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CLONE WARS



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SCHOLASTIC PRESENTS:



By Jude Watson

Obi-Wan Kenobi and Anakin Skywalker were returning from a mission, heading back to the Temple by way of the Llon Nebulae. As they approached the Kronex spaceport, they had to reduce speed to minimum levels. Anakin drummed his fingers on the pilot seat. There was nothing worse than piloting an ultra-tweaked starfighter and having to go slow.

Ahead, three stray asteroids bounced on a wave of atmospheric disturbance. Anakin pushed the throttle. He had only seconds before the asteroids were suddenly in front of him, careening crazily. He cut to the left, avoiding the first one, then zoomed right, just missing the second. Then he flipped over for a screaming dive and made a hard right for open space, missing the last asteroid by a comfortable twenty meters.

Within seconds his Master had drawn his own starfighter level with Anakin's. Obi-Wan had given the asteroids a wide berth—exactly what he was supposed to do.

The comm unit crackled with his Master's dry tone. "You could have gone around them."

"It was faster to go through them."

"Ah. And what do you know about the Llon Nebulae, my young apprentice?" Obi-Wan prodded.

"Smaller cruisers are advised to proceed at minimum velocity. Atmospheric waves can appear without warning," Anakin said dutifully.

"And yet you decided to play 'chase the asteroid,'" Obi-Wan said sternly. "You're too old for these childish games."

Anakin pressed his lips together. He couldn't explain to his Master that for him, testing his skills wasn't a childish game. It was a necessary release.

There was a wall between them now. He had done things he could not tell Obi-Wan. He knew things he could not say. The Clone Wars had ripped the galaxy apart. Times were difficult for all the Jedi, but Anakin knew he felt the darkness more than most. It was like a physical presence. It was as though he carried the weight of it in his body.

And so he pushed the darkness away with what had always helped him forget in the past. Speed. Physical training. His Jedi path.

Anakin glanced at his instruments and was suddenly alert. Ships were approaching from the rear. The skirmishes of the Clone Wars had reached every corner of the galaxy. It was always wise to check out your neighbors.

"Looks like large transports behind us," Anakin said.

"Unusual for such a large fleet to be traveling in such close formation," Obi-Wan observed.

Anakin flipped over in a fast roll, and Obi-Wan followed. They split up and paced the three asteroids, keeping them between their starships and the fleet.

Anakin watched the first line of ships approach. They were huge, sheathed in dull black durasteel and advanced weaponry. That wasn't unusual these days. Even bulk freighters had to arm themselves now.

But these transports were too well designed to be bulk freighters, Anakin realized. It wasn't obvious unless you studied the lines of the ship and the quality of the fittings.

"They look like they could be from the Kuat Drive Yards," Anakin said. "The proportions and the lines of the design . . ."

"Look at the plating on the underside," Obi-Wan said. "Something is odd about it."

Anakin followed the lines of the plating. His Master was right. Something was off. It took him several seconds to figure it out.

*The Kuat Drive Yards . . .*

"It must be the Storm Fleet," Anakin said.

The Jedi had recently learned that the Separatists had secretly put in an order for a heavily armored fleet of attack ships. Disguised as freighters so that they could travel secretly through the galaxy, they were actually outfitted with so much firepower that smaller planets were completely defenseless against them.

The Jedi hung back while the transports landed at the spaceport. Then they commed for clearance and docked at a landing bay close by.

"We'll never get in to investigate without a battle," Obi-Wan said, surveying the area quickly. "I've been to this spaceport with Qui-Gon, long ago. He has a friend who works here. A mechanic. He ended up here after a brilliant career on the Senate elite security team. He'll be able to help us."

"Should we head to the mechanic shop, then?" Anakin asked.

A small smile flickered on Obi-Wan's face as he shook his head. "The cantina."

Kronex was so large that it had a variety of cantinas. Obi-Wan chose the darkest and noisiest. A large holosign outside with missing letters proclaimed: CHEC

WEAP NS AT DO R, but Anakin could see with one glance at the holstered blasters and vibroshivs tucked in belts that the directive was ignored by the clientele.

In a corner a tall being sat, an ale in front of him on the table. He wore a grimy scarf around his head, and his ten-fingered hands were permanently stained with grease. Large pouches underneath his hooded eyes gave him a sad air. He was so still he appeared to be almost asleep.

"That's your contact?" Anakin asked dubiously.

Obi-Wan and Anakin sat down at his table. "Can I buy you another?" Obi-Wan asked, indicating his mug of ale.

"Thank you, stranger, but two is my limit," the being said. His tone was friendly, but his sleepy eyes examined the two Jedi suspiciously.

"I don't remember you ever having limits, Fizz," Obi-Wan said.

Shaggy gray eyebrows rose. The movement seemed to cost the being a great deal of effort. "Everything changes. Everything goes. Including my memory. Do I know you?"

"We've met," Obi-Wan said. "Perhaps you remember my Master, Qui-Gon Jinn."

The being blinked twice, which for him was a substantial reaction. "Qui-Gon Jinn," he said slowly. "The best of the best." He heaved a sigh. "Gone now, like the best of them are. You must be Obi-Wan. You've grown up, I see. And you need a favor, no doubt."

"A large fleet just landed in docking bays 1211 through 1222," Obi-Wan said. "We'd like to know where they're going. And we don't want it known the Jedi are asking questions."



"I like that kind of favor. I don't even need to move." He took a small datapad from his pocket, checked it, and frowned. "No data. That means they have special clearance. But if you can't go in the front door, try the back." He pushed away his glass and stood. "Come with me."

Fizz used his security card to get them into the service area. There, massive tanks pumped fuel to the receiving stations. With a wave at a fellow mechanic, Fizz used his card to access the control board. Quickly he punched in several numbers.

"That should do it." Fizz ambled toward the door that opened onto the hangar. "The fuel gauge will tell them something's wrong, and they'll call a mechanic."

The Jedi watched as Fizz grabbed a hydrospanner and approached the guard standing by the ramp. Fizz waved his arms. The guard checked a datapad at his waist belt. Fizz pointed to the ship, but the guard shook his head.

"He won't let him board," Anakin said. "Let's go."

"Wait," Obi-Wan ordered.

