to toss a readied grenade. As Ronovi hastily summoned a barrier to try and absorb at least some of the blast, a blast door snapped closed between the grenade and them. A slight clank of the grenade hitting the durasteel door could be heard, and shortly thereafter, another much louder thud could be heard.

“Well, that was convenient.” Kz’set said, with more than a hint of snark. Ronovi was less amused.

"Kriff, kriff, kriff, kriff, *kriff!*" The Epicanthix was clearly more annoyed by the helpfully timed but now inconveniently placed blast door.

Kz’set shook his head and pulled out his datapad. “For once, we’re in agreement.” He plugged away at the device for a moment before confirming his suspicion. “Door is jammed. Blast probably damaged the mechanisms.”

“Kriiiiiiff,” Ronovi all but repeated.

“I might be able to fix it, if I could just get at the...” Kz’set was thinking out loud, but Ronovi was clearly done with the thinking. She grabbed her saberstaff and stormed over to the door.

“My way is faster.”

Before the Verpine could say, “Qui-Gon Jinn-ing it much?” the Epicanthix had plunged one blade of her saberstaff deep into the blast door, grunting as she worked around the heavy steel and bolts. Her “surgical” incision left an orange glowing gash before the heat subsided, and by the time the severed chunk had landed on the other side with a clang, the two could clearly see another corridor - unoccupied. For now.

“C’mon, beetle boy,” the Dread Lord said, squeezing her way through the opening she had made for the two of them. “I’ve had enough stealthing to last me fifty years.”

Kz’set followed, bulbous eyes scanning the vicinity. By this point, the crystal had grown surprisingly cold in the folds of Ronovi’s jacket. The cape she had worn proudly, as if she were attempting to be Lando Calrissian incarnate, looked like a tattered gray flag across a dull, metallic landscape. And now, as she kept her grip on her saberstaff, she was becoming acutely aware of others closing in on them.

“I believe,” oozed a voice from the eastern flank of the corridor, “what you have is not a souvenir.”

Ronovi stiffened. The sight of a petite, yet armed, Chiss was not something she anticipated - unless she were taking shots with Khryso Mallus and Brimstone. Drawing a DE-21 slugthrower pistol from its holster at her hip, the head of the Shikari Huntresses made herself instantly recognizable to the two Plagueians. Kendra Icasta was certainly someone they had reviewed time and time again in the dossiers that the Inquisitorius had passed off to the Ascendant Clan. But everything from the hair to the cybernetic implant replacing her right eye seemed much more stark and excessive to the Consul of Plagueis.

“Nice hairdo,” she couldn’t help remarking, gazing at Icasta’s blue bangs that contrasted wildly with the rest of her red hair. “Who’s your stylist? Queen Amidala’s ghost?”

“Amidala didn’t color her hair, Tavisæn.”

“Don’t. Ruin. The diss,” Ronovi shot at Kz’set through clenched teeth.

By this point, a half dozen Shikari had emerged as if from the shadows, blocking what Ronovi could only now presume was an exit to the facility. Icasta smiled widely. As she raised her left arm, the hand of which gripped the slugthrower, Ronovi could easily spot the cybernetic right hand. Having an eyepatch was already annoying enough; she couldn’t even imagine what it would have been like to have to replace a limb, too.

“Man, I hope that’s not foreshadowing, what I just thought,” she muttered, as she activated her saberstaff for what felt like the umpteenth time.

“Let’s make this easy for you, Force users,” Icasta sighed. “My Huntresses are eager to fight. Just hand us back our artifact, and I won’t have to put holes in you.”

“We are not the least bit intimidated by you, Icasta,” retorted Kz’set.

“Yeah, we’ve made excellent work of some of your back-up dancers already,” added Ronovi with a sneer. “That little blaster isn’t even gonna graze us.”

“Oh?” Icasta wouldn’t stop smiling. “Is that so? Well, then. Perhaps I ought to take a different approach.”

Then, almost lightning-fast, the pistol was back in its holster, and a loud *crack* could be heard in the vicinity. What felt like an electrical current crept up Ronovi’s back, settling on the nape of her neck and setting her hair on end. As the Huntresses prepped their bows, their fearless leaders now held a crackling whip in her hand, charging it with the touch of a button, ready to create a *shocking* sensation.

Ronovi said and did nothing at first, simply holding her saber in front of her in an offensive Juyo stance. Then, she turned to Kz’set, who had his saber at the ready.

“Please don’t hate me for saying this.”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

The Epicanthix giggled. “You think Kelly Mendes would be BFFs with this girl, given their mutual love of whips?”

“You irritate me, Tavisæn.”

“You sound like all of my exes.”

