

Teeth and Claws:
Ronovi Tavisæn vs. Konnus Dreen

Nesolat Platform - Corridor

Arx system

38 ABY

She could taste blood clotting in her mouth without even getting hit. That was because she was too busy chomping down on the inside of her cheek.

Skidding across the slick transparasteel floor of the *Nesolat* corridor, Ronovi heaved her body against a wall and just barely dodged another stream of blaster bolts from the lone E-11 blaster rifle. She raised her ignited saberstaff to catch stray shots, the smell of sizzling plasma like taking a blowtorch to an old freighter. Suddenly, she was reminded of Zane. Her father. Welding a YV-100 engine in his workshop on Yridia IX.

She was distracted. Her enemy sensed it. The scrawny bastard was perceptive, and he made that clear, speaking as bluntly as he had when he had first approached her:

“Pathetic. I expected better.”

He squeezed the trigger of his rifle again and sent Ronovi skittering like a spice spider, almost on all fours as she tried to find a door - *any* door - to open and slip through. The corridor seemed to go on forever - curling, serpentine, sidewinding into the abyss. As she ran and defended herself, the Epicanthix was certain that she was missing opportunities to escape. But she had been caught off guard, separated from her boarding party, right as they had gone on the offensive against a swarm of Hive Mind Marines...

And to think, I was going to be the one going after him, Ronovi thought bitterly. He was my target. Now I'm his...

Konnus Dreen was a weapons specialist from the Liberation Front, and had he been shooting at anyone else, he would have already riddled the poor soul with blaster bolt holes. Ronovi, of course, had the Force on her side, but it could only help her for so long. She could already feel her lungs screaming in protest. Her stamina was good, but Dreen's was better. The slim Falleen found it easy to keep up with her, only taking short pauses in firing at her. One bolt finally managed to singe the sleeve of her uniform. Another caught the heel of her right boot. No precise hits. Not yet.

Hurling perpetually forward, Ronovi cursed and flailed, almost forgetting her Juyo form as the blades of her saber spun recklessly like an erratic pinwheel. She could only see her opponent in her peripheral vision, catching glimpses of his armor and cloak. His ponytail. Dark, long hair like hers.

Where is everybody? The Collective, my clan, the other clans. Why are we the only ones here?!

It was almost comedic how perfectly set up this was.

Then Ronovi spotted it. A “light” at the end of the tunnel. A turbolift was still active that led away from the fourth floor and the administrative building - if she could board it and close it up quickly enough, she’d evade Dreen. However, if he joined her, she could move into close quarters combat, and that served to her advantage. She deactivated her lightsaber and held its empty hilt tightly in her fist. Then she pushed herself into a sprint. Her chest and legs ached.

Go, go, go, go, GO...

The lift doors slid open. Two unassuming fighters - Iron Throne or Collective-affiliated, she’d never know - were bowled over like clumsy droids, and Ronovi feverishly mashed buttons on the side panel to get the turbolift to move. Dreen was too agile for that. He pushed himself into the lofty space, and as the doors closed, he once again opened fire.

The volley of blaster bolts, this time, had more of the appearance of a firework, spraying every which way and leaving puncture wounds in the turbolift’s exposed body. Ronovi clicked her tongue mockingly; her Force barrier had worked wonders. She reached over slowly, her belly swelling as she caught her breath, and placed a finger on the hot barrel of the E-11 rifle, ignoring the sting of the heat.

“I wouldn’t sabotage our ride, if I were you,” she remarked.

A sliver of Force lightning slipped from her palm down her finger, and instantly, the Falleen dropped the weapon as if he had been scalded, edging away from her and placing a hand on the hilt of his rapier. Ronovi grinned mischievously. Certainly, he had surprised her, but that didn’t change how vastly out of her league power-wise he truly was. Dreen’s pristine green skin glistened, and he tossed his ponytail back from his shoulder, waiting for the Epicanthix to strike.

