

STAR WARS



RED HARVEST

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1/Ring



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WIM NICKTER STOOD JUST OUTSIDE THE CIRCLE, AWAITING FIRST BLOOD.

The cold morning air of Odacer-Faustin tasted like ozone, numbing his tongue and lips, making his heart pound harder in his chest until it actually shook the heavy fabric of his wind-resistant tunic. He had climbed the seventy-seven steps to the top of the temple with the other students, muscles aching, sweat from his exertions still drying in the wind. The lightsaber training session was over. Now the duels would begin.

In the three standard years since he'd arrived at the academy, Nickter had come to anticipate these duels with a special kind of excitement. A tall, rangy seventeen-year-old with a thatch of jet-black hair, he gazed into the circle with hungry blue-gray eyes that matched the unforgiving landscape almost perfectly.

Nickter looked down. From the top of the temple, the Sith academy

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resembled nothing so much as a partially demolished wheel, its spokes radiating crookedly out from the central hub of the tower. Its ancient chambers, enclosed walkways, tunnels, and temples, and the great library that served as its haunted heart had all long ago begun to crumble and deteriorate from decades of accumulated snow and ice, and the constantly shifting tectonic eccentricities of the planetary crust. The result was a sprawling ruin of forgotten spaces—some of them palatial—groaning under tons of age-tortured Sith architecture.

It was here that they'd come, Nickter and several hundred others, to learn everything they needed to know about the dark side of the Force.

Directly across from him, Lord Shak'Weth, the Sith Blademaster, took three steps forward into the open space, turning to regard the students from beneath the hood of his cloak. For a moment, the wind had fallen still; all was quiet except for the scrape of his boots across the flat, uneven surface. The Blademaster's stony countenance betrayed no hint of expression. The thin, lipless slit of his mouth never moved. No comment was made, nor was any needed. This was the moment when the first challenge would be made, and Nickter—along with all his peers—had heard the rumors.

This was the day that Lussk was going to issue his challenge.

Rance Lussk was the academy's top student—a Sith acolyte of such fierce promise and potential that few, if any, dared approach him, let alone face him in a duel. These days he spent most of his time in private training sessions with Shak'Weth and the other Masters at the academy. Some said that he'd even sat in meditation with Lord Scabrous himself, up in the tower . . . although Nickter had his private doubts about this last bit. He hadn't met a student yet who actually claimed to have been inside the tower.

Even so, he waited, holding his breath.

The group had fallen absolutely silent.

A moment later Lussk stepped forward.

He was an agile, muscular figure in a robe and tunic, with a long face and flaming red hair that he'd grown long, pulled back and kept braided so tightly that it pulled on the corners of his pale green eyes, giving them a slightly slanted look. But his most outstanding feature was the self-contained silence that hovered around him like a lethal cloud. To approach him closely was to experience a climate of dull dread; the one or two times Nickter had accidentally bumped into Lussk in the halls of the academy, he'd actually felt the temperature drop along with the oxygen content. Lussk emanated menace; he breathed it out like carbon dioxide.

Nickter felt his whole body fall still, save his pounding heart, as Lussk turned slowly to regard his fellow acolytes with an indifferent, almost reptilian stare. As far as opponents went, there were only a few worthy of his time. Lussk's gaze passed over Jura Ostrogoth, Scopique, Nace, Ra'at, some of the most skilled duelists in the group. If challenged, Nickter wondered, would any of them accept? The humiliation of backing down was nothing compared with the potential catastrophe of losing to Lussk in the circle; in his hands even a training blade, with its durasteel shaft and millions of microscopic toxin-filled barbs, could deal out disastrous injury.

Lussk stopped, and Nickter realized that the red-haired acolyte was staring at him.

Lussk's words hung in the air.

"I challenge Nickter."

At first, Nickter was certain that he'd misheard. Then the reality sank in and he felt his innards drop, as if the ground itself had abruptly vaporized beneath his feet. Time seemed to have stopped. He was aware of Shak'Weth and all the apprentices turning around to look in his direction, waiting for him to step forward or back down. As a purely practical matter, Lussk's selection made no sense—although he could hold his own in practice, Nickter was clearly the other student's inferior,

providing no opportunity to hone his skills or even offer the others a good performance.

