STAR WARS

MACE WINDU

THE GLASS ABYSS



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Family is more than blood. The line of love and gratitude runs
from my two living fathers: Larry Niven and Steve Muhammad . . .
through me . . .
To my son, Jason, and daughter, Nicki . . .
you are my heart.

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

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"Tell us the story again," the child said.

"It is late," the Webkeeper said, knowing she had already lost the argument.

"Please!" they all cried.

The Webkeeper's lips curled in a mock frown, and then she nodded agreement. She had never tired of this story, and if life was kind, she never would.

"Once within the Web," she began, "there was a wounded world, a land of crystalline wonder. A people balanced on the edge of disaster."

The children elbowed one another and whispered in anticipation. This was more than a good story . . . it was the very best.

She continued, "But Spinners never despaired, knowing that all existence is connected through the Web. And that one day a warrior would come, the fiercest in the galaxy. Drawn by duty but bound by love . . ."

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CHAPTER ONE
THE STRANGER

Metagos

Staff in hand, the stranger arrived in the slums of New Xaxxis, capital city of the planet Metagos. In days past, the underground caverns housing New Xaxxis had been derisively referred to as the Glass Abyss, thanks to the gigantic crystal obelisks towering proudly from the ground like stalagmites or hanging from the ceiling like jagged, broken fangs. The entire city was laid out like a wagon wheel, with roads and canals sectioning it off. The very poorest section, sometimes called the Children's Maze, was situated at the hub.

Swathed in black leather, the stranger was tall, lithe, and human. His face was almost as dark as his ankle-length bantha-hide coat. With his every step along the slum streets, moisture oozed around the edges of his boots, drawn from deep artisanal wells.

Gaping volcanic vents in nearby vacant lots jetted steam that drifted upward toward the ceiling, forming into wispy clouds, which personal flight craft, birds, and leather-winged reptiles glided through.

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Three armed enforcers appeared: one human and two Zilka, much like four-legged, armored bugs. "Here's an ugly one!" the human cried,

laughing. He and one of the Zilka were armed with shock prods. The other bug carried a halberd with a smear of dried blood on the blade.

"All you humans are ugly," the halberd-wielding Zilka said to his human companion. "But this one could give lessons." They cackled at the mild witticism. The stranger seemed to ignore them, but if they thought he hadn't noticed, then they'd missed the angry glint in eyes as black as a blaster's barrel.

"Checkpoint, stranger," the first enforcer—the Zilka carrying the shock prod—said. "Citizen or newcomer?"

"Newcomer. Rim-runner. Just landed."

"Are you armed?" he asked.

The newcomer nodded and carefully thumbed aside his black cloak, revealing the hilt of a holstered blaster. Under the triple threat of their weapons, they disarmed him of the pistol but ignored his two-meter brown staff, formed from some seamed and knotty wood.

"Gotta have the right credentials," the second said, the human—a big male with outsized hands. Strangler's hands.

"No weapons. You can enter," the third said, and the second laughed.

"*He* won't live long," one said, as if the newcomer were not standing directly before them.

"Welcome to New Xaxxis," the third sneered.

The stranger scanned a few buildings and spotted a placard promising gaudy entertainment a few steps away. He walked half a block, ignoring solicitations and questioning eyes, until he found the sign reading VIN-VIN'S WHEELHOUSE and pushed through the door. The interior was crowded with tables and noisy, but the bar proper seemed underpopulated, and he found himself a seat.

THE BARTENDER'S NAME was Vin-Vin Sunfall. He was a reptilian Metagosan, with all the dense, almost casually brutal musculature famous among a similar breed, the Trandoshans. It had been a busy night with patrons enjoying their drink and food and the music of the Xaxxis Axis Quartette and acrobatic dancers ("Hot Licks! Cool Tricks"). But he noticed the stranger when the doors opened. Vin-Vin noticed everything.

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It was one reason he was still alive when the rest of his family fed the Web.

Without speaking a word, the stranger pointed a finger at a glass of foamy brown bitters currently being drained by a Muun miner, then lifted that finger in request. He seemed a man whose fondest wish was to be left in peace.

