

# STAR WARS™

## THE CESTUS DECEPTION

— (A CLONE WARS NOVEL) —

STEVEN BARNES

Author of *Lion's Blood*

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

The Confederacy is trying to get its hands on some very special battle droids, and the Republic is determined to stop them, so Obi-Wan Kenobi is sent to the planet Ord Cestus, manufacturer of the droids. His mission: diplomacy. But if diplomacy doesn't work, he will use any means a Jedi can to help keep these potentially super-dangerous weapons out of enemy hands. And diplomacy can't work. Someone is pulling the manufacturing planet's strings - someone with an agenda all his or her own, which can't allow for either side to win control. As Obi-Wan and Jedi Master Kit Fisto uncover the secret plans layer by layer, Obi-Wan learns just how much he can trust a clone warrior...and just how reprehensible war can be, especially in the face of true honour.

*Also by Steven Barnes*

DREAM PARK (with Larry Niven)

THE DESCENT OF ANANSI (with Larry Niven)

STREETLETHAL

THE KUNDALINI EQUATION

THE LEGACY OF HEOROT POCKET BOOKS (with Larry  
Niven and Jerry Pournelle)

THE BARSOOM PROJECT

GORGON CHILD

ACHILLES' CHOICE (with Larry Niven)

THE CALIFORNIA VODOO GAME (with Larry Niven)

FIRE DANCE

BEOWULF'S CHILDREN (with Larry Niven and Jerry  
Pournelle)

BLOOD BROTHERS

IRON SHADOWS

FAR BEYOND THE STARS

SATURN'S RACE

CHARISMA

LION'S BLOOD

ZULU HEART

# STAR WARS™

THE CESTUS DECEPTION  
— ( A CLONE WARS NOVEL ) —

STEVEN BARNES



arrow books

For my new son, Jason Kai Due-Barnes.  
Welcome to life, sweetheart.



# CLONE WARS

## TIMELINE

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*WITH THE BATTLE of Geonosis (EP II), the Republic is plunged into an emerging, galaxywide conflict. On one side is the Confederacy of Independent Systems (the Separatists), led by the charismatic Count Dooku, who is backed by a number of powerful trade organizations and their droid armies.*

*On the other side is the Republic loyalists and their newly created clone army, led by the Jedi. It is a war fought on a thousand fronts, with heroism and sacrifices on both sides. Below is a partial list of some of the important events of the Clone Wars and a guide to where these events are chronicled.*

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### MONTHS

*(after Attack of the Clones)*

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- |           |   |
|-----------|---|
| <b>0</b>  | <b>THE BATTLE OF GEONOSIS</b><br><i>Star Wars: Episode II Attack of the Clones (LFL, May '02)</i> |
| <b>0</b>  | <b>REPUBLIC COMMANDO</b><br><i>Star Wars: Republic Commando (LEC, Fall '04)</i>                   |
| <b>0</b>  | <b>THE SEARCH FOR COUNT DOOKU</b><br><i>Boba Fett #1: The Fight to Survive (SB, April '02)</i>    |
| <b>+1</b> | <b>THE DARK REAPER PROJECT</b><br><i>The Clone Wars (LEC, October '02)</i>                        |
| <b>+1</b> | <b>THE BATTLE OF RAXUS PRIME</b><br><i>Boba Fett #2: Crossfire (SB, November '02)</i>             |

