

IF IT BLEEDS...



The Eldar Rangers were known as some of the toughest special forces units in the Arconan Armed Forces. When it came to knowing the terrain of Selen, they were second to none, and they were at their best when they could utilize jungle warfare to their advantage.

A squad of six stalked their target through the cover of camouflage. They moved in time through the underbrush and shadows of the trees with the efficiency of a team that had survived attacks from ancient beasts and the forces of an archaic Goddess.

Comms were silent. When their scout identified the target, she made a tight series of hand gestures that were echoed by the others.

The Ascendent Trooper, who early reports claimed to be a more “perfected” version of the creatures that the Shadesworn had fought on Dandoran, was not hard to find. It moved through the forest with a purpose and seemed to be searching for...something. Whatever it was, the *Killteam 42* would eliminate the threat.

Twitch, the squad’s top marksman, tracked the Ascendent through the sight of his rifle. She exhaled slowly, set the crosshairs just in front of the humanoid Trooper’s path and started to squeeze the trigger.

A moment before the shot should have pierced the air and split the Ascendent's skull into a bloody pulp, the creature turned its head and looked directly down the sighted scope and tilted its head like a quizzical child. Her finger depressed the trigger, the bolt launched, but it seemed to...bend away from the Ascendent somehow.

What the—

Before she could question what could happen, the Ascendent let out a choked noise that almost sounded like laughter through a throat filled with broken glass. Then there was screaming, as her scout was yanked out of the trees by an unseen

hand and twisted like a wet rag midair. There was a sickening *pop* and *crunch* as bones and muscles warped and snapped. Their demolition expert, Tent, met a similar fate.

The remaining three marksman somehow remained calm, and each took up a triangle flanking formation around the Ascendent. Their rifles barked blaster bolts in calculated bursts. The Ascendent, however, didn't seem all too concerned with dodging or evading the bolts. They hit the crystalline armor that had encased its body, and any bolts that strayed close to one of its organic parts was deflected off of a quickly erected barrier.

Which was exactly what the strike team had been waiting for. Alternating fire, they rolled thermal detonators towards the target, slowly, with the hope of getting under or through the barrier. It helped that they were trained in the tactics of Force Users—

—except the Purified Ascendents were no ordinary Force Users. In a feat only a select few within the ranks of the Brotherhood's Elders could achieve, the Ascendent maintained their barrier with one hand while the other made a dismissive gesture. The simple movement of its wrist triggered a telekinetic wave of energy that redirected the thermal detonators back towards their owners.

In the same flowing motion, the Trooper stretched out their long, crooked fingers and cast a chain of Force Lightning that caught each Eldar Ranger marksman and caused them to cry out in pain just before their caterwauls were drowned out by the sound of the detonating thermal grenades.

Twitch was the only member of her squad that remained. She watched it all happen quicker than she could offer a prayer to the old deities and the new. Despite all of her training and skill, she froze in place from her crouched cover in the tree line. She had to do something...run, send a warning, something, anything besides sitting here and waiting to die—

Somewhere in her frantic frenzy of thoughts, she blinked and lost sight of the Ascendent. The smell of burnt bodies filled her nostrils, and a haze of smoke and ripples of heatwaves clouded her vision. She blinked once more and the Ascendent was standing over her, that same broken chuckle now so close she felt her entire body begin to shut down with fear and terror.

It held a lightsaber in its hand, a blazing crimson blade she knew would be her doom. It looked down at her with cold eyes filled with malice as the blade came down...

...and was met by a black-cored blade that hissed defiantly against the strike.

Perched adroitly on the branches beside her was a man with a dark gray cloak and white robes, holding the Ascendents blade at bay. Through a veil of long, ashen hair, the man's deep blue eyes were narrowed and locked on the Ascendent's.

"Hello, ther—" he started to greet the Ascendent, but was cut off by a guttural roar from the Trooper as it leapt back down towards the ground and sent a tendril of Force Lightning up towards Twitch and her new ally. She winced and waited for her inevitable end, but instead watched the man casually intercept the streak of lightning with his lightsaber and somehow ground it back into the tree itself.

"Fall back, Theresa Vess'an," the man spoke. She was too shocked to ask how he knew her name, but when she managed to finally take in his full features, recognition dawned over her.

"Lord Tyris...yes-sir, understood," she kept her voice under control despite the adrenaline coursing through her veins causing her fingers to tremble ever so slightly.

Marick Tyris Arconae flashed a small smile at her, nodded, and then dropped down to the ground to stand before the Ascendent Trooper. Alone.

The Ranger inside of her knew she had to stay and help, but the Arconae's orders superseded anyone in the chain of command for the AAF...short of the Consul of course. Twitch wasn't about to get involved there. As she started to withdraw, she also took into account the sobering realization that she was out of her element against these...monsters.