When the stranger had entered, he'd moved as if gliding on rails. His brown eyes suggested a soft yet focused gaze. This was a man of action who was seeking calm. No. He was the center of calm and would remain so even amid violent action. Vin-Vin's fingers brushed Bloodhammer, the massive peacekeeper under the bar. He hoped he wouldn't have to reach for it, at least in part because the thought of fighting this newcomer twisted his gut.

Vin-Vin poured, served, and took a coin in return. He'd have then moved his attention elsewhere, but two enforcers, a human and one of those annoying Zilka bugs, swaggered through the door, wafting attitude and unwashed skin. The Zilka's powerful musk glands reeked of adrenal danger. The pair pushed their way through the crowd and bracketed the stranger. It seemed to Vin-Vin that they were attempting to renew a discussion that began outside.

"You strut in here like a Harch on death sticks," the human said. "Who are you working for?"

No reply. The Zilka, the taller of the two, leaned over and drooled a greenish gob of sputum into the stranger's drink and then stepped back, smirking, awaiting a response.

Nothing. The musicians continued to play their percussion and wind instruments, and the dancers writhed in display of skill. The murmur of conversation and the clink of glasses and cutlery continued as if nothing had happened. When the stranger didn't react, the shorter said, "He's a brave one."

They chortled, jostling each other merrily as they left.

Huh. Did they think the stranger was afraid of them? Or had they sensed the same danger signs that had raised his own hackles?

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The stranger calmly pointed again, raised the same finger a second time, and slipped a coin onto the bar.

This one is interesting, Vin-Vin thought.

The dark, strong face exhibited no fear and no anger in response to the provocation. In fact, there was no reaction at all.

"What brings you here, *ssstranger*?" Vin-Vin asked, the sibilant hiss typical of his species lengthening the last word.

"Heard there's work."

The bartender polished a glass. "For the right kind of man." He chuckled slyly. "Or maybe the *wrong* kind, if you know what I mean." Vin-Vin gave a practiced wink.

The stranger raised an eyebrow. The rest of his face didn't move. Impressive.

"How about one who doesn't mind dirtying his hands?" the stranger said.

Maya-12, a holodroid who appeared to be wearing a business suit, sized the stranger up. She morphed her appearance to resemble a severe, alert dark-skinned human female and approached him. She was a regular. Her "sister" droids Maya-8 and Maya-14 were the acrobatic dancers in the Xaxxis Axis.

Maya-12 used Vin-Vin's Wheelhouse as a base of operation, connecting with clients for everything from bodyguarding to therapy, language lessons, massage, and private investigation. She and her sisters had never created a problem for Vin-Vin, and that was mostly what mattered.

"New here, stranger? Need orientation? A tourist guide? I have connections to the Sa'ad. Care to meet a spider-worm?"

The stranger smiled. "Not at the moment. But if I did, you'd be the one. Here, please. Whatever the lady wants."

He placed another coin on the bar.

"Lady . . . ?" the droid said, surprised.

"To my eyes, yes."

Right answer. She slid in next to him. "My name is Maya-Twelve. You're new here."

"Just a tumbling fasha-weed, looking for a place to root awhile."

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She lowered her voice to a near-whisper. "It isn't safe here. Not for a . . . gentleman. Might be better to move on."

"Appreciate the advice."

She pocketed the coin, shrugged, and spotted a table where the two other Maya-series holodroids were hailing her. The music had paused, and they were taking a break. Maya-12 headed over.

The stranger slid another coin onto the bar.

"The *sssame*?" the bartender asked.

"Information."

Vin-Vin wiggled his claws, and the coin disappeared. "About what?"

"The layout hereabouts. What might a fellow seeking employment need to understand?"

"Well, now. Information. I can do that. New *Xaxxisss* is a *sssnake* with two *headsss,* and *sssooner* or later anyone who *kissesss* one gets bit by the other."

"Who are you aligned with?"

"Oh, I'm happy where I am, friend."

"So what are these two heads?"

