

They had been preparing for an attack for years. A perpetual game of cat and mouse between the Inquisitorius and Capital Enterprises. An amalgamation of assassinations, double agents, honeypots, and security breaches. They had taken every precaution, prepared for each contingency, down to the ability for the platform to detach and retreat through the shield generator and sink safely down to the fortified planet below.

None of that mattered now. They had not planned for anything like *this*.

## **Nesolat Space Station**

### **Arx Orbit**

**38 ABY**

A sea of bodies, broken and battered, littered the once crisp and clean corridors of the *Nesolat* space station. Klaxons blared brazenly in an orchestra of distorted and disjointed sirens. The artificial air filtration system did little to quell the astringent stench of charred flesh from both organic and cybernetic soldiers. Blood and oil.

The fringe skirmishes that remained were nothing more than frantic flailing and screaming as explosives detonated beneath the feet of organics and blades of plasma seared through metal limbs and body matter. Chaos.

Through the chaos, a shadow shimmered against the flickering fluorescent lighting overhead, weaving with purpose towards the docking bay. The cloaked figure passed a Technocratic Guild *soldier* missing both its legs crawling with its mechanical arms towards a kneeling Inquisitor clutching at a wound in their side.

Marick idly wondered if he knew the Inquisitor's name. Were they one of the ones he had trained, or one of the new recruits that Idris and Ness had taken on? The Master pushed the question away, lowering himself deeper and deeper into a heart of iron, stripping away emotion and staying focused. In the end, it really did not matter who you trained or who you fought for. Brotherhood or Collective, the dead were of no concern to those left living.

*When we take a life, we take nothing of value*, a distant voice echoed in his mind.

Focus. These were not his kills. The Gray Fang had a target, and that was all that mattered. Arcona would do what it wanted, as they had for all those years in his absence. The Council would move along without him, just as they had when he resigned his position.

Reports across the Inquisitorius network had identified that Deputy Grand Master Evant Taelan had engaged with the bulk of the Collective's new Hive Mind marines. Apparently, he was unleashing as much damage to the Brotherhood's assets as he was the Collective's, which had probably been one of Telaris' many plans. One he had most likely kept only to himself. Some things never changed. Headmistress Ciara, who had taken over from Seraphol, was leading the evacuation with poise and determination. The additional mayhem caused by the mixed motives of the seven clans inserting into the system had caused even more confusion, however.

There wasn't anything else Marick could do to help them at this point. It was out of his control. What he could control, however, was robbing Rath Oligard of a critical chess piece on the board. And

perhaps, he would gain *some* closure for all the lives lost to the Collective's zealous tactics. This was what he'd been built for, after all. Trained and conditioned.

If you removed the head of hydra, the body would follow. Yet even after the events on Meridian Space station, Marick had known that the death of Daggo Mouk would not truly put an end to the Collective's machinations. Setback after setback he had watched them recover and strike back.

So it did not surprise him to learn that Gwendolyn "Sparks" was here at the heart of the storm. Marick knew her dossier better than most. The former Voice still remembered, clear as crystal glass, the first time he watched a Quadrajt tug detonate into a Brotherhood ship.

Ace and Zig, the duo of slicers aboard his Star Courier—the *Encanis*—had isolated where the signal controlling the Hive Mind agents was strongest. That's where "Sparks" would be, and Marick knew exactly what he would say to her once he found her, once he watched the light drain from her remaining organic eye.

*Nothing is true, everything is permitted.*



## A Fading Spark



### ***Security Checkpoint Aurek*** **Nesolat Space Station** **Arx Orbit**

In order to process and transmit records and data securely down to the surface of Arx, the data center had spared little expense for its construction. As one of the larger facilities on the Shadow Academy Platform, it was not difficult to find, even with the bedlam of battles still breaking out across the platform. Still, there remained a security checkpoint he'd need to slip past.

A pair of Technocratic Guild *soldiers* kept their attention trained on the far end of the corridor, exchanging blaster fire with what remained of an Iron Forces strike team. The seemingly lone remaining member blindly hurled a fragmentation grenade towards the stacked supply crates the two Technocrats had taken cover behind.

The first *soldier* tracked the trajectory of the explosive device with eerie, mechanical precision. She smirked as she squeezed off a single bolt, forcing the device to detonate prematurely midair.

Through the shower of sparks, the second *soldier* sighted seamlessly down the barrel of his rifle and topped off the Iron Forces grenadier's head when he poked up from cover to see his gambit fail. A meaty crunch filled the corridor as the Technocrat marksman monotonously droned, "Target eliminated. Maintaining defensive positi—*sscrsskkkk*"

The robotic words grinded to a screeching halt as the tip of a stiletto blade burst through the back of his trachea and jutted out his open mouth. The blade retracted—quickly as it had arrived—before a second appeared. The obsidian tip stabbed into his temple, puncturing the cybernetic implant and sending static current sputtering around the Sith dagger. The *soldier* crumpled woodenly to the floor, replaced by the hooded figure of Marick Tyriss.

