

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Star Wars: Coruscant Nights II – Street of Shadows

Michael Reaves

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About the Book

The second of three related novels starring Jedi Jax Pavan, droid I-5YQ, and journalist Den Dhur during the time directly after the events of *Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith*. Jax Pavan is one of the few Jedi Knights who survived the slaughter of Order 66. Now he ekes out a living as a private investigator in the bowels of Coruscant, trying to help people in need while avoiding revealing himself as a Jedi to those who are still ready to kill any Jedi who remain alive – and especially Darth Vader.

About the Author

Michael Reaves received an Emmy Award for his work on the Batman animated tv series. He has worked for Spielberg's DreamWorks, among other studios, and has written fantasy novels and supernatural thrillers for Tor Books. He is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Star Wars: Darth Maul: Shadow Hunter*, as well as the cowriter (with Steve Perry) of the two *Star Wars: MedStar* novels and *Star Wars: Death Star*. He lives in the Los Angeles area.

By Michael Reaves

THE BURNING REALM

THE SHATTERED WORLD

DARKWORLD DETECTIVE

STREET MAGIC

NIGHT HUNTER

VOODOO CHILD

DRAGONWORLD (*with Byron Preiss*)

SWORD OF THE SAMURAI (*with Steve Perry*)

HELLSTAR (*with Steve Perry*)

DOMES (*with Steve Perry*)

THE OMEGA CAGE (*with Steve Perry*)

THONG THE BARBARIAN MEETS THE CYCLE SLUTS OF
SATURN (*with Steve Perry*)

HELL ON EARTH

MR. TWILIGHT (*with Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff*)

BATMAN: FEAR, ITSELF (*with Steven-Elliot Altman*)

STAR WARS: DARTH MAUL: SHADOW HUNTER

STAR WARS: MEDSTAR I: BATTLE SURGEONS (*with Steve
Perry*)

STAR WARS: MEDSTAR II: JEDI HEALER (*with Steve Perry*)

STAR WARS: DEATH STAR (*with Steve Perry*)

STAR WARS: CORUSCANT NIGHTS I: JEDI TWILIGHT

STAR WARS: CORUSCANT NIGHTS II: STREET OF SHADOWS

Anthologies

SHADOWS OVER BAKER STREET (*co-edited with John Pelan*)

Star Wars: Coruscant Nights II – Street of Shadows

Michael Reaves



For
Jim Bertges

Acknowledgments

Once again, thanks go first and foremost to my editors: Shelly Shapiro at Del Rey and Sue Rostoni at LucasBooks, who invited me to walk on the wild side of Coruscant again; to Leland Chee and the other galactic wonks who never got tired of continuity questions; and, as always, to George Lucas for the whole shebang.

Dramatis Personae

Aurra Sing; bounty hunter (female humanoid)
Baron Vlaçan Umber; art patron (male Vindalian)
Baroness Kirma Umber; noblewoman (female Vindalian)
Darth Vader; Sith Lord (male human)
Dejah Duare; artist's assistant (female Zeltron)
Den Dhur; Whiplash partisan, former reporter (male Sullustan)
I-Five; protocol droid
Jax Pavan; Whiplash partisan, former Jedi Knight (male human)
Laranth Tarak; Whiplash partisan, former Jedi Knight (female Twi'lek)
Pol Haus; sector police prefect (male Zabrak)
Typho; Naboo captain, security specialist (male human)
Ves Volette; light sculptor (male Caamasi)

Prologue

Planet Naboo, 19 BBY

PADMÉ HAD NEVER known how much he loved her.

She had died, as far as he knew, in a lonely, far-off place, on a planet that, if not the hell envisioned by the superstitious beliefs of sundry worlds, certainly came close. That was as far as he'd traced her final journey: to Mustafar, a globe still in the throes of creation, where rivers of fire and molten rock stitched across a landscape of basalt and obsidian, and where specially designed heat-resistant droids mined the lava flows for rare and precious minerals. A terrible place, a world of eternal darkness, of soot-filled skies and mephitic gases. No one deserved to die in such a place, especially not Padmé. If she had to die, she should have spent her last hours on a world of sunlight and song, like their mutual homeworld of Naboo, a world of green and blue, not black and red.