"Chulok and *Sssybil.* Everyone *knowsss* that." His forked tongue flickered to lick thin reptilian lips.

"Hiring?"

The bartender laughed. "*Sssybil* rarely *hiresss* other than her own children." He paused, wondering if he should say the next thing, and then decided to. "Sometimes her *children* hire *outsidersss.*"

"Got a lot of kids?"

"A new one almost every day."

"Busy lady. And this Chulok?"

"Oh, they hire. When *there'sss* an opening."

"And how often does that happen?" He raised that isolated eyebrow again. Again, the rest of his face didn't move. Either nerves had been severed in that dark flesh or the stranger had a unique level of muscle control. Vin-Vin considered such a man, even one centimeters shorter and kilos lighter, to be extraordinarily dangerous. His hackles trembled.

"Haven't heard of anything recently. And even if there were, you'd need to be recommended by *sssomeone* they trust. *Ssshow* some *unusssual ssskill.*"

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"Huh." Something happened behind the dark eyes. And to them as

well. Perhaps it was a trick of the light, but the brown irises had deepened to black. Vin-Vin had the sense that some relays had clicked in the stranger's brain. Some decision had been made. And not a pleasant one, either.

"*What'sss* your name, friend?"

The stranger didn't answer.

"All right. Maybe the wrong question. *What'sss* your *professsion*?"

"Problem solver," the stranger said, then pushed away from the bar.

"Where are you going, Problem *Sssolver*?"

"To solve my problem."

Vin-Vin watched him leave. A spot of moisture remained on the bar, and the reptilian smeared it away with one scaly finger, as if it had never glistened there at all. A moment later, he'd erased the stranger from his mind just as completely.

There were new tough guys in New Xaxxis every day. Most didn't make it to breakfast.

THE CAVE HOLDING nearly a million New Xaxxan citizens was klicks wide in all directions, so large that the farthest edges seemed to mist like a horizon. Commuter speeders buzzed around the periphery in their own traffic patterns. New Xaxxis existed in nothing less than a stupendous geode, gigantic crystals projecting from the roof and walls, while those on the ground had been mined, plowed, or built around for years or even ages as the city expanded into a gigantic pie shape. Major roads and canals met at the center, dividing it into wedges.

At one outer northwest edge, a branching path led to a bridge above a burbling stream that led to a well pond. Access to that well was guarded by three ruffians, the same who had challenged the stranger on entry to the city: two Zilka and a human the stranger didn't recognize.

As the stranger approached, he heard and saw them hassling a silver-furred Tynnan and her three children. The mother was in white mourning garb. Her children were crying, from old wounds and new. Each carried a water jug carved from some kind of grainy wood. They were empty, by the heft of them.

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"It's Marzi again," a Zilka said, waving his shock prod. "We told you, you need to pay the toll."

The old woman blinked plaintive, milky eyes. "Just seeking water. We haven't had water in two days."

The human laughed, a metallic, pitiless sound. "This is our bridge. Go around if you can't pay the toll."

"My leg is bad. My children need water."

"You should have chosen a better mate. Old Kassis owed us money. Which means that *you* owe us money."

She bridled. "You killed him!"

"He should have paid. Now go around. Shouldn't take you more than half the day." The other, larger Zilka reached out and gripped her with suckered fingers.

The stranger took this moment to interject himself. "Is this how men treat widows and orphans in New Xaxxis? The tourist guides should mention such entertainment."

The halberd-holding enforcer laughed. "There's the brave one!"

"Whattaya want, nerf herder?" the human asked.

"Why do you interfere with our business?" the second Zilka asked.

The stranger tilted his head slightly, as if seeking a different perspective. "Oh, I don't give a kriff about her. But you owe me a drink."

They stared incredulously. "Unless you think this a good day to die, stranger, you want to watch that mouth."

The stranger leaned on his staff. "You don't look like brothers. I doubt you knew your fathers, but I don't think any one woman could birth so much ugly. I figure you work for Chulok?"

Then they moved.

And what happened next was argued about for years, for every witness saw it differently.

