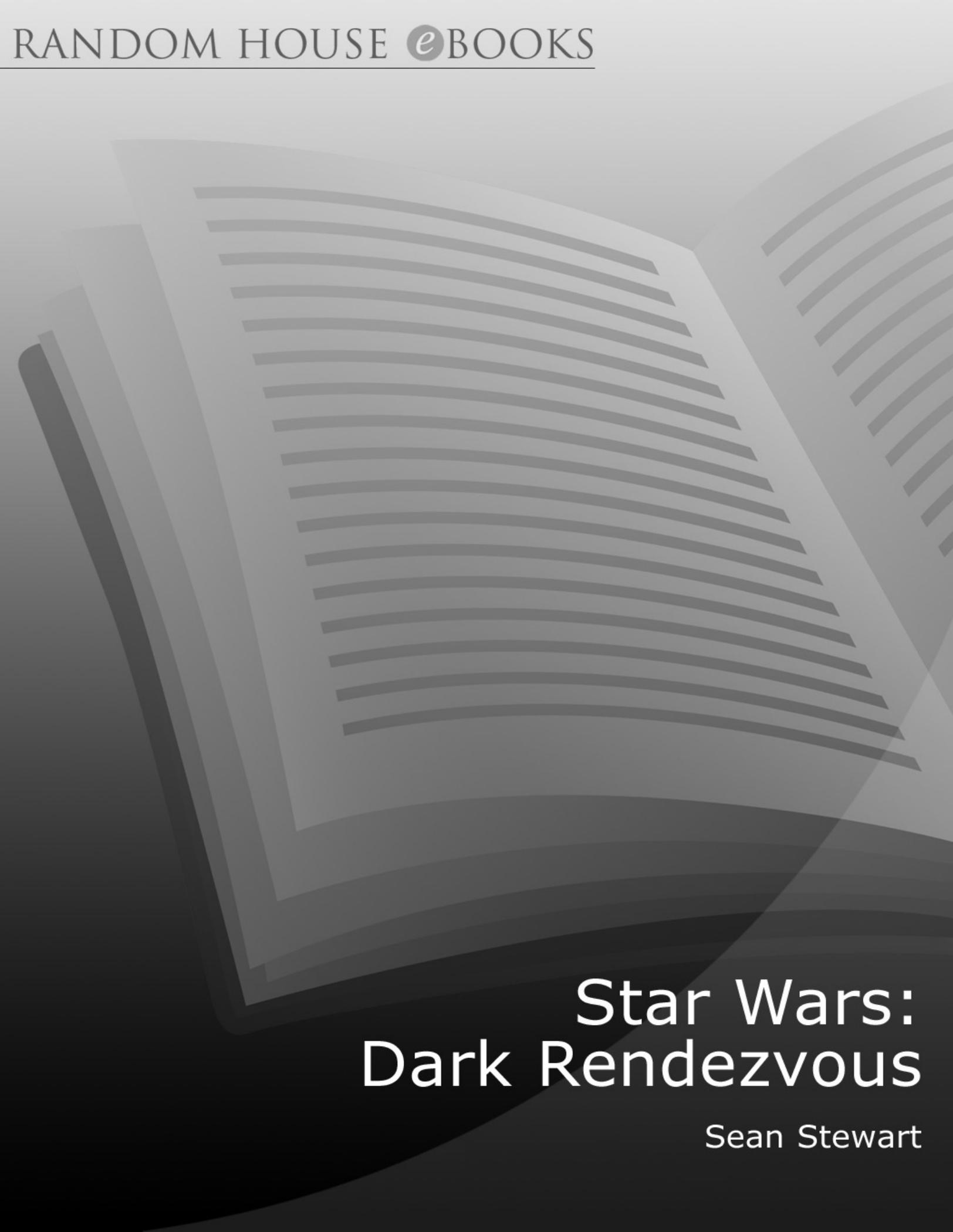


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Star Wars: Dark Rendezvous

Sean Stewart

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About the Book

Never before has Yoda, the most famous Jedi Master ever, starred in his own Star Wars novel. Now, at long last, he gets the spotlight, against the backdrop of the Clone Wars and the collapse of the Republic - the Jedi's greatest challenge and, their ultimate downfall!

About the Author

Sean Stewart is the acclaimed author of the *New York Times* Notable Book *Mockingbird*, *The Night Watch*, *Clouds End*, the *New York Times* Notable Book *Resurrection Man*, the Aurora Award-winner *Nobody's Son*, and the Aurora and Arthur Ellis Award-winning debut *Passion Play*.