- +1.5 CONSPIRACY ON AARGAU**  
*Boba Fett #3: Maze of Deception* (SB, April '03)
- +2 THE BATTLE OF KAMINO**  
*Clone Wars I: The Defense of Kamino* (DH, June '03)
- +2 DURGE VS. BOBA FETT**  
*Boba Fett #4: Hunted* (SB, October '03)
- +2.5 THE DEFENSE OF NABOO**  
*Clone Wars II: Victories and Sacrifices* (DH, September '03)
- +3 MISSION ON QIILURA**  
*Republic Commando: Hard Contact* (DR, November '04)
- +6 THE DEVARON RUSE**  
*Clone Wars IV: Target Jedi* (DH, May '04)
- +6 THE HARUUN KAL CRISIS**  
*Shatterpoint* (DR, June '03)
- +6 ASSASSINATION ON NULL**  
*Legacy of the Jedi #1* (SB, August '03)
- +12 THE BIO-DROID THREAT**  
*The Cestus Deception* (DR, June '04)
- +15 THE BATTLE OF JABIIM**  
*Clone Wars III: Last Stand on Jabiim* (DH, February '04)
- +16 ESCAPE FROM RATTATAK**  
*Clone Wars V: The Best Blades* (DH, November '04)
- +24 THE CASUALTIES OF DRONGAR**  
*MedStar Duology: Battle Surgeons* (DR, July '04)  
*Jedi Healer* (DR, October '04)
- +29 ATTACK ON AZURE**  
*Jedi Quest Special Edition* (SB, March '05)
- +30 THE PRAESITLYN CONQUEST**  
*Jedi Trial* (DR, November '04)
- +30 LURE AT VJUN**  
*Yoda: Dark Rendezvous* (DR, December '04)
- +31 THE XAGOBAN CITADEL**

- Boba Fett #5: *A New Threat* (SB, April '04)  
Boba Fett #6: *Pursuit* (SB, December '04)
- +33 THE HUNT FOR DARTH SIDIOUS**  
*Labyrinth of Evil* (DR, February '05)
- +36 ANAKIN TURNS TO THE DARK SIDE**  
*Star Wars: Episode III Revenge of the Sith* (LFL, May '05)
- 



## KEY:

**DH** = *Dark Horse Comics, graphic novels*

[www.darkhorse.com](http://www.darkhorse.com)

**DR** = *Del Rey, hardcover & paperback books*

[www.delreydigital.com](http://www.delreydigital.com)

**LEC** = *LucasArts Games, games for XBox, GameCube, PS2, & PC platforms* [www.lucasarts.com](http://www.lucasarts.com)

**LFL** = *Lucasfilm Ltd., motion pictures* [www.starwars.com](http://www.starwars.com)

**SB** = *Scholastic Books, juvenile fiction*

[www.scholastic.com/starwars](http://www.scholastic.com/starwars)

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## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

### CORUSCANT GROUP

*Obi-Wan Kenobi*; Jedi Knight (male human)  
*Mace Windu*; Jedi Master (male Nautolan)  
*Anakin Skywalker*; barrister (male Vippit of Nal Hutta)  
*Admiral Arikakon Baraka*; supercruiser commander (male Mon Calamari)  
*Qui-Gon Jinn*; technician (humanoid)

### CLONE COMMANDOS

*CT-7567, "Nate"*; ARC Trooper, recruitment and command  
*CT-7560, "Xutoo"*; pilot  
*CT-7566, "Sirry"*; logistics  
*CT-7564, "Forry"*; physical training  
*CT-7562, "Seefor"*; communications

### CESTIANS

*Trillot*; gang leader (male/female X'Ting)  
*Trillot*; broodmate of Trillot (male X'Ting)  
*Trillot Tull*; pilot (female human)  
*Trillot Shug Hai*; Desert Wind member (female X'Ting)  
*Trillot Val Zsing*; leader of Desert Wind (male human)  
*Trillot Nicos Fate* (male X'Ting)  
*Trillot OnSon*; Desert Wind member (male human)

### FIVE FAMILIES OF CESTUS CYBERNETICS

*Trillotbbikin*; research (male human)  
*Trillotdy Por'Ten*; energy (female human)  
*Trillotfka*; manufacturing (male humanoid)  
*Trillotitishi*; sales and marketing (male Wroonian)

*Wizza Quill*; mining (male X'Ting)

#### CESTUS COURT

*Mai Duris*; Regent (female X'Ting)

*Bar Shar*; Regent Duris's assistant (female Zeetsa)

#### CONFEDERATION

*Count Dooku*; leader of the Confederacy of Independent Systems (male human)

*Commander Asajj Ventress*; Commander of the Separatist Army (female humanoid)

VOLUME 531 NUMBER 46

**HOLONET NEWS**

13:3.7

**Baktoid Closes Down Five More Plants**

TERMIN, METALORN—In a statement issued to shareholders, Baktoid Armor Workshop confirmed that it will close down five more plants in the Inner Rim and Colonies as a direct result of Republic regulations that have hindered its battle droid program.