Some thought that the stranger hit the Zilka behind him with his staff, then kicked the human, and then smashed the first one with the staff. Others said that no, it wasn't his staff, but rather the stranger disarmed the Zilka with the halberd, then kicked the one behind him, and then hit the human with the blunt end of the halberd. Neither of these witnesses could explain how the first Zilka went flying off the bridge.

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All they knew for sure was that the stranger seemed to be moving slowly and everyone else was flailing at top speed. Somehow, though, in the blink of an eye, all three were down and unconscious: one with a paralyzed diaphragm, one with a knot on his skull, and the third with a month's worth of healing to do.

In the blink of an eye.

The witnesses gawked as the newcomer reclaimed his blaster from the twitching fingers of the larger Zilka.

"I didn't get an answer," the stranger said, dropping the halberd. Setting it down, he retrieved his staff, which leaned against the bridge's rail. When had he placed it there?

No one could remember, as the entire event had been so sudden.

"What . . . was your question, mister?" a bystander asked.

"Who'd they work for?"

"Why . . . Chulok. The Jedi Killer."

Mace Windu's eyes flamed, and then that fire was swiftly masked. "Tell Chulok to come and sweep up my credentials."

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CHAPTER TWO
THE FUNERAL

Naboo, a week earlier . . .

Lush and green and peaceful, Mace thought. *Qui-Gon wouldn't have cared for this.*

The cremation spot between four-meter statues of winged guardians was one of the most honored locations in Naboo's royal cemetery. Qui-Gon Jinn's body rested atop a wooden pyre, his hands folded across his mighty chest. In one sense, it was the perfect place for his mortal remains to be consumed in flame, here where so many great warriors had been laid "to rest." There was no real way around it, but Mace suspected Qui-Gon himself would have enjoyed the irony.

The Jedi Master had met his end at the hands of a Sith while helping Queen Amidala liberate her planet. Death was always and ultimately a private affair, but a Jedi's death often became a matter of public mourning and official sobriety. So the funeral pyre was attended by key dignitaries from the Galactic Republic, the Jedi Order, and the people of Naboo.

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Mace Windu did not dwell upon the city of Theed's natural beauty, all flowing water and greenery, but it did not deceive him. His face may

have been peaceful, but his heart roiled with the realization of the *real* implications of Qui-Gon's death: *the return of the Sith.*

Qui-Gon's former Padawan Obi-Wan Kenobi, dressed in the ceremonial plain cloth of traditional Jedi robes, was speaking of his mentor, but Mace heard only snatches of the eulogy.

"He was the greatest friend imaginable, for any who knew him. A mentor who saved my life more times than I would want to remember, a man of deep wisdom and a warm heart. He seldom smiled, but when he did, it was like the sun emerging from behind a thunderhead . . ."

And so he continued. It was all sincere and all true.

None of it comforted Mace.

Obi-Wan had killed the mysterious Sith, a feat of skill that made Mace proud. So their adversaries were not the immortal monsters some feared, but creatures of flesh and bone. Flesh could be seared, and bones broken . . .

His thoughts had drifted in that direction when he felt a gentle nudge from Master Yoda at his side. The Grand Master Jedi was a fraction of his size with twice his wisdom, Mace was convinced. If there was anyone in the galaxy whom Mace Windu looked up to, it was this little green titan.

Even a hint of Yoda's disapproval caught Mace instantly, and he snapped his attention back to the ceremony.

Obi-Wan had just finished recounting Qui-Gon's wisdom, dedication to the Force, and commitment to his personal version of the Jedi Code. As a symbol of respect, in sync with the others, Mace drew and triggered his lightsaber. All were raised high in a bouquet of sacred fire, casting a reverent glow over the gathering.

Queen Amidala then added her thoughts as the lightsabers blazed. Mace later remembered something about sacrifice and duty. The rest slipped from his mind. Even in one so young, the familiar cadences of politicking had been learned by heart. Politicians were necessary, he understood, but politics was not his natural mode of thought and emotion. He considered it an art of compromise and deception, one that could be, and had been, corruptive to those walking a higher path. It

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was ironic that politicians so often mocked the warriors, then demanded they bleed to correct political misfires.