For the sake of her squad, she would live and continue fighting while trusting the former Shadow Lord to hold his own against this new threat to Selen.



“Mar...rick...Ty...ris,” the Ascendent creature spoke as if it were chewing on a pouch of shattered crystals. Which was entirely fair, considering the grotesque protrusions of such crystals jutting out of the sides of its jaws. “We were...looking...”

“For me?” The Hapan made a showing of casually tossing aside his lightsaber, but caught it with his mind before it could hit the ground. The black-cored *Radiant* lightsaber hovered in the air off to the side of his head. “Flattered.”

“We...will...break—”

“—We’ll see,” Marick countered as he spun the beskar spear around in his hands before tucking the back under his armpit and letting the long length of the shaft extend tip first towards the Trooper in challenge.

The Ascendent Trooper let out another sickly laugh and accepted the challenge. With a burst of preternatural speed, it surged forward and lashed out with a violent flurry of alternating blows.

Marick’s feet wove a smooth pattern through the grass as he backpedaled, dipped, ducked, and sidestepped each of the attacks, subtly tapping into the Force for an added twitch or turn of speed when he needed it. The Ascendent’s blade came dangerously close to taking off the tip of his nose, but his floating lightsaber moved in to intercept the strike and turned it away.

Seizing advantage of the very slight opening provided by the parry, Marick thrust the beskar spear with precision towards the Trooper’s face. The Ascendant did not so much as flinch, however, and evaded both. Marick adroitly altered the spear’s trajectory and instead stabbed it down into the Trooper’s foot.

The Ascendent, again, did not so much as flinch. The beskar tip dug into the sole of its still-fleshy foot, but there was no grunt or signal that pain was being registered. To add insult to the *lack* of injury, the Ascendent took his lightsaber and sliced right through the center of the beskar spear.

Marick’s usually stoic face registered surprise in the form of slightly widened eyes. The former Dark Councilor had seen beskar hold up against a Grand Master’s golden lightsaber without so much as a dent. Somehow, the Children of Mortis had figured out a way to make their sabers strong enough to cut through the fabled metalwork.

Unfortunate, Marick heard Atra Ventus' voice echo in his head for whatever reason.

The next exchange of blows happened in a blur of motion. Marick retreated backwards holding only the bottom half of his beskar spear. The Ascendent lurched forward, swung his lightsaber twice, missed, but then shoved its hand forward to send a powerful wave of telekinetic energy directly into Marick's chest.

The smaller-framed fighter flew backwards and collided bodily with a tree trunk at least fifteen meters away. There was a gnarly *pop* as his shoulder took the brunt of the impact and he bit back a cry of sharp pain as he awkwardly slid down to the forest floor and willed himself to stand. His floating lightsaber dropped somewhere on the forest floor and disengaged.

Dislocated. Contusions to the upper deltoid... Marick idly noted the injuries in the back of his mind. The second he was back on his feet, however, the Ascendent had closed the distance, quick as blinking. Reflex and a bit of luck saved the Hapan from getting cut in half. As he started to dodge, he grabbed hold of his second lightsaber sheathed at his hip. The shadowheathe modification made it less obvious that it was indeed a lightsaber, so the Ascendent actually looked confused for just a moment as Marick parried the death blow with a somehow silent plasma blade.

With one hand hanging limply at his side, Marick lowered himself deeply into a mindset he had developed over years and years of fighting those more powerful than himself. Emotion faded and his willpower hardened around him like an armored shield. There was no right or wrong, dark or light, hubris or humility. There was only the enemy in front of him, a duel to the death.

Marick's lightsaber wove in tight defensive coils, parrying every one of the highly kinetic, aggressive lunges and slashes from the Ascendant's blade. Even one-handed, the Sorseu master had little trouble keeping up with the Trooper's Juyo, the patterns and tendencies filing away in another corner of Marick's mind for later use. And while it was still some way off, he knew that eventually he'd run out of forest and inevitably run up against the islands naturally formed cliffs and bluffs.

Growing frustrated, the Ascendent reached to its belt and ignited its second weapon—a lightwhip—to press the advantage. The sinuous blade wormed to life and started to lash out in alternating sequences with his lightsaber.

Still, Marick managed to avoid each attack, slipping away or slapping aside attacks from both weapons. He continued to time his bursts of augmented speed while dulling pain and fatigue away. Fortunately, the Elder Arcanist was still able to tap into the slipstreams of the Living Force to refuel his reserves. He could do this all day, but eventually...

The Ascendent changed tactics and retreated back a step. Marick continued his backpedal as well, and barely had time to duck as the Trooper's lightsaber scythed through the space between them like a plasma-tipped pinwheel.

Instinct took over as the Hapan leapt over the boomerang arc of the thrown lightsaber and tucked his body into a backward flip. While he gracefully avoided the strike, Marick never got to plant his feet back on the ground. Instead, his momentum was arrested mid-air by an unseen hand that clamped around his neck like a vice-grip. His lightsaber slipped from his grip and shut down as it clattered against the forest floor.

