

THE REAL TEST: MARICK

"I'm not telling you 'nothin'," the man pinned down under my knee spat up at me.

"Anything," I corrected the man absently as I applied more weight against one of his already cracked ribs. I'm not that heavy, but with a subtle nudge from the Force and the right placement, it's easy to apply enough pressure if you know just ~~where~~ to .

"Oh-god-stop!" he cried out as his splintered bone pushed against something sensitive.

"That's fine. I don't really have anywhere to be," I assured the mercenary, my voice never escalating above a conversational level. "Up to you, really."

He cried out and in desperation tried to swing at me with his hand that wasn't laying limp at his side. I caught it and trapped his wrist under my armpit, flexed, and then twisted my torso to the side.

rack.

The mercenary screamed. Through it all, I calmly looked down at him. I don't know much about the more subtle techniques with interrogation that Timeros uses, but he at least taught me the basics. I am also very good at inflicting pain, among other things.

He started to talk. He didn't know much, but I wasn't expecting him to. Just enough to help me get a handle on what was going on. Once I had everything I needed, I did the mercenary a courtesy and snapped his neck with a simple twist and some added torque from the Force.

Atyiru didn't expect me to keep every Merc' alive...did she? Future Marick would have to deal with that. Present Marick had a job to do.

"Such dark, very wow," an annoying voice announced from off to the side. Wyndell leaned against the door to the now battered shop that had become a skirmish between three Force users and a squadron of mercenaries.

I glowered at my brother, pointedly ignoring him as I turned my attention to the man beside him. Adem Bol'era. Smart kid. Talented, powerful, and iron worth shaping. This ordeal was a bit much for his first time shadowing me, but I guess we all get thrown into the fire eventually.

"You pick up on everything he said?" I asked the Umbaran.

"Yeah. It looks like you were right and they're targeting Bulkhead," Adem replied.

"He's going to try ~~and discover what~~ ~~at~~ ~~that~~ I did during the . Except this time, it won't be a test," I explained, realizing the weight of what was about to happen.

Wyn shrugged and knelt down over one of the the dead mercenaries that he had shot and rummaged around his person. He found a small disk-like communication device and pulled it free, studying it for a moment and determining it's value. He glanced over at a few pieces of foodstuffs that had spilled out of a broken crate on the floor, and picked up an apple. He hefted it as if his palm where a scale, and the nodded once.

"I heard these are good for the body," Wyn murmured as he left the apple on the dead mercenaries chest and tucked the communicator into his jacket pocket.

I sighed and shook my head. "Let's get moving, we need to make it to the mines before Teroch can undo years of work."

Adem nodded and fell into step behind me as we took to the streets, sticking to the shadows and corners I knew all too well.



It always felt odd to me, being back on Port Ol'val. The shadowport had been different back then: an underworld haven free from the influences of the fabled Jedi, Sith, or the Empire that fueled them.

And then we showed up.

It seems like yesterday that Invictus arrived after defecting from Nagao Sadow, stepping into the role of the while also agreeing to be my Aedile. Together, we helped carve out House Qel-Droma's niche in the shadowport and created a new home for the House. Working against the Triumvirate from the shadows, we set up safe houses and plants and moles where we could. We took control without those in power having any idea that we even existed. They were chasing a ghost, a specter, and all the while we sank our roots into the asteroids core.

That was all before the war, of course. Everything changed when we returned home. Nothing was ever the same again.

was located deep beneath the once active minefield on Port Ol'val. It was where we held Qel-Droma's prisoners of operations and had, at one point, used them as stock for Dod B'nar's experimentation. The operation had since been...forgotten as the Neti has been focused elsewhere and Atyiru felt that it crossed a line she was not comfortable with. Looking back, I see her wisdom, but in times of war, you needed every advantage you could get.

I don't regret the things I did as Shadow Lord. I made the calls I needed to make and did the things that needed to be done. To linger or drift back to the past serves me no good.

The last time I had been down under the mines, I was tying off the loose end of the "test" I had engineered for what the historians called "The Trials of Loyalty". Whoever came up with

that name really could have done a better job, but I won't judge them too harshly. That said, it had been a long while since I returned to Bulkhead.

The mines, though now abandoned, were lined with old string-lights that did not require a lot of power but worked well enough to provide luminance for the typical Human eye. Of course, that meant it was double hard for me, thanks to my genetics.

Thanks, mother.

other than being a

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"Alright Grey, you get to take point, on account of havin' those night-vision eyes. You see something off, shout it out and I'll shoot in that direction."

"It's not night vision," I tried to explain to my brother. "He can just see in the ultraviolet spec--"

"Like I said: night-vision!"