The guard reached for a comlink. Fizz began to argue and, in a gesture so graceful it almost looked tender, reached out and tapped the guard behind the ear with the hydrospanner. The guard slumped to the floor.

Fizz didn't hesitate. With a surprising display of speed and strength, he leaped over the guard and raced up the ramp. They counted off the seconds, and Fizz reappeared. He streaked down the ramp, leaped over the guard again, accessed the service door, and grinned at them.

"The fleet is headed for the Cyphar system," Fizz said. "But I don't know why."

"I do," Obi-Wan said grimly.

"So why are the Jedi so interested in bulk freighters?" Fizz asked. Then he held up a hand. "Don't tell me."

"Perhaps one day we will need your help again," Obi-Wan said.

"No offense, young Obi-Wan," Fizz said. "But I hope you do not ask. I intend to wait out the Clone Wars in the cantina."

They left Fizz at the entrance to the cantina and headed back to their starfighters.

"What is Cyphar, Master?" Anakin asked.

"A small but strategically located planet in the Mid-Rim," Obi-Wan answered. "A coalition of Separatists is there right now, negotiating to establish a base. At least the Separatists are calling it negotiation. Threats are more like it."

"So the fleet will orbit Cyphar during the talks in order to intimidate them," Anakin said. "Cyphar will fear an invasion if they don't comply."

"I'm afraid that looks like the plan," Obi-Wan said.

"We must follow the Storm Fleet," Anakin declared.

Obi-Wan shook his head. "And do what?"

"We can't just let them go!"

"We will notify the Temple of what we have learned," Obi-Wan said. "They'll alert the Republic and try to send ships."

"You know we are stretched thin," Anakin said. "Most likely there won't be ships to send. And we are here, now."

"This is one small battle in a very large war, Anakin," Obi-Wan said. "The Council needs us for other things."

Anakin set his jaw stubbornly. "And that is all right with you?"

"No," Obi-Wan said. "But I can't see another way at the moment."

A roar filled the air. "They're taking off!" Anakin cried, then raced to his starfighter's docking bay and leaped into the cockpit. He saw Obi-Wan dashing to his own starfighter. Anakin took off and was followed by Obi-Wan into the stratosphere.

Obi-Wan's voice came over the comm unit. "I hope you have a plan."

"Just contact the Temple," Anakin said. "I'll do the rest."

Within minutes, the Storm Fleet was in sight. Anakin zigzagged in and out of the formation. He was so close he could count the rivets on the front panels.

"Identify yourself," a voice came over the comm.

Anakin did a quick roll, then zoomed under the belly of a ship to come up next to another. He flew between the two massive ships, darting in and out.

Suddenly, the fleet changed direction slightly. That was a good sign. He was getting to them. Anakin dropped back and slowed his speed.

Three of the ships peeled off from the formation. They executed a surprisingly sharp turn, considering their size. Anakin took a moment to admire their maneuverability before he noticed that the armor plating was rolling back.

"Anything to say now?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Oops?" Anakin said.

The first fire from the laser cannons hit empty space as Anakin and Obi-Wan simultaneously went into a steep dive. The ships followed. The shock waves of the weapons fire caused his starfighter to dance.

Anakin turned sharply to the left. Obi-Wan turned to the right. The laser cannons blasted again, missing them by a few meters.

"Proton torpedoes coming up," Obi-Wan said tersely.

The torpedoes locked onto the starfighters. Anakin pushed the ship into a steep dive, then veered left. The torpedoes missed him by two meters. Close.

"More torpedoes on the left! Anakin, watch out!"

Anakin kept the starfighter in the same arc but pushed the nose down. He could feel the controls shudder. He was really pushing the engines now.

The blast almost threw him to the floor. Anakin grabbed the controls. He checked his warning lights. All clear . . . then a red light began to blink.

"I've been hit. They got my stabilizer," he told Obi-Wan. They both knew what that meant. Without a horizontal stabilizer, he wouldn't be able to maneuver. A series of chirps came through comm as his astromech droid tried to fix the problem.

Anakin pulled up. Laser cannon fire thundered past his flank. Obi-Wan darted ahead of him, trying to draw the fire, giving the droid time to finish. Anakin called on the Force, reaching out for it to make his decisions fluid.

"Anakin, you're pushing it," Obi-Wan shouted. "I can see your stabilizers shaking."

His droid beeped. The warning lights blinked off, and Anakin felt the ship's movement smooth underneath his hands.

"We've got to get out of here," Obi-Wan said. "We can't outrun them. And firing at them would be like pelting them with pebbles."

Anakin studied his nav screen. "There's an asteroid storm up ahead, coming up fast. I say we fly right into it. With any luck it will be too late for them to avoid it."

If Anakin had longed for a chance to put his starfighter through its paces, he'd found it. Asteroids careened crazily around him. Engines screaming, he shaved off centimeters from close encounters, pushing the ship to its limit. He could not use his instruments. He could only use the Force. Sweat beaded up on his forehead.

It was too late for the Storm Fleet to turn. They blundered into the storm. Asteroids bounced off the surfaces of the ships harmlessly. But even a capital ship wouldn't be able to survive an impact with a large asteroid. Anakin saw the first ship begin to turn to retreat.

He changed direction and came directly at the disguised freighter, firing his laser cannons. The ship stopped its slow turn and reversed, firing at Anakin. Anakin dived, heading straight for the massive asteroid ahead of him. The Force hummed around him as he swerved at the last possible second.

The enemy ship behind him hit the asteroid head-on.

Chunks of debris flew his way. More obstacles. He could see Obi-Wan spinning away, diving away from the wreckage. Anakin was too far to make the same maneuver. He pushed his nose up and climbed. He felt debris knock the ship, but with a quick glance at the instruments he saw that it hadn't been damaged.

Another explosion sent shock waves against the starfighter. The second freighter had been caught by the debris. Smoking and flaming, it spiraled down out of sight.

Anakin saw clear space ahead. With a last surge of speed, he avoided the last asteroid and sailed into the open atmosphere.

A moment later, he saw Obi-Wan over to his left.

"Wouldn't want to do that again," Obi-Wan said.

"At least we knocked out two of the freighters," Anakin said. "That will slow them down in time for the Republic Fleet to get to Cyphar."

"We were lucky."

This time Anakin didn't argue. "Yes."

"Let's set our course for the Temple," Obi-Wan said. "And hope for a dull trip."