The remaining Technocrat whipped the barrel of its blaster rifle towards her partner's assailant, but even her enchanted reflexes were too slow. With a sudden surge of strength and speed, Marick swatted the rifle to the side and snapped the hilt of his dagger into the *soldier's* organic nose. Bone cracked and blood splattered, but her cybernetic eyes had no tear ducts to react in kind. She would have blinked—if she still had eyelids—and still missed the follow up sweep of the Hapan's dagger. The razor sharp edge sawed through the top of her skull to reveal a medley of brain matter and complex circuitry.

The Technocratic Guild *soldier* staggered backward, body twitching and convulsing, as Marick flipped his grip on the dagger and slammed it down through her exposed cranium. Another fit of static energy discharged around the alchemically treated dagger as the photoreceptor lights in her eyes dimmed and the remaining body was ridden to the ground with a barely audible *thunk*.

Marick rose from the fallen Technocrat like quicksilver rolling from a jar. Both bodies lay concealed, mostly, behind the shadow of the stacked crates. He shrugged to himself as he pulled on the hem of his hooded jacket, his boots padding silently past the checkpoint as if nothing had transpired. His body shimmered as it disappeared under a cloak from the Force.



## Remote Data Center

Perhaps he was rusty in his time behind a desk. Perhaps he had gotten too confident in his own power. Perhaps it was just bad luck. Whatever it was, Marick's mistake was not accounting for Gwendolyn's cutthroat cunning.

It was not just that she was an expert in her respective fields—chemical engineering and explosives—but that she truly considered herself an artist and took *pride* in the damage that she wrought. The true heart of the Technocratic Guild had been restrained under Daggo Mouk, but now, there was nothing holding her back. The Collective's Mad Bomber had no strings to hold her down.

Confidently cloaked in the Force, Marick ghosted into the data center and took cover behind one of the towering floor-to-ceiling cages that housed the technical equipment. The expansive room was chilled by large, oscillating turbines overhead that pumped out cool air to keep the tech from overheating and smelled of clean metal. There was a perpetual *hum* of electrical generators filling in the otherwise quiet rooms ambience.

Gwendolyn's voice was easy to pick up from the far side of the servers and power couplers.

"I don't care how many more *minions* we need to throw at their defenses, I need that path cleared to the central generator for this all to work. Ugh, I'm surrounded by mediocrity!"

“Yes ma’am, of course,” an Aleena assistant agreed.

“Don’t just blindly agree with me, Jeni’ka,” Gwendolyn growled. “Why can’t anyone just see what I see, my masterpiece,”

“Of course, ma’am,” the Aleena repeated reverently. Gwendolyn sighed.

Marick ran the name through his memory. He had memorized the Collective roster more thoroughly than the Brotherhoods during his time as Voice, and some information just stayed with you. She must have been Jeni’ka Marrino, a member of the Aleena Demolition Squad. They had been responsible for the destruction of the *Inquisitorius Listener* ship during the Meridian Station operation.

“Well, what are you waiting for, go!” Gwendolyn shouted, and Marick could hear the frantic shuffling of Aleena footsteps and the sound of a door opening and then closing shut. Then, there was quiet save for the sound of slender fingers tapping away at a terminal.

Marick reached out through the Force and sensed no other presences lingering. That could have been misleading, considering that droids and certain Technocratic Guild prototypes had escaped his notice before. Without a true line of sight, however, his preternatural eye for detail was not much help. He had to assume that Gwendolyn was now alone, the perfect time for him to end this.

The Master Assassin crept around the corner to get a visual on his target. He saw her striped pink headtails bobbing as she moved back and forth across a control console, head pivoting on a swivel as she studied an array of vidscreens. He just needed to get a bit closer.

A DRK-1 droid floated over to the cloaked Hapan and blinked its optical sensor once at his position. Marick froze in place, idly wondering if the droid could somehow see him. It twittered excitedly and then floated away, seemingly carefree. He continued to stalk forward, taking a wider angle and trying to circle towards Gwendolyn’s left, where the shadows of the storage racks would give him the final cover he needed.

The DKR-1 Droid from earlier floated over to Gwendolyn and chirped into her earcones. Marick increased his pace, almost within striking distance. He silently slid his Sith dagger from its sheath and coiled it back.

