

The book cover features a stylized illustration of Anakin Skywalker and Ahsoka Tano. Anakin is in the foreground, wearing his black Jedi robes and a yellow visor, holding a glowing yellow lightsaber. Ahsoka is behind him, also in black robes, holding a glowing yellow lightsaber. The background is a mix of red and black with white splatters, suggesting a dramatic or dark theme.

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. . . .

STAR WARS

DARK DISCIPLE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
CHRISTIE GOLDEN

BASED ON UNPRODUCED EPISODES OF *STAR WARS: THE CLONE WARS*
FOREWORD BY KATIE LUCAS



STAR
WAR^S

DARK DISCIPLE

CHRISTIE GOLDEN

Based on *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*

Created and Executive Produced by George Lucas

Supervising Director: Dave Filoni

Produced by Cary Silver

“Lethal Alliance,” “The Mission,” “Conspirators,” “Dark Disciple,”
“Saving Vos Parts I and II,” “Traitor,” and “The Path”

Written by Katie Lucas and Matt Michnovetz and Dave Filoni

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By Christie Golden

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FOREWORD

Star Wars has always loomed large in my life. I simply don't remember a time without it.

We began filming the prequels when I was eight years old and wrapped when I was fifteen. I spent a few adolescent summers as a PA on the sets of the prequels, watching and learning. I remember my baby brother training for days with Nick Gillard to execute an elaborate stunt as a fearless young Padawan. When he shot his scene, most of the actors came to the set to cheer him on—Hayden and Nick were so proud of him. The cast and the crew became an extended family of sorts. That was what *Star Wars* was built on—the collaboration and support of an entire community of passionate, talented people.

When I was seventeen, I was honored to have the opportunity to join that very community when I wrote my first ever episode of *Clone Wars*, “Jedi Crash.” The positive response of the fans drove me to consider pursuing screenwriting in a more serious way. My run as a writer on *Clone Wars* ended up lasting almost ten years. During that time I had the pleasure of writing for some of the show's most exciting, not to mention most morally bankrupt, characters: Aurra Sing, Savage Opress, Darth Maul, and, of course, my favorite—Asajj Ventress.

I've always been drawn to resilient female characters having grown up obsessively watching *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and Ventress was the punk warrior witch of my dreams. Her strength and vulnerability resonated profoundly with me. I was thrilled to be assigned the *Dark Disciple* episodes and had a hell of a time writing them. I was in the throes of a bad breakup, and writing for Ventress and Vos was incredibly cathartic for me.

I was sad to see that *Clone Wars* was canceled before the episodes could air, but feel relieved that Ventress will finally be given her due with the publishing of this novel. At its core, *Dark Disciple* is a story of redemption; a story of how people can be unbelievably broken, and yet find a way to rebuild despite the odds. All of us are given chances time and time again to transform our lives, and it is our responsibility to seize those opportunities before they disappear.

Working with the incredible writers of *Clone Wars* and the incomparable Dave Filoni will always be one of the highlights of my career. *Clone Wars* gave me the tools to move forward on my own path, and, most important, gifted me with the chance to serve the *Star Wars* universe for a brief time.

For as long as I live, I will never forget the times when my dad and I would sneak into the back of a darkened movie theater just as John Williams's unforgettable theme trumpeted from the speakers, holding hands while the crowd roared, raising their lightsabers into the air as the *Star Wars* logo flashed across the screen. I've never seen my dad happier.

May the Force always be with you.

Katie Lucas

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away....

For years, the galaxy-wide conflict known as the Clone Wars has raged. The struggle between the rightful government of the Galactic Republic and the Confederacy of Independent Systems has claimed the lives of untold billions.

The Force-wielding Jedi, for millennia the guardians of peace in the galaxy, have been thwarted nearly every turn by the Separatists and their leader, the Sith Lord Count Dooku.

With the war showing no signs of ending, and the casualties mounting each day, the Jedi must consider every possible means of defeating their cunning foe. Whether some means are too unthinkable—and some allies too untrustworthy—has yet to be revealed...

CHAPTER ONE

Ashu-Nyamal, Firstborn of Ashu, child of the planet Mahraneer, huddled with her family in the hold of a Republic frigate. Nya and the other refugees of Mahraneer braced themselves against the repercussions from the battle raging outside. Sharp, tufted Mahran ears caught the sounds of orders uttered and answered by clones, the same voice issuing from different throats; keen noses scented faint whiffs of fear from the speakers.