Their starfighters moved gracefully toward their waiting hyperspace rings.

Had it been luck? he wondered. Or the Force?

Obi-Wan was so good at so many things. He could inspire loyalty. Shift strategies in a heartbeat. Fight harder than any Jedi Anakin had seen.

Yet did he trust the Force enough? If they were truly able to use the Force at its maximum potential, opposition would be nothing. They could destroy enemies. They could claim the galaxy for peace.

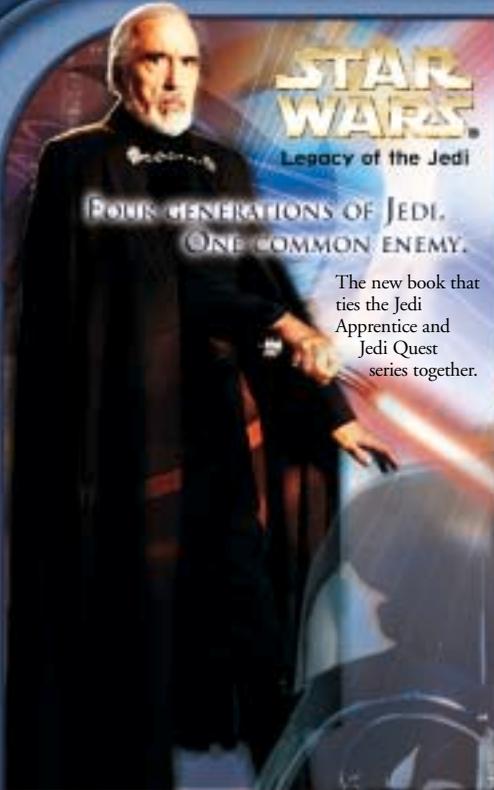
"You can't do everything, Anakin," Obi-Wan said suddenly, as if he was reading his apprentice's mind. "You must choose the battles to fight."

Anakin wanted to fight them all. He wanted to do everything. And he knew he could.

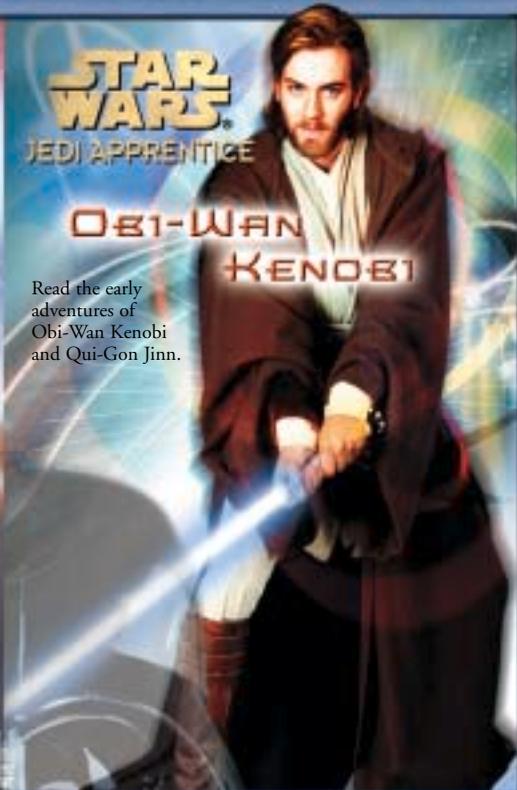
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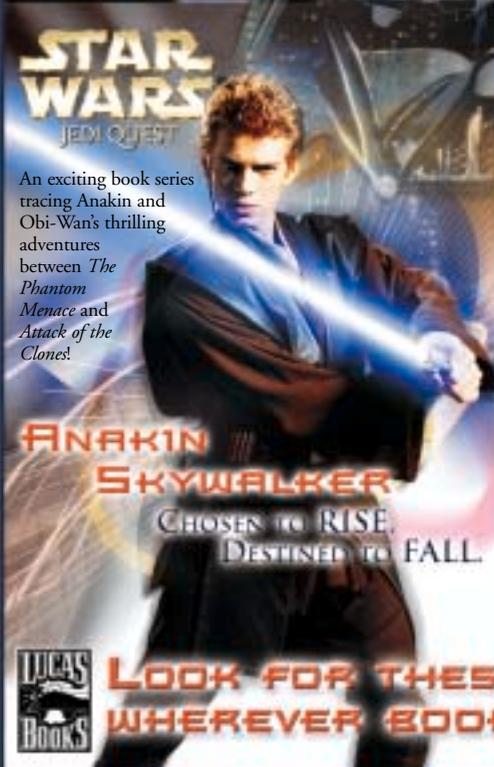
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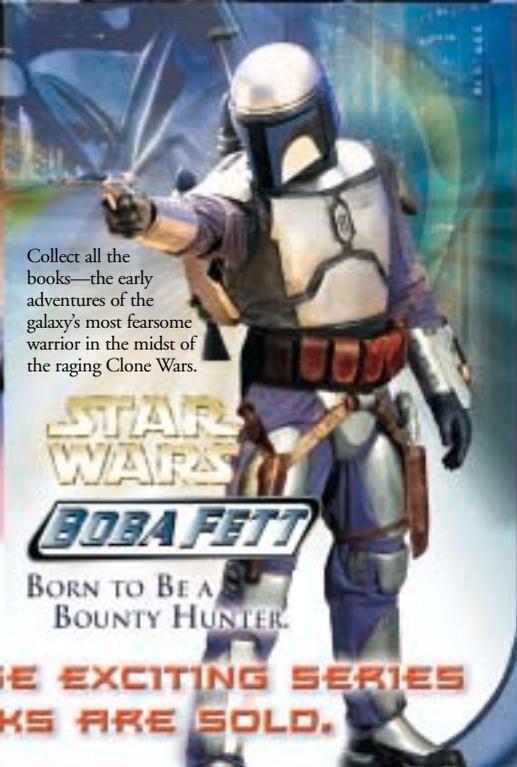
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DEL REY PRESENTS:



# EQUIPMENT

A Personal Account of the Sub-orbital Action at Haruun Kal, as reported by Auxiliary Heavy-Weapons Specialist CT-6/774.