Gwendolyn nodded once to the droid and then turned her head to look over her shoulder. She smiled, her crimson, cybernetic eye seeming to focus on Marick’s body. He expected her to pull her blaster, which he knew he could dodge, but instead she simply pointed with her finger down towards Hapan’s feet.

Marick bit, his too-blue eyes glancing down to see that he had stepped on some kind of tape.

*Karabast...*

The dentine tape erupted suddenly like a wire fuse, sprinting a short distance towards the shelf and triggering a nondescript looking mine that had been planted and disguised among the scattered data disks.

Preternatural reflexes and a whisper from the Force saved Marick's life as the Master threw himself away from the detonation, hugging his armorweave cloak tight around his body as he crashed across the floor and slammed into the ledge of one of the data racks. He felt something *pop* in his shoulder on impact while the heat of the incendiary mines shrapnel tore into his cloak and coat and slightly singed the surface of his skin.

The Assassin did not cry out, but felt a flash of fiery heat scream across his nerve endings.

"You know, I almost expected better from the feared 'Gray Fang'," Gwendolyn commented, still apparently focused on her work and not paying him much attention.

Marick crawled shakily back to his feet, willing the Force to numb the stinging pain in his body. This, at least, he had remembered. He was no stranger to pain.

"I did not choose the name, your agents are the ones who coined it," Marick replied, hoping to keep her talking as he covertly moved his hand towards the lightsaber clipped to his belt.

"So melodramatic. I told Kerwin that you're not different from the rest. He didn't believe me. Get that?" she threw her head back and laughed to herself. "Also, it's really not hard to see through a Force Cloak, you know." She gestured to the DKR-1 droid. "Organics give off so many other kinds of signatures beyond sight alone."

Marick knew that, of course, but he did not have time for games. He managed to stave off the worst of the pain, and had a job to finish. "Fair enough, but if that was your grand plan to stop me, you've played your hand." To accentuate his point, he pulled out his lightsaber and ignited the ultraviolet blade. He toggled the dual-phase setting, the black core stretching as it extended to its full length.

Gwendolyn did stop her typing and turned to face the Hapan fully. Her organic eye seemed to sparkle with glee as her cybernetic one stared unblinking at him. "Oh, Tyris. You have no idea what my 'grand plan' is." With her torso now revealed, Marick's eyes narrowed as he assessed what appeared to be some kind of explosive harness or apparatus.

"Here's the skinny," she said, holding her hands out to the sides with a feral grin. "If my heart stops, for any reason, this vest goes off. There's enough reagents in here to trigger an exothermic chain reaction that will chew right through this space station's plating and open a gaping hole into space. Not only would that be bad for whoever tries to 'take me out', but say goodbye to all this precious data that links in to your fancy "Inquisitorius Network". Hehe, boom!"

She let out an excited giggle-snort that turned into a straight up cackle. Marick's face remained its usual stoic mask as he processed her words.

“Also, who says I’m alone. MINIONS!” Gwendolyn cried out as she clapped her hands excitedly. As she did, a trio of floating spheres of metal with dangling metallic legs activated from a sleep state on a hanging rack nearby.

Marick recognized them to be some variant of Viper Probe Droid, like the ones favored by the old Imperials. That wasn’t on the Collective briefings he had read, so it must have been new. He narrowed his eyes, and readied an attack on the closest one. Marick knew he had to be quick and precise and take them out as quickly as possible.

With a sneer he launched himself towards the first probe droid and brought his saber down in a quick, bisecting cut. Just before his lightsaber made contact, however, Marick froze, his eyes noticing a blinking red light and squared device soldered onto its base like a power pack. Something in the back of his mind told him that cutting through the droid would trigger another trap or explosion.

While he was able to halt his own motion, the probe droid had enough time to reach out with a modified stun prod and jabbed it into Marick’s ribs. The Hapan cried out this time as his body twitched and his muscles spasmed, forcing him backwards. He lost the grip on his lightsaber, and the blade retreated into its emitter once it clattered against the floor and started to roll away from him.

Gwendolyn’s laughter filled the room, mocking and jeering and filled with sadistic glee.

“Oh, Tyris, you *are* making this more fun than I ever could have imagined. You really know how to make a girl smile,” she grinned. “I’m impressed you were able to figure it out, though. These guys are just like the Quadrajets, really. Once they make contact with...well, anything that gives off intense heat—like say, your fancy lightsabers—the result can be *explosive*.” She broke out into a fit of giggles.

A dark expression passed over Marick’s visage as the Twi’lek’s taunting words reached his ears. For the Master Disciple, the Force was neither dark or light—it was simply a tool for him to leverage when he needed it. In that moment, however, something deeper, something more primal pulled at his chest. Something...*darker*. It crept past his mental walls and distorted the edges of his ironclad will.