Also by Sean Stewart

PASSION PLAY
NOBODY'S SON
RESURRECTION MAN
CLOUDS END
THE NIGHT WATCH
MOCKINGBIRD
GALVESTON
PERFECT CIRCLE
STAR WARS: YODA: DARK RENDEZVOUS

**STAR
WARS™**
YODA
DARK RENDEZVOUS
(A CLONE WARS NOVEL)

SEAN STEWART



arrow books

For Caitlin and Rosie, bright and brave as any Padawans,
and Christine, my swashbuckling companion and guide to
this galaxy, and all the others too.

CLONE WARS TIMELINE

WITH THE BATTLE of Geonosis (EP II), the Republic is plunged into an emerging, galaxywide conflict. On one side is the Confederacy of Independent Systems (the Separatists), led by the charismatic Count Dooku who is backed by a number of powerful trade organizations and their droid armies.

On the other side is the Republic loyalists and their newly created clone army, led by the Jedi. It is a war fought on a thousand fronts, with heroism and sacrifices on both sides. Below is a partial list of some of the important events of the Clone Wars and a guide to where these events are chronicled.

MONTHS

(after *Attack of the Clones*)

- 0 THE BATTLE OF GEONOSIS**
Star Wars: Episode II Attack of the Clones (LFL, May '02)
- 0 REPUBLIC COMMANDO**
Star Wars: Republic Commando (LEC, Fall '04)
- 0 THE SEARCH FOR COUNT DOOKU**
Boba Fett #1: The Fight to Survive (SB, April '02)
- +1 THE DARK REAPER PROJECT**

- The Clone Wars (LEC, October '02)
- +1 THE BATTLE OF RAXUS PRIME**
Boba Fett #2: *Crossfire* (SB, November '02)
 - +1.5 CONSPIRACY ON AARGAU**
Boba Fett #3: *Maze of Deception* (SB, April '03)
 - +2 THE BATTLE OF KAMINO**
Clone Wars I: *The Defense of Kamino* (DH, June '03)
 - +2 DURGE VS. BOBA FETT**
Boba Fett #4: *Hunted* (SB, October '03)
 - +2.5 THE DEFENSE OF NABOO**
Clone Wars II: *Victories and Sacrifices* (DH, September '03)
 - +3 MISSION ON QIILURA**
Republic Commando: Hard Contact (DR, November '04)
 - +6 THE DEVARON RUSE**
Clone Wars IV: *Target Jedi* (DH, May '04)
 - +6 THE HARUUN KAL CRISIS**
Shatterpoint (DR, June '03)
 - +6 ASSASSINATION ON NULL**
Legacy of the Jedi #1 (SB, August '03)
 - +12 THE BIO-DROID THREAT**
The Cestus Deception (DR, June '04)
 - +15 THE BATTLE OF JABIIM**
Clone Wars III: *Last Stand on Jabiim* (DH, February '04)
 - +16 ESCAPE FROM RATTATAK**
Clone Wars V: *The Best Blades* (DH, November '04)
 - +24 THE CASUALTIES OF**

DRONGAR

MedStar Duology: *Battle Surgeons* (DR, July '04)
Jedi Healer (DR, October '04)

+29 ATTACK ON AZURE

Jedi Quest Special Edition (SB, March '05)

+30 THE PRAESITLYN CONQUEST

Jedi Trial (DR, November '04)

+30 LURE AT VJUN

Yoda: Dark Rendezvous (DR, December '04)

+31 THE XAGOBAN CITADEL

Boba Fett #5: A New Threat (SB, April '04)

Boba Fett #6: Pursuit (SB, December '04)

+33 THE HUNT FOR DARTH SIDIOUS

Labyrinth of Evil (DR, February '05)

+36 ANAKIN TURNS TO THE DARK SIDE

Star Wars: Episode III Revenge of the Sith (LFL, May '05)



KEY: DH = Dark Horse Comics, graphic novels
www.darkhorse.com
DR = Del Rey, hardcover & paperback books
www.delreydigital.com
LEC = LucasArts Games, games for Xbox, GameCube,
PS2, & PC platforms www.lucasarts.com
LFL = Lucasfilm Ltd., motion pictures www.starwars.com
SB = Scholastic Books, juvenile fiction www.scholastic.com/starwars

1

THE SUN WAS setting on Coruscant. Shadows ran like black water, filling up the the alleys first, then climbing steadily higher, a tide of darkness rising to drown the capital. Twilight's gloom spread over retail districts and medcenters, and crept like a dark stain up the walls of the Chancellor's residence as the sun slipped below the horizon. Soon only the rooftops were gilded with the day's last yellow light; then the shadows conquered them, too, swarming up the pinnacles of the Senate Building and the spires of the Jedi Temple. The long day of the Republic had come to an end.

Dusk on Coruscant.

On a moonless night a million standard years earlier, perhaps even before the rise of sentient beings, sunset would have meant darkness absolute, except for the distant burn of the stars. Not now. Even during galactic war, Coruscant was still the blazing heart of the greatest civilization in the history of the galaxy. As the sun retreated, the great city began to sparkle with innumerable lights. Speeders darted between tall towers like glow-flies dancing in meadows of transparisteel. Signs flared to life along every street, blinking bright promises at evening passersby. Lights came on in the windows of apartments and stores and offices.

