

A NOVELIZATION BY ANTOINE BANDELE

Loyalty



BASED ON THE SHORT FILM BY ROGUE ZOHU PRODUCTIONS
COVER ART BY VIVIAN A. FRIEDEL

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The rocks gently crashed on the riverbed of Yavin 4. Master Andreas meditated at the river's shoreline. The rushing water over the large rocks produced a calm melody that cleared his mind. How could he have been so careless with Alar? She was so fragile at this troubling time.

The Jedi Master snapped out of his meditation's stupor.

She was close.

He almost didn't sense it. Mere meters away, Alar was softly walking behind him. He sensed a minor malice around her, though it was faint.

"You've gotten better at that, Alar," he said.

Instantly the hostility within her dissipated. He could sense the Alar he once knew. But in the same instance her wall was back up. The light in her was fleeting.

"Master Andreas," she nodded. Her expression displayed a trace of disappointment. Perhaps she thought she could sneak up on her former master. Perhaps it would have been easier that way. Or perhaps she wanted to be heard.

Andreas could sense the conflict within her.

"It isn't too late," he locked eyes with her. "You can still come back."

She met his eyes with the same softness. Andreas couldn't sense a single ounce of the darkness he felt in her a moment before. Her lips parted as though to speak.

“To what?”

Loban stepped through the tree line. Andreas lifted his lightsaber but did not ignite it. How did he not sense him coming? Was this a trap? Had Alar let her guard down as a distraction to cloak Loban’s approach?

“To what? Old ideals and narrow mindedness?”

Andreas lowered his staff. He did not sense an attack from either of them.

“My sister and I both know those principles are misguided,” Loban briefly traded a glance with Alar. She turned to Andreas, her eyes were sincere.

“Join us master,” she began. “And we’ll change the old ways.”

Change the old ways? What was she thinking? What had Loban done to her?

Andreas met Loban’s eyes. Perhaps he knew what he was thinking. Andreas could feel a fire burning within himself. Alar had disagreed with him before, surely, but she was speaking treason to the Jedi Order, to him. Loban glared into his eyes, feeding into his smoldering inferno.

No, it’s not Alar’s fault. It can’t be.

“To Loban’s way?” Andreas shook his head disapprovingly towards Alar. “You know that I won’t.”

Alar’s lips parted, her eyes faltered. What had that look meant?

“So be it,” Loban grunted. He lifted his lightsaber in front of him. Though it was not ignited, he meant to do harm with it.

Andreas’ eyes drifted from Loban’s scowling face towards Alar’s tender stare. But instantly her expression had changed. Perhaps Andreas only imagined the gentleness in her eyes. Now, Alar’s eyes had nothing but intent and malice. That dark cloak surrounded her again. This meeting was never meant to end diplomatically. Loban had convinced her to murder her former master. Alar lifted her blade in a similar stance as her brother. She left her blade idle but with just as much intent to do harm.

Instinctively, Andreas lifted his own lightsaber staff in a perfect, Soresu, defensive stance. Loban and Alar parted ways, flanking Andreas’ left and right in perfect sync. They all eyed each other, waiting for the first move. Andreas let the Force envelop him, flow through him like water in a cup. He used it to keep their positions around him in perspective without a direct sightline.

Loban was the first to attack. In a swift flick of his wrist he ignited his crimson lightsaber and slashed for Andreas’ neck. In almost the same speed, Andreas flipped his staff around, igniting his indigo blade just in time to deflect the first, ferocious attack. This was no sparring match. The first strike shocked Andreas’s grip on his staff but he would not let it show. He held his concentration on

the next attack, turning his blade instantly back at Loban, fending him off. But Alar was right on his heels.

She swung her violet blade towards his neck in the same motion as her brother. But her attack was much more predictable, a poor imitation of her brother. Andreas saw the move coming. He ducked under her strike and butted her with the end of his staff, connecting with her stomach. She stutter-stepped back with a cough. Andreas didn't have time to see the damage done, he could not let his mind fester in the fact that he had done intentional harm to his former apprentice. Besides, Loban did not give him the time to empathize, not ever, and certainly not within this fight. Without a misstep, Loban was back on the assault.

