

STAR WARS™



SANCTUARY

A **BAD BATCH** NOVEL

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BY LAMAR GILES

Ruin Road

The Getaway

Not So Pure and Simple

Spin

Overtuned

Endangered

Fake ID

Static: Up All Night

Epic Ellisons: Cosmos Camp

LEGENDARY ALSTON BOYS OF LOGAN COUNTY

The Last Last-Day-of-Summer

The Last Mirror on the Left

The Last Chance for Logan County

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For Adrienne and Melanie, the queen and princess of my galaxy

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A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. . . .

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A BAD BATCH NOVEL

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It's been over a year since Emperor Palpatine declared the Jedi traitors and turned the clones, the very ones they fought beside, against them. In the aftermath, the Empire, with the aid of its iron-fisted Imperial Security Bureau quashing any threats to Palpatine's rule at the root, has proclaimed a time of "peace and tranquility" for all who yield to the Emperor's will.

Clone Force 99 (aka the Bad Batch) did not obey Order 66 and has been on the run ever since. In an increasingly chaotic galaxy, the team survives as soldiers of fortune. Without work ever since a less-than-amicable separation from the duplicitous mercenary Cid Scaleback, Hunter, Tech, Wrecker, and Omega have sought refuge on Pabu, in a small island village, where a once-in-a-generation sea surge recently left the city in disrepair.

With the aid of contacts in the galactic underworld, ally and pirate Phee Genoa has concocted a pair of schemes to assist the island in its extensive repair efforts. She enlists the Bad Batch to help, but all is not as it seems . . .

CHAPTER ONE

PIPROO AUCTION HOUSE, HOSNIAN PRIME

Clone Force 99 knew all about challenging missions. Tackling and overcoming arduous tasks was what they were made for. However, even after all these years of fighting through muck and mire and beating unbeatable odds, Hunter could not recall a set of parameters he loathed more than what lay before him now. The mission was the mission, though. Each of them had a role to play. Failure was not an option.

“These jogan fruit are not peeled properly,” a looming multilimbed culinary droid said.

Hunter faced his “superior” and used a poorly maintained paring knife to strip the last bit of rind off a seeping orb that stained his hands purple. He dropped the fruit into the bin with the dozen others he’d worked on since slipping into his cover as a lowly caterer. “You wanted them not to have peels. They don’t. What’s improper about it?”

The droid’s posture went rigid in the face of mild insubordination. Hunter felt that his defiance followed Phee Genoa’s advice on this kind of laborious subterfuge—“Put a little bit of yourself into the ruse to make it more believable!”—as much as he cared to.

He never took a dressing-down well, even when deserved. And this was not deserved. *He’d peeled the blasted jogan fruit!* The task assigned

to him—or rather assigned to the laborer he had subdued and now impersonated—was one of many in the sweltering, bustling auction house kitchen.

While the droid took issue with Hunter's blade work—something no one else had ever questioned and lived to tell—it somehow missed more serious offenses throughout the evening that should've drawn its ire. Like the Volpai dishwasher who seemed incapable of keeping the stubby digits of his lower left hand out of his ear—disgusting. Or the Ikkrukkian pastry chef who'd snuck nibbles from several sweet tarts and covered the trespass with fresh frosting.

Yet this droid, a COO cook model with multiple arms and as many annoyances, had the nerve to treat Hunter as if he were the problem.

"A correct peeling," the droid said, "would not exceed a width of 4.5 millimeters and is ideally done in a single coiled strip to preserve the rind as an aesthetically pleasing garnish . . ."

The tedious spiel continued, but Hunter's attention shifted to the crackling audio from the microcomlink in his ear.

Through the device, Tech said, "Do not dismantle him. He is correct about the proper technique for crafting a jogan garnish."

A second voice crackled through the comlink, instantly dulling the sharp edge of Hunter's temper. Omega said, "I think it's a fine-looking peel, Hunter."

Hunter glanced over the culinary droid's shoulder and spotted Omega with a freshly refilled tray, crossing the threshold from the kitchen to the ballroom, where the galaxy's elite (criminals) milled about. She was dressed in black pleated trousers and a matching waitstaff shirt. She wore a dark wig to disguise her blond locks, just as a sheen of makeup concealed Hunter's face tattoo for the day. Omega, the shortest waiter on staff, was easily identifiable among the sashaying robes and polished dress armor of the auction's wealthy attendees.

