

“The Council had no need for you,” I tried to explain.

They had dealt with the Collective without you, after all. Why would it be any different, here, with the Children of Mortis? What did you actually accomplish in your long, arduous career? Nothing, in the grand scheme. Just like you.

“You know this could have all been avoided...if you’d struck when you had the chance. You had Avitus in your sights, but chose not to act,” I said.

You shook your head solemnly. “If it wasn’t him, it would have been someone else.”

You always were your own worst enemy. Maybe this time, it would be different.

Probably not.



Fortress of the Unchained
Stairway to Central Command

“LOREM IPSUM!”

“DOLOR SIT AMET!”

The chants from the Children of Mortis sounded...wrong. The problem was, Marick couldn’t tell if that was a result of a lingering concussion, or simply a distortion of the Ethereal Realm continuing to play tricks on his mind.

“LOREM IPSUM!”

“DOLOR SIT AMET!”

That wasn’t right. His target was Loremi P’sum, Prophet of the Children of Mortis. The Arbiter of Balance—a title passed down for generations to whoever is deemed level-headed and brilliant enough to lead the Truthwardens towards absolution. They were chanting his name, of course, and that of Dolori s’Amet, his partner—not some random chant in a forgotten, archaic tongue.

Dried blood matted strands of his hair to the side of his face. Some of it was his own, but some was that of his enemies. He had lost count of how many he had killed. A small part of him told him that he should feel guilt.

But the voices were quieter, now. There was nothing he could do to uphold the promises he'd given to Atyiru. She understood. There was no one to protect that could no longer protect themselves. There was no one for him to unite. All that remained was the path before him. Perhaps everything he had done for the Brotherhood was for nothing. What he did have control over, at least, was what he did with the talents he had been gifted.

And for Marick Tyris Arconae, that gift had been one of taking life, and the weight of that responsibility was something he'd learned to carry in the past. Now, he had one singular mission. Make it to the top of these stairs.

He had come close to reaching the top but had been overwhelmed by the sheer number of Truthwardens guarding the Fortress and thrown back down to the bottom. The allegory was not lost on him.

"It's almost like it's some kind of penance," a dead Barabel offered off to Marick's side.

"If you're going to haunt me, Zakath, the least you could do is grab a blaster..."

There was no response, as the ghostly specter of his former mentor, and friend, that he had killed to prove his worth to Grand Master Pravus, vanished. Another reminder of the things he'd done. He was used to them by now, it seemed.

But the most important step a person could take was the next one. He reignited all three of his lightsabers and set them to float telekinetically around him. He picked up the broken shaft of his Beskar spear and started his way up the staircase, again.



Everything was a blur. He moved on reflex, stabbing blindly to his left, willing his lightsabers to guard his right, ramming the top of his head into the nose of the Warden that tried to grab him from behind. He pulled a knife free and jammed it into the eye socket of an Aegis. The Defenders were synergistically boosting one another's efforts, making it feel like for every Mortis soldier Marick slayed, another two would take their place.

Perhaps that was just his imagination, though. He had lost track of time, lost track of why and what he was doing. A knife bit into his shoulder blade and he countered instinctively with a rapier he appropriated from a nearby soldier's grip. He had lost his broken spear and two of his lightsabers were extinguished. Destroyed, most likely.

He recalled his remaining lightsaber to his hand, but then felt a wave of repulsing energy slam into his chest. The lightweight Hapan was lifted up and hurled backwards down the

stairs, thumping and thudding with gasps and grunts of pain as his vision whited out, blurred, and came back into focus.

Marick lay flat on the floor. Back where he had started. And for what? What was he doing? Did he really still think he could do this on his own? What purpose did he serve?

As he lay there, darkness started to encircle him, a soothing melody cut through the discordant aura of the Fortress. It became a voice, one he had not heard in so long. Not in the conventional way, as Cythraul did not actually speak in the manner of sapient beings...

“My how much you’ve grown since last we spoke. Though, of course, I already knew that, because I’ve been with you all that time,” the large white wolf spoke. Her massive head came up to Marick’s hip, her mismatched, heterochromatic eyes glowing through a ghostly shroud.

“Kira...” Marick murmured, blinking away a sudden mist that clouded his vision.

“It’s okay. I know,” the Hapan’s first Cythraul, who had been killed by treachery in another of the Brotherhood’s great wars. Marick did not have many true friends and losing her had largely been what had driven him to turn from Arcona and his responsibilities to it in the first place. It had driven a wedge between him and Atyiru, keeping him away from her and not letting him be where he needed to be when he lost her.