Some even thought that the Jedi should lead the Senate. That was another potential disaster. Power might not corrupt absolutely, but it was like sun and rain, facilitating the growth of whatever lurked in a soul's shadows. Mastery of the Force was already temptation enough.

The funeral concluded with a traditional Jedi ritual: Master Yoda ignited the pyre with Qui-Gon's own lightsaber. As flames rose, the attending Jedi collectively meditated, focusing their energy on Qui-Gon's journey into the Force.

This, finally, resonated with Mace Windu, in tune with that deep sense of calm within him that some mistook for detachment. Enemies who had mistaken that calm for weakness had paid with their lives more times than he wanted to count, but fewer than his future dictated.

Something was coming, he had no doubt. The return of the Sith portended greater conflicts ahead. And the Jedi had just lost one of their stoutest allies.

As the flames dwindled, aided by special potions within the wood and within Qui-Gon's body itself, naught remained, save ash.

Mace bid a silent goodbye to his old friend and comrade. Then, while the others milled about and conversed, he returned to his ship as soon as decorum allowed.

Public mourning was not his way.

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CHAPTER THREE
THE FINAL FAVOR

Coruscant

Coruscant's Jedi Temple was an iconic and historic structure serving as the spiritual and administrative center for the Jedi Order. Most considered it a grand, awe-inspiring edifice that reflected the Order's principles and values.

For Mace Windu, it was the only home he had ever known.

The Temple was situated in a prominent location known as the Jedi Temple Precinct. The structure occupied a square kilometer within the broad cityscape, towering above the bustling urban sprawl.

Returning to this sacred place always calmed Mace. The architecture was a blend of classical and modern styles. The immense ziggurat-like Jedi Temple itself scraped the clouds, with each level up to the pinnacle becoming smaller and more ornate. The exterior was constructed of pale stone mined from private Coruscanti quarries, giving it a uniquely noble appearance. And the fact that the stone was so dense as to be impenetrable to all but a planet-busting weapon was no coincidence.

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The Temple's central spire was capped by a majestic conical roof

pierced by transparisteel windows that allowed natural light to flood the inner chambers.

Mace dropped his ship through Coruscant's atmosphere, peering at the Temple grounds as he approached. Numerous splendid courtyards and gardens provided peaceful retreats for Jedi, some of whom planted and pruned as part of their discipline. These spaces were adorned with statues, fountains, and a variety of plant life, creating a harmonious environment for meditation and reflection.

He touched down on the private landing pad closest to his own chambers and set the autopilot to take the ship to the main hangar sixty seconds after parking.

His walking path led through corridors branching off to every major nerve center of the Temple, including the Jedi Council Chamber, where galaxy-spanning decisions were made.

The training grounds, the site of thousands of hours of grueling practice, came next. Spacious halls and dojos featured the most advanced mind- and body-training equipment in the galaxy, including state-of-the-art lightsaber training tools that would have astounded even the Czerka Corporation's weapon experts. Here, Jedi younglings and Jedi Knights honed their combat skills against targets, droids, and one another—with wooden training staffs, not lightsabers, of course. The design was both functional and symbolic, emphasizing the Jedi's commitment to peace through preparedness.

One of his very fondest memories had occurred here: the first time a young Mace Windu had bested one of his Jedi instructors. The look of astonishment, surprise, and genuine respect on T'ra Saa's face had been gratifying. Indeed, Mace's entire Jedi family had welcomed and embraced his excellence. There had been no envy or jealousy. Just "*Welcome, brother.*"

Perhaps the most renowned part of the Temple, the Jedi Archives contained an immense collection of holocrons, scrolls, and datacards. The archives were divided into numerous sections, each dedicated to a different field of knowledge, including history, diplomacy, and the mysteries of the Force.

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At the summit of one of the exterior spires sat the Council Chamber, a circular room where the Jedi High Council convened. The chamber was furnished with a central dais and twelve seats for the Council members, each with its own purpose and design.