By Matthew Stover

**W**e popped out of hyperspace above the plane of the ecliptic. Al'har's light was brilliant yellow. Haruun Kal was a bright blue-green crescent. Two asteroid belts sparkled yellow among the black-and-white starfield: one beyond Haruun Kal's orbit, vast and old, spreading toward the gas giants that swung through the outer system, and a smaller, younger belt in orbit around the planet itself: remnants of what once had been the planet's moon.

I snugged my helmet and checked my armor's life-support parameters, then dogged the transparisteel hatch of the bubble turret.

My helmet's speakers crackled softly. "Comm check," Lieutenant Four-One said.

The Lieutenant's our pilot. The 2nd Lou, CL-33/890, handles nav. He checked in with a "Nav is go." I reported my turret as go, and my port-side partner, CT-014/783, did the same from his.

The *Halleck* swung down out of interstellar space and inserted into planetary orbit almost halfway out to the moon-belt, more than ten thousand clicks from the surface. Intel had reported a rumor that Haruun Kal might have a small number of planetary-defense ion cannons, and a medium cruiser is a very large target.

Just before we lit engines and lifted out of the *Halleck's* ship bay, I clicked my comm over to the dedicated turret-freq. "Take care of the equipment, Eight-Three."

My partner answered the way he always does: "And the equipment will take care of us, Seven-Four."

That's how we wish each other luck.

The mag-screen de-powered. The ship bay's atmosphere gusted out toward the star in a billow of glittering ice crystals.

Blue-white pinpoints fanned out before us: ion drives of our starfighter escort. The transparisteel of my bubble-turret hummed with sympathetic resonance as one of the *Jadthu*-class landers undocked and followed them, then it was our turn.

Our flight leader took point. We sucked ions on left wing. Five gunships left the *Halleck*.

None would come back.



Take care of your equipment, and your equipment will take care of you.

That's one of the first things they teach us in the creche-schools on Kamino. Even before we're awake. By the time we are brought to consciousness for skills-development, the knowledge pumps have drilled "Take care of your equipment" so deeply into our minds that it's more than instinct. It's practically natural law. We live or die by our equipment.

I am a clone trooper in the Grand Army of the Republic.

My designation is CT-6/774. I serve on a Republic close-assault gunship. I am the starboard bubble-turret gunner.

I love my job. We all do; we're created for it.

But my job is special. Because my partner—CT-014/783, the port bubble-turret gunner—and I are the ones who take care of the equipment.

Our weapons platform, the RHE LAAT/i, is an infantry-support weapon. We soften up and harass the enemy; our targets are bunkers, armored vehicles, mobile artillery, and enemy footsoldiers. When our infantry brothers need to get to the enemy, we're the ones who blast down the door.

The LAAT/i is designed for dropping troops into a hot fire-zone. We're not fast, but we can go anywhere. Our assault weapons are controlled through nav; the navigator runs all three antipersonnel turrets, the main missile launcher and two of the four main cannons. Our laser cannons can punch holes through medium armor, and the missile launchers take care of the heavy stuff; they're mass-driver launchers, so our loads can be customized for the mission. We carry HE (high explosive), HEAP (high explosive armor-piercing) and APF (anti-personnel fragmentation) missiles; we stay away from baradium weapons—too unstable—but detonite and proton-core warheads can handle everything we're likely to come up against.

Our job—me and Eight-Three, the bubble-turret gunners—is to handle everything that comes up against us. Each turret is a sphere of transparisteel that tracks along with our cannons; my partner and I also each control a launcher loaded with four short-range air-to-air rockets. If anything comes at us, we shoot it down.

That's what I mean about taking care of the equipment.

Let's say we're cracking a hardened bunker on a desert planet. We come in low over the dunes, pumping missiles and cannonfire against the target emplacement. Let's say you're operating an anti-aircraft cannon half a klick away, and you

open fire on us. The pilot and the navigator don't even have to look up. Because I'm there.

Go ahead and take your shot. You won't get two.

Fire a missile at us. I'll blast it to scrap. Launch a proton grenade. I'll blow your head off. Make an attack run riding a speeder bike. But make out your will, first. Because if you attack us, I will take you out.

That's what I do.

I love my job, and I am very, very good at it.

I have to be: because sometimes my gunship has to do things it's *not* designed for. That's how it goes when you're fighting a war.

Like at Haruun Kal.

We were assigned to the Republic medium cruiser *Halleck*, on station in the Ventran system. A regiment of heavy infantry, twenty *Jadthu*-class landers, an escort of six starfighters.

And us: five RHE LAAT/i-s.

We weren't supposed to know why we were there, naturally; just as naturally, we knew anyway. It was clear this would be a VIP extraction on a hostile planet.

It wasn't hard to figure. Those *Jadthu*-class landers are basically just flying bunkers. They go in fast, land, then stand there and take a pounding until it's time to take off again. Nothing but armor, engines, two heavy laser turrets and an Arakyd Caltrop-5 chaff gun. They're plenty fast in a straight line, but they are the opposite of nimble. There is no evasive action in a *Jadthu*.

The *Halleck* had twenty of them: that meant the landing-zone would be hot. Maybe *very* hot. Maybe nova-class. The starfighters were for orbital cover. Sub-orbital and atmospheric cover was our job.

Ventran is on the Gevarno Loop, one of half a dozen systems linked by hyperspace lanes that run through Al'har. Haruun Kal is the only habitable planet in the Al'har system.

Haruun Kal is Separatist.

General Windu—that's Jedi Master Mace Windu, General of the Grand Army of the Republic and Senior Member of the Jedi Council—had gone dirtside on Haruun Kal, alone and undercover, tracking a rogue Jedi. Why had a General gone in personally? We didn't know. Why had he gone in alone? We didn't ask.

We didn't care.

It wasn't our business.

This is what we knew: If nothing went wrong, we wouldn't have anything to do. We'd cruise our station in the Ventran system for a week or two, then jump back for reassignment.

Something went wrong.

Our business was to get General Windu out again.



The moon-belt was where they were hiding. Waiting for us.

The whole system was a trap.

They must have been there for weeks, powered down, clamped to drifting asteroids. Undetectable. Waiting for a Republic ship to enter orbit.

Which the *Halleck* had just done.

Against the glittering weave of the belt, they were close enough to invisible that I couldn't pick them out until Lt. Nine-Oh muttered from nav: "Hostiles incoming. On intercept. But not for us, sir! They're after the *Halleck*!"