So life goes on despite the gathering dark, Senator Padmé Amidala thought, looking out her window. *Each individual life burning bravely, like a candle raised against the night.* She kept her eyes on the spaceport landing

platform nearest to the Jedi Temple. "It isn't a luxury," she said.

A handmaiden turned to look at her, puzzled. "Pardon?"

"Hope. It isn't a luxury. It's our duty," Padmé said.

The handmaiden started to stammer a reply, but Padmé cut her off. "Someone's landing," she said.

A ship settled like a dragonfly on the landing platform nearest to the Temple, lights burning at its tail and wingtips. Padmé grabbed for a pair of macrobinoculars and tabbed the night-vision settings, trying to read the designation on the courier's battle-scarred side. Searching the hooded figure climbing from the cockpit.

"M'lady?"

Slowly Padmé put the macrobinoculars aside. "It's not him," she said.

Chief Technician Boz Addle loved all the ships in his care, but he had a special affection for the sleek couriers. He ran a gloved hand along the metal flank of the Hoersch-Kessel *Seltaya*-class fast courier *Limit of Vision* that had just come home. "Electrical sparking, meteorite pocking, a couple of laser cannon burns," he murmured. His hand paused over a nasty gash where part of the ship's protective laminate had boiled away, showing a mass of fused wiring studded with shrapnel. "And unless I miss my guess, you took a few proton hits to boot."

Jedi Master Jai Maruk clambered out of the cockpit. His face was gaunt, stitched with shrapnel cuts, and puckered by a bad burn that lay in a bar of charred flesh across his cheek. Half healed on the frantic trip home, the burned skin had bubbled and turned stiff, pulling up one corner of his mouth. The chief technician regarded him gravely. "You promised you'd bring my ship back without a scratch, Master Maruk."

Grim smile. "I lied."

The duty medic bustled forward. “Let me check you out.” He paused, squinting more closely at the slashing burn mark on the Jedi’s cheek. “Master Maruk! What—”

“There’s no time for that now. I must speak to the Jedi Council at once—as many as can be found, anyway.”

“But Master Maruk—”

The Jedi waved him off. “Forgive me, medic, but now is not the time. I have a message to deliver that cannot wait, and I have been left, very much on purpose, in good enough shape to deliver it.” Again the grim smile. He strode away, pausing only at the docking bay doors. “Chief Boz,” he said more gently.

“Yes, Master?”

“Sorry about the ship.”

The medic and the chief technician stood side by side on the landing platform and watched him leave. “Lightsaber burns?” Boz asked.

The medic nodded, wide-eyed.

The chief tech spat thoughtfully on the deck. “Thought so.”

* * *

The Clone Wars like a mighty hand had flung Jedi throughout the stars, leaving only a few senior Jedi Knights in the Temple at any time. Yoda, of course, as Master of the Order and military adviser to the Chancellor, was nearly always on Coruscant. Tonight only two others had joined him to hear Jai Maruk’s story: Jai Maruk’s close friend Master Ilena Xan, nicknamed Iron Hand by the students—she taught hand-to-hand combat, and her specialty was joint locks—and Jedi Council member Mace Windu, who was too intimidating for nicknames.

“We were running recon in the Outer Rim,” Jai said. “Began to think there was something funny going on in the neighborhood of the Hydian Way. Little drab transports

kept popping up, like a mermyn-trail leading into and out of the Wayland region. Nothing so unusual about that, the Trade Federation has the whole region locked down ... but these were popping in from strange coordinates. Deep-space vectors, not local traffic. I got a funny feeling about them, so I dressed up one of the clone transports in pirate's colors and sent it to intercept. Turned out that little commercial shuttle had legs on it like a Neimoidian jakrab. Dropped down a burst of plasma fire and jumped to hyperspace in a heartbeat."

Master Yoda's wrinkled brow rose. "In a nerf's coat, this krayt dragon was."

"Exactly." Master Jai Maruk glanced down at his right hand, which was trembling. An ugly char mark was burned across his palm. He regarded the hand steadily. The trembling stopped.

A young Padawan, a red-haired girl of perhaps fourteen, came into the room with a pitcher of water and some glasses on a tray. Bowing, she placed them on a low table. Master Xan poured a tumbler of water and gave it to Jai. He stared at the glassy, oozing skin on the palm of his burned hand, forced it to curl around the tumbler, and drank.

"So the Trade Federation was shipping something important into the Hydian Way," Jai continued. "Why? Not new ordnance; we don't have any significant troop concentrations out there. And why the disguise? They could wear their fleet colors proudly—it would scare off any pirates or casual raiders, like my poor clone troopers had pretended to be."