Baktoid plants on Foundry, Ord Cestus, Telti, Balmorra, and Ord Lithone will close by month's end. An estimated 12.5 million employees will be laid off as a result.

Legislation passed by the Senate eight years ago forced the disbanding of the Trade Federation's security forces, the largest single consumer of Baktoid's combat automata and vehicles. Further licensing restrictions on the sale of battle droids made the purchase of such hardware prohibitively expensive for most of Baktoid's clientele ...

# 1

FOR HALF A millennium Coruscant had glittered, a golden-towered centerpiece to the Republic's galactic crown. Its bridges and arched solaria harked back to ages past, when no leader's words seemed too grand, no skyscraper too spectacular, and titanic civic sprawls boldly proclaimed the rational mind's conquest of the cosmos.

With the coming of the Clone Wars, some believed such glorious days were past. Whether the news holos spoke of victory or defeat, it was all too easy to imagine flaming ships spiraling to their doom beneath distant skies, the clash of vast armies, the death of uncounted and uncountable dreams. It was almost impossible not to wonder if one day war's ravaging maw might not envelop this, the Republic's jeweled locus. This was a time when the word *city* symbolized not achievement, but vulnerability. Not haven, but havoc.

But despite those fears, Coruscant's billions of citizens kept faith and continued about their myriad lives. A flock of hook-beaked thrantrills flew in perfect diamond formation through Coruscant's placid, pale blue sky. For a hundred thousand standard years they had winged south for the winter, and might for yet another. Their flat black eyes had watched civilization force Coruscant's animal life into inexorable retreat. The planet's former masters now scavenged in her duracrete canyons, their natural habitats replaced with artificial marshes and permacrete forests. This, others argued, was a time of marvels and marvelous beings from a hundred thousand different worlds. This was

a time for optimism, for dreams, and for unbridled ambition.

A time of opportunity, for those with vision to see.

The red-and-white disk of a two-passenger *Limulus*-class transport sliced through Coruscant's cloud-mantle. In the morning sun it glittered like a sliver of silvered ice. Spiral-dancing to inaudible music, it had detached its hyperdrive ring in orbit, slipping through wispy clouds to land with a *shush* as gentle as a kiss. Its smooth, glassy side rippled. A rectangular outline appeared and then slid up. A tall, bearded man wrapped in a brown robe stepped into the doorway and hopped down, followed by a second, clean-shaven passenger.

The bearded man's name was Obi-Wan Kenobi. For more years than he cared to count, Obi-Wan had been one of the most renowned Jedi Knights in the entire Republic. The second, a startlingly intense younger man with fine brown hair, was named Anakin Skywalker. Although not yet a full Jedi Knight, he was already famed as one of the galaxy's most powerful warriors.

For thirty-six hours the two had juggled flying and navigational duties, using their Jedi skills to hold their needs for sleep and sustenance to a minimum. Obi-Wan was tired, irritable, famished, and felt as if someone had poured sand into his joints. Anakin, he noticed, seemed fresh and ready for action.

*The recuperative powers of youth*, Obi-Wan thought ruefully.

Only an emergency directive from Supreme Chancellor Palpatine himself could have summoned the two from their assignment on Forscan VI.

"Well, Master," Anakin said. "I suppose this is where we part company."

"I'm not certain what this is about," the older man replied, "but your time will be well spent studying at the



Temple.”

Obi-Wan and Anakin continued down the skywalk. Far beneath them the city streets buzzed with traffic, the walkways and ground-level construction occasionally interrupted by wisps of cloud or stray thrantcills. The web of streets and bridges behind and below them was dazzling, but Obi-Wan noticed the beauty little more than he had the height, the fatigue, or the hunger. At the moment, his mind was occupied by other, more urgent concerns.

As if his Padawan could read his thoughts, Anakin spoke. “I hope you’re not still annoyed with me, Master.”

There it was, another reference to Anakin’s rash actions on Forscan VI. Forscan VI was a colony planet at the edge of the Cron drift, currently unaffiliated with either Republic or Confederacy. Elite Separatist infiltration agents had set up a training camp on Forscan, their “exercises” playing havoc with the settlers. The most delicate aspect of the counter-operation was repelling those agents without ever letting the colonists know that outsiders had assisted them. Tricky. Dangerous.