But she had gone to Mustafar, gone after the Jedi Anakin Skywalker, on a mission so secret, she'd said, that not even her bodyguard could accompany her. And he, believing that she would be protected under the aegis of the Jedi, had let her go.

And had never seen her again—alive.

Captain Typho, once head of security for the Consular Branch of the Naboo Senate, castigated himself for his decision as he stood with the rest of the mourners, watching the flower-covered casket moving slowly down the esplanade. It had been his job as a soldier to protect Senator Amidala, to shield her from attacks by clandestine

Separatist agents. He had known there would be more attempts on her life. He had known it because there had been previous ones: the bombing of her starship on the very day of her arrival on Coruscant; the deadly kouhuns released into her sleeping chamber by a changeling assassin; her near execution in the arena at Geonosis.

Even had he not loved her, he would have sacrificed his life to protect her without a second thought. That would have been his duty. His love for her only compounded his culpability. She had gone on her mysterious mission with Skywalker, and he had not gone with her. And now he had to live with the guilt of his survival, a curse infinitely harder than the relatively easy task of dying for her.

It was true that, had she lived, there still would have been no chance of his love for her being requited. Padmé had, after all, been a Senator, and before that the planetary Queen. He was but a soldier; the difference in caste had been far too great. But it hadn't stopped him from loving her. No power in the galaxy, not even the Force itself, could have done that.

After the funeral, Typho milled aimlessly about in the crowd, still stunned, still trying to wrap his mind around the fact of her death. Still reviewing, over and over, what he might have done differently, if he could possibly have persuaded her to reconsider that last journey . . .

Pointless. Fruitless. These self-flagellations served no purpose. Execrating his actions would not bring her back, nor would it honor her memory. Had she known how he had felt, had she known of his love for her, he knew Padmé would have wanted him to move on, to release her, to live instead of wallowing in despondency. And he was willing to do that.

But first, he told himself, there is one last task that must be performed . . .

Padmé Amidala must be avenged.

He had heard conflicting rumors, snatches of conversation during the chaos immediately after her death. Most of the government factotums and officials were caught up in dealing with larger issues; although to Typho there could be no greater concern than his personal feelings regarding Padmé's death. He knew that the diplomatic reverberations, especially in light of Naboo's already tenuous status of autonomy in the eyes of Palpatine's new regime, were gigantic. For the circumstances of the Senator's demise were, to put it bluntly, suspicious. There was evidence—compelling evidence—that she had died a violent death.

Of course, this was not meant to be known by the population at large. But rank did have certain privileges, and Captain Typho had learned some things about Padmé's last hours. There were conflicting reports, of course, but all the autopsy reports were in agreement on two things: that she had been strangled, and that the child had died with her.

But exactly how the former had been accomplished, no one was quite sure. The evidence of strangulation had been there, and obvious: the fractured hyoid bone, damage to the larynx, and compression of the trachea were all clear indications of fatal throttling.

But . . .

There were no signs of bruises on her neck, no scratches or signs of congestion . . . no indication of exterior trauma at all. Her throat had been pristine. It was as if she had somehow been choked to death *without* physical contact. And there was only one power in the galaxy that Typho knew of that could accomplish such a thing.

The Force.

Padmé had gone to Mustafar to meet with the Jedi Knight Skywalker. And all evidence indicated that she had been killed through the Force.

It could not possibly be a coincidence. Even if Skywalker was not the murderer, he had to have been connected

somehow. In any event, he was the best and only lead to follow.

Typho knew what he had to do.

He would go to Coruscant. He would find Anakin Skywalker. And depending on what he learned, the Jedi would live or die.