Lt. One-Four: "How many, nav?"

"Calculating. No. Sorry, sir. No hard numbers available. Sensors keep picking up more."

"How many so far? What are we looking at?"

"Acceleration and drive output profiles indicate starfighters. Droid starfighters, sir." Automated weapons systems directed by sophisticated droid brains. "Probably Geonosian. So far, I'm reading sixty-four."

"Sixty-four!"

"Strike that. Ninety-one. One-oh-five. One-twenty-eight, sir."

One hundred and twenty-eight droid starfighters streaked toward us: a vast array of crescent sparks haloed by blue-white ion scatter. Faster, more maneuverable, and more heavily armed than anything in our little twelve-ship flotilla—and the droid brains piloting those starfighters have reflexes that operate at the speed of light.

And the *Halleck* was directly in their path.

"Hear that, turrets? This will be hot space. Repeat: we are entering hot space."

"Starboard reads, sir," I told him as I charged my cannon. "And I am go."

"Port reads, sir. Go."

"Signal from the *Halleck*, sir!" Nine-Oh said. "Recall: All ships abort. The *Halleck* is under attack—she's all alone back there, sir!"

"Not for long."

Lt. Four-One spun our ship through a spiral that whipped us around and aimed us back toward the *Halleck*. The cruiser was a star-specked wedge of shadow transiting the grid of droid starfighter drive-streams. Now turbolasers started blasting out from that shadow toward the grid; from here the huge particle beams looked like hairlines of blue light. I worked my pedals and swung the fire-control yoke so that the turret's servo-boom angled my weapon to bear on the grid-formation of starfighters.

I knew Eight-Three was doing exactly the same.

"Fire at will, turrets."

They were still far beyond the effective range of my cannon. I squeezed the yoke anyway. Even through my armored gloves, the hum of the yoke buzzed up my arms as four arcs of electric blue energy joined in front of the cannon's oval reflector-shield, then flashed away through the vacuum. I held the triggers down. Concentrating on evading the *Halleck*'s turbolasers, a droid starfighter might just blunder into one of my shots by accident. You never know.

The grid formation began to break up as the droids took evasive action. Our own starfighters—all six of them—flashed past us in pairs that swung and scissored and looped into battle.

We made for the *Halleck* as fast as our external drives could push us. Our gunship was never intended to dogfight against starfighters. That didn't stop us. It didn't slow us down. But we never got there.

They came out of nowhere.

The first I knew of the new ambushers was when our ship shuddered under multiple cannon-blasts. A droid starfighter flashed past not thirty meters from my turret. I twisted my yoke and the turret spun and my bolt caught one of the starfighter's aft control-surfaces. It broke up as it spun, but I didn't have time to enjoy the view because they were all over us.

Must have been at least half a wing: thirty-two ships. They were *everywhere*. Four-one had our gunship spinning and whirling and dodging side to side: from the turret it looked like the whole galaxy was yanking itself in random directions around me. All I could do was hold on to my fire-control yoke and try not to hit friendly ships. My cannon sprayed green fire and I scored on at least five hits—two of them kills—but there were always more incoming.

I saw the lander crack open and then explode: huge chunks of its armor spun out like ship-sized shrapnel to crush two of the starfighters that had blasted it. I saw another LAAT/i drifting through a slow barrel-roll, its engines dark, sparks spitting out through the twisted blast-gap where its cockpit used to be. One of its bubble-turrets was shattered; in the other, a trooper struggled with the turret's access hatch. I never got a chance to see if that gunner made it out; another flight of enemy fighters swarmed around us, and I was too busy shooting to watch.

Then I felt a shock that bounced my turret. The spin of the galaxy changed, and I knew I was in trouble.

That last shock had been a cannon-blast hitting my turret's servo-boom. It had blown my turret right off the ship. Now it wasn't even really a turret anymore. It was just a bubble.

Spinning lazily, I drifted through the battle.

I didn't have any illusions about surviving. Turret-gunners don't wear repulsor-packs; no room in there. My emergency repulsorpack was back in the troop bay of my gunship. If my gunship even existed anymore.

From inside my slowly spinning bubble, I saw the rest of the battle. I saw the *Halleck* absorb blast after blast, until a pair of droid starfighters streaked in and rammed the bridge. I saw the other nineteen landers undock from the cruiser and lumber through the swarm of hostiles. I saw the cruiser streak away into hyperspace.

I saw landers peeled like meatfruit, spilling troopers into orbit. These were the heavy infantry and the RP troopers—the repulsorpack men. They knew they were going to die. So each and every one of them decided to die fighting. How do I know that?

They are my brothers. And that's what I would do.

The heavy infantry opened up on the droid starfighters with their hand-weapons and small arms; some of them scattered miniature minefields of magnetized proton grenades. Others had shoulder-fired light missile launchers. Some of the RP troopers had nothing but their DC-15 blaster carbines, which couldn't put much of a dent in a starfighter, so they used their repulsorpacks to deliberately move themselves into the paths of streaking enemy ships. At orbital combat speeds of thousands of kilometers per hour, a starfighter that strikes a combat-armored trooper might as well be flying straight into the side of an asteroid.

The landers did what they could to help us out; those chaff guns they carry shoot out huge clouds of durasteel fragments, intended to confuse enemy sensors and interfere with enemy cannonfire. Those fragments don't have the velocity to penetrate the armor of drifting troopers, but any enemy ship whipping through a cloud of them at a couple thousand  $\text{km}$  just comes apart.

But the landers hadn't come out there to fight for us; General Windu had ordered the whole regiment down to the surface. I imagine you've already heard about the Battle of Lorshan Pass, and the firestorm in Pelek Baw, and everything else that happened planetside.

I wasn't in any of that.

Though I did fire the last shot in the orbital battle.

Most of the landers broke through, and pretty much all the droid starfighters followed them in. After that, things got pretty peaceful there in orbit.

Most of us were dead.

$\text{RP}$  troopers flew from one drifting body to the next, gathering those who'd survived and salvaging life-support packs from the armor of the corpses. A couple of the  $\text{RP}$  troopers stopped by my bubble; they managed to halt my spin, but there wasn't much else they could do for me, and we all knew it.

I was headed down into the atmosphere.