The frigate rocked from yet another blast. Some of the pups whimpered, but the adults projected calm. Rakshu cradled Nya's two younger siblings. Their little ears were flat against their skulls, and they shivered in terror against their mother's warm, lithe body, but their blue muzzles were tightly closed. No whimpers for them; a proud line, was Ashu. It had given the Mahran many fine warriors and wise statesmen. Nya's sister Teegu, Secondborn of Ashu, had a gift for soothing any squabble, and Kamu, the youngest, was on his way to becoming a great artist.

Or had been, until the Separatists had blasted Mahraneer's capital city to rubble.

The Jedi had come, in answer to the distress call, as the Mahran knew they would. But they had come too late. Angry at the Mahraneer government's refusal to cooperate, the Separatists had decided that genocide, or as close a facsimile as possible, would solve the problem of obtaining a world so rich in resources.

Nya clenched her fists. If only she had a blaster! She was an excellent shot. If any of the enemies attempted to board the ship, she could be of use to the brave clones now risking their lives to protect the refugees. Better yet, Nya wished she could stab one of the Separatist scum with her stinger, even though it would—

Another blast, this one worse. The lights flickered off, replaced almost instantly by the blood-red hue of the backup lighting. The dark-gray metal of the bulkheads seemed to close in ominously.

Something snapped inside Nya. Before she really knew what she was doing, she had leapt to her feet and bounded across the hold to the rectangular door.

“Nya!” Rakshu’s voice was strained. “We were told to stay here!”

Nya whirled, her eyes flashing. “I am walking the warrior path, Mother! I can’t just sit here doing nothing. I have to try to help!”

“You will only be in the…” Rakshu’s voice trailed off as Nya held her gaze. Tears slipped silently down Rakshu’s muzzle, glittering in the crimson light. The Mahran were no telepaths, but even so Nya knew her mother could read her thoughts.

I can do no harm. We are lost already.

Rakshu knew it, too. She nodded, then said, her voice swelling with pride in her eldest, “Stab well.

Nya swallowed hard at the blunt blessing. The stinger was the birthright of the Mahran—and, used, their death warrant. The venom that would drop a foe in his tracks would also travel to his slayer’s heart. The two enemies always died together. The words were said to one who was not expected to return alive.

“Good-bye, Mama,” Nya whispered, too softly for her mother to hear. She slammed a palm against the button and the door opened. Without pausing she raced down the corridor, her path outlined by a strip of emergency lighting; she skidded to a halt when the hallway branched into two separate directions, picked one, and ran headlong into one of the clones.

“Whoa, there!” he said, not unkindly. “You’re not supposed to be here, little one.”

“I will *not* die huddled in fear!” Nya snapped.

“You’re not going to,” the clone said, attempting to be reassuring. “We’ve outrun puddle-jumper like these before. Just get back to the holding area and stay out of our way. We’ve got this in hand.”

Nya smelled the change in his sweat. He was lying. For a moment, she spared compassion for him. What had his life been like when he was a youngling? There had been no one to give him hugs or tell stories, no loving parental hands to soothe childhood’s nightmares. Only brothers, identical in every way, who had been raised as clinically as he.

Brothers, and duty, and death.

Feeling strangely older than the clone, and grateful for her own unique life that was about to end, Nya smiled, shook her head, and darted past him.

He did not give chase.

The corridor ended in a door. Nya punched the button. The door slid open onto the cockpit. And she gasped.

She had never been in space before, so she was unprepared for the sight the five-section viewport presented. Bright flashes and streaks of laserfire dueled against an incongruously peaceful-looking starfield. Nya wasn’t sufficiently knowledgeable to be able to distinguish one ship from another—except for her own planet’s vessels, looking old and small and desperate as they tried to flee with their precious cargo of families just like her own.

A clone and the Jedi general, the squat, reptilian Aleena who had led the mission to rescue Nya’s people, occupied the cockpit’s two chairs. With no warning, another blast rocked the ship. Nya went sprawling into the back of the clone’s chair, causing him to lurch forward. He turned to her, his eyes dark with anger, and snapped, “Get off this—”

“General Chubor,” came a smooth voice.

Nya's fur lifted. She whirled, snarling silently. Oh, she knew that voice. The Mahran had heard uttering all sorts of pretty lies and promises that were never intended to be kept. She wondered if there was anyone left in the galaxy who didn't recognize the silky tones of Count Dooku.