He had named his daughter, Kirra, after the Cythraul. Even before she had been born, a miracle in and of itself, he simply knew that her true name and connection lay beyond the mortal realm and was somehow connected to...something bigger. That had apparently, all along, been the Ethereal Realm, or something connected to it, at least.

“She will guide you where I cannot,” Kira explained, the voice not coming from the wolf’s mouth, but speaking directly to his soul. *“Also, Fela wants you to know that she can tell when you cut the treats in half and try to pass them off as a full treat. I did not tell her you never did that for me.”*

Marick laughed. Surrounded by enemies, bloodied, battered, but not beaten, a full bodied laugh bellowed from the depths of his diaphragm.

“Go. Finish this fight, and return to them,” Kira spoke one last time. She rested her ghostly head against Marick’s, nuzzling it. Then she vanished into the slipstreams of the Ethereal Realm, leaving behind a sense of renewed purpose and vigor.

Marick's eyes, too, had gained an eerie iridescence. A true blue, unnaturally bright, sharp, and deadly. He was no longer the Exarch of the Brotherhood. He was Marick Tyris Arconae, the *Gray Fang* that had been defying death his entire life.

Another platoon of Grayblades moved to intercept his path. But they were no longer an obstacle. Just lights waiting to be extinguished.

The Master Arcanist gripped his remaining lightsaber—his *Radiant* saber, crafted to represent all he had become and his future—and felt his dwindled reserves begin to refuel, channeling through the blockers of the Fortress of the Unchained.

Greyblade Wardens were tough and fighting on their home terrain. Inquisitive and distrustful by nature, they were feared throughout The Children due to their strict purging of those who sought to harm their ranks. They had trained their minds to dismiss the duality of the Force, the dark or the light.

Marick could relate but he did not have time to discuss dyadic philosophy. Instead, the Hapan severed the arm with a surge of speed through the Force. A flash of black light with a bone-white core severed the arm of the first Greyblade that entered his guard. The Hapan planted, spun, kicked out the legs of a second Warden and then reversed the grip on his lightsaber. Completing the spin, he drove it backwards to spear another Warden through their chest cavity.

Sure, they could have tried to slow him down again by cutting off his connection to the Force, but that would have, similarly, put the Children at a disadvantage here.

It wouldn't have mattered. He surged, spun, slashed, and swung his way through each Warden. Marick moved like a machine, muscles honed from a lifetime of doing *this*. There was always someone or something to fight. This was not the first, nor sadly the last time he would embrace the avatar of death. For as important as fighting to preserve life was, balance indeed, required death as well.



Fortress of the Unchained

Command Center

Marick reached the top of the staircase and found Loremi staring at a set of arrayed vidscreens playing out events all across the Ethereal Realms.

A lone guard pointed a blaster carbine at Marick. The Hapan reached out his free hand, balled his fist, and the barrel of the blaster crumpled, and became superheated as the

shot that was just about to be fired stuck in the chamber and detonated in the guard's face.

"Tyris, is it?" Loremi spoke without turning.

Marick said nothing, slowly stalking his way towards the Arbiter of "Balance."

"If you're going to kill me, be quick with it. At least then I'll be able to be with him...again."

Marick paused, his adrenaline taking a momentary sidestep to allow his mind to think on the ramifications of P'sum words.

"Dolori?" the Exarch asked, slowing his steps as he approached.

Loremi nodded solemnly. He gripped his lightsaber in hand but it was easy to see that his body language indicated that the fight had left him.

"There are more important things...the mission...they are so close. The Chain is almost broken..."

"I lost my partner as well," Marick spoke up.

"And what did you do?" Loremi turned, at last, to face the Arconae.

"I fought. I cried. But I found a way to get her back." He idly ran a hand through his once inky-black hair, now a faded ash-blown gray.

Loremi seemed to nod at this, activating his lightsaber and meeting the Exarch's eyes. Understanding passed.

The two Elder's surged into motion. The Prophet augmented his strength while feinting to the left. The Master dashed forward, black and white blade coiled like a viper.

Sabers clashed, hissed, and then slid off one another as Marick Tyris Arconae moved faster than should have been possible.

In the Ethereal Realm, there was no limit.

Marick's blade bisected Loremi P'sum across the chest.

The Arbiter of Balance fell.

The fate of the Force would resolve without him.

Yet maybe, just this once, his efforts had done something to help.

Only time would tell.