

STAR WARS



RED HARVEST

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4/Dranok



PERGUS FRODE DIDN'T MIND HIS MAINTENANCE DUTIES AT THE ACADEMY'S landing pad. It meant he got the first look at the new arrivals, often a pretty sorry lot, and he was privy to some sensitive information even before some of the Sith Masters found out about it. Not a bad gig for a pilot-turned-grease-monkey whose last job had been wiping down engines at the Kuat Drive Yards.

Tonight, for instance—when the Corellian cruiser banked and began descending into the snow-strewn landing lights—Frode knew exactly who it was. He would have known even if Darth Scabrous's HK droid hadn't been standing right next to him, whirring softly to itself in anticipation. Frode didn't mind droids—most of the time he actually preferred them to organic life-forms, especially on Odacer-Faustin.

“Statement: I shall alert Lord Scabrous, sir,” the HK said, “that his guests have arrived.”

“Sure, good,” Frode said, watching as the cruiser extended its landing gear, feeling the decks absorb its settling tonnage. A moment later

the main hatchway whooshed open, and the landing ramp dropped down with an unceremonious *clank*.

Coming forward to meet it, Frode watched as the two bounty hunters stepped down—*swaggered* down was more like it. The first, a tall, stocky, bald man with a permanent sneer in green-tinted goggles, stopped at the bottom of the ramp and looked around disdainfully as if he wasn't at all sure he even wanted to stay. He was carrying a metal case under one arm, linked to his wrist with a thin chain.

“What do you think, Skarl?” the bald man asked. “Cold enough for you?”

The flight-suited Nelvaanian standing next to him wrinkled his snout and gave a brief snarl, revealing a row of sharp, inward-pointing upper teeth. Then he and the man both turned and glared at Frode, who had already taken a step back.

“Where's Scabrous?” the man demanded, lifting the metal case. “We brought his package. He's supposed to meet us here.”

“I will take you to Lord Scabrous, sir,” the HK said, gesturing back in the direction of the academy's main grounds. “He is my master, and I have been dispatched to escort you to the Tower. You and your”—the droid glanced uncertainly at the Nelvaanian—“copilot?”

“Skarl's my partner,” the man said. “My name's Dranok. Anything that's worth having in this galaxy, you can get through us.” He made no move to follow the HK. “Speaking of which, your boss better have the rest of the credits he owes me for this little beauty. It wasn't exactly easy to procure.”

The HK responded promptly. “Answer: Payment has been arranged in full, sir. Rest assured that you will receive it shortly.”

Dranok nodded, the surly expression never quite leaving his lips as he glanced around the snowy terrain surrounding the landing pad. “What a pit.” Glancing at Frode, he jerked one thumb back in the direction of the ship. “Keep her hot, Ace. We're not staying on this rock one second longer than we have to. And refuel her while you're at it—think you can handle that?”

“Sure,” Frode said, “no problem.” He'd already decided he didn't

care for the man or his partner, but he was careful not to let it show in his voice. “It’ll be ready when you get back.”

Ignoring him, the bounty hunter turned and followed the droid with the Nelvaanian easily keeping pace to his right, paws crunching in the snow.

By the time they reached the tower, Dranok had already decided how he was going to handle this.

Right up to the moment they’d landed, he hadn’t been entirely sure about his course of action. It was nothing personal: he and Skarl had always worked together well enough. The Nelvaanian was a superior tracker, and always good in a fight. Plus he was loyal, a trait that Dranok obviously didn’t share. But money-wise, things hadn’t been going so well lately—their last few jobs weren’t paying as much as he’d hoped, and Dranok was tired of splitting everything down the middle.

So it was settled, then. Once Scabrous paid the balance of what he owed them—

“Statement: It’s through here, sir,” the HK said, gesturing up at the tower. “Right this way.”

