

### **Severian Principate Diplomatic Ship: *Ninox***

The representatives from each of the Brotherhood's seven clans had been in quarantine for longer than any could keep track. Shooter had done the customary soldier method of drawing lines on the wall to mark the passing days, but even he had grown tired of it.

They were given foodstuffs, the ability to use individual refreshers, and leave to use the ship's exercise facilities. But they were always under the eye of a Technocratic Guild guardsman, most of which seemed to never need sleep. They were more machine than men or women, really, and no matter how long she spent around them, they still unnerved Violet.

Violet tapped away at the Datapad they had given her. They had, apparently, realized that she had been the one who leaked the original distress beacon and confiscated her Shadow Academy issued one. The model she now held was locked with a proprietary firmware and the local network of the ship was masked behind so many proxies that she couldn't have pinged the actual holonet even if she tried.

That didn't mean she couldn't try and leave breadcrumbs, of course. The problem was, would anyone know *where* to look for said breadcrumbs.

Yet still the scrawny scribe knew that someone would eventually come for them. She hoped.



### **How To Save a Life(s)**



**Star Courier: *Encanis***  
**Tenixr Orbit**  
**Varton System**

**M**arick Tyris had said that he was done. Done with the Dark Council, done with Voice, done with spending his every waking minute trying to fight an enemy organization with one hand tied behind his back. He had given everything he had, and more. There was nothing left for him to teach Ness'arin. Idris had already proven resourceful, and he had faith the Mandalorian would handle the mantle as needed to carry on the legacy of defending the Brotherhood from threats unseen and moving in the shadows.

He had not been present in Lyra-3K-a when the false-flag attacks launched. The Inquisitorius had moved quickly, but there were inherent delays in their response based on proximity to the system. He had not been present when the *Ninox* was taken, and all seven of the Brotherhood's Clan representatives were taken hostage along with the new Deputy Grand Master. He had not been there, and had been told repeatedly that it was not his fault.

So, what was he doing here?

Arcona had deployed a series of strike teams to help get control of the prison outbreak. He had come along, if only to lend a hand to the few that had earned his trust since returning. For her, really. Why else did he do anything anymore?

The prison riot was not his focus, however. Since returning to the ship with Zig to rejoin Ace and Wyndell, his small crew had a different task at hand. Marick sat and used the quiet din of the ship's systems to recover from all the fighting. He chewed on a ration bar and downed another ration of water from a canteen. His too-blue eyes studied the terminal that Ace and Zig were sharing, both slicers typing furiously as they cycled through the data from a nearby Inquisitorius Listener ship.

"You do know we're not supposed to be able to tap directly into the *AIN*, right?" Ace asked, running a hand through the mohawk that combed backwards down the center of his otherwise shaved head.

"Yes," Marick replied quietly.

"Just checking, because I'm already patched in," Ace grinned. The slicer had learned and worked directly with Seneschal James Entar in designing the Advanced Inquisitorius Network's infrastructure and security. He was probably one of the few living beings who could, if given enough time, get through even James' encryption keys.

In reality, though, Marick had reached an understanding with Telaris upon leaving that he could retain high-level clearance for anything that pertained specifically to the Collective as a threat. The former Voice was willing to bet the Grand Master would consider getting an edge in finding his Clans' delegates and Deputy counted as a reasonable exception.

"So, what exactly are we looking for?" Zig asked from the co-pilot's seat. The mechanic had changed into a more relaxed suit that consisted of baggy pants and a grease-stained halter top. Marick knew better than to press the Zygerrian, and was just glad that her and Ace seemed to somehow get along despite their different...outlooks on life.

"Well, the boss's theory is that if the Collective staged this, they wanted to draw the Brotherhood in. The easy answer, of course, is that they wanted some of their scientists that were being held on Tenixir. That tracks with their previous patterns," the Hapan Infiltrator continued.

Zig nodded along. "But you have a reason to think that there is something more?"

Marick steepled his hands together and leaned forward, matted strands of silvery-gray hair falling in front of his too-blue eyes as he studied the ground, continuing to let his reserves in the Force recuperate. Was he getting old, or had he really used that much energy fighting off the Technocratic Guild reinforcements?

"The man we found in the prison break," Marick said, his lilted voice carrying easily through the cockpit without having to raise his tone.

"Trepbor? That secondrate hacker?" Zig asked, jabbing a thumb towards the back of the ship.

"That 'second class' hacker managed to get the turrets online while you were working on gaining access to the camera systems," Marick replied sharply without raising his voice. "His cell was also adjacent to the scientist the Collective extracted. He heard where they had been working before being captured. If we can find those coordinates...he might end up being the key to finding where Rath has been hiding the *Ninox*."

"And If we can find the *Ninox*, we can get Violet and the others—" Ace nodded.