“No,” Obi-Wan said. “We contained the situation. My approach is more ... measured. But you displayed your usual initiative. You weren’t disobeying a direct order, so ... we’ll mark it down to creative problem solving, and leave it at that.”

Anakin breathed a sigh of relief. Powerful bonds of love and mutual respect connected the two men, but in times past Anakin’s impulsiveness had tested those bonds sorely. Still, there was little doubt that the Padawan would receive Obi-Wan’s highest recommendations. Years of observation had forced Obi-Wan to grant that Anakin’s seeming impetuosity was in fact a deep and profound understanding of superior skills.

“You were right,” Anakin said, as if Obi-Wan’s mild answer gave him permission to admit his own errors. “Those mountains *were* impassable. Confederacy

reinforcements would have bogged down in the ice storm, but I couldn't take the chance. There were too many lives at stake."

"It takes maturity to admit an error," Obi-Wan said. "I think we can keep these thoughts between us. My report will reflect admiration for your initiative."

The two comrades faced, and gripped each other's forearms. Obi-Wan had no children, and likely never would. But the unity of Padawan and Master was as deep as any parent-child bond, and in some ways deeper still. "Good luck," Anakin said. "Give my regards to Chancellor Palpatine."

A hovercar slid in next to the walkway, and Anakin hopped aboard, disappearing into the sky traffic without a backward glance.

Obi-Wan shook his head. The boy would be fine. *Had* to be fine. If a Jedi as gifted as Anakin could not rise above youthful hubris, what hope was there for the rest of them?

But meanwhile there was a more immediate matter to consider. Why exactly had he been called back to Coruscant? Certainly it must be an emergency, but what *kind* of emergency ...?

The appointed meeting place was the T'Chuk sporting arena, a tiered shell with seating for half a million thronging spectators. Here chin-bret, Coruscant's most popular spectator sport, was played before hundreds of thousands of cheering fans. Today, however, no expert chin-bretier leapt in graceful arcs across the sand; no pikers vaulted about returning serves. No cerulean-vested goalkeepers veered like mad demicots, hoisting their team's torch aloft. Today the vast stadium was empty, cleared and sequestered, hosting a very different sort of gathering.

As he emerged from the echoing length of pedestrian tunnel, Obi-Wan scanned the tiered stands. Most of the

rows were as empty as a Tatooine desertscape, but a few dozen witnesses were gathered in the box-seat section. He recognized a scattering of high-level elected officials, some important but ordinarily reclusive bureaucrats, a few people from the technical branches, and even some clone troopers. Instinct and experience suggested that this was a war council.

Over time the Clone Wars' initial chaos had settled into a tidal rhythm; loyalties declared, alliances formed. The galaxy was too vast for war to touch all its myriad shores, but at any given time battles raged on a hundred different worlds. While that number represented an insignificant fraction of the billions of star systems swirling about the galaxy, due to long-standing alliances and partnerships, what happened to millions of living beings had the potential to affect trillions.

Already kingdoms, nations, and families had been ravaged by the wars. As the numbers grew and weapons inevitably became more and more powerful, devastation might well spiral out of control, offsetting the countless eons of struggle that had finally birthed a galaxywide union. The labor of a thousand generations, vanished?

Never!

Lines had been drawn: Separatists on the one side, and the Republic on the other. For Obi-Wan as well as many others, that line was drawn with his own life's blood. The Republic would stand, or Obi-Wan and every Jedi who had ever strode the Temple's halls would fall. It was a simple equation.

And in simplicity there was both clarity and strength.

## 2

T'CHUK ARENA'S SAND-COVERED floor was empty save for a pale, slender humanoid female. She wore a white technician's cloak, and her black hair was cropped short. She stood tinkering with a gleaming chrome hourglass-shaped construct that Obi-Wan found a bit puzzling: it looked more like an edgy work of art, a Mavinian cluster-wedding organ, or perhaps a Juzzian colony marker, than anything dangerous enough to concern a Jedi. Rows of narrow pointed legs at the base were the only apparent means of locomotion.