And then, perhaps, Padmé would rest easier.

—[PART I]—

PLANET NOIR

one

"I THINK IT'S safe to assume," the droid said, "that we've been set up."

A fusillade of laser and particle beams erupted from across the room, aimed at the five of them, as if to punctuate the statement. Den looked at Jax. "Aren't you glad your father gave him that neural upgrade?"

Another series of beams struck the huge hypercondensor unit behind which they were hiding. They were protected for the moment, Jax knew, but eventually, if the stormtroopers' lasers and charged-particle bursts kept hitting the unit, the duralumin housing would overheat, quite possibly upsetting the stability of the ultracold Tibanna condensate within. Should that happen, I-Five estimated the explosive factor as at least a 7.5, which would certainly vaporize the building they were in, as well as a sizable chunk of the surrounding urban landscape.

"That's only a rough estimate," the droid explained. "There are too many variables to factor for me to refine my —"

"Seven-point-five is more than enough for me," Jax assured him. "Den?"

"I'm good," Den agreed. The little Sullustan was crouched beside I-Five. "You definitely know how to motivate people," he added to the droid.

"Less talk. More shooting," Laranth said. The Twi'lek Paladin had a blaster in either hand and was crouched near the far end of the unit. "I say we go—*now*."

Jax couldn't argue with her logic. The longer they remained pinned down, the less chance of survival they and

their client had, not to mention however many hundreds of thousands of beings would die if I-Five's 7.5 scenario really was in the immediate future. Not that Jax had any doubt of it. The droid had an annoying habit of being right just about all the time.

"Okay," he said. "Laranth, take the right; I-Five, the left. On my signal—"

"Hey, what about me?" Den asked.

"Stay here with the undersecretary." Jax spared a glance at the corpulent, trembling form crouched beside Den. Before the Empire had superseded the Republic, Varesk Bura'lya had been a midlevel government official assigned to the Bothan embassy on Coruscant. Immediately after the Republic's fall, he had become a fugitive, along with thousands of other representatives of various species on the city-planet. True, no particular effort was being made to hunt them down, and in a global metropolis that was home to literally trillions of sentient beings, one stood a very good chance of living a lifetime (thousands of lifetimes, in fact) without ever coming into contact with an enemy. But one overall characteristic of the Bothan species was paranoia, and Bura'lya had no shortage of that. So he had contacted the Coruscant resistance movement known as the Whiplash, and arranged for safe passage offworld through the Underground Mag-Lev, a dangerous and circuitous secret route that delivered enemies of the state to spaceports and sympathetic starships via safe houses, private conapts, and other clandestine means.

Jax Pavan, one of the last surviving Jedi and a partisan of the Whiplash resistance, had been assigned to help ferry the Bothan dignitary to freedom. All had gone well until they'd reached the final checkpoint, in the dimly lit interior of a carbonite-processing plant. Here they'd been greeted, not by the resistance members they'd expected, but instead by a brace of Imperial stormtroopers.

They were smart, he had to give them that. Knowing that a droid was part of the party, they'd staged the attack in the depths of the carbonite-cracking plant, taking advantage of the low-level background radiation that would confuse I-Five's bio- and energy sensors for the moment needed. They hadn't known that there would also be two Jedi to contend with, however. The Force had warned Jax and Laranth of the trap, which is why four troopers now lay dead on the floor. If the Bothan hadn't, in his panic, gotten in the way, Jax was certain that the rest of the troopers would also be dead by now, and Varesk Bura'lya would be about to board the spice freighter *Big Score* and become a fading unpleasant memory instead of hiding behind the hypercondensor unit, caterwauling about his imminent demise.

Now he looked up at Jax, the fleshy tendrils that protruded from his upper cheeks quivering in fear. "You were hired to protect me!" he squealed, his voice scraping unpleasantly along the Jedi's nerves. "Your job was to help me escape from this overbuilt rock! Is this what you call *escape*?"