She balanced a tray of Daruvvian champagne while holding Hunter's gaze. He gave a curt nod, signaling he was fine and would not be tearing this droid limb from limb, so she could go about her duties and not blow her cover. She offered a drink to the nearest attendee, who accepted it greedily as the kitchen door slid shut. These beings accepted

everything greedily, even what they had no rightful claim to. Thus, the mission.

The culinary droid droned on and on about proper slicing, hand position, leverage, and so on, and Hunter tuned it out, secure in his knowledge of what he could do with any blade, dull or otherwise. The droid stopped abruptly, perhaps sensing its tutelage was not getting through.

“Upon further consideration,” it said, “I think a tool more suited to your skill level is appropriate.”

The droid plucked the paring knife from Hunter’s hand, then presented his new instrument: a safety peeler, suitable for a child who’d been allowed in a kitchen for the very first time.

Droid, be thankful I’m letting you believe you’re the expert, Hunter thought, taking the peeler. This is the last time I let Phee plan anything! Ever!

HALL OF TREASURES, PABU

Four Days Ago . . .

Phee Genoa’s umber skin took on a violet sheen in the hazy glow of the holographic floor plans she orbited while attempting to get the team on board. She was animated as she spoke, hands passionately chopping the air. “. . . and then we stroll right out. No muss, no fuss.”

Hunter stood, his arms crossed, his scowl fixed. “Why am I in the kitchen?”

Instead of stating the obvious—that Hunter’s natural disposition was not well suited for the social aspects of an undercover con job—Phee took a more diplomatic approach and reminded him of the other option. “You could wait on the ship with Mel.”

MEL-222, Phee’s cylindrical and eager power droid, had been freshly refurbished with junk parts and a memory backup after a rough outing on Skara Nal got her old body smashed to bits. She zipped to Hunter’s side on mismatched treads, chirring enthusiastically about a possible collaboration.

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“Everyone else is going in, so I’m going in,” Hunter said, dismiss-

ing the suggestion and triggering a series of disappointed beeps from MEL-222.

Everyone else *wasn't* going in, though. Wrecker, for example, would be outside playing the role of a valet, keeping an eye on the auction house's exterior while ensuring they had transport and a clear escape route should things go awry. But Hunter didn't really mean *everyone*. He meant Omega.

The young clone was sharp-eyed, taking in every detail, her enthusiasm radiating to the point she seemed to vibrate. "I'll maneuver through the crowd," Omega said, confirming her understanding of her role, "with the auto-slicer strapped to my ankle. For every bidder I get close to—"

"Mel-Tootootoo's crude code will upload to their assigned bidder datapads and initiate a moderate credit siphon from their auction house accounts into ours," Tech finished, sounding miffed.

MEL-222 chirped, also miffed.

"Easy, you two!" said Phee.

Tech said, "*I* would've written a much more elegant program. And foolproof."

The droid had a few more choice beeps and burrs for Tech.

"Hush. He didn't mean anything by it," Phee told the droid, clearly a lie. Then she said to Tech, "You might have done it differently, but you have to admit it will work."

"Given the available intel, with no deviations, it will *probably* work. Still—"

"Still nothing," Phee said. "We all play our parts. And you have yours. Care to recap?"

Tech sighed deeply. "You and I will portray a married couple that has built a sizable fortune through beverage distribution—and an ancillary business smuggling blasters. I am to appear friendly."

"Easy work for you, Brown Eyes," Phee said.

Wrecker, with his brow creased from deep concentration, spoke up for the first time in an hour. "Maybe *I* should be in the kitchen. Because the food's there."

"Valet!" Phee said, refusing to go down this path again.

Wrecker's shoulders slumped, but he did not argue.

"Look, I know this isn't your usual kind of gig," Phee said, attempting to ease the resistance in the room. "Way less *pew-pew*"—she mimicked firing rifles—"and *boom-boom*"—she spread her arms in a wide arc over her head for a pantomimed explosion that tugged a big grin from Wrecker—"but Pabu needs this."

As if on cue, a slight tremor rumbled through the floor and their bones, an aftershock from the once-in-a-lifetime groundquake that sent a sea wave smashing into the island last month. A drizzle of dust shook loose from the rafters overhead. Though the aftershocks were less severe than in the first days after the sea wave, the island's recovery had been slow and uncertain. Immense progress had been made on repairs through the combined efforts of every single resident chipping in and applying whatever skills they possessed—from engineering to carpentry—but the reality of such a damaging natural disaster still held true: Pabu might never be exactly what it was.

Especially if they couldn't secure the resources and credits for deep structural repairs and levees to prevent catastrophic damage from future surges.