In Mace's heart, Coruscant's Jedi Temple wasn't just a physical structure; it was also a place where Jedi Knights trained, mentored, and prepared to safeguard the galaxy, preserving the balance of the Force and ensuring the galaxy's prosperity for generations to come.

And more than any of that, all of that . . . it was home.

MACE'S LIVING QUARTERS were just large enough for a bed and a meditation mat for morning ablutions. To an outsider, the accommodations would have seemed poor indeed. But then, Jedi didn't live where they slept—they lived in the Force. A Jedi was not his body.

His chambers befitted his status as one within the Jedi Order. The outside world knew little about such things, and Mace found some of the wilder speculations palely amusing. Jedi quarters were typically modest and functional, reflecting the Order's emphasis on discipline. His own were no exception.

He pressed the exterior door control, and the panel slid open. The short entryway led to a meditation alcove. He preferred this. Upon entry, he enjoyed pausing to center and reflect before entering his living space. Today, he did this standing, but he often sat cross-legged upon cushions.

Turning, the next thing he saw was a plexisteel display case. Here Mace stored past lightsaber hilts, from his first half-scale weapon he had built in childhood to several models he had shaped over the years, utilizing the kyber crystals of Ilum that had called to him. His personal designs had evolved, as was tradition.

A Jedi's lightsaber was functional art, and the purple glow of his own was both aesthetically pleasing to him and a warning to all who had heard whispers of his unique mastery of the Force. More than one opponent had simply thrown down his own weapon the instant Mace's blade appeared. The color of his blade was uncommon among Jedi.

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Some had suggested that he took too much pride in his weapon's unusual appearance. He could understand that perception, but he was unconcerned with random opinions.

All his blades had served him with honor. This special case kept them safe and easily accessible.

Mace also had a well-loved repository filled with holojournals. These storage devices contained a wealth and breadth of knowledge of the Force, second only to the Jedi Archives themselves. In them, exhaustive accounts of his thoughts and adventures were stored forever, indexed for rapid reference. The rigor with which it was all organized reflected the machinelike precision of his mind.

A small training area in one corner of the room held a square mat where he performed a quick series of stretches and strengthening exercises every morning upon rising and every night before retiring, without fail. Uneducated eyes would have been astonished.

Today, his heart was troubled, and the proper use of emotion . . . was motion.

After his body was sheened with perspiration, he drew his blade and began practicing a spontaneous Vaapad lightsaber routine. Vaapad was an advanced and dangerous form he had created with Sora Bulq, his longtime friend and fellow Jedi.

Form VII was known as Juyo. Vaapad was an offshoot of this, a highly aggressive and intense form that was perfect for his current mood.

He practiced now with long, powerful strikes and quick, decisive movements. Each one struck at the cables of grief binding his heart. "*Turn pain into power,*" Qui-Gon had once told him.

Mace missed his friend.

When he had vented enough emotion to breathe smoothly, Mace extinguished his blade and continued with empty hands, tightening the arcs and spirals down to eye-baffling and bone-breaking precision. This was how he dealt with grief. He turned emotion into motion and motion into preparation for dealing with whatever triggered the initial grief.

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Known for his exceptional lightsaber skills, Mace was more than merely strong in the Force. Even without its power, he'd have been one

of the greatest human athletes in the galaxy, although he never boasted of this fact or even displayed it. There was one exception that he rarely discussed: There had been a time when, incognito, he had entered the great Heptathlon on Fasha IX. Without using Force powers at all, he had dominated every event before deliberately losing to the best non-augmented competitors. Fair was fair, and he had done it to amuse himself and determine his level of basic fitness.

Bladeless now, he punctuated his flow with moments of furious and violent focus, eventually ending his empty-handed practice with a 720-degree leap and spin, snatching his unignited hilt in the middle and whipping it through every major angle of attack before his feet hit the ground again. He holstered the weapon, satisfied.

Mace's living space was bare, and his clothing simple. But in his heart of hearts . . . yes, his blade's color pleased him. It was, as youngsters were fond of saying these days, "sync."

