

## Double Tap

Marick's arm hung uselessly at his side. Blood caked the entire left half of his face. While there was a cut across his brow, there was too much blood to have come from him alone. His symmetrical features had been thrown off by what was clearly a broken but idly mended nose and his cheek was swollen on one side with a dark purple bruise. His shoulder-length, ashen hair was the only part of his appearance that seemed to retain its shine and luster.

Regardless, today was not the Hapan's day.

On the bright side, he now possessed a pretty clear comprehension of the new enemies they now faced. The *Restoration Troopers*—as reports were calling them—seemed to be standard soldier archetypes that were being empowered by the Force-sentient crystals infused into their bodies. Their physical attributes were preternatural, and they adapted to whatever weaponry they possessed in what he had come accustomed to seeing from Weapon Specialist in the Brotherhood.

For all of that, they still coordinated and fought like soldiers, which made them predictable and, quite frankly, no different than squaring off against the enhanced Technocratic Guild soldiers they'd faced in the past with the Collective. Difficult, but not impossible.

His current state was more due to the *other* new adversary. *Crystal Ascendents*, they were called, according to the Advanced Inquisitorius Networks real-time database. They wore tattered cloaks and carried a lightsaber and vibrodagger but little else. Not that they needed any weapons—their speed, strength, resistance paired with a frenzied battle haste that required little strategy and relied on pure ferocity to tear through their enemies. Another neat trick they could do was harness and unleash the Force.

Neat.

Marick was sure if Wyn had been here, he'd have come up with a clever nickname for these abominations, but Marick was tired and just wanted to go home.

Unfortunately, the two Crystal Ascendents blocking his path were just finishing tearing a helpless Tenixir Revenant in half, sinew stretching and tearing as blood and guts spilled out in loose thumbs to the floor.

There was no time to heal his arm. The Master had, however, locked the dragging sensation of pain and fatigue flooding through his body away to the corners of his awareness. Self-triage was becoming harder, a metaphoric bandaid to his increasing list of ailments.

Fortunately, the Elder Arcanist had a trick or two of his own. As he faced up with both *Crystal Ascendents*, Marick took a deep breath and inhaled both through his lungs and channeled the slipstreams of the Force. When he exhaled, slowly, he felt his reserves renew like the first breath of clean winter air after a snowstorm. With his energy restored, he resumed his internal application of the Force while focusing intently on his adversaries.

There was no pain. There was no fury. There was simply the Gray Fang, alone against two monsters, one arm barely functionable and the other gripping his lightsaber tightly. There was no fear. Only action.

The first Crystal Ascendent howled a battle cry as its body contorted and it shot its backwards-bent arm out with forked and mangled fingers. Predictably, a stream of Force Lightning erupted and hurtled his way. Marick was already moving, having perceived the attack with preternatural precognition. His lightsaber jumped out and met the blast of lightning, catching it and then redirecting it harmlessly into the ground.

Of course, the second Crystal Ascendent hadn't just waited around. It charged the Hapan's flank, moving with blurring speed for its bulk like a runaway freight skid. Marick planted on his back foot, pivoted, and spun, like a matador escaping a bull. He made a quick cut with his lightsaber in an attack of opportunity as it passed through his range, but the crystals protruding from its body resisted the sting of the black-cored Elder Lightsaber.

Marick had learned that the hardway, however. Which was why he was down one arm. With all that knowing, he did the only sensible thing and hit the Ascendent *again*. This time, he hit the fleshy bit of one of its joints, searing through knotted muscle and taking off one of its disfigured arms.

An arm for an arm, if you would.

The creature shrieked and lashed out Marick with a violent volley of Force Lightning in rebuttal. The Master accelerated with the Force, however, and danced away from the attack and kept the wounded Ascendent between him and its partner.

The partner, of course, had not remained idle. It surged forward, faster than Marick's eyes could track, and leap-frogged over its partner.

"Biddy, now!" Marick shouted.

From off to the side, a small BD-unit poked its head up and chirped an affirmation. It hopped up into the air and ejected a hidden lightsaber from its storage compartment.

The cylinder launched into the air, and Marick took control of it Telekinetically with his mind. As he kept the airborne creature focused on crushing him, the Master willed the shoto lightsaber's blue blade to life. It began to accelerate through the air, guided by an invisible hand, until it lodged itself point-first into the creature's neck.

The Ascendent screamed and writhed in mid-air. Marick backpedaled on the balls of his feet, allowing the creature to crash awkwardly into the space he had occupied a moment prior. With a gesture, he jerked the shoto lightsaber free and let it hover off to the side of the skirmish.

Both Crystal Ascendents clawed at each other as they both tried to regain their feet. In their moment of confusion, Marick struck. This time, it was from a distance.

Marick hurled the Elder Lightsaber in his hand at the pair of Ascendents, Telekinetically grabbing control of it and steering it to join his shoto lightsaber.

Sweat beaded across his brow as the full weight of the Arcanist's focus bore down on the Crystal Ascendents. His twin sabers started to lash out at both Ascendents with abandon, darting in, looking for an opening like a pair of starfighters. The Crystal Ascendents hissed and started to punch, kick, and try to launch Force Lightning at the lightsabers, but each time they would dance away, deflect, or riposte. This kept them both in one place, more or less, while Marick stood back and directed their efforts.

To add to the chaos, Tyriss tossed in two full sets of Throwing Knives from his belt. He added his third lightsaber, which while it was only a training saber he used for its low-output "stun" settings, added yet another item for the creatures to try and fend off.

The storm of weapons became a swarming torrent fluorescent blues, dull silver, and cackling black-and-white plasma. Marick furrowed his brow and increased their speed, timing, and cadence.

There were no major, decisive blows. But ten smaller slices soon became a hundred biting cuts.

When Marick finally stopped the weapons and recalled them to his person, all that was left of the Crystal Ascendents was a pile of crimson sludge, ichor, and minced Ascendent. Severed bits of limb and bone twitched or tried to knit themselves back together, but there was nothing to rebind or rebuild.

Marick sheathed his bloodied throwing knives, collected his lightsabers, and made towards the shuttles, leaving behind him a trail of broken Restoration Troopers and Crystal Ascendents alike.