Loban's one-handed fighting style was swift but he could not break into the defensive circle of Andreas' staff. Loban favored the fencing principles of Form Two Maka-shi. It worked well for him against other Sith Acolytes and even Jedi Knights. But Andreas' mastery of Form Three, coupled with his unusual staff, made penetrating his defenses impossibly difficult. Before long Andreas turn his staff around, attacking out of his defense. He was adapting his Soresu principles into Form Five, The Way of the Krayt Dragon, bringing the fight back to Loban through skillful parries. After a high block, Andreas turned his blade around to feint an attack for Loban's neck. Just as Loban was swinging for the bait, Andreas kicked the back of his

knee. Loban buckled at the strike but still had his lightsaber poised. He swung low for the edge of Andreas' staff. He managed to hit it but his lightsaber sprung off.

"*He's using phrik,*" Loban thought. Andreas' hilt was immune to any strike from a lightsaber.

Just as Loban's blade was bouncing off, Andreas kicked his hilt away into the rocky ground. Alar recovered and continued her attack. She stabbed out at Andreas' head but he deflected it easily. She only had knowledge of the most basic form of lightsaber combat. Each of her Form One strikes were terribly predictable. Again, Andreas worked his defense into an instant attack, turning his blade over and swinging at Alar high enough for her to block but not precise enough to kill her. Her swings were wide and haphazard. Andreas could sense the unease in her moves. She was not submitting herself completely into the dark side as her brother had been.

Maybe Alar could sense her former master's thoughts. Her next attack was more direct and powerful, locking blades with him. She thrust her grip out, hitting him across the chin with her hilt.

Andreas stumbled back just as Loban was swinging in a downward motion, aiming to slice him in half. Andreas evaded the strike, swinging his saber around at both of them. The siblings ducked instinctively at the same time, turning into each other and attacking in tune. There was more focus between the two of them and Andreas could

sense it. The trio broke away briefly staring at one another. This time it was Alar who attacked first, giving into her animus. Finally, her ferocity matched her brother's.

Andreas was becoming overwhelmed, barely batting them off with his staff. He could only manage to keep up a sloppy defensive posture under their combined strength. The whizzing of their lightsabers passing his ears broke down his focus. The closeness of their blades tested Andreas' Jedi calm to its limits. Their unity would be his demise. He had to think fast on how to break their attacks apart before one of their blades tore through him.

Andreas recalled one of his training sessions with Alar. He explained to her the benefits and the detractions of a lightsaber staff. Most Sith and Jedi who encountered a staff were at a disadvantage, simply because not many of them had experienced the weapon. It was one of the more difficult lightsabers to wield, but in the right hands it could be devastating. However, the strokes of a staff were predictable. While a single blade had many different directions it could attack or defend from, the opponent of a staff always knew that the next move was on the other side of the hilt. Andreas thought now that teaching her this would be his undoing. He was certain Alar had explained this to Loban. Their attacks were much too confident and accurate to not know otherwise.

He could not believe how far Alar's betrayal had gone. Where he had gone wrong with her, he could not pinpoint.

His grip on his former padawan may have been too tight, too rigid. Her desires for independence were clear. She certainly made that very plain now. But Andreas had wanted her to follow the old code, the way of the Jedi consulars. It was the only way to find peace in this time of war. Despite his own expressed desires for harmony, Alar had proclaimed the Jedi to be too passive to end any conflict. Perhaps she was right. How would he ever be able to defeat this pair with mere Jedi tranquility.

He spun close to Alar, drawing distance away from Loban. As Loban began his downward swing, Andreas used the bottom of his hilt to hit him in his gut. Like Alar before, Loban fell back coughing. Andreas turned his attention to Alar again, trading blows, but Loban was already back. Andreas unwillingly fought with them both but Loban's attacks were less fierce. The pain in his stomach was slowing him down. Andreas started to turn his attention towards him, whittling the Sith down with a series of attacks. He swung the butt of his saber in a reverse motion, uppercutting Loban under the chin. The impact sent Loban stumbling away.

Without a blink, Andreas was back on Alar, overwhelming her with his blinding fast Shii-Choo strikes. She may have known the concept behind his moves but she did not have the experience to fight him off alone. Andreas turned his staff effortlessly around her rudimentary sequence of blocks. Eventually he used the blunt end of his

staff to hit the top of her head, incapacitating her. Andreas towered over her. His breathing was heavy though his temperament was controlled. He could end it now. She would not even feel it in her state, just one quick flick of his wrist.

Andreas deactivated his lightsaber.

Loban stumbled to a standing position, rubbing the underside of his chin.

“Are you so weak you can’t even kill an enemy when they’re down,” Loban lectured.