"There has to be something there we aren't supposed to know about," Ilena said.

Mace Windu studied the lightsaber burns on Jai Maruk's cheek. "Or *someone*."

Yoda tapped out a pattern on the Council Chamber floor with his cane. "One of these krayts, followed it did you."

“But you were caught,” Mace said.

Jai’s face tightened. “I tracked them to a rendezvous on Vjun.”

Master Yoda stirred and shook his head. The others looked to him. “Strong in the dark side, Vjun is,” he murmured. “Know you the stories?”

They looked at him blankly.

The corners of Yoda’s mouth turned down. “A trial of being old is this: remembering which thing one has said into which young ears. But *he* knows; I remember we spoke of it when he was only a Padawan ...”

The other Jedi stared. “Who knows?” Master Xan asked.

Yoda waved the question off with his stick. “It matters not. Master Maruk, continue.”

Jai took another sip of water. “At first I remained sunside, hidden from my krayt, but when it stayed dirtside for longer than just refueling, I had to risk following it to the surface. I made a soft landing many kilometers away, I kept my heat and IR signatures crushed down, I swear it—” He slowed to a stop. His hand was trembling again. “It doesn’t matter. She caught me.”

“She?” Master Xan asked.

“Asajj Ventress.”

A gasp came from the Padawan who had brought the water. Yoda glanced over, furrowing his face into a mass of stern wrinkles. Only those who knew him very well could have detected the light of amusement in his eye. “Little pitchers, big ears they have! Duties to attend to, have you not, Scout?”

“Not really,” she said. “We’ve finished dinner, and there’s nothing urgent I have to do before tomorrow. I mean, I was intending to practice in the training room, but that could—”

The girl flushed and stuttered to a halt under the massed gaze of the Jedi Masters. “Padawan Scout,” Mace Windu said deliberately, “I am surprised to hear you have

this much free time, given the upcoming Apprentice Tournament. I hate to think you might be bored. Would you like me to *find* you something to do?”

The girl gulped. “No, Master. Not necessary. As you say—practice—I should ...” She bowed and backed out of the room, sliding the door almost shut, until they could see only one green eye. “But if there’s anything else you need, don’t hesitate to—”

“Scout!”

“Right!” And with a click the door slid shut.

Mace Windu shook his head. “The Force is weak in that one. I don’t know—”

Master Xan held up her hand, and Mace fell silent. Xan’s fingers truly were like iron, sheathed with muscle, the joints knotted from years of hand-to-hand combat training. She flicked her hand at the door in a gentle Force push. The door thunked and they heard a muffled yelp. A moment later, embarrassed footsteps pattered away down the corridor.

Mace Windu shook his head impatiently. “I don’t know what Chankar saw in her.”

“We’ll never know now,” Jai Maruk said. Together they paused in remembrance of Chankar Kim, another Jedi fallen in the ring at Geonosis. At first, there had been ceremonies and vigils memorializing that horrible slaughter. But time and the war had gone on, and the Temple was now bleeding from more than that one great wound. Every week or two, another report would come in of a comrade lost in a battle on Thustra, or blown up in high space over Wayland, or assassinated in a diplomatic mission to Devaron.

“Frankly,” Mace said, “I was surprised she was ever chosen to be a Padawan.”

The tip of Yoda’s cane swirled slowly over the chamber floor, as if he were stirring the depths of a pond visible only

to him. "To the Agricultural Corps she should be sent, think you?"

"Actually, yes, I do." A note of sympathy entered Mace Windu's voice. "There is no dishonor in that. When you see how hard she has to fight just to keep up with children years younger than she is ... Perhaps it would be kinder to let her work at her own level."

Yoda cocked his head and looked curiously at him. "See her struggle do I, as well. But if you make her stop, tell you it is 'kind,' she will not!"

"Maybe not," Jai Maruk said grimly. "But children do not always want what is best for them."

"Nor do Jedi Masters," Yoda said dryly.

The burned Jedi forged on. "Let's be honest. Not every pairing of Jedi Knight and Padawan will be Obi-Wan and Anakin, granted, but the truth is *we are at war*. To send a Jedi into battle with a Padawan who cannot be trusted to hold her own is to needlessly risk two lives—lives the Republic cannot afford to throw away."

"The Force is not as strong in Scout as it should be," Ilena agreed. "But I've had her in my classes for years. Her technique is good. She is smart and she is loyal. She tries."

"There is no *try*," Master Maruk said, unconsciously letting his voice slip into the Yoda imitation for which, a lifetime ago, he had been famous among the young boys of the Jedi Temple. "There is only *do*."

The other three Jedi in the room glanced guiltily at Yoda. He snorted, but laugh lines crinkled around his eyes. "Mm. Thinking of students, I am. Best then I should go to battle with him in whom the Force is strongest, hmm? With young Skywalker, think you?"