“You’re a competitive one, aren’t you?” asked Ronovi, more assuming than doing any Force hocus pocus. She couldn’t read minds or telepathically communicate with anyone, after all, on account of her species.

Dreen's eyes narrowed. "You bore me. I'm not interested in small talk."

"Then fight me. Go on."

The turbolift lurched as it approached the first floor. Ronovi could already hear blaster fire. They were rapidly approaching a docking station.

"I like to play with my food before I eat it," she replied, before wincing at her own metaphor. "That sounded better in my head. Let's just get this over with, shall we?"

She hooked her lightsaber back onto her belt. She wouldn't need it now.

The doors of the lift slid open, revealing havoc along the docking station. Collective and Brotherhood troops alike were busy in combat, saber blades alight and blasters shrieking. Nearby, one could see various frigates and cruisers engaging in naval battle. Ronovi smiled and backed out of the turbolift slowly, focused on Dreen. He followed her. Slowly but surely, he followed her.

He watched as Ronovi armed herself. He waited as she readied herself in a Broken Gate stance - hands close to her chest, elbows tucked in, knees bent. Then he pulled the rapier out of its scabbard and jabbed it at Ronovi's head.

Ronovi already had her vibrodagger in her right hand, and surprisingly, the red blade of Dreen's weapon held firm against her parry, despite the polylayered ceramic's fragility. The Falleen had withdrawn his rapier too quickly for the dagger's vibrations to do more damage to it, and consequently, he was still armed. Ronovi sidestepped, then was the one to initiate the next move, launching into a roundhouse kick before aiming to stick the blade into the man's thigh. She simultaneously lashed out with her left hand, gripping a set of honed and glistening vibroknucklers.

But Dreen sprung away deftly from the flurry, his rapier aimed now at Ronovi's chest, and she was only just beginning to recover from her last move when he struck again. The blade's tip grazed her skin, tearing the fabric easily. Ronovi hissed and slid backwards, more annoyed than in pain. Her palm went straight to the wound, the weathered skin of her hand easily stained with her own blood.

I smell...the burning metal again. The engine...Father...?

She suddenly saw Zane in front of her. Not Dreen. Her father was silver-haired on top, his jaw spackled with wild stubble. He had lifted his welding mask to look at her. He was smiling. Toothlessly, but smiling nonetheless.

How did I...?

She was interrupted by the sensation of a blade plunging into her hip. The scream that burst from her throat was almost animalistic, shriek-hawk like. Ronovi stumbled back as Dreen pulled the rapier from her side, beaming, as if he had finally won his prize. Meanwhile, she could still see her father. She could still smell the musky, oily odor of his shipyard's garage. She could *taste* the oil.

And blood. She tasted her own blood.

The bastard had poisoned her. She had underestimated him. And now, scrambling to heal herself, Ronovi ran again. She found a bulkhead unoccupied by blaster fire and dove around it, feeling her energy drip away just like her own life essence leaving the gash above her leg. She sat down, hard, on the floor. She moaned. She pressed her hand hard against the wound.

Her father had gone after her.

He was smiling at her with teeth now. Sharp teeth. The fangs were long and Vornskyr-like. His eyes were amber. He had set down his blowtorch and was kneeling beside Ronovi, extending his hand. His voice was gravelly and guttural.

"Poor thing," he was saying. "You hurt yourself again."

Somewhere, there was an explosion. Ronovi tried to close her eyes. It was as if her remaining organic eyelid was glued and could not be forced down, like a broken window blind. She couldn't seem to disable her eyepatch. Zane still remained almost corporeal to her, untouched by the freighter ship that had crushed him over a decade ago. Tall. Weathered. Gray-haired. Fanged.

"You're not here," she kept muttering. "You're dead. You're not here."

She felt his fingers clench her calf.

"You're bleeding. What did you do this time?"

"You're not here. You're dead."

"I told you not to go out picking fights," Zane scolded her, his voice now taking on the texture and consistency of burnt steak. Ronovi couldn't figure out how she had heard that, but she had. It left her ears ringing and a new terrible taste lingering in her mouth. "And what do you do? Go out and pick fights."