Yes. It was totally sync. And that brought pleasure and peace to a heart forged in war.

A FLASHING LIGHT and reverberating tone announced visitors. Mace paused. At the door stood Obi-Wan and Kit Fisto, stout Jedi and dear companions.

"May I welcome you in?" he asked.

"Our business is brief," Fisto said. He was a Nautolan Jedi Master known for his exceptional skills in lightsaber combat and his winning smile. His gogglelike eyes and tentacled head appendages were distinctive, but his aura of acute awareness was what Mace most commonly remembered. Fisto was pure loyalty to his comrades and pure danger to his enemies.

"Here." Obi-Wan extended his hand. He held a disk-shaped package wrapped in some metallic foil. Mace could see the dark circles of sleepless nights beneath Obi-Wan's eyes. But Obi-Wan bore the weight of his new responsibilities as a Jedi Knight with a quiet resolve. "Qui-Gon's lightsaber is now resting in the archives, but it was his wish that you receive this after his death. I know you were friends."

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Mace received the package from his fellow Jedi with infinite gravity. How unusual! A message of some kind. Qui-Gon and Mace had indeed been close. They had recognized and relied upon each other's courage, intelligence, and combat wisdom. But Jedi left little to be said to one another in case of death. Intuition told him this was more than a mere sharing of sentiment.

"Lose to a man at top-level dejarik, I guess, and you have either an enemy or a friend . . . for life."

"That must have been quite a game," Fisto said.

"We made it to the semifinals in the tournament, and we sweetened the deal just to make things more interesting."

"What was the wager?" Obi-Wan asked.

"A favor."

Fisto gave them a radiant smile. "What favor?"

Mace smiled in return. "He didn't specify. Just that the loser would owe the winner. He won with a Savrip sacrifice but refused to name the favor." He shook his head. "One of a kind."

"And if you'd won?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Never really considered that possibility. I knew he'd win."

"Why'd you bother playing him then?" Fisto asked.

"I wanted to see how badly he'd beat me."

AFTER THEY DEPARTED, Mace sat on the floor and examined the package. It had been wrapped and tied with great care. Mace might have recognized the sender from the elegant knotting alone. He opened it, and as he expected, it contained Qui-Gon's dejarik practice set, a present from the ruler of some grateful nation. He was wondering about the best alcove in which to create a little place of honor when its holo triggered to life. A human male appeared with flowing salt-and-pepper locks and a matching beard. His piercing blue eyes and calm demeanor suggested the eye of a storm.

Qui-Gon Jinn.

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"Greetings, Master Windu, my old friend. If you are seeing this, it means that that day we all prepare for has come."

"It has, old friend," Mace replied, more to himself than to the holo.

"And now it is finally time for me to call in that favor. There is a planet on the Outer Rim called Metagos."

Metagos . . . ? He didn't know it.

A planetary holomap appeared, rotating on its axis. It zoomed out to reveal a star on the galaxy's Outer Rim, then moved in again to reveal a planet that looked like desert burned to the color of coals.

"It was first colonized some thousands of years ago. In more recent centuries, it has thrived as the source of Hillian fiber. Then fifty years ago, the surface dwellers suffered a disaster and had to move underground. In the confusion, the criminals who controlled the underground seized power."

Qui-Gon's hologram smiled ruefully. "I had dealings there, pursuing an assassin and smuggler who was providing contraband weapons to political agitators. In the process, I almost died. There is a gangster there named Chulok. Beware of them. You will learn. Just know that their clownish act conceals a warrior as deadly as anyone the Jedi have faced. It is their power, and that of the creature called Sybil, that you must break."

Mace calmed his breathing. The shape of the mission had begun to emerge, and it was daunting.

"You will need to make contact with KinShan Nightbird, of the Spinner clan. The Sa'ad. She will tell you the rest. I made her a promise, and her request for aid has reached me in the midst of another quest. If all goes well, I will complete that, then turn to this. But if you are watching this, all has not gone well. I must go now. But the fate of Metagos is in your hands, old friend. And unless I am much mistaken . . . they are good hands indeed. I will tell you more if I get the chance."