What in the thousand worlds was this about?

The technician fiddled with the device, running various wires from it to a pod at her waist. Perhaps it was some sort of advanced med droid?

The audience grew increasingly restless as she detached the wires, then turned and addressed them.

"My name is Lido Shan, and I thank you for your patience," she said, ignoring their obvious lack of same. "I believe that our first demonstration is ready for your graces." Shan gave a little bow and swept her hand toward the gleaming construct. "I present the JK-thirteen. To demonstrate its prowess, we have selected a Confederacy destroyer droid, captured on Geonosis and reconstructed to original manufacturer specifications."

The JK stood chest-high with a glassy finish, aesthetically pleasing in ways few droids ever managed. A child's toy, a museum display, a conversation piece, some fragile and delicate bit of electronics, perhaps. On the

other hand, the black, wheel-like destroyer droid looked comparatively primitive, battered and patched, but still as menacing as a wounded acklay.

With a hiss of compressing and decompressing hydraulics, the destroyer droid rolled forward, crunching the sand into tread ridges as it did. The JK model hunched down, gleaming, but in a strange way seemed oddly helpless. It seemed almost to *quiver* as it crouched. The impression of helplessness was reinforced by the size differential: the JK was perhaps half the battle droid's mass.

At first Obi-Wan wondered if he was simply to witness another demonstration of destroyer droid power and efficiency. Hardly necessary: he still carried scars from the blasted things. No, that was an absurd assumption: Palpatine couldn't possibly have summoned him from Forscan for so mundane a purpose. In the next instant the destroyer droid rolled within five meters of the JK, and all questions were answered.

In a single moment the JK divided into segments, assuming a spiderlike configuration. In that instant its pose seemed less of a cowering leaf eater than one of those cunning creatures that mime helplessness to lure their prey into range.

The destroyer droid spat red fire at its adversary. The sand rippled as the JK projected not a single force field, but a series of rotating energy disks that absorbed the blasts with ease. That was a surprise: typically a machine required less sophistication to *deflect* energy than to *absorb* it. This display implied some kind of advanced capacitance or grounding technology. The attacking droid continued its rain of fire, unable to comprehend that its pure-power approach had proved inefficient.

Like most machines, it was powerful but stupid.

Obi-Wan's eyes narrowed. Something ... *something* unusual was happening. The JK sprouted tentacles from the

sides and top, tendrils snaking out so swiftly that the destroyer droid had not the slightest chance of evasion. Now Obi-Wan, and indeed most of the witnesses, leaned toward the action as the war droid struggled helplessly in the JK's tentacled grip. Initially the tendrils were thick and ropy. Even as he watched they grew thinner, and then thinner still, webbing the attacker with fibers that finally reduced to an almost invisible fineness.

The tendrils chewed into the destroyer droid's casing like hundreds of silk-thin fibersaws. The droid finally seemed to comprehend its peril and commenced a desperate struggle, emitting disturbingly lifelike keening sounds.

The droid's struggles ceased. It quivered, vibrating in place until it threatened to shake itself apart. Smoke oozed from its slivered casing. Then, like some piece of overripe metallic fruit, it simply divided into sections. Each crashed to the sand in individual chunks, spitting sparks and leaking greenish fluid. The pieces rattled into the dust, trembled. A second later, stillness and silence reigned.

For a moment the crowd was stunned into silence. Obi-Wan could well empathize. The tactic had been unconventional, the weapon deadly, the result indisputable.

"Droid against droid," the globe-headed Bith beside him scoffed. "Games for children. Surely *this* is not worthy of a Chancellor summons."

Beneath them, Lido Shan was unruffled. "Your indulgence, please," she said. "We wished merely to establish a baseline, a reference point against an opponent both familiar and formidable. This class four combat droid was stopped in less than ... forty-two seconds."

Behind Obi-Wan an amphibious Aqualish's translation pod gargled a question. "But what of *living* opponents?"

The technician nodded, as if she had anticipated such a query. "Our very next demonstration involves an Advanced Recon Commando."