"—And Evant," Zig added.

"And Evant," Marick echoed, his thoughts drifting momentarily as his eyes closed.

"Where is he now?" Zig asked.

"With Wyn in the cargo hold," Ace responded.

"Doing..."

"He's supposed to be getting information out of him. But, knowing Wyn..."

Marick tuned out the idle banter as he entered a pseudo-state of meditation. He cleared his thoughts of the current situation, and let himself address his innermost mind.

He missed Atyiru, but knew there was no power in the verse that would have stopped her from being back on the front lines, helping people. A part of him was worried, but another was glad that even with all she'd been through, she truly was the same woman who had changed his view on the galaxy at large.

He also missed Fela, the three-legged Cythraul runt that would usually be chewing on his boot lace or marking her territory on the ship. She had stayed behind for a very important mission, Marick had told her, in guarding the other Cythraul of the second pack. Most of the second pack were bigger than her already, of course, but Fela was taking her duty seriously and had been yipping and nipping at the larger Cythraul to keep them in order.

Marick was jogged from his thoughts as Zig's voice perked up.

"Wait...Ace, re-run that backtrace one more time."

Ace leaned forward in his chair, nimble fingers flashing across the keys of his console.

"Huh, would you look at that, the prisoner was right." He started to explain the logistics behind the trace routes and secure socket layers and remote lookups...but it was mostly jargon to Tyris' ears.

Marick stood and moved to stand between the slicer and the engineer. "What does that mean?"

Zig turned in her chair and flashed a fanged wide grin at Marick.

"It means that we found the *Nixon*."



"All personnel, I repeat—**all personnel**—we have a breach in—garrghhh!" the guardsman's radio plea devolved into a bloody gurgle as a Sith Dagger slashed across his throat.

Just as quickly as the hand that bore it had appeared, the hooded attacker disappeared from view. Blaster bolts filled the empty space he once occupied. The remaining guardsman, proud member of the Liberation Front that had been personally-trained by Arraris Varken to counter the Brotherhood's Force-Users, managed to keep their calm. They ceased fire and regrouped at the far end of the corridor, toggling infrared scanners on their helmets' visors to track their assailant's position.

As the first guardsman drew a bead on a humanoid-shaped heat signature, his blaster wobbled in his hands and then started to pull to the left. The barrel aligned with his fellow guardsman as his eyes widened. "Jalen, no, look out—" he tried to protest, but he felt himself compelled by an unseen Force to pull the trigger. The blaster carbine barked twice, and the second guardsman dropped to the floor with a smoldering hole in his chest.

A second figure appeared out of his peripheral. *Reinforcements*, the guard thought.

This guardsman was one he did not recognize, however. While he wore the helmet, and the armor, he had long dark hair tied back into a horse-tail and his hand was extended, eyes focused. He held no gun in hand, and was coming from the same direction from which the cloaked Assassin had entered. Which meant...

Before the guardsman could piece the mystery together, he watched in detached horror as his own body turned the gun around in hand and pointed at his own neck. The figure made a gesture with his hand, and the guardsman pulled the trigger on his own blaster rifle and ended his abject terror in the flash of a blaster bolt to the jaw.



Wyndell Tyris lowered his hand and gestured that the coast was clear. "Hate to see it," Wyn shook his head in feigned regret. He removed the Liberation Front Helmet and patted it on the head. "I keep telling Ace, you have to have a hat to really get into someone's head and sell the act. Why doesn't anyone listen to me? Kids these day."

Marick appeared beside him as the Force cloak around him shimmered away. Wyn's half-brother raised a hand to his earpiece as he spoke. "Zig, according to the schematics Ace pulled, the delegates should be held in the prison hold."

Marick turned to lock eyes with Wyn. "Wyn and I cleared the path, I'm sending him to rendezvous with you. I'm trusting you two to rescue the prisoners."

*"And what about you?"* Zig inquired through the earpiece.

"I'm heading for the Captain's Quarters," Marick replied, his voice losing any intonation and going cold and flat as a glacier's edge.

Wyn offered a mock-salute and headed towards the turbo lyft. Marick pressed on, and again was reminded that he was getting older, not younger, as his work never seemed to be finished.



Violet thought she heard a commotion from outside the entrance to the prison hold. The only sounds, usually, were the changeover of guards or the staff bringing in foodstuffs and extra supplies for the captives. The others seemed to notice, too, and all made their way towards the laser-gate door.

Blaster fire echoed. The sound of crunching metal and broken bone rung out. Two mechanical, feminine voices howled, heavy weight clattering to the floor.

The laser-door vanished, and in walked a most welcome sight.

"Hello, my name is Wyn, and I'm here to—"

“—Violet!” Zig exclaimed, pushing past Wyn and running towards the Arconan representative.

