

STAR WARS



RED HARVEST

JOE SCHREIBER

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

5/Pain Pipe

“MASTER, I AM READY TO BEGIN AGAIN.”

Seventeen-year-old Mnah Ra’at stood in the center of the academy’s combat simulator, the one the students called the pain pipe, wiping the blood from his split and swollen lip. He felt no pain now, only a burning desire to attack and avenge what had been done to him. The fact that the damage had been inflicted by an automatic system as part of his training didn’t matter at all to Ra’at. He was angry, and his anger made him strong.

Up above, Sith Combat Master Xat Hracken sat back inside the control booth, one hand resting on the wraparound suite of controls. Though he was human, Hracken was built more like an Aqualish, bald, bulky, and broad across the shoulders, his wide, olive-skinned face pinched into a perpetual scowl like stapled bundles of oiled suede. The hour was late, and he and Ra’at were the only ones in the simulator. Hracken, like Blademaster Shak’Weth, had been teaching here at the academy for decades, and he had seen students like Ra’at come

and go—acolytes who seemed to require little or no sleep, who insisted on continuing their training late into the night, sometimes into the morning—and he'd seen how it caught up with them in the end. After a moment's consideration, he tapped the intercom.

"That's enough for tonight," Hracken said.

"No." Ra'at glowered up at him with red and baleful eyes. "I want to go again."

Hracken rose from behind the control deck and stepped forward so that the apprentice could see him through the transparisteel window. "You defy me?"

"No, Master." Ra'at's tone was only slightly mollified—a symbolic obeisance to the Master's authority. "I only wish to train under the same regimen as Rance Lussk."

Hracken nodded to himself. He'd expected as much. From the moment he'd arrived here, Lussk had set the pace for the academy's most driven pupils, all of whom wanted to fight, train, and study as intensely as he did. What none of them seemed to understand was that there could only be one Lussk, and those who challenged him found themselves sharing the fate of Nickter, among others.

Still, Master Hracken had to admit that he found Ra'at's ambition intriguing. Ra'at was easily the smallest in his class, wispy-haired and fine-featured, and two years of training hadn't added more than a few ounces of muscle to his spindly frame. But he had deep steel in him, a kind of gritty, semi-psychotic rage, and a will to power that drove him to do whatever was necessary to get ahead. He also had some very peculiar ideas. It was Ra'at, after all, who had started the rumors that Darth Scabrous himself was abducting students and taking them up to the tower in an effort to find one powerful enough to succeed him. He'd argued the case so successfully that some of the students—and even a few of the Masters—wondered if he might be right.

Now Hracken wondered if he had finally grasped Ra'at's ultimate goal.

He touched the intercom again. "All right, then, once more."

Without so much as a nod of acknowledgment, Ra'at dropped back into fighting stance, shoulders squared, jaw set. It was as if he'd known all along that the Master would acquiesce.

All right then, Hracken thought, let's see how good you really are.

He tapped in a sequence of commands and watched the simulator come to life below him. An automated series of heavy swing-arms arced out from either side, each one of them two meters wide, closing in so that Ra'at had to jump to avoid being crushed. He dived between them easily before going into a tuck-and-roll, successfully dodging the third obstacle, a spring-loaded picador pike, five meters long, that thrust itself unexpectedly downward from the ceiling. Hracken nodded again. It had been the pike that had caught Ra'at last time. Now he was faster.

Are you fast enough, though? That's the question, isn't it? How about when you can't see?

Picking up a pair of thermal lenses from the counter beside him, Hracken adjusted them over his eyes, then reached over and switched off the lights. Darkness swallowed the room, vast and total. Hracken flicked on the goggles. His vision helioscoped into a hundred brilliant variations of fluorescent green before resolving itself into focus, and he leaned forward with keen interest.

Down below, the now-blind Ra'at stopped in his tracks, processing what had just happened, and in that second the wall behind him burst open in a whistling array of heavy rubber whips, slashing into the air. Ra'at jerked forward, but it was too late—the whips drove him to his knees. Hracken saw the apprentice's face clench, his lips drawn back in pain.

It's over, he thought, and reached to switch the lights back on.

But it wasn't.

Ra'at was on his feet again instantly, jumping clear of the whips. Hracken immediately realized that the apprentice was no longer hampered by vision, or lack thereof: now he was relying entirely upon the Force. When the swing-arm came down again, Ra'at reached up, grabbed it, and actually held on—a move that the Sith Master hadn't seen before, even from Lussk—riding it all the way up to the ceiling. At

the apex of its arc, he let go, twisting and launching himself headlong through open space to catch hold of the spring-loaded rod as it came spiking out of the wall.