Still the challenge hovered in the air between them, unanswered.

“Well, Nickter?” the Blademaster asked. “What do you say?”

Nickter lowered his head, feeling a slow familiar warmth crawl into his cheeks and neck. He was aware that a formal reply wasn’t necessary. Simply bowing his head and stepping back would be answer enough, and a moment later the whispers would begin as what little prestige he’d manage to garner here in the last two years began to evaporate around him. It was an unwinnable dilemma, of course, but at least this way he would walk away intact. Several of Lussk’s previous opponents hadn’t been so lucky—the last three had left the academy after losing to him. One had taken his own life. It was as if losing to Lussk had . . . done something to them, inflicted some profound inner wound from which there was no recovery.

The answer was obvious. Nickter would just step backward and bow out.

And so he was as shocked as any of them when he heard himself say, “I accept.”

The murmur of surprise rippled audibly through the other apprentices. Even Shak’Weth cocked one thorny eyebrow.

Nickter blinked, unable to believe what he’d just said. He hadn’t meant to speak at all. The words had bubbled out of him involuntarily. Looking up at Lussk, seeing the slightest hint of a smile curling at the corners of that small, unremarkable mouth, Nickter realized that, of everyone here, only Lussk was unsurprised by his response.

And for the first time, Nickter saw what was happening.

This wasn’t about dueling at all.

It was about something else entirely.

“Well, then,” Lussk said, beckoning with his free hand. “Come on.”

Before he knew it, Nickter felt himself being sucked forward into the ring, one foot and then the other, dragging the rest of his body along with it. His heart raced as his body registered that this was actually happening. *No*, his mind protested, *I’m not doing this, I don’t want*

this, but that didn't matter because all he could see now was Lussk's smile broadening enough to show a faint yellow glint of canines behind the lips. Nickter knew what was going on, and what was worse, Lussk *knew* that he knew. Lussk's eyes were braziers of pure, sadistic pleasure, and their intensity transformed his otherwise plain face, distorting it somehow, making it appear horrible.

They were face-to-face now, close enough that Nickter could feel that terrible coldness spilling out of Lussk's pores, and Lussk raised his training blade, its shaft hissing up through the air as he placed himself in standard ready position.

Don't, Nickter wanted to say, his eyes silently pleading, but instead he saw his own blade go up. It was too late. Whatever was being done to him—whatever Lussk was *doing* to him—

Lussk's blade swung down hard and fast. Nickter reacted instantly, with instinctive speed and agility ingrained from countless practice sessions. Metal struck metal with a clang that shook the air, reverberating through the circle around them and making it hum like a high-voltage circuit. Something snapped to life inside Nickter, and when Lussk came at him again he was ready, deflecting Lussk's next thrust with a sharp, unhesitating parry and snapping back with a move that suddenly created an opening between them. From what sounded like far away, Nickter heard the crowd let out a slight, appreciative mutter. He'd already outlasted their most pessimistic expectations.

Lussk charged forward again, and Nickter sprang to deflect the thrust, less skillfully now. That fleeting sense of competence was already gone, stripped away, replaced by a dizzying loss of perspective. How had he gotten so close, so quickly? Lussk was moving too fast, and Nickter's blade seemed to have come to life all on its own in his hand, jerking and slashing to hold Lussk off, but Lussk's cold smile told the whole story. *I own you, maggot*, it said, the strength of the other cadet's will booming through Nickter's skull, *and you will do as you're told*.

No. Nickter's jaw clenched, summoning what remained of his resolve. He understood now that his only hope lay in freeing himself, wresting his will away from Lussk's authority. What the other acolyte

was practicing on him now was obviously some advanced Force mind control technique learned from one of the Sith Lords at the academy, perhaps at the knee of Scabrous himself. Had the rumors of his secret tutelage been true after all? Whatever the case, for reasons known only to Lussk, he'd decided to try it out this morning on Nickter, and Nickter had nothing to counter with.