“Um, hello...” she replied shyly, unsure of who the Zygerrian woman was.

“Sorry, name’s Zig. I’ve heard a bunch about you! I’ve mostly been working with the *Voidbreaker* crew and Lucine has spoken fondly of you and everything you did for the Clan.”

Violet stared blankly at the woman. “M-miss Vasano...spoke of m-me?”

“Yep, she has had the DIA searching high and low for you.”

Violet froze in place. “I...you...you have to tell her. It was not my fault. I wore the glasses, I did everything just like she told me!”

Zig blinked a few times and studied the diminutive woman. Apparently, whatever Lucine had done to instil fear in her still superseded the predicament of spending months in captivity to an enemy faction.

“Uh, yeah, don’t worry. We’ll take care of you.”

Off to the side, Wyn tried to address the remaining Clan representatives.

“As I was saying: the rest of you might not know me, but my name is Wyndell Tyris and you need to come with me if you want to—”

“—I don’t care if you’re Pre Vizsla incarnate, if you got a way out of this place, get me the karking hell out of here!” Shooter growled as he shoved past the Defender.

Wyn frowned and folded his arms. “Yes, fine, follow us, we’ll get you out of here.” He gestured for them to follow. “*Fun ruiners,*” he grumbled.



The doors to the Captain's Quarters slid open. No threats presented themselves. From the cover of his cloaking through the Force, Marick’s too-blue eyes took in every detail of the room, checking for hiding places, points of egress, anything that would give away something lying in wait.

There were none.

All that the room contained was a man, hunched on the ground in the corner, shackled with some kind of shock collar and wrist-cuffs that Marick had never seen before. Even with the disheveled, unkempt hair and unruly beard, it was easy to recognize the man he had worked for and alongside for so many years.

Evant Taelyan lifted his head slowly, amber eyes distant but then coming into focus as Marick bent down in front of him and slowly took the lightsaber off of his belt.

"Marick," the Deputy Grand Master stated, his voice dry and raspy. "Hah..." he started to laugh, but broke out into a chorus of coarse coughs.

Marick Tyris held the hilt of the lightsaber in front of Evant's face, activating the ultra-violet blade upwards so that its glow cast a shadow over the Deputy Grand Master's face. The same face of the man who had led the purge of the Undesirables. The man who had paved the path for Marick to assume control of the Inquisitorius in his wake. The two had formed a bond, loose as it may have been, out of necessity. A mutual understanding between warriors of different castes. Evant sought power and control while Marick pursued order and efficiency. Together, they had accomplished much.

But now, things would change. Tyris stared impassively down at Evant.

The saber came down. The former Dark Councilor made a quick cut and the shackles around Taelyan's wrists smoldered in half and fell away to the sides, clattering against the floor.

"Behind..." Evant started to say.

Reflex alone saved the half-Hapan's life as the glistening blade of a diamond-edged sword *nearly* cleaved up the line of his spine. Marick threw himself sideways, dodging the backstab for the most part but dropping his lightsaber in the process. He bit back a cry of pain as the blade still managed to flay a thin strip of skin from the muscle of his shoulder, cutting straight through the fabric of his cloak.

"Gray Fang," Arraris Varken sneered in challenge. "I have been waiting, counting the days until I could run you through with my own blade."

Marick spun and pulled out a slender, obsidian dagger. He willed the Force to numb the pain in his bleeding shoulder. When it was slow to answer his call, he visibly frowned. His mind caught up with the action, then, as he realized that Avitus must be nearby.

Evant was in no condition to fight. Arraris Varken, with his own experience inside the Collective and out, one of the best swordsmen not to carry a lightsaber. He'd watched Rath's prized champion skewer even the most talented of lightsaber masters. And Avitus had shown the

kind of focus and hypocritical ability to nullify even a Master Sith Marauder's connection to the Dark Side.

So Marick did the only thing he could do. Wincing through the pain in his injured shoulder, he used his free hand to pull a pouch from his belt and hurled it into Arraris' face. The bag exploded into a shower of blinding dust flakes, causing Varken to reel back and cover his eyes.

"Graahh!" the Zabrak exclaimed, squinting and shaking his head to restore his vision.

Marick used the opening to dive into a forward roll, coming up beside Varken's hip and making a quick jab for his ribs. Arraris sensed it and twisted out of the way, but Marick reversed his grip on the dagger and raked it against the Zabrak's lower back.

Arraris hissed as the blade bit into his flesh, but slammed his elbow down into Marick's temple to send him tumbling sideways into a table. Dazed, the Master tried to crawl back to his feet, but Arraris grabbed him by the hair and headbutted him square in the nose. Blood squirted free from the half-Hapan's face, tears welling, unable to do much as Varken drove the blunted pommel of his Diamond Sword into Marick's gut.