It was a move of unprecedented grace and absolute precision. Ra'at spun himself around the rod once, twice, three times, building speed, and fired himself directly at the window of the control booth.

Master Hracken jerked backward. Ra'at slammed into the transparisteel with both hands, actually clinging there for a split second, long enough for Hracken to see the student's face staring straight in at him.

Then he dropped.

Hracken whipped off the goggles and turned on the lights. Light roared across the room, filling every corner. He saw Ra'at standing down below, his face flushed, shining with sweat, shoulders rising and falling with the effort of catching his breath. Despite his obvious exhaustion, the apprentice's face was almost incandescent with leftover adrenaline. When he saw Hracken coming down the stairs, his eyes filled with expectation, awaiting the Sith Master's judgment.

"Interesting," Hracken said. "Tomorrow we'll see if you can do it again."

Ra'at blinked at him. "Master?"

Hracken looked around. "What is it?"

"Lussk . . . in combat simulation, has *he* ever . . . ?"

The Sith Master waited for Ra'at to finish the sentence, but in the end the apprentice simply nodded and looked away.

"Tomorrow," he said.

Walking back to the dorm with his cloak drawn up over his shoulders and his wounds throbbing in the frigid night air, Ra'at stopped and glanced back at the simulation bunker. He was aware of what the other students and Masters said about him—how he was too small, too weak, in thrall to his own paranoid delusions—and he didn't care. Tonight he'd shown Hracken what he was capable of. Soon the rest would see.

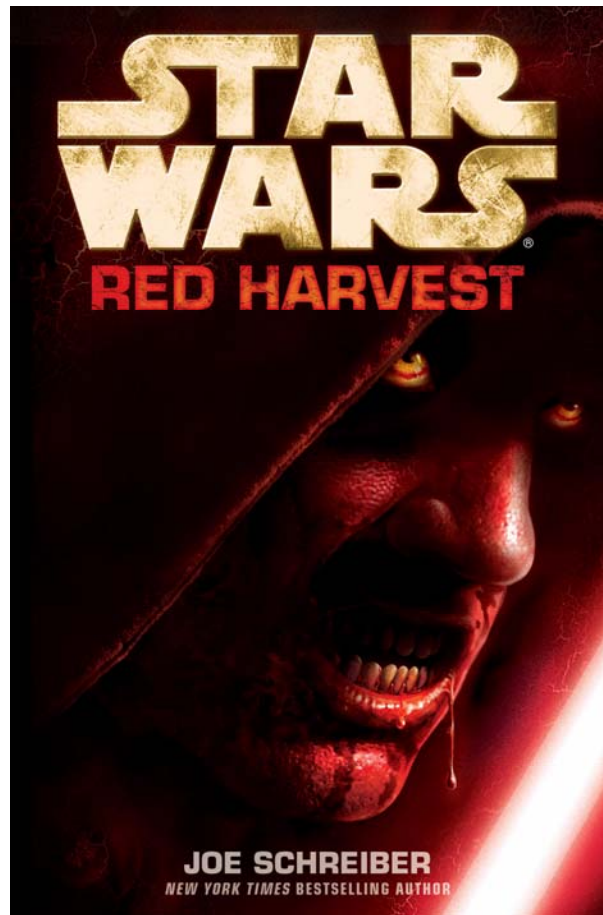
He stepped over a high snowdrift that had formed outside the library, making his way around the eastern wall of the building until he found himself in the shadow of the tower. It was snowing steadily, but Ra'at could still make out the tracks leading up to the tower's main entryway, two sets of prints along with the familiar tracks of the HK droid.

Ra'at felt the requisite twinge of jealousy. The tracks in the snow meant that Lord Scabrous had brought visitors here, very recently. The Sith Lord had invited them into his sanctum, and they had stepped inside. Ra'at, who had never been inside the tower and could only imagine its secrets, wondered who the visitors had been. Lussk? Nickter? One of the Masters?

Slipping off his glove, Ra'at placed one bare hand directly on the closed hatchway, imagining for a moment that he could feel the power pulsating out from inside, power that he would do anything to possess.

Someday, he thought, I'll go through there myself.

Until then, he would keep practicing.



Pre-order STAR WARS: RED HARVEST today:

[Amazon](#)

[Barnes & Noble](#)

[Borders](#)

[Powell's](#)

[IndieBound](#)

[Other Retailers](#)