Andreas activated his lightsaber. Its blue light cast a majestic shadow on his face.

“Alar is not my enemy.”

In a flash, Andreas was attacking Loban with all his might. Loban saw it coming, igniting his lightsaber long before Andreas made his first stride towards him.

All the frustration Andreas had towards Alar he directed at Loban. Every strike, every step, every breath and turn was a move to end the fight quickly. Loban felt each of the piercing blows. His grip nearly gave way to each of the violent strikes. Loban attempted to kick Andreas away, but to no avail. Any defensive strike he had was met twice over with a series of vicious swings from Andreas’ blinding staff. Still, Andreas was having trouble landing anything lethal. He was holding to his Jedi reservations, favoring the more conservative arrangement of Form Five. Though feeble, Loban’s one-handed style was fast enough

to meet each of his strikes. The long swings of Andreas' staff were showcasing gaping holes in his offense. The pair broke away from each other briefly.

Alar began to wake, lifting herself up gingerly. Andreas looked over his shoulder knowing he didn't have much time. He began attacking Loban desperately and aimlessly. Loban was more comfortable with Andreas' staff now, baiting him closer, waiting for the right opening. Loban feinted for Andreas' neck, getting him to duck. As he ducked, in a deft movement, Loban took the butt of Andreas' hilt, holding it in place. He saw a weak point at the lightsaber's emitter and struck it. It began to fizzle and deactivate. Loban pushed Andreas away.

As Andreas stumbled from Loban, the sizzling became louder, eventually exploding and destroying the core of his lightsaber. Andreas fell face-first into the rocks. Alar covered her face from the debris. Her former master tried to crawl and get up but his lightsaber was gone, scattered in pieces. Loban strutted over towards the crawling man, kicking him across the stomach.

Andreas rolled over just before Alar's feet. His beard was matted with blood and dirt. Sweat glistened on his brow. She looked down at him with gentle eyes, like a mother to a wounded child, sorry for his failure. Loban circled behind her.

"Kill him," he whispered sternly into her ear.

Andreas lifted himself to his knees, accepting his fate. Alar treaded behind him, readying her blade for an execution. The sound of her own lightsaber igniting shocked her for a moment. She could hear the lethality within its hum, the finality in its drone. Though a lightsaber gave off no heat, the purple hue casting off its core stung her face. Beads of sweat rolled down her cheek. Her heart thumped fast and her breath was bated.

She knew she had to be strong, to distance herself from Andreas. This was the only way now. She and Loban had gone too far. Alar attempted to feed on the darkness around her, but the finality of the situation was conflicting.

“Your trust is misplaced,” Andreas spoke with his head down. His eyes were closed in a peaceful state. He was searching within her, empathizing with her struggle. Alar shook her head, though she knew he could not see her gesture.

This must be done, I can't go back.

“Kill him,” Loban said more firmly.

Alar gripped her lightsaber tighter. She took a deep breath. Her arms began to shake. She could feel Andreas within her, prying the darkness away. He had to make her see reason.

“Look at what he's turned you into --”

“KILL HIM!” Loban shouted. He could sense the conflict within Alar. Her training would not be complete if she did not act now. She had to be the one to do it.

“I can’t,” she spoke softly, almost to herself.

She lowered her lightsaber and turned it off. She met her master’s mind, letting him know that it would be okay, that she could still be saved. She turned slowly to her brother, meeting his disapproving scowl.

“I won’t kill my master.”

Loban searched within her thoughts. He no longer felt the power within her, it had faded with her compassion. His scowl turned into a grimace. His face contorted with rage. Alar could sense his distaste. His growing anger was welling up an attack for Andreas. She saw his actions before he could act. As Loban ignited his lightsaber to strike down, she was already there protecting her master from his death.

The siblings locked lightsabers, their beams crackled on one another. Loban’s shock at Alar’s betrayal was only for a moment. She had decided her loyalty, and by extension, her fate, the second she chose to defy him. Without a second thought, he swung towards her neck. She ducked just in time but Loban was on her, fiercer than he ever was before.

Andreas could sense the growing spite within Loban. Andreas could taste the blood on Loban’s thoughts. He was not meaning to wound his sister, he was prepared to murder her. Andreas jumped to his feet, running towards the pair of them with an outstretched hand.

“No!”