With an audible grunt of effort, Nickter surged forward again, blade at the ready, only to be met by a bemused smirk of contempt, as if Lussk expected nothing else. In a series of moves, Lussk sequenced seamlessly from a brutal and precise Makashi attack to the more acrobatic Form IV, flipping up from a standing position, spinning midair, and landing behind Nickter before he'd even had a chance to react. Too late, Nickter heard the blade hiss off to his right, whipping across his elbow, and he let out a sharp, agonized cry as his hand went numb, fingers springing open to release his blade.

Helpless, disarmed, he felt the cold tip of Lussk's durasteel come to rest against the back of his neck, biting into the skin just below the base of his skull. There was that awful numb sensation that Nickter knew all too well, the second before the nerve ending registered an overload of pain.

At least it was over.

Now, Lussk's voice throbbed inside his head. It was low and toneless, an irresistible command. *Push yourself backward into my blade.*

Nickter resisted, straining forward, muscles drawing taut in his neck—but it was useless. He couldn't hold back. The pain swelled, doubled back on itself, grew infinitely worse, shrieking through him, and some grim, instinctive part of him knew that he was seconds away from severing his own spinal cord, shorting out his brain, and extinguishing all remaining thought in that final instant of consciousness. He sucked air through his teeth and looked out, as if from some great distance, at the faces of the others outside the circle, staring him down. Their eyes were bright and eager, awaiting the inevitable coup de grâce.

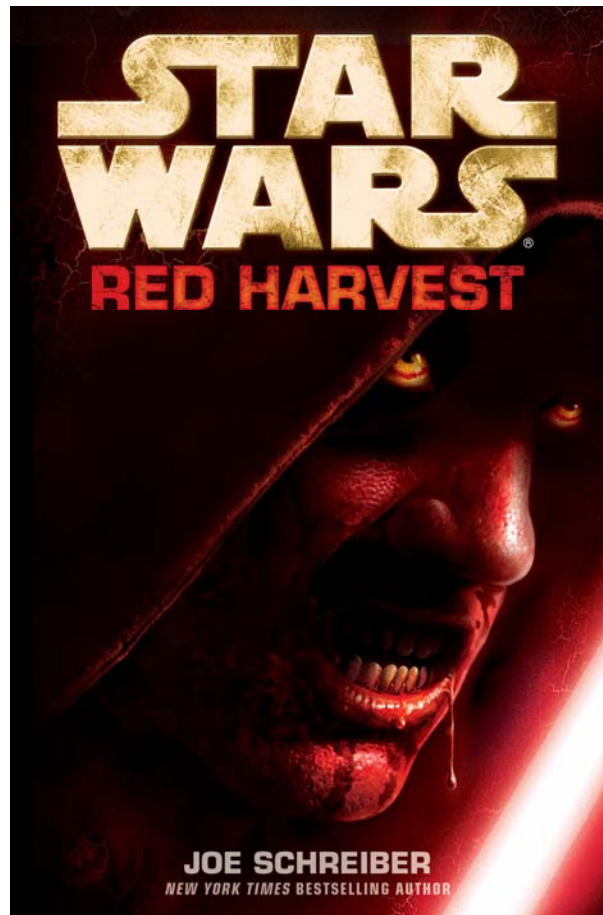
Curse you, Nickter thought, *curse every stinking one of you, I hope you*

all have to endure this torture or worse, I hope you each suffer like I am suffering now, I hope—

With a gasp, Nickter lurched forward, suddenly free, away from the blade, reaching up to place one hand over the painful but ultimately superficial wound it had left just above the bony knob of his vertebral prominence. He could barely manage to keep his hand upright. The battle—both physical and mental—had reduced his body to a blurry hologram of its former self, muscles trembling, wrung to rags, skin and hair drenched in fresh sweat. His head felt like it was going to explode. He couldn't catch his breath. Turning around to face Lussk on legs that seemed as though they might betray him and buckle at any moment, he caught a glimpse of the other acolyte's impenetrable green eyes.

You only lived because I let you, those eyes said, and Nickter understood that in the end, Lussk's act of mercy had sentenced him to the greater humiliation of unwarranted survival.

He looked away, turned, and made his way through the crowd. No one spoke or made a sound as he followed the stony steps downward from the top of the temple to the snow-strafed walkway below.



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