

The Hunted

Marick's spear was broken. He was still processing the new information he had gleaned from his duel with one of the so-called *Purified* Ascendant Troopers. Their weapons could break beskar. They could channel multiple Force powers at once—a feat usually reserved for the Dark Brotherhood's sorcerers. It was nearly impossible to break their focus. They were not mindless. They could perceive, analyze, adapt. They were cold, callous, and calculating. Even with the Collective's attempts at machine learning, hive minds, and cybernetic augmentation, the Brotherhood had yet to face such a foe.

But they still bled. And if they bled, they could be killed.

He tried to take a minute to think and calculate where he was needed most. Kirra was safe—as safe as she could be during a full scale invasion of their homeworld. Atyiru was being...Atyiru. He wanted to be beside her, but they'd agreed they could best serve Selen, and the Clan, by dividing their prowess. It was the right thing to do. But deep down, the former Shadow Lord hated it. He'd given enough for the Clan, the Brotherhood, and all he had wanted was to raise his family.

The cycle, however, never seemed to end. So, he would do what was necessary. As he always had.

Voidbreaker Battle Team was engaged in a trench war to secure the starport at the top of Fort Blindshot. That was where, he sensed, he was needed the most. Zig was no doubt doing her best to lead the team, and he trusted that Cinteroph was there among others to help keep them all safe. He had intentionally been hands-off with the *Voidbreaker II* itself. He was past the age and patience of trying to make friends with everyone. Even if they didn't fully realize or recognize *who* he was and *what* he'd done in the past to earn the ire of some of the most loyal Shadesworn.

That was all in the past now, though. He needed to move forward. Forward always.

His team needed him. And between his current position and the starport, there was a horde of crystalline “raptors” as the reports were calling them. Marick, alongside Alethia, had fought against alchemically altered *mastiff phalone*'s during the SARLACC incident on Arx. So he was familiar with the reported creatures' tactics and tendencies.

They were pack animals, hunted with preternatural awareness, and had vicious talons and teeth. Apparently now they had reinforced armor as well. But that still meant they still had gaps in whatever kind of carapace it was. Otherwise, their limbs would not be able to move or operate.

Three of them were following him. Stalking silently from the shadows of the treeline. Marick couldn't smell them, only the scent of smoke in the distance from battle and the tinge of the vegetation and solid terrain beneath his boots.

The Master Arcanist quietly reached out into the slipstreams of the Living Force to refuel his reserves. Doing so no doubt painted a pretty target on his back. That was fine. He wanted them to know he was there. He kept his lightsabers—all three of them—sheathed and continued up the hillside at an accelerated jog. The raptors started to close in, but were unable to conceal the clicking noises their mouths made at the anticipation of their next kill.

Or so they thought.

The first raptor boldly lunged for Marick's left shoulder. Crystalline claws rent through the armorweave fabric like it were plain cloth, but found not the purchase of flesh. Marick was already moving, discarding his cloak, and letting the first raptor distract itself trying to shred it to pieces.

The second raptor lunged from his right, but Marick had already turned to face it. With a surge of speed through the Force, he unsheathed his Ghostfire lightsaber from his hip and used the outward momentum to cut a neat, silent line across the creature's neckline. Part of the sudden strike skimmed off its crystal carapace, but a deft turn of the wrist angled the blade's edge downward to find the flesh of the creature's neck joint.

Black ichor fused with traces of crimson spilled out of the crystal raptors neck as it screeched in agony. Marick grabbed a hold of its body with a telekinetic grip, lifted it up, and pivoted quickly to use it like a body shield against the third and final raptor that had been poised for the killing blow.

The creature's crystal-enhanced teeth tore into the carapace of its packmate. They both went down in a tangle of thrashing limbs and claws as they pawed and snapped at one another.

The first raptor had clearly had enough of Marick's discarded cloak. It cared little for its packmates' failures, and stalked in with abandon towards the pesky Hapan.

The Master Arcanist, however, had pulled free his second and third lightsabers. He tossed each one out to the side and took a telekinetic hold over each hilt. The green and black-cored blades snap-hissed to life and formed a floating aegis over each shoulder.

With a crack whip of its whippy tail, the first raptor tried to sweep Marick's legs out from under him. But the Hapan hopped over it, landed nimbly on the balls of his feet, and immediately sent both of his telekinetic lightsabers charging into the raptors chest.

The crystalline predator thrashed and twisted and dodged away from the twin blades of plasma. Its carapace protected it, sure enough, but they did the job of distracting it. Just so.

Marick became a preternatural blur—blue eyes blazing with intent as his ashen hair flowed with his every augmented twist and flurry of motion. He closed in on the raptor, isolated an opening in its carapace, and then stabbed it once, twice, and then a third time in the exact same, squishy spot. The raptor reared back and wailed. Marick was unrelenting, however, and continued to stab his *Ghostfire* lightsaber into the exposed wound he'd carved out.

Finally, the first raptor wilted and came to a rest at Marick's feet. Black ichor tinged with crimson oozed out onto the dirt and grass, with some staining the edges of Marick's boots.

The Hapan turned to see that one of the two remaining crystal raptors was left standing. It had, apparently, ended its partner for daring to attack it instead of their intended prey.

It's beady, eerie eyes locked onto Marick's. The Hapan met its gaze levelly. Usually, survivalists taught you never to look a predator in the eyes, as it was an unspoken, primal challenge.

But the raptor was no longer the predator here. It was the prey.

The raptor lurched forward, but Marick was once again already making his move. He launched himself up high into the air with an added lift from the Force. As he hovered over the creature's head before gravity started to pull him down, he angled both his telekinetic lightsabers tip-down and sent them lancing towards the ground beneath him.

The raptor managed to dodge the first, took a hit on the carapace from the second. It craned its neck up and opened its maw wide and prepared to devour the falling Hapan.

Instead of a tastemeal, however, Marick's third lightsaber, the one gripped in his hand, was shoved straight down into its open mouth.

Marick used the creature as a landing pad and somersaulted off of it, leaving his lightsaber in the raptors gullet. The raptor hissed and sneered but unintentionally swallowed it.

The moment his boots hit the ground, Marick spun and made a quick gesture with his hand like he was stirring a pot. In response to his action, the lightsaber that the raptor had swallowed spun in circles and began to tear its organs apart from the insides. It writhed and screamed and screeched until it toppled over, dead.

Marick held out his hand and with an effort of will summoned his blade. The lightsaber answered his call, piercing through the dying flesh of the raptor to return to its master.

The Hapan glanced down at his now bloody and soiled lightsaber hilt. He frowned. He whipped it out to the side a few times to try and clear the ichor, but ended up grabbing the nerf-wool towel he'd started keeping in his kit. For once, Wyn had a point and it really was worth never leaving home without one.

He cast one last look at the three dead raptors. He shrugged, brushed some dust off his shoulder, and continued to jog up the hill towards the starport and his team.