Dranok paused in his tracks and looked up. He’d seen some weird architecture in his time, but the Sith Lord’s tower was unsettling in a different way. It was imposing, yes, and much taller than it had looked from the air, but there was another quality to it, an indefinable sense of *wrongness*, as if it had been built at some unnatural angle so that it seemed to curl down on top of him like an immense black claw. He’d once overheard talk in some spaceport about the Sith, how they’d learned to manipulate spatial geometry itself, creating buildings that were, in themselves, detached from physical reality. The guy telling the story had claimed you could get lost inside a Sith labyrinth and never escape. Dranok had dismissed it as a lot of drunken superstition, but looking at the tower now, he wasn’t sure. He didn’t like standing in front of it, and liked even less the idea of going inside.

But that was where the payment was.

And that settled it.

“All right.” He turned to Skarl. “You better wait out here, just in case something goes wrong.”

The Nelvaanian looked at him and gave an uneasy growl. *This isn't how we normally do things*, that growl said. *This isn't standard operating procedure.*

“Hey,” Dranok said, with all the brusque, hail-fellow-well-met heartiness that he could muster, “trust me, will ya? We're both safer if you're out here watching the door. I'll settle up with Scabrous and bring the money out.”

And before Skarl had a chance to argue, he followed the droid inside.

Even though they were out of the wind, Dranok felt the temperature drop sharply. It was dark enough that his first few steps were guided mainly by the pale blue lightspill from the HK's dorsal processor array. A second or two later, his eyes began to adjust and he could make out the wide, circular space around them, supported by pillars and massive stone arches that made up the tower's lowest level. The air smelled wet and dirty, and there was an unpleasantly musty human component to it that reminded him of the bathhouses on some of the Inner Rim planets he'd visited.

“Statement: Follow me,” the HK's voice said from up ahead, gesturing to a waiting turbolift. Dranok ducked inside, and as the door sealed shut behind him, he realized that the droid had not followed.

He was alone.

The turbolift shot upward fast enough to leave his stomach behind. Dranok felt the first prickle of unease down the small of his back. The lift was still rising. Was it taking him all the way to the top?

Finally it halted, and the doors opened.

“Lord Scabrous?” Dranok called out, loud enough to make himself heard. “Your droid sent me up.” He realized that he was holding the metal case in front of him like a shield. “I brought your package.”

Silence. It was a big circular room—to his eyes, it looked like a laboratory furnished by somebody with a serious fetish for the arcane. Dranok had heard that some of these Sith Lords could be decidedly peculiar, mixing technology with the ancient ways of their people, preserving the old ways whenever possible. This proved it.

Tall arching windows made up the surrounding walls, with sconces, candles, and torches protruding above them, along with pulsing panels and banks of lights. Machinery hummed with a low, irregular drone that made the air itself seem to vibrate in Dranok's nostrils and the pit of his throat. He made his way past the piles and tables of scientific equipment, not particularly liking the way the torches made his shadow leap and twitch across the bare stone floor behind him, as if there was someone following on his heels. A smell hung in the air, thick and familiar but as yet indefinable—chemicals? No, it was sweeter than that, almost cloying, like a cooking smell.

He walked over to the window and glanced down through the falling snow at the academy below. From here it looked like a ruin, abandoned and forgotten. The occasional faint glimmers of light that burned in the windows of one of the buildings—some kind of dorm, he assumed—only made it look more hollow somehow, a place that had fallen into the possession of ghosts.

You're getting jumpy, he scolded himself. *Cut it out.*

He turned and walked back toward a stack of machinery half buried in shadow. Something crunched under his boot, and he paused to look at it.

Flowers.

Squatting, the bounty hunter set the metal case aside—it was still cuffed to his wrist—and reached into his pocket for a glow rod. He switched it on, shining it down in front of him. The crunching had come from broken glass, test tubes or vessels that Dranok guessed had held the different species, before they'd all been dumped or thrown unceremoniously across the floor.