Another tremor shook the Hall of Treasures, knocking Phee's holo-projector disk off the table, which tipped the floor plans sideways as it fell. Omega leaped forward nimbly, catching the disk before it hit the ground, deactivating it. The hologram winked out of existence.

The tremor persisted for another few moments. When it finally ended, Phee said, "Maybe it's time for a break."

Wrecker raised his hand.

Phee did not need to hear the question. "Yes, you can go eat."

He left the conference room at a run.

Hunter watched his brother go, then eyed Phee warily. "I suppose we could all use a little fresh air. Let's walk, you and me."

Omega sprang between them. "Can I come?"

Sensing Hunter wanted a private conversation, Phee said, "Can you help Tech and Mel go over escape routes? Later, I'll tell you about the time I infiltrated a gang on Jedha and became their leader for nine days."

"All right!" Omega said and sidled up beside Tech, who was arguing programming languages with MEL-222.

Phee and Hunter left the Hall of Treasures for the salt-sea breeze of Pabu's exterior slopes. A few steps outside the hall, a group of island youths tossed a ball in a game of keep-away with Gonky, Clone Force 99's sometimes—not often—useful power droid. The boxy, bumbling droid had become an unofficial mascot to the kids, and boosting their morale might be his true calling. One child's throw was off, and the ball caught Gonky in the side. The droid squawked and fell over, his bipedal treads kicking the air. The children cackled. Yes, definitely Gonky's calling.

Phee and Hunter moved on. The mix of foliage and architecture, of the natural and the constructed, felt like harmony made solid. This was easily one of the most beautiful places Hunter had ever seen. However, he wondered if the assessment was relative. He'd seen horrors during the countless battles fought beside his brothers and now Omega. What doesn't look beautiful compared with war?

Skewed perspective or not, Pabu was a good place. Worth saving. Thus the jobs—*plural*—that had fallen into Phee's lap by way of her various contacts throughout the galaxy.

The auction house con was just one-half of an equation that should solve Pabu's problems, according to Phee. The items for sale at this pricey (and illegal) gathering included all sorts of plundered relics acquired by ill means during the Clone Wars. The invite-only bidders were among the more insidious criminals in the galaxy, the kind who *funded* brutality from a distance, who were silent partners in the unsavory, who hid their true nature behind seemingly legitimate business (like beverage distribution) to not get their hands dirty. What those beings really traded was pain and misery.

Despite his discomfort with the playacting involved, even Hunter had to admit the satisfaction in making that kind of glossy, snobbish scum go home with their pockets a bit lighter. However, he still had reservations.

He said, "Tell me about your source and the intel again."

If Phee was irritated by him asking the same questions repeatedly, she didn't let it show, though she did push back. "Don't you want to wait until we reconvene with the others? That way—"

“No. Here. Like this.” He never did his best thinking in briefings. He preferred being on the move, in the elements, where his senses could stretch.

“Fine. A colleague by the name of Ven Alman—”

“The Balosar pirate.”

“Yes. He did a job for the entrepreneur sponsoring our gig.”

“A devoutly religious Caridan with the construction company.”

Hunter closed his eyes while he walked and listened, effortlessly avoiding flowerpots, running children, and fresh cracks in the pavement that threatened to roll an ankle. Recognizing the immediate obstacles in his path required no effort and, in fact, felt more like a thin scrim over what he sensed beneath the obvious. The energy generated from Pabu’s power plant traveled by cables to every structure throughout the island, registering like a root system made of lightning. The day’s catch from the docks hundreds of meters away scented the air in a language recognized by only Hunter’s nose, his sense of smell so keen he’d be able to identify each fish by its species once he learned their names. His ears were tuned to Phee’s voice, but a shift in focus could’ve plucked details from several nearby conversations. His enhanced senses were part of his so-called “defect,” which made him a CT-99, the designation granted to him and his brothers because of how they varied from the Regs—regular clone troopers.

Hunter and Phee walked a coiling cobblestone path on a downward trajectory, strolling beneath scaffolding erected as part of the island repairs—repairs that would soon be impossible to complete as materials and credits dwindled. Still, workers hammered, sawed, and welded with the optimism that all would work out for the best. That was the Pabu way.

Hunter and his family were somewhat adrift when Phee brought them to this island city. There were hardly any good days in war, but Hunter wondered if the worst he’d seen was that still-surreal day then Supreme Chancellor Palpatine ordered the clones to summarily execute every Jedi they’d fought side by side with for years.

Losing fellow clones to blasterfire or thermal detonators or proton torpedoes was expected. Losing brothers to an irresistible compulsion to betray comrade warriors was nothing he could’ve prepared for. Even

that wasn't as devastating as his brother Crosshair betraying them of his own free will in pursuit of being an exemplary soldier.