"Well," Den observed, "that depends on how metaphysical a definition of *escape* you want to go with . . ."

Another volley of beams struck their shelter, scorching the air and leaving the unpleasant tang of ozone in Jax's nostrils. There was no more time, he knew; they had to make their move. He opened himself to the Force, letting it expand his awareness, feeling its strands groping outward, beyond the bulk of the condensor unit, giving him an accurate "picture" of the chamber they were in and highlighting the locations of the eight concealed stormtroopers who had them pinned down.

"On my mark," he said again. ". . . *Go!*"

Laranth hurled herself from behind the right side of the condensor's bulk, blasters in both hands firing, her eyes as cold and hard as chips of comet ice. I-Five burst from concealment on the left side, the lasers in his index fingers zapping beams of coherent light at their adversaries. Jax let

the Force lift him, let it carry him up and over the huge, shielding slab, his vibrosword parrying the blasts as he landed, batting them back toward the astonished troopers. This was much harder than it looked. The durasteel blade had been woven with cortosis, a mineral strong enough to resist energy blasts, but its similarity to a lightsaber ended there. A scarlet ray struck low on the blade, more by luck than by aim, and the vibrogenerator in the hilt shorted out. Even through the insulation the jolt was painful. Jax knew immediately what had happened, as did the troopers; they could see the blade's edge lose its high-speed blur. Jax dropped the weapon and extended both hands, palms-out, in a Force strike that hurled three of the troopers back against a wall. Even as he did so, however, he could sense another trooper lining up on him—

Laranth stepped into the edge of his peripheral vision, firing her blaster. The beam struck the blast meant for Jax. The air sizzled with multicolored ionized energies, flickering corposant danced along his arms and momentarily wreathed his brow, and the sound was like a thousand fire wasp nests being broken open at once.

Jax's vision was momentarily dazzled by the pyrotechnics. I-Five's photoreceptors, fortunately, were not. The droid fired rapidly, his laser blasts unerringly accurate. In a matter of moments it was finished. The eight stormtroopers lay sprawled in various ungainly positions, on the floor or across slurry pipes, control consoles, and other large pieces of industrial apparatus. The three hesitated a moment, wary of another possible attack. Then Jax said, "It's over. Stand down."

Laranth nodded and holstered her blasters. The hard-bitten Gray Paladin's connection to the Force had no doubt told her, just as his had told Jax, that the immediate danger was past. Simultaneously the droid lowered his arms. Jax knew that I-Five had swept the room for life signs and booby traps with his sensors, and that the readings were null.

“That was exhilarating,” I-Five said. “Have I mentioned lately how much I enjoy the organic predilection for violence and carnage? No? That might be because—I don’t.”

Jax grinned. “Okay,” he said. “Let’s get our reluctant client to the spaceport and on that spice freighter before anyone else shows up wanting to play.” He raised his voice. “Den! Secretary Bura’lya! Let’s go!”

There was a moment of silence, and then Den’s voice came from around the corner of the hypercondenser: “I’m afraid that might be a problem.”

Jax felt himself go cold. Had they come this far, only to have the being to whom they’d promised safe passage die at the last minute? Had a stray energy bolt ricocheted from a reflective surface somewhere in the room at just the right angle to kill the undersecretary? Jax reached out with the Force, just as Den continued, “Bura’lya’s fainted. And—” The Sullustan peered around from behind the unit, his nose wrinkled. “I think he’s had an . . . accident.”

I-Five said, “My olfactory sensor confirms that Den is correct—assuming that *had an accident* in this case is a euphemism for—”

“It is,” Jax said. He sheathed his useless vibrosword and sighed. “Come on. Let’s get him cleaned up before we put him on board.”

two

THERE WERE NO further impediments in getting Undersecretary Bura'lya on board the freighter *Big Score*, unless finding a new set of pantaloons in the spaceport duty-free that fit a Bothan counted as such. Once the ship had lifted, and I-Five's illegal patch into the orbital grid feed had confirmed its slot for hyperspace insertion, the four headed back to their current quarters, in the downlevels sector known as the Southern Underground. This was several thousand kilometers from Jax's previous neighborhood, the Blackpit Slums, near the equator and not far from the ruins of the Jedi Temple.

