

# STAR WARS

The book cover features a dramatic scene with two characters. On the left, a close-up of a man with a beard and intense expression. On the right, a man with a beard and blue eyes, wearing a red and white tunic, holds a green lightsaber. The background is dark with a blue light source on the right and a green glow on the left.

THE CESTUS DECEPTION

— ( A CLONE WARS NOVEL ) —

STEVEN BARNES

Author of *Lion's Blood*

# STAR WARS®

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— (A CLONE WARS NOVEL) —



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This book contains an excerpt from the forthcoming book *Star Wars: Labyrinth of Evil* by James Luceno. This excerpt has been set for this edition only and may not reflect the final content of the forthcoming edition.

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

# **DRAMATIS PERSONAE**

## **CORUSCANT GROUP**

*Obi-Wan Kenobi*; Jedi Knight (male human)

*Kit Fisto*; Jedi Master (male Nautolan)

*Doolb Snoil*; barrister (male Vippit of Nal Hutta)

*Admiral Arikakon Baraka*; supercruiser commander (male Mon Calamari)

*Lido Shan*; technician (humanoid)

## **CLONE COMMANDOS**

*A-98, "Nate"*; ARC Trooper, recruitment and command

*CT-X270, "Xutoo"*; pilot

*CT-36/732, "Sirty"*; logistics

*CT-44/444, "Forry"*; physical training

*CT-12/74, "Seefor"*; communications

## **CESTIANS**

*Trillot*; gang leader (male/female X'Ting)

*Fizzik*; broodmate of Trillot (male X'Ting)

*Sheeka Tull*; pilot (female human)

*Resta Shug Hai*; Desert Wind member (female X'Ting)

*Thak Val Zsing*; leader of Desert Wind (male human)

*Brother Nicos Fate* (male X'Ting)

*Skot OnSon*; Desert Wind member (male human)

## **FIVE FAMILIES OF CESTUS CYBERNETICS**

*Debbikin*; research (male human)

*Lady Por'Ten*; energy (female human)

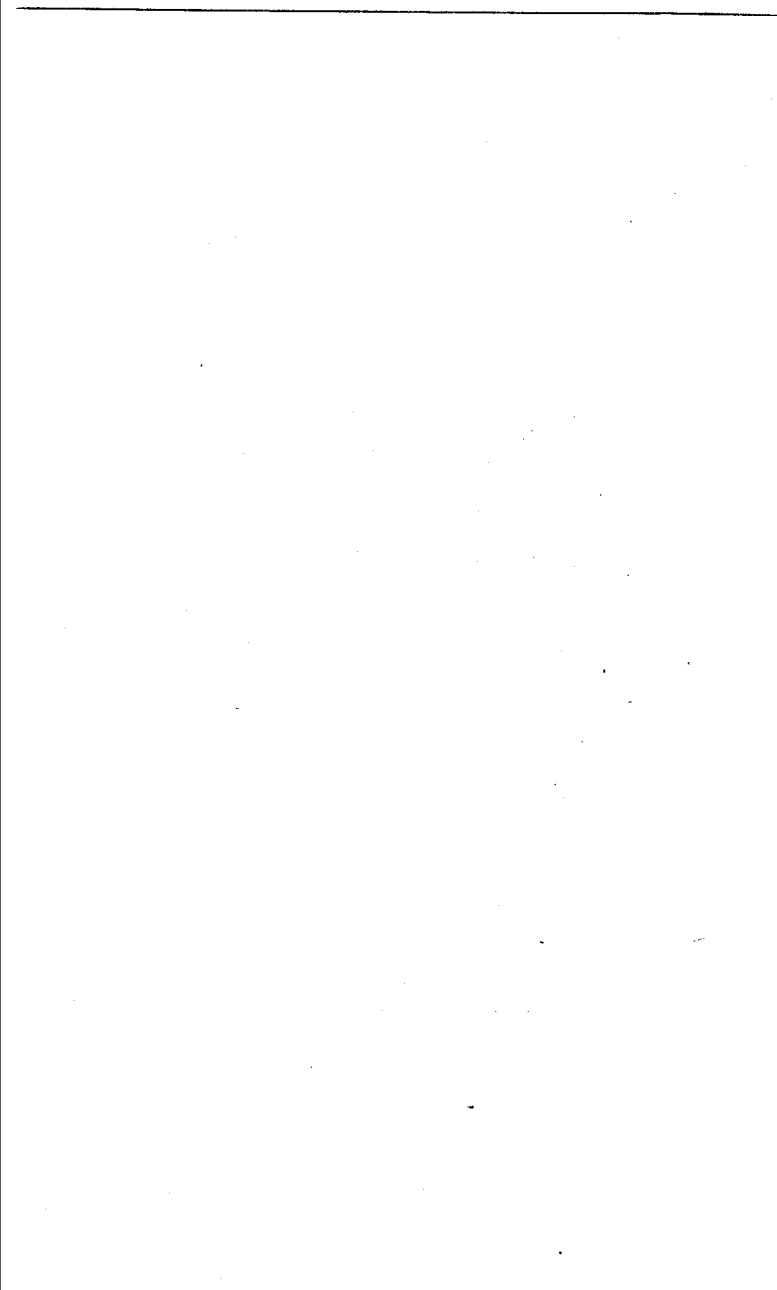
*Kefka*; manufacturing (male humanoid)

## **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 . . .



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 ravening 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 thraucills 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 walk-

ways and ground-level construction occasionally interrupted by wisps of cloud or stray thranctills. 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 desert, 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.

**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 feinted 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 thranctill, 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