"He's not polished," Ilena said.

"And too impulsive," Mace added.

"Hm." Yoda stirred again with his stick. "Then best of all would be the strongest student, yes? Wisest? Most learned in the ways of the Force?" He nodded. "Best of all, Dooku

would be!” His eyes found the other Jedi, one by one: and one by one, they looked away. “Our great student!” Yoda’s ears flexed, then drooped. “Our great failure.”

The ancient Master hobbled over to the tray and poured himself a glass of water. “Enough. The rest of your story, tell us, Master Maruk.”

“Ventress found me,” Jai said. “We fought. I lost.” His burned hand was shaking again. “She took my lightsaber. I composed myself for the killing blow, but instead she took me prisoner. She blindfolded me and bundled me into a speeder for a short ride, no more than an hour. Count Dooku was waiting at the end of it.”

“Ah!” Mace Windu leaned forward. “So Dooku is on Vjun!”

“You escaped from Dooku and Ventress alive!” Ilena said.

A mirthless smile tugged on Jai Maruk’s burned cheek. “Make no mistake, I am here because Dooku wanted me here. Ventress would have killed me if she could, she made that very plain, but Dooku wanted a messenger. One he could *trust*,” the Jedi said, his voice heavy with irony. “One who would report here first, and not to the Senate. He was very particular about that—I was to deliver my message to Master Yoda, and only in the Temple, far from other ears.”

“And what was this urgent message?” Mace Windu said.

“He says he wants peace.”

Jai Maruk looked at the disbelieving faces of the Jedi and shrugged.

“Peace!” Master Xan spat out. “Bioweapons slaughter innocents by the millions on Honoghr and he wants peace! The Republic is falling like burned logs into the fire and he wants peace! I can imagine exactly the kind of peace he means.”

“Dooku anticipated we might be, ah, *wary*.” Jai Maruk reached for a pocket under his cloak. “He would send me back, he said, with an offering and a question for Master

Yoda. The offering was my life. But the question was this ...” He drew his hand from his pocket and opened it. There on his shaking palm was a shell—a single, quite ordinary shell, such as a child might find on the seashore of a hundred worlds.

The Jedi looked at it in confusion, but Yoda, for once, was not so serene. He drew a sharp inward breath, and his brow furrowed.

“Master?” Jai Maruk looked away from the shell in his shaking hand. “I have carried this thing across half the galaxy. But what does it *mean*?”

Sixty-three standard years earlier. It is evening, and the sky is dark blue above the sprawling compound of the Jedi Temple. In the Temple’s walled gardens, the twilight sky is reflected in the ornamental pond. Yoda’s most accomplished student is sitting on a rock by the pond’s edge, looking into the water. In one hand he holds a shell, running his thumb again and again over its bone-smooth surface. Before him, water-skeeters dance on the surface of the water, light-footed.

The apprentice’s attention moves with them, dancing, too, on the surface of silence; skating on the endless deepness of the Force. He has always been light-footed; the Force dimples underneath his attention, but holds him up, effortlessly. Only tonight, for some reason, he feels sad and strangely heavy. As if realizing for the first time how easy it would be to see his foot fall through, into that deep power—to sink into dark depths there, and drown.

Tick, tick, *tchak*. Tick, tick, *tchack*. Footsteps coming nearer, one, two, and then the *thunk* of a cane stubbed into the white-pebbled path. A glow light approaches, coming from the direction of the Masters’ quarters, a blur of light moving through the garden’s tangle of leaves and vines. The presence is a familiar one, and the student can feel Yoda, his old mind warm and bright as that glow light, long

before the old one's silhouette rounds the last bend, and the great Master of the Jedi Order hobbles slowly up to join him.

The student smiles and dips his head. How many times Yoda has told him, in endless hours of meditation or lightsaber training, that while the outer form of a figure or an attack need not be displayed, one must feel its *intention* in every cell. So that little dip of the head, so casual, carries a lifetime of gratitude and respect. And fear, too. And guilt.

The Grand Master of the Jedi Order puts down his light and clambers awkwardly onto a rock, scrabbling for purchase and then hauling himself up to sit snuffling beside his student like some unfortunate garden gnome. The student's grin broadens, but he knows better than to offer to help.

Yoda settles himself on the stone in a series of grunts and shifts, adjusting the skirts of his worn Jedi robes, and letting his feet hang just over the surface of the pond. The water-skeeters zip under his ancient green toes, oblivious to the slightly hairy greatness dangling over them. "Pensive, are you, Dooku?"

The student doesn't attempt to deny it.

"No fear about this mission have you, surely?"

"No, Master." The student corrects himself. "Not about the mission, anyway."

"Confident, you should be. Ready you are."

"I know."

Yoda seems to want the light he has left on the ground. He turns his cane around and tries to hook the glow light's handle with it. Grimacing, he fishes once, twice, but the light slips off. He grunts, exasperated.