That was when we saw the last of the starfighters, heading right toward us. It was pursuing what was, to me, the single most beautiful thing I should ever hope to see: battered, shot full of holes, one wing gone, limping along on a single engine at half-power, one bubble turret missing, the other smashed: an LAAT/i.

My LAAT/i.

Missiles exhausted, it was trying to hold off the droid starfighter with pinpoint fire from its antipersonnel turrets, without much luck.

But I had a surprise. Bubble turrets pack powercells to maintain weapon-charge for short periods if all enginepower is shunted to maneuvering.

I still had a couple of shots left.

The  $\text{RP}$  troopers who had stabilized me rotated my turret and steadied it for the shot, and I led the enemy ship and squeezed the fire-control yoke —

And it flew right into my shot.

I enjoyed the explosion.

Between the  $\text{RP}$  troopers and my ship, we collected every single one of the drifting survivors. The gunship was in no shape for atmospheric flight, so we limped out to the moon-belt and docked on to an asteroid. The lieutenants put me in for a commendation.

Salvaged life-support packs kept us all breathing for two standard days—which was when the Republic task force arrived.

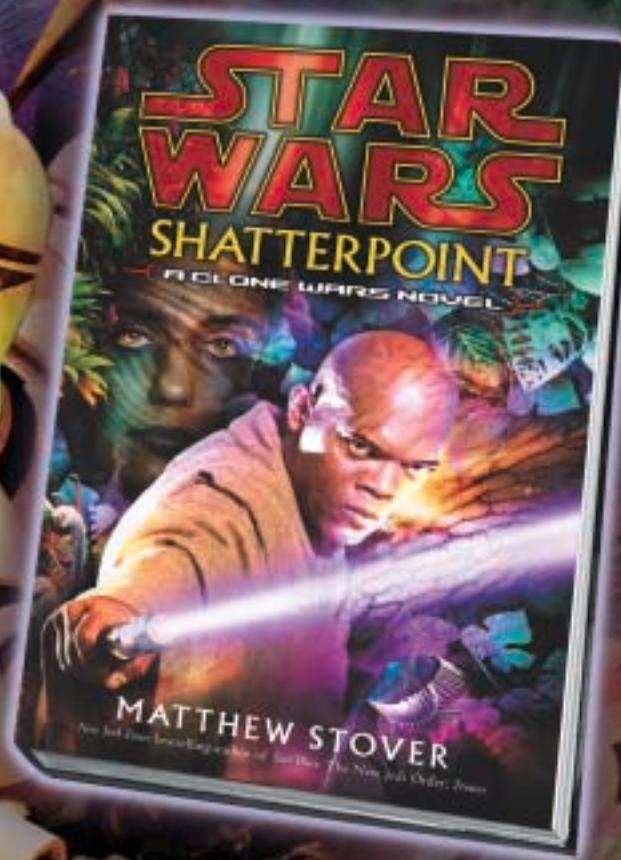
The first thing they did was pick up survivors.

Because we are equipment, too.

As long as the Republic takes care of us, we'll take care of it.

END

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## STAR WARS INSIDER PRESENTS:



By Timothy Zahn

**T**he battle for this part of the city was over. The Republic's forces had lost. They had lost very badly.

Commander Brolis woke suddenly from his uneasy sleep as the proximity alarm buzzed, his hands fumbling for his DC-15 blaster rifle. Wincing at the pain in his side, he raised his head from his chest and peered out through one of the gaping holes in the wall of the ruined building he'd taken refuge in.

The day had given way to early evening while he dozed. But with the remaining daylight, the glow of the fires blazing elsewhere in the city, and the weapons flashes from the battles still raging in the distance, there was more than enough light to see the squad of battle droids making their way across the remains of the town square toward him.

With a grunt of pain, Brolis forced himself to his feet. On one level, it seemed a complete waste of time, both for the droids to keep attacking and for him to keep fighting them off. His entire force was dead now, the last two squads whittled away as they waited here in this ruined building for the reinforcements that had never arrived. It was just a matter of time, he knew, before they got him, too.

Except that they didn't want him dead. They wanted him alive; and they wanted him badly enough to keep sending in battle droids, hoping to catch him napping.

Not this time, though. As long as he had a charged blaster and the ability to pull a trigger, he would continue to litter the ground with scorched droid parts.

A slight movement across the square behind the battle droids caught his eye, and Brolis grimaced. Eventually, of course, they would get tired of wasting droids and decide to end the game once and for all. And when they did, they had the ultimate game-ender waiting in the shadows: a hailfire droid, towering over the rubble on its two massive hoop wheels, its twin missile launcher pods pointing idly in his direction. This particular droid had been fitted with the lower-strength anti-personnel missiles, he knew, so that it could take out the troopers without bringing the whole city down on top of it. Just the same, a single one of those missiles through the wall, and it would be all over.

But until then, Brolis had work to do. Hoisting the blaster rifle to his shoulder, he centered his sights on the first battle droid.

"Your weapon, put away."

Brolis spun around, nearly losing his balance in his haste. The gruff voice had come from *behind* him, where there was nothing but rubble from the row of buildings that had been destroyed in the earlier fighting. This had to be some kind of trick.

If it was, it was a very good one. The creature standing there was short, with green skin, large eyes, and even larger ears. Leaning on a gnarled walking stick, he was dressed in the kind of simple robe worn by lower-class beings all across the Republic.

And somehow, he seemed familiar.

"Commander Brolis, you are?" the creature asked.

"Yes," Brolis said, frowning. "Who are you?"

"The reinforcements you requested, I am," the creature said dryly. "Tell me: into the Fortress of Axion, you have penetrated?"

Brolis grimaced. *This* was his reinforcements? "Briefly," he confirmed. "That's why the Separatists out there want me alive. They want to find out how we got in so they can plug that hole in their defenses."

"Indeed." The creature smiled, his long ears flattening as he did so. "For that same reason do *we* also wish you alive. That is why I am here."

He lifted his stick and pointed to the opening. "Aside, stand you. Deal with the droids, I will."

Without waiting for permission, he hobbled forward. Brolis watched, his brain too frozen with bewilderment and the pain of his injuries to try to stop him. The creature paused just outside the gap, letting his stick drop to the ground and reaching a three-fingered hand in front of him. There was a flicker of motion, and a small cylinder seemed to jump into it from beneath his robe.