Their living quarters were, for a change, relatively upscale, which meant, as far as Den was concerned, that the roof didn't leak and slugthrower fire hadn't riddled the walls. Lately. As a result of the unexpected generosity of Kaird of Nedij, the former Black Sun assassin who, thanks to Jax, had been able to exit the criminal organization and return to his homeworld, they had enough credits to live comfortably for a while. Unfortunately, the same plan that had aided Kaird and saved the lives of himself and his friends had cost Jax his lightsaber. He had used it to trigger a small-scale nuclear explosion in the deserted Factory District in order to escape the clutches of both Darth Vader and the Falleen Prince Xizor. It seemed to have worked; several months had gone by, and Jax had felt no untoward "plucking" of the psionic threads that constituted the way he experienced the Force—at least, nothing that carried with it the sense of Vader's renewed attention. The Sith Lord

evidently had assumed that Jax and his companions had not escaped the blast.

"It's not like you really *need* another lightsaber," Den pointed out. "After all, there's no surer way of saying *Look, I'm a Jedi!* than to go waving one around.

"Besides," he added, "don't you still have that other gizmo that Nick Rostu gave you?"

The "other gizmo" was an energy whip: a length of flexible, conductive metal that could be charged with a plasmatic field, which Jax had used in his battle with Prince Xizor. Ironically, the Black Sun operative had been wielding Jax's own lightsaber against him—and not too shabbily, either, Den remembered, considering that Xizor didn't have the help of the Force with it.

"The lightwhip? Yes," Jax replied. "But it's not very good for close work, or multiple opponents."

"Even so," Laranth said, "I agree with Den. A new lightsaber will just tempt you into more overt demonstrations of the Force. If you want Vader to know you're alive, then by all means find another one."

The green-skinned Twi'lek was standing by the partly opaqued window, looking down at the street below, as she spoke. She was dressed mostly in gray: leggings, tunic, and vest. This wasn't surprising, since Laranth Tarak was one of the few surviving members of the Gray Paladins, a splinter group of Jedi who had believed, even before the overthrow of the Republic, that the Order relied entirely too much on the Force as a metaphysical panacea. Since the lightsaber's use was nearly always augmented with the Force, they advocated proficiency in other weaponry as well. To an amazing degree, Laranth had honed her skill with the pair of DL-44 blasters she wore; Den had never seen her miss. If she shot at something, that something either vaporized, blew up, or fell over; it was a surer bet than a perfect twenty in sabacc.

Of course, Den mused, she obviously used the Force to warn her of lasers or particle beam blasts that were about to be fired at her. No one was fast enough to block something traveling at or near light-speed. But Den was pretty sure that, if one could somehow turn off Laranth's access to the Force, it wouldn't affect her speed and accuracy all that much.

The Twi'lek turned her head slightly, and Den could see light reflect off the shiny scar tissue on her right cheek. That and the burned stub of her left lekku were souvenirs of the atrocity known as Flame Night. As a reporter, he hadn't been able to stop himself from asking once about her part in it. "And don't tell me I should see the other guy," he'd cautioned.

"You can't," she'd replied, "unless you dig up his grave."

She didn't smile as she said it, but then, neither Den nor anyone else in the small group could recall seeing Laranth ever smile. There was no question in Den's mind but that the Twi'lek's nerves were wound tighter than the carbonite nanofibers that tethered skyhooks to the surface of Coruscant. He was glad she was on their side. He hoped she'd stay there. He'd hate to be facing the business end of her blaster.