On cue, a single clone trooper, a commando in full battle armor, armed with an infantry-grade blaster rifle, stepped forward from his hiding place beneath the lip of the arena wall. Clone Commandos were specialized troopers. They had been modified from the basic trooper template to allow for specific training protocols. A blast helmet concealed his features, but his posture bespoke aggressive readiness. An uneasy mutter wound its way through the crowd.

The amphibian seemed taken aback. "I ... would not wish to be responsible for a death ..."

The technician fixed the Aqualish with a pitying gaze, as if every response had been anticipated. "Don't worry." Her motions were measured and relaxed as she manipulated a few controls. "The machine is calibrated for nonlethal apprehension."

Although that pronouncement quieted most of the witnesses, Obi-Wan felt even more uneasy. This droid, with its ethereal beauty and unconventional lethality, had something to do with his mission. But what? "What exactly is the trooper's objective?" Obi-Wan called down.

The corners of Lido Shan's lips pulled upward. "To fight his way past the JK and capture me."

The muttering witnesses regarded her with disbelief and something more disturbing: *anticipation*. They knew they were about to witness something memorable. But which did they desire most? The JK defeated, or this snooty technician given her comeuppance?

The trooper edged forward warily until he was about two dozen meters from the creature ...

Obi-Wan shook his head. *Creature?* Had he really done that? Thought *creature* instead of *droid*? What had triggered that?

The trooper raised his blaster to his shoulder and fired a crimson bolt of light. The spinning absorption disks reappeared, sucking the energy bolts with a liquid crackling sound.

But the mere fact that the droid needed a force screen seemed to encourage the trooper. He fainted to the right and then rolled to the left, sprang nimbly off his shoulder to fire again, repeatedly changing position as the droid continued its defensive action.

Obi-Wan opened his senses, stretching out with the Force. He could almost feel the man's racing heart, taste his nervousness, sense the choices weighed as he wove his evasive web. Left, right, left ... the next move would be to the—

*Left again.*

As the great Jedi watched, the JK spat out a webbing of strands as thick as his small finger, ensnaring the clone helplessly in midleap. He might have been no more than a wounded thrantcill, bagged by any musk merchant with a net. The timing was superb. No. More than superb: it had been *perfect*. What kind of programming made such precision possible? Obi-Wan could swear that the aim had been almost precognitive, almost ...

But that was impossible.

Struggling in the net as the JK dragged him closer, the trooper pulled his blaster around to draw a bead on the technician. Obi-Wan's eyes flickered to the technician: she seemed unconcerned. In the moment before the barrel would have fixed on her, an orange spark flowed out along the tentacles. The trooper rocked with a single hard, violent shiver, thrashed his heels against the sand, and then lay still. The JK pulled him close, one tentacle lifting his trunk high enough for a second, more slender probe to flash a beam of light against the trooper's closed eyes. The JK lowered the trooper back to the sand, then stood still and watchful.

For a moment the crowd's every intake of breath seemed frozen in their collective throats. Then the JK's web unraveled, flowing back into the droid. The trooper groaned and rolled over onto his side. Another moment and



he levered himself to his knees, wobbly but unharmed. Another trooper helped him retreat beneath the arena wall's curved lip.

The audience applauded, with the exception of Obi-Wan and another Jedi who edged his way through the crowd to stand beside him. Obi-Wan felt relief as the familiar form approached, and also as he saw that the newcomer was no more inclined toward applause than he.

The newcomer was two centimeters taller than Obi-Wan, yellowish green in skin tone, with the ropy cranial sensor tentacles and unblinking eyes typical of a Nautolan. This was Kit Fisto, veteran of Geonosis and a hundred other lethal hot spots. He neither smiled nor applauded the JK's actions: no Jedi would ever look at another being's injury, no matter how superficial or temporary, as entertainment of any kind. Was it mere coincidence that the Nautolan was here, or had he, too, been summoned?

Kit looked down at Obi-Wan's hands, noted their tension. "Such displays are not to your liking?" he asked. His voice had a moist sibilance even when speaking of mundane issues. The surfaces of Fisto's unblinking black eyes swirled. This was repressed anger, but few non-Nautolans would have known that.

"I see little regard for the trooper's welfare," Obi-Wan said.

Kit gave a humorless chuckle. "The reefs of policy and privilege make war seem merely some distant entertainment."