It was too late. Loban had broken down his sister's defenses. Without the dark side she could not match his malevolence. It had been so long since she was in the light. She had no full trust in the Force. Before Andreas could process it, Loban's lightsaber sunk deep into Alar's chest. She let out a small gasp in shock more than pain. Loban snapped out of his craze. He looked at his sister eye to eye. Her gentle brown eyes were etched with treachery and pain. Slowly she slumped over to her side.

Andreas wrapped his arm around Loban's neck, screaming in an astounding frustration. Andreas had to get to Alar, he had to do something quickly. Loban attempted to shake him off but Andreas' rage gave him too much strength. The distressed Jedi Master took Loban's hilt and punched him across the face with it. Loban fell onto the rocky ground.

Without a second glance at Loban, Andreas ran to Alar's inert body. She was still breathing but only just. Her breath was shorter and more violent as she gasped for her last wisps of air. Andreas could feel her presence fleeting. He could only bring himself to place his hand on her shoulder. He did not know the ways of Jedi healing, that was an ability with which Alar had been adept. But he was sure she no longer possessed the ability. He wanted to give her some solace. He had to let her know he was there. She grabbed his wrist too, feeling his life and warmth run through her one last time. No words were needed between

the two of them. Alar was at peace, Andreas could feel it. They did not need to apologize to one another. They knew they were both forgiven. Alar clutched Andreas' wrist tighter. At first he thought she was trying to communicate her apology. Instead, she was gasping for words.

Master, behind you!

He could hear her in his head, clear as day. He could hear the humming of a lightsaber behind him. A purple glow was filling the ground around him and Alar. Loban was rushing him from behind with her fallen lightsaber.

Andreas turned on him in a rage he had never felt before. Loban started the attack but Andreas was finishing it. It took Loban off-guard. He had not expected such wrath and fury to be behind each of Andreas' strikes. He only experienced lightsaber combat like this with the Sith Masters at the academy. They called the form Juyo, the ferocity form, the seventh and final form of lightsaber combat. It was a form that was based in raw emotion, a perfect personification of human sentiments. Andreas' bladework was definitely not of the Sith Masters' caliber, but the authority behind his heavy cleaves were immediate. Loban's use of Makashi was dexterous, but the form lacked the kinetic energy to withstand such powerful blows.

Loban could sense the dark side flowing effortlessly through Andreas. He had never sensed anyone who honed it so easily and intensely. It was all he could do to bat back Andreas' ferocious strikes. Loban feared for his life with

an immediacy he had never felt his whole life. Andreas fed off Alar's dwindling presence. Each dying breath she took gave life to his pounding lightsaber. Alar clung on, watching him fight with a speed she had never seen him perform before.

Andreas did not think. All he saw was red. His actions were not of his conscious mind. He had given himself over to a powerful force he had never known before. He could see Loban's feeble attacks several moves before he made them.

And then he saw it.

There was a crosscut in Loban's armor. It was simmering orange from a fresh lightsaber cut. Andreas' blade was stuck deep in Loban's chest, searing through his skin. He could smell Loban's flesh and bone sweltering. It burned his nostrils. Saliva was running down Andreas' chin like a rabid rancor.

But it hadn't happened yet. He and Loban were still trading blows but he could not stop what he already saw. Loban's eyes widened, sensing his own death coming soon. This was beyond lightsaber combat, beyond a sequence of moves, beyond delicate footwork and pivets. This singular moment, this was the dark side of the Force. It was pure and it was powerful. Unlimited.

But it was instant.

Andreas broke out of his crazed oblivion. Loban's arm was on his shoulder. The vision had come true and the Jedi

hadn't even realized it. He blacked out to the power his mentors had warned him about. He could still taste the power on his lips, the bloodlust. Loban was gasping for air as Alar was, holding onto Andreas' shoulder as though he was holding onto life itself. Alar released her last breath and drifted. Andreas let Loban fall to his side, dead. He looked to his hands, awestruck at what he had caused. His head was throbbing a murderous beat. He let Loban's lightsaber fall to his side. He was responsible for the deaths of a whole bloodline, brother and sister. Was this the culmination of all his Jedi teachings?

Andreas turned to Alar. He ran to her but stopped short, just as he saw her inert figure. He could not believe it. He knew she was passing but he was not prepared to see her lifeless body. He knelt next to her. She was looking past him, up into the tree line and the sky beyond it. Alar was gone. He closed her dead eyes and bowed his head into her shoulder as though in prayer.

Be at peace, Alar. I won't fail you again.