The others didn't know this, but when Hunter dreamed, it was too often Crosshair and fallen Jedi that he saw.

For a while, they'd made their way taking high-risk, low-reward jobs brokered by the unscrupulous Trandoshan Cid Scaleback through the galactic underground. It was a living, but their relationship eventually soured as Cid's jobs became increasingly ill conceived and dangerous, forcing Hunter and the rest to cut ties.

The benefit of all their narrow escapes from Cid's sketchy assignments was that Hunter had become much more discerning than he used to be. Being a mercenary allowed him more freedom to question dodgy parameters than back in the "good soldiers follow orders" days of Republic fighting—not that he'd been so great at following orders then, either. Still . . .

"Awfully convenient," Hunter told Phee, opening his eyes and breaking the extended silence between them. "A follower of this Holy Husk and Stone faith whose devotion is so great that he's willing to trade an unseemly amount of building materials for a single relic during our time of greatest need."

"He might tell you it's not convenient at all but divine!"

"I suppose he might," Hunter said, though he didn't say he wouldn't have believed that. "Why is this thing—"

"A mortar," Phee clarified.

"Why is this *mortar* so important anyway?" Hunter had investigated it after Phee first mentioned the plan. It seemed like nothing more than a simple stone bowl to him.

"All I know is it's ancient and sacred. High priests used it in ceremonies to mix potions that followers ingested as a path to high consciousness. Do I understand it? No. I never bought much into the 'higher power' thing. I don't need to understand it to respect it."

Hunter nodded. That was fair. The galaxy was vast, and he'd never grasp every wonder and belief it held. Questioning the logistics of all they were about to do was also fair.

He said, "Once we *liberate* the artifact from the auction, we're on to the second job?"

“Yes. That one’s so easy it’s barely worth discussing again.”

“I’ve never seen a big payday come easy.”

“Did the Republic pay you guys?”

Hunter glared.

“As I thought. So you’re talking about the occupational hazard of working for Cid. Freelancing’s a different animal altogether. You’ll see.”

That was what Hunter was afraid of. Different didn’t necessarily mean better. While the soldier’s life left much to be desired, he never underestimated the possibility of best-laid plans going to druk.

Hunter caught Phee staring. “What?”

“You’re catastrophizing, aren’t you?”

“I’m . . . no.”

“Everything’s going to be fine, Hunter. Let’s get through the auction, and you’ll thank me later.”

“For what?”

“You said this is all coming together in *our* greatest time of need. You’re warming up to Pabu. Soon you’ll be all-in on the place, as I knew you would be.”

Hunter scowled, annoyed by her presumptions. He wasn’t all-in on anything. Not her schemes, not even Pabu. But he’d do his part.

Phee noticed the look on his face and said, “You know what, why wait? You’re welcome.”

CHAPTER TWO

PIPROO AUCTION HOUSE, HOSNIAN PRIME

Now

Tech's endurance was being tested by the confines of his formal—and uncomfortable—disguise. His trousers were royal blue and fitted. The suit coat was dark crimson with a collar high enough that he had to resist tugging at it. He was supposed to be a criminal patron comfortable in these clothes and environment. But he would not agree to any future role-play unless his disguise was tailored to his exact specifications based on an increasingly long list of improvements. He leaned in to Phee and voiced his primary complaint. "I am itchy."

"No, you're not," she countered with a certainty he'd come to think of as her trademark. "You feel exposed because it's not your armor. But I must tell you, this is a much better look."

The ensemble complemented Phee's gown, which shimmered with tiny electrodes that shifted into gradients of Tech's color palette.

She said, "We fit in and, more importantly, we look fabulous. Roll with it, Brown Eyes."

Tech did not "roll with" things. For his entire life he'd utilized a shifting hierarchy of algorithmic calculations to determine optimal decisions. Data produced options. Probability presented choices. Choice determined action. Simple.

“Roll with it.” A declaration so casual it would’ve been offensive coming from anyone else. Proximity to Phee demanded looser parameters if for no other reason than to preserve his own sanity. Plus, there was the X factor of it all. He *liked* being in close proximity to Phee. The why and how of that was somewhat of a mystery to him, which was unnerving. He couldn’t crack the calculus of him and her. But he’d keep trying.