He appeared on a small screen near the top of the main viewport. A satisfied, cruel smirk twisted Dooku's patrician features.

"I'm surprised you contacted me," his image continued. "As I recall, Jedi prefer to be regarded as the strong, silent type."

The clone lifted a finger to his lips, but the warning was unnecessary. Nya's sharp teeth were clenched, her fur bristled, and her entire being was focused on the count's loathed face, but she knew better than to speak.

General Chubor, sitting beside the clone in the pilot's chair, so short that his feet did not reach the floor, likewise was not baited. "You've got your victory, Dooku." His slightly nasal, high-pitched voice was heavy with sorrow. "The planet is yours...let us have the people. We have entire families aboard, many of whom are injured. They're innocents!"

Dooku chuckled, as if Chubor had said something dreadfully amusing over a nice hot cup of tea. "My dear General Chubor. You should know by now that in a war, there is no such thing as an innocent."

"Count, I repeat, our passengers are civilian families," General Chubor continued with a calmness at which Nya could only marvel. "Half of the refugees are younglings. Permit them, at least, to—"

"Younglings whose parents, unwisely, chose to ally with the Republic." Gone was Dooku's civilized purr. His gaze settled on Nya. She didn't flinch from his scrutiny, but she couldn't stifle a soft growl. He looked her up and down, then dismissed her as of no further interest. "I've been monitoring your transmissions, General, and I know that this little chat is being sent to the Jedi Council. So let me make one thing perfectly clear."

Dooku's voice was now hard and flat, as cold and pitiless as the ice of Mahranee's polar caps.

"As long as the Republic resists me, 'innocents' will continue to die. Every death in this war lies firmly at the feet of the Jedi. And now...it is time for you and your passengers to join the ranks of the fallen."

One of the largest Mahranee ships bloomed silently into a flower of yellow and red and then disintegrated into pieces of rubble.

Nya didn't know she had screamed until she realized her throat was raw. Chubor whirled in his chair.

His large-eyed gaze locked with hers.

The last thing Ashu-Nyamal, Firstborn of Ashu, would ever see was the shattered expression of despair in the Jedi's eyes.

—

The bleakest part about being a Jedi, thought Master Obi-Wan Kenobi, is when we fail.

He had borne witness to scenes like the one unfolding before the Jedi Council far too many times to count, and yet the pain didn't lessen. He hoped it never would.

The terrified final moments of thousands of lives played out before them, then the grim holographic recording flickered and vanished. For a moment, there was a heavy silence.

The Jedi cultivated a practice of nonattachment, which had always served them well. Fe understood, though, that while specific, individual bonds such as romantic love or family were forbidden, the Jedi were not ashamed of compassion. All lives were precious, and when so many were lost in such a way, the Jedi felt the pain of it in the Force as well as in their own hearts.

At last, Master Yoda, the diminutive but extraordinarily powerful head of the Jedi Council, sighed deeply. “Grieved are we all, to see so many suffer,” he said. “Courage, the youngling had, at the end. Forgotten, she and her people will not be.”

“I hope her bravery brought her comfort,” Kenobi said. “The Mahran prize it. She and the others are one with the Force now. But I have no more earnest wish than that this tragedy be the last the war demands.”

“As do all of us, Master Kenobi,” said Master Mace Windu. “But I don’t think that wish is coming true anytime soon.”

“Did any ships make it out with their passengers?” Anakin Skywalker asked. Kenobi had asked the younger man, still only a Jedi Knight, to accompany him to this gathering, and Anakin stood behind Kenobi’s chair.

“Reported in, no one has,” Yoda said quietly. “But hope, always, there is.”

“With respect, Master Yoda,” Anakin said, “the Mahran needed more than our *hope*. They needed our help, and what we were able to give them wasn’t enough.”

“And unfortunately, they are not the only ones we’ve been forced to give short shrift,” Windu said.

“For almost three standard years, this war has raged,” said Plo Koon, the Kel Dor member of the Council. His voice was muffled due to the mask he wore over his mouth and nose, a requirement for his species in this atmosphere. “We can barely even count the numbers of the fallen. But this—” He shook his head.

“All directly because of one man’s ambition and evil,” said Windu.

“It’s true that Dooku is the leader of the Separatists,” Kenobi said. “And no one will argue that he is both ambitious *and* evil. But he hasn’t done it alone. I agree that Dooku may be responsible for every death in this war, but he didn’t actively commit each one.”