He opened the metal case and looked at his own flower, the alleged Murakami orchid itself, comparing it with all of those scattered over

the cobblestones. The black-market spice dealer who'd sold it to him had guaranteed that it was a genuine article, the rarest in the galaxy, stolen from a secret Republic bio-lab on Endor. The dealer had even provided him documented proof, complex chemical and gas spectroscopy equations that Dranok had pretended to understand.

But now, looking at these other flowers on the floor—rejects all—Dranok found at least two that looked exactly like it.

His breath caught in his throat.

He'd been duped, and now—

“Dranok.”

The bounty hunter froze at the sound of his own name, the voice turning his breath to dry ice in his lungs. Up ahead, standing between him and the exit, a tall, dark-cloaked figure gazed back at him from the other side of a long stone table. Dranok realized that he was looking into the face of a man with long, refined features, the aquiline nose, raked brow, and prominent cheekbones stretched out until they were almost a caricature of arrogance. Thick gray hair, a strange silvery blue color, swept back away from his forehead. The figure extended one long-fingered hand, gesturing him forward, and at the same moment Dranok saw the man's eyes flicker and pulse as if reflecting the burst of some far-off explosion.

“Lord Scabrous.”

“Did you bring the orchid?”

“I—”

“Where is it?”

A bluff, then—the bounty hunter realized that it was his only way out. He had bluffed his way out of tight spots before. This would be no different.

“This is it,” he said with manufactured brusqueness, holding up the open case to show its contents. “The Murakami orchid, as you requested.”

When Darth Scabrous didn't move to take it—in fact, he didn't seem to move at all—Dranok unlocked the chain from his wrist, set the case down in front of the Sith Lord, and stepped back. Still, Scabrous

made no indication of coming around to examine the flower. His eyes remained locked on Dranok.

“Did you come alone?”

“My associate is waiting outside,” Dranok said. “Just in case.”

“Your associate.”

“That’s right.”

“And you have brought no one else with you?”

Dranok scowled a little. “Who else would I have brought?”

Scabrous apparently didn’t judge the question worthy of reply. The bounty hunter frowned, genuinely flummoxed now, his confusion only tightening the clenched fist of anxiety in his guts. “Enough questions,” he shot back, hoping the tone of impatience might help mask the fear. “I delivered the orchid as we agreed. Now where’s my money?”

Scabrous still didn’t make any move to respond. The moment stretched, and in the pursuant silence Dranok realized that he smelled something else gathering around him, growing more potent, stronger than the reek of dead flowers: an aroma of roasting meat that had slowly begun to fill the air. Despite the tension, he felt his mouth beginning to water. It had been a while since he’d eaten. His stomach gave a noisy growl.

“You have failed me,” Scabrous said.

“*What?*”

“That is not the Murakami orchid.”

“How can you tell? You haven’t even looked at it!”

Scabrous lifted his head slowly. His entire body appeared to stiffen, to grow taller somehow—an illusion, certainly, but Dranok still felt himself taking a step back, like an unruly child being taken to task, spreading his hands out in supplication. “Now, wait a second—”

“Sit down.”

Dranok felt his knees buckle involuntarily, and he dropped down hard on the stone bench that he hadn’t realized was there.

“Despite your failure, your payment awaits you.” Scabrous gestured behind him, to an arched doorway that Dranok hadn’t noticed before, and the HK droid stepped out pushing a cart with a huge silver tray on

top. The droid wheeled the cart to the table and set down a plate and utensils in front of Dranok, along with a cup and a pitcher. “Help yourself.”

Dranok shook his head. Whatever was underneath the lid of the silver tray, he wanted no part of it. And he realized now, with the merciless clarity of hindsight, how everything he’d done—taking the job, trusting the shady fence who had sold him the orchid, coming back up here alone—had all been links in some colossally ill-advised chain of disaster leading up to this penultimate moment of reckoning. Yet he could not stop his hand from stretching forward toward the platter.