Another explosion. Screams ricocheted off the walls. The docking station was getting torn up.

“Let go of me. You’re not here.”

She noticed something about her father’s hand. It had claws. Long, thick, black claws. And they were digging into her leg. Like needles.

Like needles leaving spiderwebs on her skin.

Like darts digging into a sad torn up dartboard in a bar.

Like daggers pressing into a screaming face.

Like scalpels burying themselves into an open eye.

Like maggots burrowing into useless flesh.

Like needles -

Like daggers -

Like scalpels -

“Give it up, Ronovi,” gurgled Zane. His consonants were a bubbling cauldron of acid. His vowels were a howl of agony from a dying animal. “Give it up.”

“You’re not here.”

“Give it up.”

“Go away.”

“Give it up.”

“*Go away!*”

Scalpels -

She shrieked and punched outward, forgetting all about the vibroknucklers she still had on her left hand. She heard a strange, almost distant sound - choking? Swearing? Crying? - and saw her father stumbling backward. His body contorted, like a broken marionette. His back arched and humped, twisted and corkscrewed. His clawed hands flew to his eyes. Eyes, Ronovi realized, that he could no longer see from.

Then she blinked. And it wasn't Zane anymore. And she blinked again. And it was him again. And then she blinked a third time.

Dreen.

The Falleen had found her behind the bulkhead and had been taunting her, though the toxins in her body had left her unable to comprehend his insults. He had been ready to leave his rapier in Ronovi's heart, but his foresight, in this moment, had failed him. He had not expected such a violent hallucination, nor an equally violent reaction.

Ronovi Tavisæn had blinded Konnus Dreen.

And now, her Force healing could start in earnest.

Now, the scratches and cuts that the Collective specialist had left on her were beginning to fade. But the poison responded differently. It practically curdled, like bad bantha milk. The visions flickered and changed. Zane's face became something different entirely. Burned, blackened skin dripping off his jawline. Eyes more red than amber now. No language was discernible in the woman's ears. It was all incantation. Dissonant music. Snarling. Incoherent.

Ronovi felt the rage burst from her throat. She forced herself to her feet, organic eye blazing. She could still taste ship fuel. In her mouth. Practically *poured* into her mouth.

"Your head is *mine*, Father!"

Dreen didn't know what she meant, but he moved at the sound of her footsteps, leaping on top of the bulkhead despite being unable to view his surroundings. A turbolaser blast from a nearby ship dislodged him, however, the sound wave strong enough to rip through the docking station and send him flying back to the ground. He groped for his rapier, but when he picked up the hilt, it was lighter than usual. His fingers danced toward the blade.

Broken. It had shattered from the fall. Mentally, he cursed the Brotherhood.

Ronovi saw the clawed doppelganger of Zane Tavisæn lying before her. He was growling, writhing, squirming like an injured centipede. His hands scratched outward at an invisible enemy. His face was no longer charred. But it didn't look like him. It looked...

She charged him. Threw herself at him. Pinned him to the floor and hit him, again and again and again. Just to get rid of him. Just to strip the visage away from him entirely.

The vibroknucklers left deep holes in Zane's cheeks, only for his wounds to close up and heal as quickly as they were inflicted. This angered Ronovi further. She punched harder. The adrenaline was now zipping through her. Her stamina had not fully returned, but the combination of the hallucinations and her unbridled fury did the job. She tore her father's face wide open. She cleft his chin from beneath his lower lip. She sliced into one ear, then the other. She jabbed. She hooked. She punched. She screamed.

She would not stop screaming.

Until Dreen's face became unrecognizable - became redder than the green skin, became shapeless, became devoid of all features and expressions - she did not stop hitting him.

Finally, she collapsed beside the corpse, and she wept.

She wept for her father. He was dead. He wasn't there.

Konnus Dreen was the latest victim.

And a part of Ronovi that she thought she had killed long ago had finally died.