“Of course not,” Plo Koon said, “but it’s interesting that you use nearly the same words as Dooku. He placed the blame for the casualties squarely upon us.”

“A lie, that is,” Yoda said. He waved a small hand dismissively. “Foolish it would be, for us to give it a moment’s credence.”

“Would it be, truly, Master Yoda?” Windu asked with a hard look on his face. As a senior member of the Council, he was one of the few who dared question Master Yoda. Kenobi raised an eyebrow.

“What do you mean, Master Windu?” asked Yoda.

“Have the Jedi really explored every option? Could we have ended this war sooner? Could we, in fact, end it right now?”

Something prickled at the back of Kenobi’s neck. “Speak plainly,” he said.

Windu glanced at his fellows. He seemed to be weighing his words. Finally, he spoke.

“Master Kenobi’s right—Dooku couldn’t have done this completely alone. Billions follow him. But I also stand by my observation—that this war is Dooku’s creation. Those who follow him, follow *him*. Every player is controlled by the count; every conspiracy has been traced back to him.”

Anakin’s brow furrowed. “You’re not saying anything we don’t already know, Master.”

Windu continued. “Without Dooku, the Separatist movement would collapse. There would no longer be a single, seemingly invincible figurehead to rally around. Those who were left would consume themselves in a frenzy to take his place. If every river is a branch of a single mighty one, then let us dam the flow. Cut off the head, and the body will fall.”

“But that’s what we’ve been—*oh*.” Anakin’s blue eyes widened with sudden comprehension.

No, Kenobi thought, *surely Mace isn’t suggesting—*

Yoda’s ears unfurled as he sat up straighter. “Assassination, mean you?”

“No.” Kenobi spoke before he realized he was going to, and his voice was strong and certain. “Some things simply aren’t within the realm of possibility. Not,” he added sharply, looking at Mace, “for a Jedi.”

“Speaks the truth, Master Kenobi does,” Yoda said. “To the dark side, such actions lead.”

Mace held up his hands in a calming gesture. “No one here wishes to behave like a Sith Lord.”

“Few do, at first. A small step, the one that determines destiny often is.”

Windu looked from Yoda to Kenobi, then his brown-eyed gaze lingered on Kenobi. “Answer me this. How often has this Council sat, shaking our heads, saying, *Everything leads back to Dooku?* A few dozen times? A few *hundred?*”

Kenobi didn’t reply. Beside him, Anakin shifted his weight. The younger Jedi didn’t look at Kenobi or Windu, and his lips were pressed together in a thin, unhappy line.

“A definitive blow must be struck,” Mace said. He rose from his chair and closed the distance between himself and Kenobi. Mace had the height advantage, but Kenobi got to his feet calmly and met Windu’s gaze.

“Dooku is going to keep doing exactly what he has been,” Windu continued quietly. “He’s not going to change. And if we don’t change, either, then the war will keep raging until this tortured galaxy is nothing but space debris and dead worlds. We—the Jedi and the clones we command—are the *only* ones who can stop it!”

“Master Windu is right,” said Anakin. “I think it’s about time to open the floor to ideas that before we would have never considered.”

“Anakin,” Kenobi warned.

“With respect, Master Kenobi,” Anakin barreled on. “Mahranee’s fall is terrible. But it’s only the most recent crime Dooku has committed against a world and a people.”

Mace added, “The Mahran who died today already have more than enough company. Do we want to increase those numbers? One man’s life must be weighed against those of potentially millions of innocents. Isn’t protecting the innocent the very definition of what it means to be a Jedi? We are failing the Republic and its citizens. We must stop this—*now*.”

Kenobi turned to Yoda. The ancient Jedi Master peered at all those present, be it physically or holographically: Saesee Tiin, an Iktotchi Master; the Togruta Shaak Ti, her expression calm but sorrowful; the images of Kit Fisto, Oppo Rancisis, and Depa Billaba. Kenobi was surprised to see sorrow and resignation settle over Yoda’s wrinkled green face. The diminutive Jedi closed his huge eyes for a moment, then opened them.

“Greatly heavy, my heart is, that come to this, matters have,” he said. Using his cane, he rose and walked to the window. All eyes followed him. Below, Coruscant unfolded, and myriad small, personal vessels sped past, and the sun gazed down at it all as clouds drifted languidly by.