Marick choked and sputtered as his feet kicked fitfully in the air. The Ascendent tightened an extended fist that was clenched around the hilt of its wilted lightsaber whip, a sinister sneer painted across its macabre mask of a visage.

"Break...you..." the Ascendent rasped.

Marick's path to becoming an Elder had not been kind or conventional. But even before he joined the Dark Council and served bad news to no less than *three* Grand Masters and Dark Lords of the Sith...his first and early lessons had been with his Master, Timeros Entar Arconae—former champion of the Combat Center, renowned for his borderline sadistic applications of the Force through terror and other debilitating techniques.

So, aside from the core principle of **dodge**—which had quite literally been beaten into him—one of the first tricks he had learned was how to free himself from the weirdly popular applications of the Force that involved choking one's adversary.

Heh, was the only thought that played across his mind as he stopped trying to resist and instead focused inward.

There was a surge through the Force. A caesura—the archaic term for a break in ancient poems that spoke of epic battles for supremacy. A disjunction.

Marick broke free of the telekinetic grip and landed nimbly before a somewhat bewildered Ascendent. He drew his final lightsaber, its plain, ordinary hilt nothing noteworthy. The emerald blade that sprung out, however, seemed to flicker with some kind of static energy, compliments of the new focusing crystal he had fitted it with.

Fury spread across the Ascendent's grotesque face. It let out a feral battlecry that radiated waves of terror through the Force. They crashed into the Master Arcanist and *broke* around him like the bulwark of a ship at sea during a storm. He remained calm and collected as he welcomed, once again, the Trooper's follow-up flurry of blows.

And again, Marick met each strike with a perfectly placed parry or a smooth sidestep. This time, however, the attacks seemed to be coming in...slower. Thanks to the Ascendent's seemingly infinite well of power, it would have been hard to notice. But to the former Assassin's keen eyes, he realized that the poison coating the tip of his beskar spear was having *some* kind of effect, albeit a delayed one.

The Ascendent never relented, weaving pushes and pulls with the Force in an attempt to unbalance Marick, followed by a lash of lightning. The lightning managed to graze the Hapan's thigh, causing him to growl in pain and start to favor his other leg. He had also finally run out of room with which to retreat, as he noticed the edge of a steep cliff getting closer and closer behind him.

Sensing weakness in its prey, the Ascendent Trooper cackled and started to strike harder and faster with lightsaber and lightwhip. Sweat sheened across Marick's face as he struggled to maintain his defense. Eventually, he was going to slip, and that's all it would take for the Trooper to end it...

Something strange happened instead. After repeated contact with Marick's odd green lightsaber, the Ascendent's crimson blade and lightwhip started to blink, fizzle, and then just...died out. The Child of Mortis looked at its weapons dumbfoundedly. What kind of sorcery was—

The Ascendent reared backward with a startled hiss as a cloud of blinding dust collided with its face. Even with its Force-enhanced vision, there was still an

organic set of retina that once belonged to its former self. It staggered backward, clawing at its own eyes.

Marick took advantage of the brief respite and forcefully *snapped* his shoulder back into place. Instinctive tears rolled down his cheeks but he bit back a yelp and smothered any lingering pain he had with the Force.

His opponent, meanwhile, was now spinning in circles, clawing and swiping at empty air as if fighting an unseen foe. It pivoted, shuffled backwards, and started to shout. “No no no...the voices! FATHER NO MAKE IT STOP! WE ARE THE PROMISED....you PRomISED!!!”

The poison Marick had laced the blinding dust with was a variant of the standard “Voice’s Manifest”. The irony of the title was not lost on the retired Dark Councilor, so he had named this blend “Whisperbane”, which seemed to be working better than he had dared hope.

Marick spared a very rare grin as he glanced from the flailing Ascendent, to the edge of the cliff, and then back to the Ascendent. Having rekindled his reserves once again from the Force, the Master Arcanist reached out a telekinetic hand and simply...pitched the Purified Ascendent Trooper backward over the cliff.

Silence stretched across the forest for a few moments before a sickening *crunch* could be heard in the distance. Marick dared a glance over the ledge.

The Ascendent Trooper landed like a rag doll on the jagged rocks at the base of the cliff. One of them had been so bold as to impale itself through the Trooper's chest. Blood pooled out around the wound as the limp body seemed to *melt* away as the crystals consumed whatever was left of the flesh that had once been its host.

Marick felt his shoulders slump and found himself leaning against a tree trunk to catch his breath. While it was concerning that the Children of Mortis had engineered such powerful soldiers, one thing had just been made apparent.

Even the most powerful of Ascendent’s could bleed. And if it could bleed, they could kill it.