When she mentioned the kamikaze ships the Collective Zealots were known to operate, he remembered the recording he had watched of one crashing into the hull of the *Invicta II*. He remembered watching and not being able to react to the news that the Consul of Arcona had been killed in action during the ensuing destruction of that ship.

He had been undercover within the Collective at that point, and never truly was able to react to the news. He had plenty of time to reflect in the years after Nancora, and while he had ultimately found a way to bring *her* back, something long buried inside of him lurched back to the surface of his awareness.

The *dark side*. He had trained under the Elder’s in the Dark Brotherhood since his early days in the Brotherhood, had fought alongside two Grand Master’s and executed their wills. Timoros

would have said that you should not let your emotions affect calling on the *dark side*. Sashar, conversely, would say that emotion was not a hindrance, but added fuel to the fire.

Well, Marick Tyris was neither Sashar nor Timeros. He was not Pravus or Telaris. He was not sure he was even close to being Ventus, no matter how much the two had exchanged rhetoric on the subject. Marick was simply just...himself. Nothing more, nothing less.

In that moment, the dark side answered Marick's call without him having to ask. It welcomed him with excitement and filled his body with energy that seemed to feed on the very strings of chaos emanating from the entire station. His muscles teemed with renewed vigor, his pain fading to a distant part of the back of his mind.

Gwendoyln did not seem to notice any change in the Hapan's demeanor, but she did recoil when she saw his fallen lightsaber ignite on its own and lift up into the air. It was joined by a second lightsaber, unclipped from the back of his belt, that ignited and hovered in front of him as well.

Marick's too-blue eyes locked onto Gwendoyln's organic and cybernetic eyes. Through both lenses, she saw it, the shadow of something dark that pushed the boundaries of science and technology. Her smile faded.

Without need of a hand gesture, but still guided by the Force and Marick's will, both lightsabers went to work weaving and cutting through the air to dissect the trio of viper probe droids. Everytime they struck, they nimbly dodged out of the way of their respective detonations.

In the space of a few heartbeats, nothing stood between Gwendolyn and Marick. In that moment, Marick could sense the creeping fear bubbling inside of the Twi'lek. It was quickly smoldered by her faith in science and her trust in her own machinations.

"Sneer all you want, Tyris! You won't do anything to me. You'll try and take me in so your silly Inquisitors can interrogate me? Hah—"

Her voice cut out as Marick darted forward with dizzying speed, a blur of tattered black and gray cloak and coat and hair. Before she could utter another word, the hidden blade on Marick's wrist extended and thrust itself into her stomach, just beneath her breast. She gasped slightly at the sensation and stared with one wide organic eye at Marick as his face moved close to hers, close enough that she could see the beads of sweat gleaning across his matted brow and the fury burning in the eerie blue hue of his stare.

"...you can't...kill me..." Gwendolyn spat, flecks of spittle spraying onto the Hapan's face. "The data...you...you'll die."

"To the void with the data," Marick replied quietly, an unnerving amount of calm considering the look on his face and the blade embedded in the Twi'lek's chest. "You will finally pay for all the lives you've taken in the name of your art. These will be your final breaths," he continued, his voice seemingly detached and devoid of any hint of emotion.

He pulled the blade out of Gwendolyn's chest and lowered her down to the floor, kneeling over her. "Your heart won't stop for a bit thanks to the poison on my wrist-blade. But with this?"

Marick took a small vial from his belt pouch and unscrewed the top. He carefully tipped the bottle over and dripped a single drop into the open wound. Gwendolyn's body remained still, but her breathing started to slow, her organic eyelid growing heavier and quivering.

"In about thirty seconds your heart *will* stop," Marick explained. "After that, I don't care what happens to you or this place. Just know that when you face whatever it is that awaits on the other side? Tell them the 'Gray Fang' sent you."

With that, Marick rose and moved towards the exit of the room. The door closed behind him.



Marick wanted to say that he counted the seconds in his head, but that would not be the truth. He lost count the second he had stepped out of the room.

He continued to walk slowly down the adjacent corridor but started to waiver as his earlier wounds seemed to remind him he needed to pay them heed. The dark side retreated, leaving him feeling sore and aching. It had not been rage that fueled him, just a different source from which he had controlled his body's reaction to the pain. He'd need a proper bacta treatment, and soon.

Just as he stopped to look out the viewport window, the remote data center burst into flames, the reaction enough to pierce a nasty hole in the side of the space station platform. Clouds of flame licked into the void of space as countless databanks and equipment were sucked out.

Marick watched, the flames playing across his too-blue eyes, and noticed the fading sparks of light that settled in the wake of the initial explosion.

Perhaps Gwendolyn did, in a way, get her wish. It was a sight to behold.

A true work of art.