I pinched the bridge of my nose. Why did I bring Wyn with me again?

We made our way through the tunnels without any resistance. That's when I started to worry. We passed two of the sentries, dead and stopped briefly to examine them. We had to keep moving, though. Something was definitely wrong. Sure enough, as we came to the first cell-block, the heavy durasteel-barred doors were all slid open.

Sithspit.

I made my way to one of the terminals as quickly as I could. I punched in my override code and pulled up the displays. Only one cell-block had been opened. The rest, oddly, remained intact.

One of the prisoners held up a large sign. It was white and had a few simple words on it. I tapped the screen to enlarge the image and then bit down on my molars when I read the words.

My mind raced as I tried to figure out why Teroch would have only released one cell block. He could have done so much more damage. Unless...maybe that wasn't his goal. Mass chaos would cause too much confusion. It would also be much more difficult to hunt down a smaller group of escaped prisoners than to round up a large horde or riot.

This meant that there were fourteen highly dangerous convicts (that knew classified information and were probably not too keen on the band of Dark Jedi that had imprisoned them) on the loose in Port Ol'val.

"Well, at least we know where they all probably went?"

Even in the dim lighting, I narrowed my eyes at Wyn.

“He’s re-staging the breakout I engineered all those years ago. This time it’s not a just a ‘test’, though. Every one of the prisoners kept here knows about Qel-Droma’s presence on the Shadow Port. We need to stop them. We need to...”

My voice trailed off as I realized exactly where Teroch was headed.

“Wyn, I need you to assist Adem with rounding up the escaped prisoners,” I said quickly as I started to walk away from the duo.

“But, shouldn’t I come with you?” Adem asked.

“No, I’m sorry. This is now personal, and you will only slow me down.”

I regretted my choice of words as I said them. I wasn’t thinking as clearly as I needed to since I was more focused on catching up with Teroch.

“What I mean to say, Adem,” I added as calmly as I could. Even when my head is running ahead of me, I am still always in control of my voice. “Is that it is more important that we find these prisoners. The slightest slip-of-tongue could mean the end of House Qel-Droma on Port Ol’val. I trust you fully to be able to handle this. There isn’t anyone else I trust, to be fair.”

“Hey now, have a heart! I’m standing right here!” Wyn protested.

I stared blankly at my brother for a minute, then turned to Adem. I placed a hand on his shoulder in what I hoped was a comforting way, forced a tight smile, and then took off down the corridor.

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I knew exactly where Teroch was heading. A part of me had known the second this whole mess started. Yet a part of me had hoped that this was all a misunderstanding—that it was someone else pretending to be Teroch, a ruse by one of our enemies looking to tear us apart. I had hoped that Teroch had grown past his petty vendetta against the Serpentine Throne.

As with most things, however, life didn’t particularly care about our hopes. I guess, in the end, this outcome was set in stone the second that Sashar and Zandro sacrificed themselves all those years ago on New Tython for the sake of the Clan.

Which brings me to Dusk Station. Suspended in geosynchronous orbit above Estle City, Dusk Station serves as the main hub for all traffic in and out of the Dajorra System. Unbeknownst to anyone not , however, it also contained ‘Code Black’ prisoners for Clan Arcona. These were criminals that were deemed too dangerous for a conventional cell in the bowels of the Citadel, or even .

I knew Dusk Station better than most. I had signed off on the order to upgrade to the Cardon-class space station, after all. While I don't know much about ships or fleets, I have a very eidetic memory when it comes to schematics. I had also personally tested the security system against my own abilities, twice. Paranoid? Maybe, but I like to think of it as being thorough. It's just the way I was trained.

...Thanks, Tim.

All of the security measures and protocols in the world couldn't have prevented the trail of dead bodies that greeted me as I stepped out of the turbolift. The guards down here were some of the best in the ADF and had been hand-selected for duty by Captain Bly and the Arconae. Their bodies lay in twisted tangles with a mixture of holes and neat slash marks from laser edged weaponry. Scorch marks from blasters littering the durasteel plated walls. They had gone down fighting, at least, but the security personnel were not meant to handle an Elder Jedi and a cadre of elite mercenaries. Especially one that no doubt knew the layout.

The alarms had not gone off. Someone had sabotaged them, or Teroch's team had simply been that quick and efficient.

I felt a quiet anger begin to build up inside me as I strode past the bodies. I had sent many soldiers to their deaths. Countless. The fact that these lives had been ended by one of our own? A former Arconae, at that? Unacceptable.

Lowering myself deep into the station, I felt that swelling anger slowly fade to the recesses of my mind. I could still sense the edges of the fiery rage, and would use it to burn as fuel when the time came. For now, I had a mission to complete and a rogue Arconae to deal with.