The globe-headed being in front of them turned his head 180 degrees without moving his shoulders. "Come now, sir. It's just a clone, after all."

*Just a clone.* Flesh and blood, yes, but bred in a bottle, merely another of 1.2 million clone troopers born with no father to protect them, and no mother to mourn.

Yes. Merely a clone.

Obi-Wan had no interest in arguing. To these, who had little fear of dying in combat, whose offspring would also be spared a soldier's terrible choices, clone troopers were a supreme convenience. This troglodyte had merely spoken his honest opinion.

"Excellent, excellent," said another witness, a leathery creature sporting a cyclopean cluster of eyes in the center of his head. "Excellent. I now understand how the JKs earned their reputation among the criminal class."

The two exchanged a swift, odd glance, piquing Obi-Wan's curiosity. "Which is ...?"

The two turned back to the arena, pretending not to hear his question. Obi-Wan was not so easily fooled. Alarm trilled along his spine. These waters ran deep indeed.

The leathery one spoke again. "You wish us to be concerned," he said to Lido Shan. "We are prepared to acknowledge the potency of such a device. But ... ahem ... we are fortunate enough to have Jedi among us today. Would it be impolite to request a demonstration?"

Obi-Wan watched as dozens of eyes turned toward them, evaluating, triggering whispers. He watched fingers, tentacles, and claws touch furtively, and was certain that credits were changing hands. Gambling on the outcome?

Kit Fisto leaned closer without ever looking directly at him. "What do you make of this?"

Obi-Wan shrugged. "I've little urge to satisfy their curiosity."

"Nor I," Kit said, and his tendrils swirled with a life of their own. He then turned and addressed the technician. "Tell me," he said. "Does *JK-thirteen* have meaning beyond a standard alphanumeric designation?"

There it was, the question Obi-Wan himself had hesitated to ask.

A thin current of whispers rippled in the arena. The technician shuffled her feet hesitantly. "Not officially ...," she began.

“But unofficially?” Obi-Wan prodded.

The tech cleared her throat uncomfortably. “Among smugglers and the lower classes,” she said, “some call them ‘Jedi Killers.’”

“Charming,” he said, more to himself than anyone else, momentarily too stunned to answer. *Jedi Killer?* What was this obscenity?

Beside him, Kit doffed his cloak, face set in its implacable pale green mask. His cranial tendrils, Obi-Wan noticed, were restless even as his unblinking eyes focused on the droid.

“What are you doing?” Obi-Wan asked, knowing the inevitable answer. In fact, almost certainly, this was why Kit had been invited: his volatility and courage were renowned.

“I would feel this thing for myself,” Kit said, voice deadly calm. He then raised his voice in challenge. “Technician! At your pleasure.”

The Nautolan’s head sensors wavered in the still air. The droid regarded him without reaction. With a single glance back at Obi-Wan, Kit somersaulted to the floor of the arena with a poise and fluidity no chin-bret point guard could have dreamed of, landing without a sound.

He stood a dozen meters away from the JK. As before, the droid seemed harmless. Master Fisto’s lightsaber flashed in his hand, and its emerald length rose from the hilt, scorching the air as it blossomed.

The droid emitted a hum that climbed in pitch and intensity until Obi-Wan’s skin crawled. It remained motionless except for its surface, which once again segmented into an arachnid configuration. It seemed to sniff the air. Its insectile whine changed, as if it were wary of its new opponent.

It extended tentacles again, but this time they wiggled in an oddly sluggish fashion. Strange indeed. Although previously appearing flexible and alert, was it now about to use the same tactics it had used against the commando?

Perhaps the droid was not so advanced as he had initially feared ...

Kit's lightsaber swatted the first tendril from the air with contemptuous ease. Obi-Wan found his attention straying from the JK, focusing instead on Kit, admiring the strength of his stance, the clarity of his angles as he chose lines of engagement. Kit favored the Form I style of combat, a fierce—

*Wait.*

Warning sirens howled in Obi-Wan's mind. Something was terribly wrong. Intellect raced to keep pace with intuition. The JK's repetition of previous patterns had lulled him into complacency. *The tendrils were only a feint.* Where, then, was the real attack?