With the barest flick of his attention, the student picks up the lantern with the Force and sends it floating to his teacher. "Why not do it the easy way, Master?" he asks—and knows what's coming as soon as he shuts his mouth.

"Because it is easy," Yoda grunts. In the young man's experience, students get a lot of answers like this from Yoda. *He didn't send the light away, though,* Dooku thinks.

They sit together in the garden. Somewhere out of sight, a fish breaks the surface, then settles back into the water.

Yoda gives the student a companionable prod with the end of his stick. "So ready to leave, yesterday you were!"

"And last month, and last year, and the year before that." A rueful smile from Dooku lights and dies slowly away. "But now that it's really going to happen ..." He looks around. "I can't remember a time I didn't want to leave—to go out, to travel the stars, to see the world. And yet I have loved it here. This place has been my home. You have been my home."

"And will be still." Yoda gazes at the sweet-scented darkness of the gardens approvingly. "Always be here, we will. Home, yes ... they say on Alderaan, *Home it is, where when you come to the door, they have to let you in!*" He snuffs the evening air, laughing a little. "Hm. Always will there be a place for you here."

"I suppose so. I hope so." The student looks down at the shell in his hand. "I found this on the bank. Abandoned by a freshwater hermit crab. They don't have homes of their own, you know. They keep outgrowing them. I was thinking about that, how the Jedi found me on Serenno. With my mother and father, I suppose. I can't remember them now. Do you ever stop to think how strange that is? Every Jedi is a child his parents decided they could live without." Yoda stirs, but does not speak. "I wonder, sometimes, if that is what drives us, that first abandonment. We have a lot to prove."

A glow-fly comes flickering out of the tangled vines to zip over the surface of the pond, like a spark shot from a fire. The student watches it make its dizzy pattern over the quiet water.

Yoda has a question he likes to ask: *What are we, think you, Dooku?* Every time the student tries a different answer: *We are a knot tied in the Force* or *We are the agency of Fate* or *We are each cells in the body of History* ... but tonight, watching the glow-fly hiss and flicker in the night, a truer answer comes to him. *In the end, what we are is: alone.*

With a faint *pop*, like a bubble bursting, a fish rises from the dark water and snaps. The glow-fly's light goes out and is gone, leaving no trace but one weak ripple that spreads slowly across the surface of the pond.

"I guess even then I was like that hermit crab," the student says. "Too big for my parents' house. So you brought me here, and it's been years, now, that even the Temple has seemed a tight fit for me. I guess ..." The young man pauses, turning, so the light falling against the edge of his hooded robe throws a shadow across his face. "I worry that once I am out in the big world, I will never be able to fit inside here again."

Yoda nods, speaking almost to himself. "Proud, are you. Not without reason."

"I know."

"Not without danger, either."

"I know that, too."

The student rubs again at the hermit crab shell, and then drops it into the pond. Startled water-skeeters skitter madly from the splash, trying to stay afloat.

"Bigger than the Jedi, bigger than the Force, you cannot be," Yoda says.

"But the Force is bigger than the Jedi, Master. The Force is not just these walls and teachings. It runs through all life, high and low, great and small, light—" Awkwardly the student stops.

"—and dark," Yoda says. "Oh, yes, young one. Think you I have never felt the touch of the dark? Know you what a soul so great as Yoda can make, in eight hundred years?"

“Master?”

“Many *mistakes!*” Wheezing with laughter, the old teacher reaches out with his cane and pokes his student in the ribs. “To bed with you, thinker of deep thoughts!” *Poke, poke.* “Your Master, Thame Cerulian, says the most gifted Padawan he ever saw, you are. Trust in yourself, you need not. I, Yoda, great and powerful Jedi Master, will trust for you! Is it enough?”

The apprentice wants to laugh along, but cannot. “It is too much, Master. I am afraid ...”

“Good!” Yoda snorts. “Fear the dark side, you should. In the mighty is it mightiest. But not yet Thame’s equal are you; not yet a Jedi Knight; not yet a member of the Council. Many shells have we left for you, Dooku—as long as you can fit inside *this* one,” he says, rapping his student’s skin. “Tomorrow, go you must, into the darkness between the stars. But home always will this place be. If ever lost you are, look back into this garden.” Yoda hefts his glow light, so shadows like water-skeeters dart away from them. “A candle will I light, for you to find your way home.”

Sixty-three years later, Jai Maruk had been sent to the infirmary, and Ilena Xan had returned to her room, making preparations for the Jedi Apprentice Tournament. Mace Windu alone lingered with Yoda.

“Dooku asks to come home,” Yoda said. “A trap, could this be.”

“Probably,” Mace agreed.

Yoda sighed and studied the shell. “A question, he called it. Yes, such a question! But ignore it we must, do you agree?”