The doors slid open to reveal a long catwalk. The metal pathway was but one of many that all lead to a central ring of computer terminals, like spokes of a wheel. There were multiple ways to gain entry into the central chamber, but the one I had picked placed me on the level right below where I knew Teroch would have chosen.

Sure enough, the misguided youth I had once called 'brother' was angrily swearing in Mando'a at the terminal. He was surrounded by a squad of 8 heavily armed mercenaries, each equipped with Blaster Rifles and vibroswords.

"What do you mean, you can't open it!?"

An Quarren engineer of some kind wearing an ADF insignia on his uniform held up his webbed hands. "I'm s-s-sorry, but they change the sequence every quarter hour."

Teroch snapped his lightsaber to life and leveled it with the engineer's head. "If you can't open the cell, you're of no use to me. When I'm done here, I will make sure your wife, children, relatives, colleagues and anyone you have ever known and loved are executed.

The Quarren blubbered and started to do the equivalent of crying from his bulbous eyes. "But sir, the code I have isn't working, and my override isn't w-w-working without a second passkey

and both a retina--er, well, they actually had to change it to a thumb imprint/dna sample from the Shadow Lady.”

“Don’t call that Jedi-loving weakling that!” Teroch snapped. “No Shadow would ever side with the Jedi and bow to the Grandmaster. She has led this Clan to ruin, and I know the only way to save it.”

I had heard enough.

Tapping back into the slipstreams of the Force, I felt my muscles surge with heightened power and adrenaline. I bent my knees and pushed off the metal underfoot. My long coat flapped behind me as my augmented leap carried me up and then over the railing of the catwalk above me. I landed nimbly with my shoto saber ignited and ready.

Three quick cuts. Two cries of pain. Two hands gripping blaster’s severed and fell to the sides of the catwalk. I made a quick gesture with my free hand and telekinetically slammed both mercenaries together, creating an improvisational shield from the remaining six. They opened fired without care for their comrade’s, blaster bolts tearing into their bodies and turning them quickly into porous sponges.

While they focused there, I cloaked myself in the Force and quickly to the next catwalk, balancing on the rail with my toes. Teroch must have realized what was happening and was able to track me, shouting a command as he pointed in my direction. Realizing my cloak would be of little use here, I burned that anger I had pushed aside earlier and tapped it for speed.

My body shimmered back into view as I sailed through the air and hurled my shoto lightsaber at the mercenary that was obstructing my landing. He slid back and away from the scything blade, but a twist of my wrist redirected the thrown saber like a homing missile towards the ‘merc’s neck.

As my feet touched down, my saber took off his head. Palm open, the hilt returned telekinetically to my grasp. As I spun the blade in a quick circle to bat aside a volley of blaster fire, I pulled my Emerald Dagger from my belt with my free hand and hurled it into the forehead of the next closest ‘merc. The blade glistened in the overhead lighting as it spun end over end and sunk into its target with a meaty .

Now, I know throwing knives, daggers or stars in general were never meant to kill. In the holovids it happened all the time, but in reality they were designed to slow or wound an opponent. The difference here, of course, was the telekinetic torque added to the blade, giving it a preternatural trajectory . Terran called it “ ,” but I just called it “throwing my dagger faster.”

That said, the man went down. I didn’t immediately go to recover the Dagger, as I was confident it would stay put and I had more pressing matters to attend. I knew I had to move quickly. Teroch wouldn’t sit by, and I wasn’t honestly sure I could take him in a direct fight, let alone with a set of Blaster’s trained on me and in a tight space.

That said, I flared the Force again and leapt up onto the railing of the central platform. Balancing, I deflected another salvo of crimson dashes, and managed to send one of them into the feet of one of the mercenaries. He yelped in pain as he grabbed for his foot and then teetered over the railing with a scream trailing in his wake as he plummeted.

My second shoto saber appeared in my free hand and snapped to life. With a flick of both wrists I sent my twin sabers flying out in either direction. Like string on a marionette, the pale blue blades danced into sporadic spins and dips like birds of prey. The remaining 'mercs fell with cries of anguish.

I hopped down onto the platform at the same time as their bodies hit the floor. Both shotos returned to my grip. I sheathed the second and kept the first lit and extended out towards Teroch, who held the engineer captive with his lightsaber draped across the Quarren's neck.

"Teroch, there is no reason to--"

The youth's toned arm flexed as he dragged the blade of his lightsaber across the Quarren's neck in a symbolic gesture. He gurgled, but died before his body slumped to the ground.

"Still trying to make everyone happy, huh Marick? I thought we were past this, after all we've been through together. You haven't changed one bit," Teroch chided, twirling his saber in front of him in a display of his talent.