With that, the Dread Lord struck.

Despite his irritation with Ronovi’s lack of seriousness during battle, Kz’set couldn’t deny she was quite an able combatant. As the Epicanthix went for the Chiss with the whip, he turned to face the group of huntresses. The first one lined up a shot, the insectoid lithely ducked while spinning slightly, the orange blade of his saber slicing into the huntress right about the belt. As she crumpled to the durasteel floor, Kz’set shouted over to Ronovi.

“First!”

Ronovi, for her part, had been dodging and parrying Icasta’s first couple slashes with the whip and shouted back.

“Seriously? Just get on with it!”

Kz’set said nothing as the next huntress sent a plasma arrow at his torso. While the Force gave him enough notice to twist out of the way, the arrow did glance off his right forearm. As he winced in pain, he noticed the distinct singe marks on the small amount of exposed carapace. He glared straight at the offending huntress and buzzed in anger.

“You singed my carapace! I just shined that today!”

Ronovi was about to say something when she saw the emerald-hued blur of the insectoid rushing past her. Before the huntress could consider another shot, the tangerine blade of Kz’set’s lightsaber was protruding out her lower spine. With a quick flick of his wrist, he sent the now unattended bow of the now fallen huntress towards the third with great force. The third huntress managed to block the oversized projectile with her own bow, but it was more than enough of an impact to disarm her. As he made his move towards the huntress, Icasta took a moment away from her assault on Ronovi to snap the whip across at the Verpine, catching him in the lower thigh.

Kz’set fell sideways from the sudden pain. As he hit the floor, still clutching his lightsaber, the Chiss went for another strike, but she was surprised with the outcome. As the energy-sheathed wires headed for Kz’set, he raised a finger, and the whip started sparking even more wildly before flaring out, leaving only the wires to strike his carapace, which he barely noticed. Ronovi smirked at the trick.

“You can do that?”

Kz’set shouted back as he staggered back to his feet. “Mechu-deru trick. Can short out technology with enough practice.”

As the three remaining huntresses and Icasta stepped back to regroup, Ronovi shook her head. “Lead with that one next time.”

Taking advantage of Icasta’s disorientation at the ruined state of her whip, the Dread Lord slammed the flat side of her saberstaff’s hilt right up against the woman’s chin, sending a shock through her face that cracked her teeth and rattled her skull. The Shikari head reeled in pain, clutching her mandible, and dropped her whip in exchange for her pistol. She tried to pull it from her holster, but the moment it was out in the open, it was wrenched from her hand, flying into the nearest wall.

Whipping around in fury, Icasta stared daggers into Ronovi. “Do you mind?”

“Mind what? Using the many Force powers that you don’t have?” smiled the Epicanthix. “Not at all.”

She then signaled to Kz’set, who had regained his balance and was barreling toward the huntresses. One by one, they were incapacitated - a severed leg, fingers almost surgically removed, bows and dart shooters compromised by hot plasma. All while Ronovi worked to amplify her moves, hitting harder, aiming better, running faster, and getting stronger with each second.

“Work it, make it, do it, make us, harder, better, faster, *stronger!*” she sang merrily, all while working her saberstaff across her body before sending a blade down, viciously, through Kendra Icasta’s collarbone.

She split neatly, one lung punctured and separated from the other, arms and legs divided as her two halves slumped to the floor. Icasta whimpered, moaned, and nearly wept. She still had time to live. She still had time to feel agony. And Ronovi knew she wouldn’t give her an easy death.

“Feel that?” she asked curtly. “That’s the sound of oxygen being deprived from your heart. You know. ‘Cause you’re missing a lung and all that. Have fun.”

“B...bast...*bast*...”

“Bast?” Ronovi raised an eyebrow pseudo-quizzically. “You mean, Moradmin Bast? Wasn’t he a guy who died on the Death Star? Well, anyway. Kz’set? We finally getting out of here?”

“Roger that,” trilled the Verpine, having moved to the blast door panel and pressed several buttons on it. The metal hatch slid away, and finally, they were blessed with the shadowy outside atmosphere of Thillon.

The two traipsed out of the research station, just in time to find Zuser Whuloc, frowning and waiting impatiently by his ship. He tapped at his wrist, even though he was not wearing a watch.

“The kriff took you both so long?” he demanded. “I had to hide out for hours! Everyone’s having fun without us at the shipyards!”

“Patience is a virtue, Whuloc,” remarked Ronovi, folding her arms like a lecturing teacher.

“Not when I’m a *Sith*, it ain’t!”

“Let him stew. He’szzz just sad we didn’t let him tag along,” Kz’set stated, and they disappeared into the Ghtroc freighter, leaving the carnage behind.