And reaching out, he lifted the lid.

He stared at what lay underneath, sudden horror piling up inside his throat like a clogged siphon. It took less than a second to realize that the shaggy thing in front of him was the severed, stewed head of his partner, Skarl. The Nelvaanian’s mouth had been pried open wide enough to accommodate the ripe red jaquira fruit that had been thrust between its jaws. Dead, boiled eyes gaped up at him with what almost looked like accusation.

“What’s wrong?” Scabrous’s voice intoned, from what sounded like very far away. “You fully intended to betray him, did you not? I simply saved you the trouble.” And then, leaning forward: “A traitor and an incompetent. One wonders how either one of you managed to survive this long.”

Dranok tried to stand up and discovered that he couldn’t lift his weight from the chair. Suddenly every part of him seemed to weigh a ton.

“Let me go.”

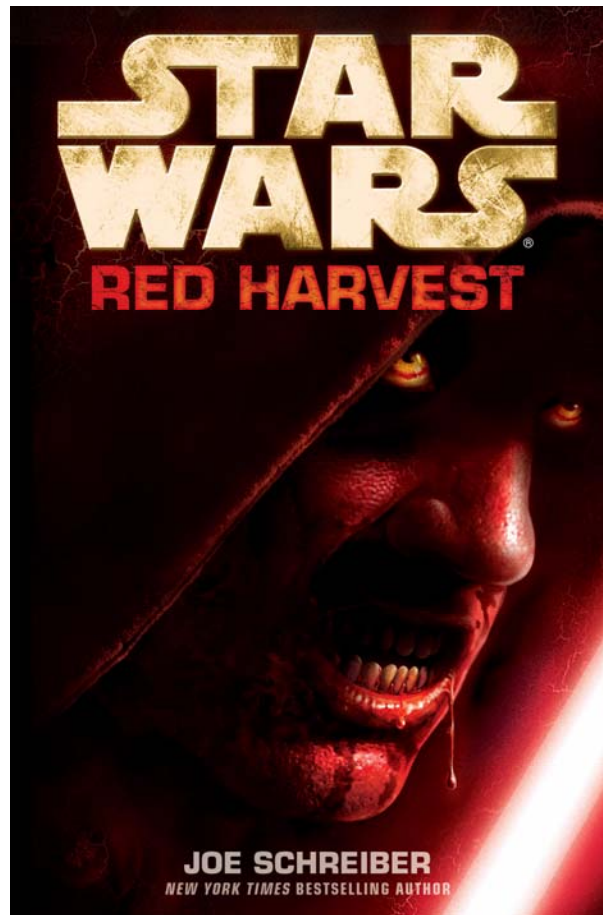
“Every traitor makes a meal of his allies.” Scabrous held up a knife and fork in front of the bounty hunter’s face. “This is your last meal, Dranok, and you must eat it, every morsel. That is the offer I present to you. If you can do that, I will allow you to walk out of here alive.”

Dranok recoiled, struggling harder to pull himself free. But the only part of his body that he could move was his right hand, the one that Scabrous was allowing him to lift in the direction of the dining uten-

sils. Jaw clenched, he grasped the knife from the Sith Lord's hand—and then thrust it forward, as hard as he could.

The knife didn't even get close to its intended target. Scabrous flicked his own hand in the bounty hunter's direction, a simple, almost offhand gesture, an act of disinterested dismissal, and Dranok felt his throat pinch shut, his windpipe siphoning down to a pinhole. A sharp and immediate weight seemed to have clamped down over his lungs. Tears of panic flooded his eyes, and his heart started pounding as he thrashed frantically in the seat, blackness already closing in around the edges of his vision. All at once everything seemed to be happening from a great distance away.

As Scabrous released him, allowing him to slump down from the seat to the floor, the last thing Dranok heard was the sound of some kind of creature shuffling and breathing and making a noise that sounded oddly like laughter.



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