Unexpectedly, Mace shook his head. “Dooku should be dead. I should have killed him on Geonosis. I could have stopped the whole war then. And still he is key. Could he come to parley in earnest? There is only a little chance. Could he come all the way back to us? Surely the chance is

less than a little. But balance that chance, however small, against a million lives, and it's a chance we must take. So I think, Master."

Yoda grunted. "Hard it would be, to dare to hope again for this lost student!"

"Tough," Mace said. "Nobody said being a Jedi Master was easy—even for you."

Yoda grunted, glaring around at the Temple. "Pfeh. All too wise, you have become. Better before it was, when only Yoda was wise!" He glanced over at Mace and snickered. Mace would have laughed, too, if somewhere in the ring on Geonosis he hadn't lost the knack.

On the other side of the galaxy, the Order's most gifted apprentice reached out to tap a lightsaber with the toe of his boot. Count Dooku grimaced. The lightsaber was still attached to a hand. The hand was soot black and rimed with frost; it ended in a gory stump of frozen blood just above the wrist. Dooku was in his study, a place for reflection, and the severed hand hardly struck the contemplative note. Besides which, as hard as it had frozen in the bitter vacuum of space, it would be thawing out in a hurry now. If he wasn't careful, it would leave a stain on the tiles. Not a good thing, even though one more bloodstain on the floor of Château Malreaux would hardly be noticed.

On the other side of Dooku's desk, Asajj Ventress hefted a bag of foil insulation. "There wasn't much left of the ship, Master. The Force was strong, and I hit the reactor chamber with my first shot. It took me several hours to find that," she said, glancing at the frozen hand. "It occurred to me a magnetic scan might turn up the lightsaber. Funny to think he was reaching for his weapon when his ship blew up. Instinct, I suppose."

"He?"

"He, she." Asajj Ventress shrugged. "It."

When her first Master died, Asajj Ventress, scourge of the Jedi and Count Dooku's most feared associate, had tattooed her hairless head and left her girlhood behind. Her skull was striped with twelve marks, one for each of the twelve warlords she had killed after swearing their deaths. She was a dagger of a woman, slender and deadly. Even in a galaxy cluttered with hate, such a combination of speed and fury comes only once in a generation; Dooku had known that from the first moment they met. She was the rose and the thorn together; the sound of a long knife driving home; the taste of blood on one's lips.

Asajj shrugged. "I never found a head, but I did pick up a few assorted bits out of the wreckage if you want to take a look," she said, giving the foil bag a heft.

Dooku regarded her. "What a little cannibal you have become."

She said, "I become what you make me."

No easy answer to that.

With an expert Force tug, Dooku brought the severed hand, still clutching its weapon, to hang in the air before him, as easily as he had drawn up Yoda's glow light all those decades earlier. Before the starfighter explosion had ripped the hand so untidily from the rest of its body, Dooku rather thought it might have been olive-skinned. The charring made it hard to tell if it was even human. The dead flesh, unconnected to any spirit, was merely matter now—no more interesting than a table leg or a wax candle, and bearing no more imprint of its owner's soul and personality. Dooku always found this astonishing: how *transitory* the relationship was between one's body and oneself. The spirit is a puppeteer to make one's flesh limbs dance: but cut the spirit's strings, and nothing remains but meat and paint, cloth and bone.

A Jedi's lightsaber, now: that was something different. Each weapon was unique, built and rebuilt by its owner, made to be a pure expression of Self. Dooku ran one finger

along the handle of the dead Jedi's weapon. The force of the explosion had stripped off half the casing and fused its works so it would never burn again, but the essential pattern was obvious still. "Jang Li-Li," he murmured. To his surprise, he found he was sad.

"I make that sixteen," Ventress said. "Seventeen, it should have been, if you had allowed me to kill that spy, Maruk."

Dooku turned. Released from his attention, the gory hand and the handle it clutched dropped with a wet *thump* and clatter to the floor. The Count walked to the window of his study. When he was very young, Yoda had told him Vjun's tragic story, and for years he'd had it in mind as a good place to make a retreat. The planet was heavy with the dark side, which made the study of the Sith ways easier. And more practically, Vjun's catastrophe—a plague of sudden madness that carried off most of the planet's population in a year—had left a great many nicely appointed manors empty for the taking. An old crab likes a comfortable shell, after all, and Château Malreaux was very comfortable indeed. The previous owner's sanity had slipped from him in sudden and spectacular fashion; except for the bloodstains, one might think the château had been built new expressly for Dooku's occupation.

Beyond the study window it was raining, of course—the same acid drizzle that had nearly eaten through the roof before Dooku had arrived to set things in better repair. In the distance, toward the seashore, a few twisted thorn-trees raised their claws at the dolorous sky, but the real ground cover was the notorious Vjun moss: soft, sticky, venomously green, and passively carnivorous. A two-hour nap on the stuff would leave exposed skin red, welted, and oozing.