And with a *snap-hiss*, a brilliant green blade blazed into existence.

Brolis caught his breath as the memory finally clicked. Kamino—the embarkation of the Republic's clone army—a small creature distantly seen across the ordered ranks as he led the troops into the transports.

Reinforcements, indeed. This was Jedi Master Yoda himself.

Perhaps the approaching battle droids recognized him, too, or perhaps it was the sight of the lightsaber that turned their stealthy approach into a sudden full-fledged attack. But if they were hoping to overwhelm him with numbers, their strategy was a failure. Yoda never moved from the spot where he had planted himself, his swirling lightsaber blade deflecting away every one of the storm of blaster

bolts coming toward him. Some of the shots ricocheted across the square to impact the ruins on the far side, but most reflected straight back to the droids themselves, shattering them into scrap metal.

Half a minute later, it was over. Brolis blinked in amazement, wondering if it was always that easy for Jedi.

And then, across the square, the hailfire droid stirred and began to roll forward. "Look out!" Brolis called. "There's a—"

The rest of his warning dissolved into a fit of painful coughing. But Yoda was already angling across the square away from him, lightsaber held ready as he slipped from one pile of debris to another. The hailfire shifted direction toward the small Jedi Master, swiveling to keep its missile launchers trained on him.

And then, midway between two stacks of rubble, Yoda stopped, facing the droid as if challenging it to a private duel. The droid stopped, too, and for a moment they seemed to be regarding each other. Then, almost delicately, the droid lowered its pods and sent a single missile sizzling through the air.

Brolis tensed, watching helplessly as the rocket streaked across the open space. Jedi lightsabers, he knew, could defend quite well against the bolts from blasters or plasma weapons. But trying to block a missile that way would merely cause it to explode. If Yoda didn't do something fast, he was going to die.

Then, just as it seemed there was no chance left, Yoda leaped almost casually to the side. The rocket burned through the space he'd just vacated, exploding harmlessly a dozen meters behind him.

From somewhere deep inside the hailfire droid came an annoyed-sounding rumble, the first time Brolis had ever heard one make a noise like that. For a second



or two it seemed to be pondering its next move. Then, in rapid succession, three more missiles burst outward, angling into a tight spread as they flew.

Yoda was ready. He leaped back toward his earlier position to let the first pass by, dropped flat onto the ground as the second shot over his head, then rolled and bounded upward in time to avoid the third. He landed on the ground, lifted his lightsaber again to ready position, and waited. Brolis strained his ears, listening for a clue as to what the droid would do.

And then, over the distance, he heard a series of calibration clicks. "Tracking lock!" he shouted toward Yoda.

His lungs heaved with a fresh coughing fit, and he could only hope the other had caught his warning. By activating the tracking system, the droid was setting its missiles to follow their target no matter what. Yoda's only hope now was to find cover before the missiles got a clean lock onto him.

But he remained where he was, waiting. Lowering its launchers again, the droid fired.

Again, Yoda leaped upward as the missile approached. But this time something was different. Instead of simply arcing into the air, he twisted his body into a dizzying set of spins, twisting back and forth like a gymnast performing a complicated aerial routine.

The effect on the missile was startling. It seemed to tremble as it flew, its nose shaking back and forth as if thoroughly confused. It shot past Yoda, still shaking, and continued on to explode across the square.

Brolis grinned tightly. It was the same sort of evasive jinking maneuver he'd seen starfighter pilots perform in order to shake off a target-locked missile. He'd never guessed that any being, even a Jedi Master, could duplicate such a technique on his own.

Neither, apparently, had the droid. Another growl rumbled across the square; and then, suddenly, it was rolling forward, filling the air with a fresh stream of missiles as it charged.

Yoda was already in motion, leaping and spinning, hitting the ground and bounding off again at unexpected angles, making himself an impossible target for even a hailfire's weaponry to tag. Brolis found himself wincing as missile after missile slipped harmlessly past the Jedi Master, shaking the ground and lighting up the square with distant detonations. One of the missiles, which looked like it couldn't possibly miss, somehow bent aside from its path just far enough to collide with another of the salvo, detonating both midway between Yoda and the droid.

And as that premature explosion momentarily blocked the droid's view, Yoda abruptly switched from defense to attack. He hurled his lightsaber toward the machine, the weapon spinning into the obscuring cloud of smoke from the missiles' collision and shooting out the other side.

But the intended target was no longer there. Even as the missiles had collided, the droid had skidded to a halt and reversed direction to roll rapidly backward across the square. The lightsaber blade sliced through the space where it had been; and as the weapon hesitated in midair, the droid fired another missile straight at it. At the last second, the lightsaber dodged out of its way, streaking back to safety in Yoda's hand. The missile itself shot harmlessly past to add yet another crater to the distant landscape.

With that the barrage ceased. For a few seconds Yoda and the droid again seemed to be staring at each other. Then, moving swiftly but warily, Yoda retraced his steps back to the broken building. "It just let you walk away?" Brolis asked, not quite believing it.

"Clever, this hailfire droid is," Yoda huffed as he stepped in through the opening and retrieved his walking stick. "Close enough to engage it in direct battle, it will not allow me. Nor in futile attacks will it expend all of its missiles. That is why it has stopped now, the situation further to assess."

"So what do we do?" Brolis asked.

Yoda's ears flattened. "Allow it to destroy itself, we must," he said, closing down his lightsaber and gesturing behind Brolis. "Come."

Brolis hadn't been to the rear of the ruined building for three days, not since he'd confirmed that there was no escape route there for him and his squad. He walked now past the scattered bodies of his troops, fighting against the pain of his injuries, wondering what exactly the Jedi Master had in mind.

He soon found out. Where once had been merely stacks of collapsed wall and ceiling material, there was now a small, Yoda-sized tunnel stretching back through the rubble. So that was how the other had appeared so unexpectedly behind him. "A series of large caverns there are, in the cliffs behind this part of the city," Yoda said. "Beyond them, my transport is."

"Yes, I know about the caverns," Brolis said, frowning. The Jedi had stopped beside the entrance to the tunnel and was looking back at him. "I'm not sure I'm up to crawling that far," Brolis warned him, eyeing the tunnel. "My side—"

He broke off as, suddenly, he found himself rising gently off the floor, turning over in midair, and floating head-first toward the tunnel. "But the caverns have no other exit," he added, determined not to show surprise or panic in front of this creature half his size, "so we decided they were of no strategic use to us." He frowned as he was deftly threaded into the narrow tunnel. "Or is there a way out that I don't know about?"