The holo faded. Then flickered back. "There is another message. But one I ask you not to open until you have completed this assignment. Remember . . . you owe me."

Mace Windu listened to the first message again, committing it to memory. As he listened, he noticed an engraved crystal the size of his thumb buried within the package. At first, he thought it a precious

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stone, but a closer inspection revealed a more common glasslike substance. He held it up to the light and saw within it a shadow of . . . something. A spider? A worm?

Huh.

He needed to talk to Yoda.

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CHAPTER FOUR
YOUNGLINGS

The next morning, Mace sought out his friend and mentor in the Jedi youngling training room. There, Mace found Yoda supervising an exercise for a trio of candidates.

The child whom Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon had brought to the Temple from Tatooine, Anakin Skywalker, was one of the three currently training. Mace watched the boy. Small for his age, he had dark-blond hair, blue eyes, and an adventurous personality. So fierce. So intent. He listened to every word and actually worked harder than requested. So much drive in one so young was . . . almost disturbing.

Mace greeted Yoda and told him his initial thoughts about Qui-Gon's request. "This does not feel like Jedi business," Mace said.

"Tell me of this task."

"There is a planet called Metagos, plagued by gangsters. He wants me to free the people from their control."

"Metagos. Heard of it, I have. Qui-Gon chased a terrible assassin there. Terrible. Barely survived, he did. Curious, this is," he said, then echoed Mace's statement: "Not *official* Jedi business."

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"No. And this feels . . . poorly timed. I have had disquieting dreams. And in those dreams, I can see something terrible drawing closer and closer."

"And where are you in this?"

"This mission could be my end. I can feel that potential, but Qui-Gon would not have asked if this mission was not vital."

"Death comes to all. Even Jedi."

Mace nodded, although there was no need. They knew each other, and they knew this sacred path.

Mace said, "We were wrong to dismiss Qui-Gon's concerns about the Sith. I will not repeat the mistakes of the past. Perhaps I can find the root of this trouble and cut it off before it spreads."

"Ah. Well. Without peer, your skills are."

"You are too kind, Master Yoda. But they can always be sharper."

"Foolish, Qui-Gon was not. Reasons he had, for choosing you. Go you must." He paused, then in a curious tone said, "Young Jedi . . . what do *you* say?"

The other candidates were both Umbarans, close in age. Although they were not siblings by birth, Frisk and Kiest were rarely seen apart. "Jedi go where the Force leads us," Frisk, the older one, said. A standard, safe answer.

"It's sync," Kiest panted.

A bit too flippant, Mace thought.

Little Anakin glared at his companions, as if disapproving of Kiest's lack of reverence. "We are Jedi! There is no other path." He looked almost absurd, trying so hard to stand straighter and taller than he was. His left hand scratched at his ribs.

"Does that still sting?" Mace asked.

Anakin was worrying the site of a medical incision, the wound where a slave tracker had been removed from his body, a painful reminder of his obligations to his master on Tatooine. Some thought the wound would remind him of the injustices in the galaxy. Mace feared it would only serve as a reminder of the Jedi's limitations. They had saved Anakin yet were unable to end the unconscionable practice of slavery outside of the Republic.

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"I can endure anything, if it makes me a Jedi," the boy said. "Jedi must ignore their feelings."

"That is quite a statement. Is it your own?"

"Yes." Then the boy considered. "Well . . . Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan said much the same."

"I think you misunderstood," Mace said. "Jedi do not ignore their feelings. They integrate them. Own them. They fear, but they are not afraid of their fear. They grow angry, but they allow their anger to motivate only honorable action. Do you understand?"

The boy nodded, but Mace knew he did not—yet. There was time.

"One more thing," Mace said. "Master Yoda . . . there is a second message, one to open only after the mission is complete."

"Odd, that is," Anakin said, perfectly straight-faced. So serious. Mace restrained laughter. Yoda seemed unconcerned, but Mace wondered, just a bit, if Anakin was making a joke at the Jedi Master's expense.

This boy would bear careful watching.

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