Marick doubled over as spittle flew from his lips. Arraris kicked him onto his back, bloodlust consuming his expression as he raised the blade high and brought it down with the tip poised for Tyriss' heart.

"Die!" Varken howled. Somehow, his thrust swerved off course and struck the metal floor beside Marick instead of his completely exposed chest. "What the—"

Arraris staggered backward, as if his balance had been thrown askew. A sudden sense of vertigo nearly had him dropping to the floor, but he jabbed the point of his sword down like a cane and straightened. "What did you..." he started to ask, but felt the burn from the cut in his lower back. "Gray Fang," he spat, and his saliva had a reddish tint to it despite taking no apparent hit to the face.

Marick slowly pushed himself up as blood trickled down from his nose and dripped across his lips. He flashed a perfect set of teeth at the Zabrak.

"No matter, I will—" Arraris Varken started to shout but was cut off as an ultra-violet blade of plasma with a black core pierced through his chest.

Evant Taelyan, Deputy Grand Master of the Brotherhood, hovered behind him, barely able to stand but gripping Marick's dropped lightsaber. Arraris tried to turn to face the Sith, but slumped forward, eyes going flat and his body went still.

"He...hehe," Evant chuckled low through a series of coughs. "Talked...too much."



*"Hey, uh, boss? I hate to break it to you, but you have multiple squads of what look to be Collective Agents heading your way,"* Ace's voice chirped into Marick's earpiece.

Tyris rose shakily to his feet but nodded at Evant. He tried, once again, to reach out to the Force and found that this time it answered him with ease. He let the Force trickle through his veins, controlling the pain and bleeding in his body for the time being.

"Time to go," Marick said.

"Right behind you," Evant nodded, similarly realizing that he could one again touch the tendrils of the Force.

Marick idly wondered why Avitus would have let up his efforts, but he had little time to ponder.



In the adjoining corridor, Avitus Oligard thrust his hands forward in frustration. "Why...why is it not working?" he hissed. "Is it because I'm not worthy? Because I am a sinner, a plague on the galaxy...?" the closeted and sole Force user of the Collective, kept alive for a singular purpose by his only remaining family, rambled and muttered to himself as he kept willing his powers to work. They would not.

Somewhere not too far away, one of the Collective guardsman casually held a hand in the direction of Avitus Oligard. The guardsman seemed focused on the withered looking man whose robes barely fit him.

*I heard you liked suppression, so I'm suppressing your...suppression...dammit I had something for this,* Wyndell Tyris murmured.

He watched as Marick and another man—Evant, he assumed—shambled away down the corridor.

"Wynning," he declared as he stripped away the layers of the guardsman's costume and tossed the helmet aside haphazardly.



***Throne Room***  
**The Dark Ascent**  
**Arx**

The Grand Master's Royal Guardsman parted their weapons to allow Evant Taelyan entrance. Behind him, a somewhat recovered but still rough looking Marick Tyriss followed.

The Throne room only had two occupants. On the dais, hovering by the Throne, was Atra Ventus. The dark haired Regent turned and stoically nodded towards Evant while lifting an eyebrow at the former Voice, as if to say *What happened to you?*

Marick shrugged, his face a neutral mask of indifference otherwise.

The second man present wore his full set of Mandalorian Armor. The current Voice smiled and offered a more welcoming bow towards the returned Deputy Grand Master.

"You're not Xen," Evant said, his voice still a bit groggy.

"No...I am Idris Adenn—"

"—from Clan Vizsla. Yes," Evant nodded, his attention seeming to sharpen as he took in the air of the Dark Ascent.

"Where is Telaris," Evant asked.

"Busy, but he has been informed of your return," Atra replied evenly. Evant furrowed his brow, and Ventus offered a faint smile at his frustration. "Besides, I figured you'd want some time to rest and clean up."

Evant shook his head. He glanced sidelong at Marick, who remained still as stone, quiet as a windless night. "Tell him there will be time for that later," Evant said. "Because I know where the Collective homeworld is."

The revelation hung in the air between the current Dark Councillors and the former one. As Adenn and Ventus moved towards the Deputy Grand Master, Marick started to turn and walk towards the exit.

"Where are you going?" Atra called out, his voice resonating through the throne room. "You're not going to try and take down Rath on your own or something crazy like that, are you?"

Marick stopped just before the door and turned back towards the Regent, the Voice, and the Deputy Grand Master.

"No," he replied simply. "My watch has ended. You know where to find me if you need me."

The former Voice turned and disappeared through the doors of stone, shrouded in a cloak of the Force. The two Royal Guardsman exchanged a glance, looked back towards the Dark Councilors and shrugged. They had served long enough to know better than to stop the Brotherhood's Gray Fang from going where he needed.