They milled about the cavernous ballroom arm in arm, strolling past uniformed security guards of varying species, from one tastefully arranged pedestal to another. On each platform—save one—was an item that would be auctioned off later in the evening. There was heirloom jewelry from some dismantled dynasty, a lightsaber with a polished wooden hilt crusted with what Tech assessed as dried blood, and the Caridan mortar that had drawn their team here. It was an unremarkable bowl of grayish-black stone with golden etchings embedded in its rim, lit and displayed alluringly for potential buyers. It sat behind laser shielding that crackled an ominous warning: *Look but don’t touch.*

When they stood before the mortar, Tech said, “The majority of modern Caridan religions are segregated into three denominations, none of which engage in practices that would utilize a mortar such as this. The Holy Husk and Stone sects are considered dormant, if not extinct.”

“You’ve been doing homework,” Phee said.

“The information is easy enough to gather. This item would be desirable to museum curators. Rare, but not priceless.”

“Since we have an agreed-upon price for acquiring it, that’s good news.”

“A Caridan practicing this religion would also be rare.”

Phee’s jaw clenched. “Have you been talking to Hunter?”

“I know he’s wary of the client, but that’s not why I’m bringing this up. I wanted to demonstrate that to support your plan and back our cover to the best of my abilities, I have compiled a knowledge base suitable for hours of small talk.”

Phee grinned. “You hate small talk.”

“Thorough mission prep, though often unpleasant, is standard.” He

cleared his throat. "It's easier when I respect the mind behind the mission."

"Now you're just teasing me," she said, pleased. "Let's keep making the rounds."

Eleven items in all were arranged on pedestals, and only one required no shielding. It was simply a flickering hologram of a solid black cube, the display screen beneath it declaring, MYSTERY ITEM.

The patrons who'd come to flaunt wealth and pat one another on the back over the prestige of being in the same room together expressed mild *ooohs* and *aaahs* over whatever item suited their larcenous tastes, since most had been pillaged from some war-struck world.

A tall handsome Falleen couple sauntered by. Their species was reptilian and regal. This particular pair leaned into a monotone palette, both garbed in lengthy emerald robes a tone lighter than their green skin, with their facial ridges and spines accentuated by dazzling gems. One of them made a show of admiring Phee's garment, saying, "Gorgeous, a classic look."

Phee accepted the compliment with a gracious nod. Surely she'd pass it on to the Pabu seamstress from the island's playhouse wardrobe department who'd tailored the team's clothing.

The other Falleen was not as taken with Tech's look, at least not the eyewear. "Have you seen the visor line coming out of A/KT Fashions this season?" the Falleen asked in a dig poorly disguised as an unsolicited inquiry. "Their new ones are showstoppers. Suitable for any occasion."

"I'm afraid I haven't had the opportunity." Tech eyed the slyly insulting Falleen through his scratched and scarred spectacles he'd relied upon for years, passively reading the scrolling data on the lenses' interior display, visible only to him.

NAME: Kime and Trast Trod

HOMEWORLD: Falleen

LEGAL TRADE: Textiles

ILLICIT TRADE: Glitterstim Trafficking

ESTIMATED NET WORTH: 200 Million Credits

The information came from a data disk loaded with details on each attendee, sent via encrypted channels by Phee's colleague Ven Alman. The forearm-mounted computer he wore beneath his jacket sleeve fed the information to Tech's display. Similar information appeared for any being he focused on—except for one.

A single Muun transferred meaty appetizers from the buffet table to his tiny plate, an unsteady mound of food close to toppling off. He was shorter than other Muuns whom Tech had encountered, with a fashionable golden chain encircling his bulbous head and the dull gray skin around his mouth flushing pink as he chewed. When Tech settled his gaze on him, what appeared in the HUD was mildly disconcerting.

NAME: ?

HOMEWORLD: ?

LEGAL TRADE: ?

ILLICIT TRADE: ?

ESTIMATED NET WORTH: ?

"Excuse me, darling," Tech said, interrupting Phee's conversation with the two Falleen. "A word?"

Phee made the socially acceptable gesture, indicating an unlikely continuation. Then they drifted toward the closest corner, allowing the murmuring crowd to form a natural separation between them and anyone who might care to eavesdrop.

"We got trouble?" Phee said, tapping a spot behind her ear that switched her comm to a wide broadcast so the entire team could hear.

"Not necessarily," Tech indicated, though his furrowed brow signaled otherwise. "You were provided a comprehensive dossier on all attendees, but there's a Muun who is not accounted for on the data disk. He is currently gorging himself on tip-yip skewers."

Phee glanced over Tech's shoulder, spotting the being that worried him. "So what?"

"The siphon code," Tech said with no inflection whatsoever, which in itself was a kind of inflection.

MEL-222 chortled her annoyance through the comm.