Yoda extended a three-fingered hand, indicating the view. “Each life, a flame in the Force is beautiful. Unique. Glowing and precious, it stands, to bravely cast its own small light against the darkness that would consume it.” Yoda lifted his cane, pointing at a cloud that was grayer and larger than most of its fellows. “But grows, this darkness does, with each minute that Dooku continues his attacks.” Yoda fell silent. No one interrupted as the cloud continued on its path, moving to hide the face of the sun. Its shadow leached away the vibrancy of the city beneath it, turning its gleam to dullness, its bright colors to a muted, somber palette. It was nothing more than the sun and a shadow, but nonetheless, Kenobi felt his heart lurch within his chest.

“Stop him, we must,” Yoda said solemnly. He closed his eyes and bowed his head. The moment hung heavy, and it seemed everyone was loath to break it.

Finally Mace spoke. “The question before us now is—who will strike the killing blow?”

Kenobi sighed and rubbed his eyes. “I, ah...may have a suggestion...”

CHAPTER TWO

Things were going very well for Koorivar merchant Sheb Valaad. Very well indeed. He had come to Otor's Hub—the place to be if one dealt in certain merchandise—a standard year before the war had broken out. While others busied themselves with choosing sides, Sheb had made himself a “powerful friend” to both. Everybody liked trinkets: jewels, paintings, statues, fancy hookah pipes made of exotic materials and studded with gems from far distant worlds. And if the makers of such exquisite items happened to have met with unpleasant fates, well, that simply caused what they had created to become even more valuable. Most times, Sheb waited for the unpleasant fates to occur and positioned himself to benefit. Sometimes, he took a more...direct approach.

Oh, not he himself, no, no. His hands were made for handling money and stroking valuable items. There were plenty of others willing to take his credits to do the ugly business of increasing the value of certain objects. He settled back in his chair and took a pull on his hookah, absently reaching a hand to finger the ornate carvings on the horn that jutted from his skull.

A Koorivar's horn is a Koorivar's pride, his father had told him. It told the world everything he needed to know about the individual sporting it. Sheb's horn was large, twisting, and lavishly decorated. Great—*late*—artisans had carved their work upon it, and jewels caught the dim lighting of the smoky back room of his “shop.”

He availed himself of one of the delicate pastries that were the specialty of his private chef, then gestured to the blue-plated protocol droid who stood at attention beside the door. Someone else stood at attention, too—the ever-reliable Thurg, a burly Gamorrean.

“Show our guest in, Blue,” Sheb said.

“Of course, my most glorious master.” Sheb had sprung for a customized version of the current protocol unit. Blue came equipped with two specialized programs: “Adul-8” and “B-Little.” TH

former soothed Sheb, and the latter had proven vastly entertaining.

Blue stepped through the curtained door into the waiting room that lay beyond while Thurg, looking slightly bored, picked at his large, yellowed teeth. Sheb hoped Blue would catch him at it. The dressing-down the droid would give Thurg was sure to be a delight. Though Blue probably should be grateful it was only the Gamorrean's teeth that were being picked, not the bodyguard's porcine nostrils.

"Master Tal?" said the droid in his precise, clipped voice. "The most honorable, reputable, and *extremely* fair merchant of high-quality valuables and artifacts, Sheb Valaad, has graciously agreed to grant your request for an audience."

"Whoa, there," came Tal's cheerful voice. Sheb took another pastry, smiling, and poured tea for his customer. Over these last couple of months, Tal had become a regular patron, and Sheb wondered what Tal's glib tongue had in store for poor Blue today. "I see you're set on verbal overload, Blue. And I've told you, don't call me master."

"Today's program setting will not permit me to override the designation, I fear, Master Tal." The droid strode through the curtain, politely holding it to the side so that Tal could enter easily.

Tal Khar was a tall, well-muscled Kiffar specimen who moved with an easy grace. As always, his eyes sparkled with good humor above the narrow yellow tattoo that ran the width of his face. Thurg blocked his way with a grunt and stood expectantly.

Tal rolled his eyes. "Sheb, call off your bantha. I've never brought a weapon in yet." The Gamorrean hesitated, looking back at his master, confused.

"Thurg, you know the rules."

Tal grinned at Thurg. "Go ahead. But you know I don't have any weapons."

"I know you no have weapons," Thurg said in guttural Basic, patting Tal down then stepping back. "He unarmed."

"You may now enter the radiant presence of my magnificent master," said Blue, sweeping his arm for good measure.

"Hey, Blue," Tal said, "how many synonyms for your name are there?"