Dooku watched rain run like tear tracks down his windows. "The last time I saw Jang, she must have been ... younger than you, even. A handsome young woman. The

Council was sending her on her first diplomatic mission ... to Sevarcos, I think it was. She came to ask my advice. She had striking eyes, very gray and steady. I remember thinking she would do well."

Ventress picked up the bloody hand and tossed it into her foil bag. "Great are the powers of the Sith, but you're not much of a fortune-teller."

"You think not?" Dooku turned to consider the dead Jedi's murderer. "Jang lived in service, however misguided, and acted by the star of her principles, however incomplete. By that judging, how many lives are better?"

"Lots are longer, though." Ventress tied a knot in the foil bag and tossed it into the corner of the room. "If you ask me," she said, watching the bag hit with a wet *thud*, "that's not what winning looks like."

She licked her lips.

"You have a point," he said.

Asajj shifted unconsciously into what Dooku recognized as the echo of a fighting stance, shoulders squared, chin up and aggressive, hands high. *Here it comes*, he thought.

Ventress took a deep breath. "Make me your apprentice."

"It's not the time—" Dooku began, but Ventress cut him off.

"I'm not in it for the Trade Federation or the Republic," she said. "I don't care about flags or soldiers, sides or treaties, droids or clones. I'm not even in it for the killing, except for the Jedi, and that's not business, it's personal. When I work on my own, I do what I like. When I do your bidding, I don't need it to be right or reasoned or even sane: I do it because you ask it of me."

"I know," Dooku said.

Ventress strode to the window and stood before it, blocking Dooku's view. "Have I served well?"

"Superbly," he admitted.

“Then reward me! Make me your apprentice! Teach me the ways of the Sith!”

“Have I not taught you many secrets, Asajj?”

“Scraps. Little devices. Lesser arts. Not nearly what you would if I were your apprentice sworn in blood, I know. I am no fool,” she said angrily. As if he didn’t know that. As if she needed to convince him she was deadly. “I have learned much about the Sith. Their lineage and their greatness.”

“But what of their natural history?” Dooku said.

Ventress blinked. “What?”

“The Sith, considered as a species. An insect, perhaps.”

Asajj’s thin lips got thinner. “You mock me.”

“I have rarely been more serious.” The Count paced over to a shelf of holocrons on the wall, plucked one out, and inserted it into the comm cube on his desk. “Behold: the sickle-back mantis of Dantooine.” A glowing picture formed in the air over the desk, a glossy red-and-black mantis, all hooked forelimbs and wicked piety. “After mating, the female tears her partner’s head off and lays her eggs in his body. When the broodlings hatch, they eat their way out and then attack one another.”

“I am not given to parables,” Ventress said impatiently. “If you have a point, make it.”

“It is a tricky business, this making of apprentices,” Dooku said. “The true Sith Lord must find a pupil in whom the Force runs strong.”

“Sixteen Jedi dead is some testament to that,” Ventress said. “Should have been seventeen,” she added.

“But do I really want to make you so strong?” the Count said softly. “We are such pleasant company now, while you know your place. But if I were to make you my apprentice, if I were to take you by the hand and lead you down below the black water that is the dark side, then either you would drown, or you would grow far stronger, and neither option appeals to me. You burn so brightly now, I would hate to put you out.”

“Why should you? What harm is there in teaching me to help you better?”

“You would betray me.” He shrugged, cutting off her protests. “It is the unhappy hazard of embracing the dark side. I am old, and I have learned the limits of my ambition. You are young, and strong, and those two things have always led to one place in the history of the Sith.”

“You think I would intrigue against you?”

“Not at first. But a day would come when you would disagree with my decisions. When you would start to dream of how much better things would be without my liver-spotted hand held over you.”

“I disagree with your decisions right now,” she said. “About that Jedi who—”

“Should have been number seventeen. I know.” Dooku smiled. “I don’t have your appetites. I can wait on my kills, and use them better. And for now, you might disagree, but you dare not disobey.” And here, with a small smile, he lifted just one finger.

She blanched. “True,” she said.

Dooku let his finger drop.

In the hologram on the desk, baby mantises were squirming from their father’s body. They groped blindly about them with their spindly hooked limbs until one, a little larger than the others, chanced to find that the sickles on his hind legs fit like a collar around a sibling’s neck. Driven by primitive instinct, he jerked and tore off his brother’s head.

“In a perfect world,” Dooku said, “one could feed an apprentice just enough to keep him growing—just enough to keep him wanting more. The Master could promise him fame, glamour. That’s a good one to deliver on,” he said. “He could do the Master’s bidding, be his public face. Then if any of the Master’s plans went wrong, why, he could take the fall.” Dooku looked up, his eyes suddenly sharp and very much in the present. “Does that sound good to you,