There was only one other member of the group who could probably match the Paladin's deadly accuracy: I-Five. As others remarked more than once, the erstwhile protocol droid, who had been Den's friend and companion since the Battle of Drongar—and who had dragged him halfway across the galaxy to Coruscant and this current thrill-a-minute existence, he reminded himself wryly—was a rather singular droid. The word *unique* had even been applied. The reason for this was as simple as it was complicated: I-Five was more self-aware than any other droid that Den had ever encountered, not to mention a sizable chunk of sentients it had been the reporter's misfortune to come across over the years. This could be partly explained by some of the

modifications that Jax's father, Lorn, had made in the droid's synaptic grid and creativity dampeners. But Den and the others couldn't help but feel that the droid was somehow journeying beyond even that, toward a consciousness that couldn't be entirely the result of programming. If he wasn't already there.

Den shook his head. He'd been slipping more and more into such esoteric reveries these days. It wasn't a good frame of mind to stay in, especially since a large part of his current existence consisted of trying to smuggle various contraband and fugitives from the streets to the spaceports and eventually offworld. One had to be alert; one had to live in the moment and take care of business in such an environment. Philosophical musings could rarely be indulged.

Not that he was given overly much to such things anyway. In his former life—which was how he often found himself thinking of it these days; it seemed as misty and faraway as a half-remembered dream—he'd been a reporter. A newsbeing who had worked on some hot stories in his time, covered some dangerous fronts, been more than once in "humpty deep poodoo," as some of the Ugnaughts who'd been his source for juicy newsbits back on Drongar had so colorfully put it. Drongar had by no means been the best of them, but it hadn't been the worst, either. He'd covered the Clone Wars from Eredenn Prime to Jabiim. He'd won awards, citations, and scrolls of merit for his stories from the front. It had been hard work, dangerous work, exciting work.

These days, the memories of those times seemed like a pleasant walk in Oa Park.

Den was jarred out of his reverie by Jax's voice. The former Jedi was saying, "—may be right. Still, given that there are more beings on Coruscant than on any other fifty inhabited worlds, I think the chances of being noticed with a lightsaber are thin, especially downlevel. And I'd rather have it and not need it than the other way around." Jax turned

and addressed another being standing in the shadows of the conapt's foyer. "How about it, Rhinann? Can you find me a lightsaber?"

Den watched as the Elomin stepped into the lighted room. Haninum Tyk Rhinann was typical of his species: tall, angular, and bipedal. He wasn't quite as hirsute as a Wookiee, but he came close. His nose tusks, stubby horns, and wide-set eyes all protruded from a fleshy lump that could only be recognized as a head because it sat on top of his short neck. He was depressed. This came as no particular surprise to Den or any of the others; Rhinann was *always* depressed. Formerly Darth Vader's personal aide, he had fled the Dark Lord's service, finding sanctuary at the last moment aboard the freighter *Far Ranger* with Jax and the others, just before the droid factory had been destroyed by the exploding reactor.

Rhinann, like the majority of his species, was a scrupulous, fastidious, meticulous, and punctilious being. For the Elomin, the reason and joy of life truly was in the details, and it had been that passion for order and precision that had convinced Vader to designate Rhinann his aide-de-camp. Unfortunately, along with that painstaking attention to minutiae came an outlook of extreme suspicion upon his life in general and his employer in particular. Den remembered reading somewhere that expatriated Elomin were prone to psychoses of various sorts—including, it seemed, paranoia. Rhinann had become convinced that Vader would sooner or later have him killed for some minor infraction or dereliction of duty, and it had been that fear as much as the very sensible desire to avoid imminent de-atomization that had driven him to jump ship.

Since then, Rhinann had been an unwilling fugitive. He yearned to return to his homeworld of Elom, but his share of the credits bequeathed by Kaird wasn't nearly enough to persuade a merchant ship's captain to carry one passenger all the way to a world on the Outer Rim, far from the trade