"In Basic, there are—"

Tal waved a hand. "No, no, in *all* your languages. And can you tell me what they are?"

A slightly choked sound emanated from the droid, and he visibly slumped. Then: "Blue: My database registers forty billion, eleven million, seven hundred forty-two thousand, nine hundred and eighty-three accepted synonyms for the color blue. Beginning with Basic, they are, in alphabetic order, ao, aqua, azure—"

"You don't have to obey that instruction, Blue," Sheb said.

"Oh, thank you, my most marvelous master, I am *exceedingly* grateful."

Sheb indicated the platter of pastries. "Tal, Tal," he said with a sigh. "Are you *trying* to short out my droid?"

"...Maybe?" said Tal, his mouth full.

"Well, if you ever succeed, I shall expect to be compensated for repairs," the merchant said. "Now wipe your hands; I've something quite remarkable for you today."

Tal obliged with the enthusiasm of a child awaiting a gift, looking expectantly at Sheb. Sheb waved one of his assistants over. The Twi'lek female carried a tray, atop which sat something covered by

piece of cloth. With a flourish, Sheb unveiled the latest treasure.

Tal gasped quite satisfactorily, which did not surprise Sheb in the least. The item on the tray was millennia old but looked as if it had left the artist's studio but a few moments past. It was a small statuette of an aquatic creature, all memory of its species now forgotten, that had once frolicked—presumably it had frolicked, if the playful motion captured by the stone carving was to be trusted—the oceans of a world that had been likewise lost to time. Small gems served it for eyes, and its tail curved beneath its four-flippered body to merge with a base that looked like a cresting wave.

Tal reached out to it, then paused, raising his eyebrows in question. Feeling like a benevolent deity, Sheb nodded his permission to pick up the precious artifact. Tal did so, with great care.

“Boss? This scum say he need see you.” Thurg forced his way through the curtains. His huge hands were clamped down on the furry arms of a Mahran, who didn't struggle at all. He looked around with appreciation.

“Nice, very nice,” he said. His gaze fell on Tal.

Tal stared at him for a moment, then heaved a sigh. “Desh. What are you doing here?”

“Came to get you.”

“Well, I'm busy.”

Still held by the mammoth Gamorrean, the Mahran—who, apparently, knew Tal, and whose name was, apparently, Desh—actually managed a shrug. “Sorry.”

“What...” Sheb struggled for words, trying to make sense of the absurd situation. “Tal, do you know this...this—”

“I do, from way back. He's not supposed to be here yet. Well, I guess what's done is done.” Shaking his long black dreadlocked hair, Tal gently put the figurine on the table, sliding it a little bit away from him. He rose. “Too bad. I liked the pastries.”

He extended a hand in Sheb's direction, then jerked it upward. The merchant let out a treble yelp of astonishment as he found himself squirming in midair. At the same instant the Mahran twisted around, brought his arms up, breaking Thurg's grip as if it were nothing at all, then grabbed the Gamorrean's arm and flipped him over.

“Oh, I say,” squeaked a panicked Blue, heading for the door with his arms raised, “help! Help—”

Four armed bodyguards charged in. The Rodian, huge black eyes fixed on Tal, slammed into the hapless droid. Blue went clattering into a corner, and the Rodian began firing at the interlopers.

“No, no blasters!” Sheb shouted, thinking of the irreplaceable items on display in the room, but they ignored him. Red blasterfire screamed through the room, and Sheb, still dangling in the air, screamed along with it, first in pain at seeing his beautiful merchandise obliterated, and then again when a bolt seared through his flapping robes dangerously close to his torso.

There were two other lights flashing about, as well, about a meter long, one green, one blue, that Tal and the interloper wielded like swords. Lightsabers! That meant—

Tal kept one hand extended, holding Sheb aloft, and with the other batted back the red bolts with an almost casual ease. Was the man...humming?

“Ahhh!” cried the Koorivar as a blast singed his thigh.

Tal winced. “Sorry,” he said, smiling sheepishly up at Sheb, even as he executed a backward flip, ending in a sharp, perfectly placed kick to the midsection of a bodyguard. The Gamorrean stumbled, then toppled as Tal slammed the butt of the lightsaber into his temple.

“I wasn’t *done* yet,” Tal said, directing his attention to Desh. The smaller, more slender Jedi—~~for such Sheb realized they both had to be~~—was on the table now. He splayed a four-fingered hand and lifted the Rodian into the air. For an insane second, he and his employer hovered eye-to-eye, the Rodian’s tubular muzzle undulating with protests, and then the green-skinned bodyguard was slammed against the wall.