"There is no way out," Yoda confirmed as they moved together down the tunnel. "Through the side of the collapsed building, I came. But the droid will not know that."

The tunnel was suddenly rocked by a terrific explosion from behind them. The piles of debris they were traveling through shook violently, the pressure wave sending a fresh surge of pain through Brolis's injuries. "What was that?" he gasped.

"The hailfire droid, it is," Yoda said, his voice sounding faint and distant through the pounding of the blood in Brolis's ears. "No longer, I fear, does it wish to take you alive. Now, I believe, it will be coming to kill."

Another blast shook the tunnel. This time, as the shock wave washed over him, Brolis fell again into darkness.

He awoke to find himself lying beside a boulder, staring upward at a distant and dimly lit ceiling of rock. Rolling over carefully, he got up onto his knees and eased his eyes above the boulder.

He was in a vast, dome-shaped cavern, one of the group Yoda had mentioned just before the hailfire droid had attacked. Scattered around the floor were a handful of glowsticks, enough to show the Jedi Master standing by the cavern's side. He was slicing into the wall with his lightsaber beneath a wide band of rock

that stretched up along the curved wall to the ceiling and down the other side, forming a sort of rough arch in the center of the cavern.

Brolis frowned up at the formation. He didn't remember any arch being there when he'd explored these caverns two weeks ago. Could his eyes be playing tricks on him?

He stiffened. Above the lightsaber's hum he could hear another sound: the creaking wheels of an approaching hailfire droid.

Which meant Yoda's plan had failed. Obviously, he'd hoped the droid would try to follow them and get itself stuck in the collapsed buildings long enough for him to cut an exit through the cavern wall. But with persistence and probably a few carefully placed missiles, the droid had managed to batter its way through the rubble, enlarge the entrance to the caverns, and chase them down.

It was approaching now. And they were trapped.

Yoda heard the sound, too. Closing down his lightsaber, he leaped across the cavern to land beside Brolis's boulder. "Ah—awake, you are," the Jedi said. "Good. Be silent, now, and observe."

Across the cavern, the hailfire rolled into view. Its cyclopean photoreceptor eye spotted Yoda at once, and it swiveled to face him. Missile pods aimed and ready, it continued forward.

It had reached the center of the cavern when, from beside the two ends of the stone arch, a pair of clone troopers suddenly rose from concealment behind boulders and opened fire.

Brolis's mouth dropped open in disbelief as the blaster fire raked across the droid. But his troops had all been killed in the fighting. Where in the world had Yoda found these men?

The droid responded instantly to the sudden new threat. Swiveling hard to its right, it fired a missile at the clone trooper there, then rotated to face the opposite direction and launched another at the second trooper. The missiles hit their targets dead-center and exploded.

With a horrendous double crack, the bottom sections of the arch blew apart. Shock waves raced upward along the walls, shattering the arch into twin waterfalls of falling stone. The waves reached the top of the dome, and with a roar the rest of the arch and the entire center of the ceiling collapsed.

Burying the hailfire droid beneath a massive pile of rock.

And Brolis finally understood. There had been no soldiers, merely empty sets of armor animated by the same mysterious power that had earlier carried him through the tunnel. Yoda hadn't been trying to cut an exit with his lightsaber, but had instead been putting the finishing touches on a booby-trap of loosened rock that he knew would collapse under the droid's attack.

Just as he had promised, he had allowed the hailfire to destroy itself.

"Come, Commander," the Jedi Master said quietly. "Await us, my transport does."

**END**

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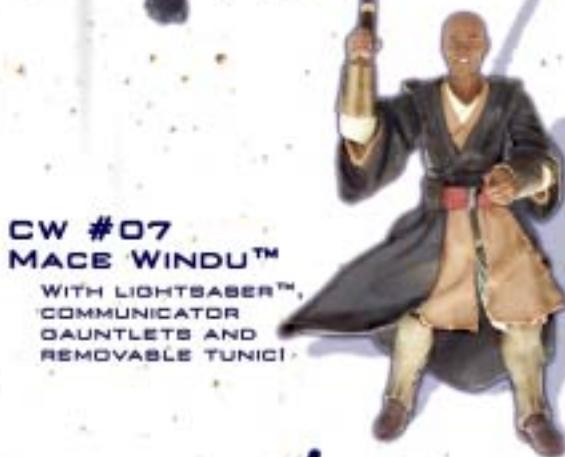
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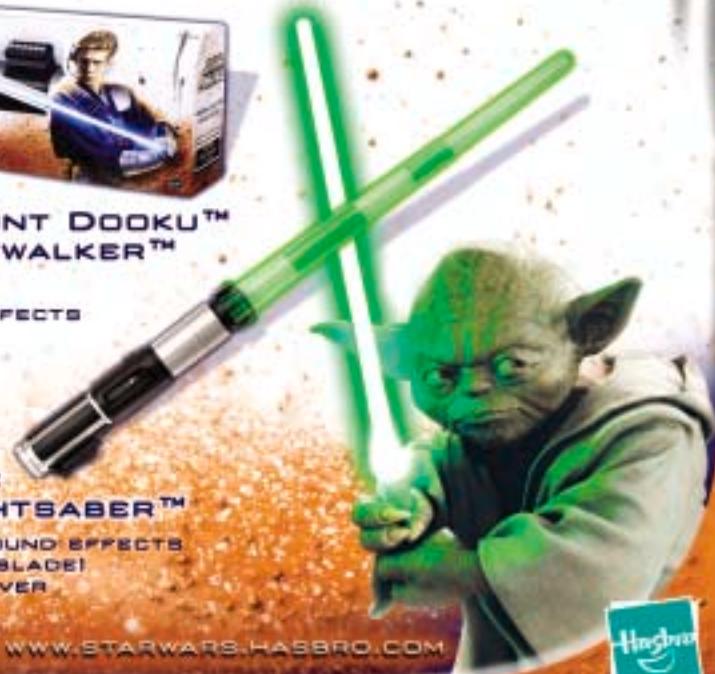


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