"And you're still just a child trying to clamber around in your father's clothes," I found myself replying. I was surprised with how calm and even my voice sounded to my own ears. It was the wrong thing to say, but I remember not caring much at the time.

Teroch blurred as he darted towards me, dipping low to the ground and then scything the tip of his lightsaber up into my groin with an uppercut-like slash. I shuffled backwards just enough for the tip to pass in front of me and waited a heartbeat longer before tapping the Force for speed. Just as I did, my shoto was forced to bounce left and then right to deflect a flurry of blows from the aggressive Clone. The contact drove me back on my heels and I nearly tripped over the railing. Teroch pressed in, but I launched myself up into a side-long roll. As my boots touched down on the railing, I immediately springboarded off it and landed back down in the center of the platform.

Teroch was waiting for me the second I landed. His telekinetic blast caught me right in the nose, and I felt my eyes water and tear instinctively as bone cracked under cartilage. I willed the Force to numb the sudden flash of pain, blinking rapidly and focusing enough to get my lightsaber back into a position to deflect Teroch's follow up assault.

To put it bluntly, I'm not built for this type of fight anymore. A chose the time and place for a fight, and only engaged when absolutely necessary. There wasn't a lot of space for me to take advantage of, no terrain to give me some kind of advantage. Teroch had always been better with a saber as well. He was a better marksman, too, a better soldier and always seemed to be at his best when taking his anger out on an enemy. The clone rained down blows from every direction. I felt myself reaching into the Force more and more to simply keep up with his assault, and it was draining my reserves quickly.

I felt a sudden sense of vertigo as my feet were swept out from under me. The wind rushed from my lungs as I felt an elbow dig into my solar plexus. My head hit the metal floor at an odd angle and my vision blurred. I heard my saber clatter the metal beside me and disengage.

Teroch moved over me and spun his lightsaber over his head with dramatic flare.

“Goodbye, 'vod,” he whispered as he drove his blade down into my chest.

The Force granted me the strength to roll out of the way. Flaring the last of my reserves, I rolled back up to one knee and lashed out with my wrist. The hidden blade in my bracer mirrored the motion, jutting out to nick Teroch in the side, biting into his flesh.

Teroch swore loudly and grabbed me by the front of my vest. He pulled my face right up to his and spat in it. “You think you’re so great, don’t you? You think your little hidden daggers and tricks and games can defeat me? You’re nothing, Marick, you hear me? You are just another bastard from a basket, an orphan with no family.”

“Heh,” I managed to say, an echo of my former master. And then I laughed, which caused Teroch to punch me across the jaw with enough torque to snap my head to one side. Blood trickled down my lip and I tasted copper. And still, I found myself chuckling.

“You’ve never understood, Teroch,” I said slowly.

Teroch started to say something but felt his muscles begin to twitch and spasm. The poison from my hidden blade was a mixture of and On their own, each was potent, but together they could induce seizure like spasms before shutting down the nervous system entirely and causing temporary paralysis.

Teroch looked at me with shock and fledging terror. He tried to shout and swear and curse my name, but his jaw muscles began to twitch and then locked up. He fell to his knees, fighting against the convulsions, and to his credit managed to keep his chest upright.

“That’s the thing that you’ve never seemed to grasp, Ter,” I explained calmly.

The doors on the various catwalks opened. From each door, a hooded figure stepped into the light. I siphoned what was left of my strength to deliver my final message to the rogue Arconae.

“It’s never been about you. Arcona and the Arconae...the Erinós the Entars? We are all bound together by more than just shared names. The bond that ties us is stronger than any one of us as an individual. Sure we disagree on many things, but you should have known that the one way to get us all to agree on something was to give us a mutual enemy.”

Wuntila was still in recovery, but the rest of the gathered Arconae pulled back their hoods one by one. Sashar, then Celahir, then Rayze, then Timeros, then Strategos, then Baxir, and finally Legorii. Close enough to a full ensemble, I suppose. (James was of course busy “serving the realm” as he like to put it.)

Timeros Entar Arconae hopped down to the center platform with supernatural ease. He looked me over, probably judging me for allowing myself to get beaten as badly as I had. Even after all these years, I still had trouble reading my former Master. Sashar mirrored the motion and landed beside him.

“We’ll take it from here, Marick,” Sashar said coldly, as he stepped forward to look at his son. Timeros nodded and folded his arms silently across his chest.

Baxir and Legorii both hefted me up and let me lean on them. I didn’t hear the words that were exchanged after the doors closed behind me. I had done my part. Arcona was safe.

For now.

-Marick Arconae