“Well, don’t blame the messenger,” the Mahran said. He wasn’t even breathing hard. “I was told you’re to be reassigned.”

“Two more weeks and I would have gotten the whole operation,” Tal grumbled. He, too, was speaking as calmly as if the entire exchange were occurring in his own home over friendly drinks. “The Council couldn’t wait that long?”

“It would seem not.” Desh somersaulted from the table to the floor, grabbing two chairs in the process and hurling them at the four-eyed, arachnoid Aqualish firing steadily, though fruitlessly, at Tal. The furniture struck the bodyguard perfectly and he went sprawling to the floor, limbs entangled in the chair’s back and legs at painful-looking angles. His blaster flew out of his hands.

The Mahran caught it effortlessly. He whistled as he examined it. “Nice.”

“Oh, no, you don’t, Blue,” said Tal. The protocol droid had hastened over to one of the fallen bodyguards and clutched a comlink in his hand. Still keeping one hand turned toward Sheb, the Jedi leapt toward the droid and severed Blue’s hand from his wrist. The droid gave a high-pitched shriek. “Oh, come on, that can be fixed,” Tal said. “Don’t be a baby.”

“So, did I ruin the whole mission?” asked Desh. He thumbed his lightsaber, and with a *snap-hiss* the blade deactivated.

“Not the *whole* mission. Just the really satisfying wrap-up part of it.” Miraculously, the statue of the oceanic creature had survived intact. Tal picked it up, smiling. “But this will do. I got a lot of useful information on a lot of very nasty sorts from this one.”

“That touchy-feely stuff you do with things does come in handy.”

“It’s called psychometry, thank you very much.”

Listening, Sheb realized why Tal—which, of course, wasn’t this Jedi’s name at all—had always been so eager to touch everything before purchasing it. Come to think of it, he hadn’t purchased much but he had certainly handled...Sheb whimpered.

“You know everything,” he said, his voice taut.

“Well, not *everything*,” said Tal-not-Tal. “I mean, I don’t know every synonym for *blue*, for example. Blue, how about it?”

“Oh, dear,” squeaked the droid.

“And as for you, Sheb, it’s been a pleasure doing business with you. This might hurt a bit, but I’m sure the Jedi who will be here momentarily will take care of you.”

Tal lifted his hand. And as the miserable protocol droid began to list the billions of synonyms for his name, Sheb almost thought he would welcome the unconsciousness that was about to claim him. Tal, looking apologetic, drew back his hand to send the black-market merchant hurtling into the wall.

CHAPTER THREE

It was not his birthplace, exactly, but the Jedi Temple was where Quinlan Vos had grown up. He raced through its corridors, hidden behind its massive pillars, found peace in its meditation hall, ended—and started—fights in rooms intended for striking blows and some that weren't, and sneaked naps in its library. All Jedi came here, at some point in their lives; for Quinlan, it always felt like coming home when he ran lightly up the stairs and entered the massive building as he did now.

He had enjoyed taking down Sheb's black-market operation back-to-back with his old friend, but that pleasure had been mitigated almost at once when they returned to Desh's ship. On their way back to Coruscant, Desh, whose formal name was Akar-Deshu, had soberly briefed him on Dooku's devastating attack on Mahranee. Vos didn't know what to say to offer comfort. The planet was now controlled by the Separatists, and they had made it clear that all Mahran were to be regarded as extremely hostile and killed on sight. A world and its people had fallen in the space of a few hours.

Obi-Wan Kenobi's normally modulated voice had had a slight edge of urgency to it when Vos and Desh had reported in, and it was that more than the cryptic words that made Vos decide to forgo anything resembling formal attire. Well, anything resembling *appropriate* attire, if he was being honest. After the refreshing scuffle, both his clothes and he could have used a good washing, but he figured there would be a chance to clean up once he'd pinned down Obi-Wan and found out what the hell was going on.

Everyone knew him here—even now, when he was often away for months, sometimes even a year at a stretch. Vos grinned happily at seeing familiar faces and exchanged so many hugs, claps on the back, and handshakes that he was concerned he might be—

“Late, as usual,” said Kenobi, in his usual put-upon tone.

Vos glanced up and smirked, used the Force to leap a dozen stairs, and landed gracefully before the

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