He leaned forward, examining the droid more carefully. Its *feet*. The spiky protrusions were sunken in the sand. And projecting outward from the treads themselves, burrowing under the surface ...

Were more tendrils, color-camouflaged to resemble sand. This thing attacked on two levels simultaneously, a strategy beyond most *living* warriors. Even more disturbing, it was deliberately misleading Kit by performing at multiple levels of tempo and efficiency, literally juggling its tactics, luring him to overconfidence.

The sand tendrils were within centimeters of their target before Kit sensed them. His lidless black eyes grew wider still as the sand erupted. A stalk snaked around his foot, trying to yank him onto his back. Other vines raced to assist the first group.

The onlookers gasped in amazement as they realized that they were about to see the unthinkable: a mere droid defeating a mighty Jedi!

But Kit was far from vanquished. As if he, too, had merely been playing a game, he crouched and leapt forward, spinning on his body's vertical axis like some kind of carnival acrobat, surging directly at the JK. He rode the

JK's yanking motion instead of fighting it, slipping between the tendrils, the Nautolan's sense of timing faster and more precise than conscious thought.

Whatever its powers, the droid had not anticipated such an assault, nor could it adjust in time. It released him and retreated up a step, all tendrils lashing at the Jedi. Kit's lightsaber rained sparks. Tentacles flopped onto the sand, some of the larger pieces twitching, more like separate creatures than severed limbs.

The Nautolan hit the sand, rolled, and bore in again instantly, his face tightened into a fighting snarl.

Now the JK battled at maniacal intensity, and Obi-Wan wondered: *What is it trying to do?* Again and again the tendrils lashed at Kit's head. Had Lido Shan failed to give the droid proper inhibiting commands? If so, and the gleaming monstrosity had a single opportunity, it would slay the Nautolan. Obi-Wan's hand crept toward his lightsaber, the weight of thirty-six grueling flight hours banished from his limbs. If the need arose—

But Kit had entered lightsaber range. At this more intimate distance, the droid was at a disadvantage. Now Kit was the predator, the JK reduced to the role of prey. Hissing, it retreated on its slender golden legs, tentacles wavering, as if it couldn't crunch data fast enough to counter the unorthodox attack. Kit's emerald lightsaber blade was *here, there, everywhere*: unpredictable, irresistible. The spinning energy disks no longer absorbed the strikes: now they merely deflected them, sparks raining in all directions.

Kit accelerated into a blur of motion complex and rapid enough to baffle even Obi-Wan's experienced gaze. The Nautolan Jedi's lightsaber wove between the energy shields, descending on the JK's housing for the first time. The droid emitted a painfully thin shriek. Its gleaming legs shivered.

It collapsed to the sand. It twitched, struggling to rise. And then spilled onto its side, spewing smoke and sparks.

The arena was silent as the crowd absorbed what they had just witnessed. Doubtless, some had never seen a Jedi in full action. It was one thing to hear whispered stories about mysterious Temple dwellers; another thing entirely to see the almost supernatural skills for oneself. A century hence, some might be regaling their great-grandchildren with tales of this demonstration.

But there was another aspect of the affair that most eyes had missed, a strange phenomenon that had manifested first with the trooper, but seemed even more pronounced with Kit Fisto: the JK had *anticipated* the Nautolan's responses.

A bitter metallic taste soured Obi-Wan's mouth, a sensation he recognized as the first whisper of fear. "What is this device?" he asked. "I note that the shields absorb, rather than deflect."

The technician nodded. "And what does that suggest to you, Master Jedi?"

"It is no battlefield implement. It is designed to protect its environment, even from ricochets."

"Excellent," she said.

"And judging by its cosmetic appearance, the JK is some manner of personal security droid."

Lido Shan held up her hands, requesting silence. "That concludes the demonstration," she said. "There will be briefings for some of you. As for the others, the Supreme Chancellor appreciates your presence."

The crowd drifted away, a few of them pausing to congratulate Kit. Perhaps they had considered descending to shake his hand or slap his back, but neither gesture seemed appropriate given the tightness around Kit's dark, unblinking eyes.

Obi-Wan jumped down from the stands and handed the Nautolan his cloak. Without a word Kit accepted it, and