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Star Wars: Labyrinth of Evil

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Darkness was encroaching on Cato Neimoidia's western hemisphere, though exchanges of coherent light high above the beleaguered world ripped looming night to shreds. Well under the fractured sky, in an orchard of manax trees that studded the lower ramparts of Viceroy Gunray's majestic redoubt, companies of clone troopers and battle droids were slaughtering one another with bloodless precision.

A flashing fan of blue energy lit the undersides of a cluster of trees: the lightsaber of Obi-Wan Kenobi.

Attacked by two sentry droids, Obi-Wan stood his ground, twisting his upraised blade right and left to swat blaster bolts back at his enemies. Caught midsection by their own salvos, both droids came apart, with a scattering of alloy limbs.

Obi-Wan moved again.

Tumbling under the segmented thorax of a Neimoidian harvester beetle, he sprang to his feet and raced forward. Explosive light shunted from the citadel's deflector shield dappled the loamy ground between the trees, casting long shadows of their buttressed trunks. Oblivious to the chaos occurring in their midst, columns of the five-meter-long harvesters continued their stalwart march toward a mound that supported the fortress. In their cutting jaws or on their upsweeping backs they carried cargoes of pruned foliage. The crushing sounds of their ceaseless gnawing provided an eerie cadence to the rumbling detonations and the hiss and whine of blaster bolts.

From off to Obi-Wan's left came a sudden click of servos; to his right, a hushed cry of warning.

"Down, Master!"



He dropped into a crouch even before Anakin's lips formed the final word, lightsaber aimed to the ground to keep from impaling his onrushing former Padawan. A blur of thrumming blue energy sizzled through the humid air, followed by a sharp smell of cauterized circuitry, the tang of ozone. A blaster discharged into soft soil, then the stalked, elongated head of a battle droid struck the ground not a meter from Obi-Wan's feet, sparking as it bounced and rolled out of sight, repeating: "Roger, roger . . . Roger, roger . . ."

In a tuck, Obi-Wan pivoted on his right foot in time to see the droid's spindly body collapse. The fact that Anakin had saved his life was nothing new, but Anakin's blade had passed a little too close for comfort. Eyes somewhat wide with surprise, he came to his feet.

"You nearly took my head off."

Anakin held his blade to one side. In the strobing light of battle his blue eyes shone with wry amusement. "Sorry, Master, but your head was where my lightsaber needed to go."

Master.

Anakin used the honorific not as learner to teacher, but as Jedi Knight to Jedi Council member. The braid that had defined his earlier status had been ritually severed after his audacious actions at Praesitlyn. His tunic, knee-high boots, and tight-fitting trousers were as black as the night. His face scarred from a contest with Dooku-trained Asajj Ventress. His mechanical right hand sheathed in an elbow-length glove. He had let his hair grow long the past few months, falling almost to his shoulders now. His face he kept clean-shaven, unlike Obi-Wan, whose strong jaw was defined by a short beard.

"I suppose I should be grateful your lightsaber needed to go there, rather than desired to."

Anakin's grin blossomed into a full-fledged smile. "Last time I checked we were on the same side, Master."

"Still, if I'd been a moment slower . . ."

Anakin booted the battle droid's blaster aside. "Your fears are only in your mind."

Obi-Wan scowled. "Without a head I wouldn't have much mind left, now, would I?" He swept his lightsaber in a flourishing pass, nodding up the alley of manax trees. "After you."

They resumed their charge, moving with the supernatural speed and grace afforded by the Force, Obi-Wan's brown cloak swirling behind him. Victims of the initial bombardment, scores of battle droids lay sprawled on the ground. Others dangled like broken marionettes from the branches of the trees into which they had been hurled.

Areas of the leafy canopy were in flames.

Two scorched droids little more than arms and torsos lifted their weapons as the Jedi approached, but Anakin only raised his left hand in a Force push that shoved the droids flat onto their backs.

They jinked right, somersaulting under the wide bodies of two harvester beetles, then hurdling a tangle of barbed underbrush that had managed to anchor itself in the otherwise meticulously tended orchard. They emerged from the tree line at the shore of a broad irrigation canal, fed by a lake that delimited the Neimoidians' citadel on three sides. In the west a trio of wedge-shaped Venator-class assault cruisers hung in scudding clouds. North and east the sky was in turmoil, crosshatched with ion trails, turbolaser beams, hypsens of scarlet light streaming upward from weapons emplacements outside the citadel's energy shield. Rising from high ground at the end of the peninsula, the tiered fastness was reminiscent of the command towers of the Trade Federation core ships, and indeed had been the inspiration for them.

Somewhere inside, trapped by Republic forces, were the Trade Federation elite.

With his homeworld threatened and the purse worlds of Deko and Koru Neimoidia devastated, Viceroy Gunray would have been wiser to retreat to the Outer Rim, as other members of the Separatist Council were thought to be doing. But rational thinking had never been a Neimoidian strong suit, especially when possessions remained on Cato Neimoidia the viceroy apparently couldn't live without. Backed by a battle group of Federation warships, he had slipped onto Cato Neimoidia, intent on looting the citadel before it fell. But Republic forces had been lying in wait, eager to capture him alive and bring him to justice-thirteen years late, in the judgment of many.

Cato Neimoidia was as close to Coruscant as Obi-Wan and Anakin had been in almost four standard months, and with the last remaining Separatist strongholds now cleared from the Core and Colonies, they expected to be back in the Outer Rim by week's end.

Obi-Wan heard movement on the far side of the irrigation canal.

An instant later, four clone troopers crept from the tree line on the opposite bank to take up firing positions amid the water-smoothed rocks that lined the ditch. Far behind them a crashed gunship was burning. Protruding from the canopy, the LAAT's blunt tail was stenciled with the eight-rayed battle standard of the Galactic Republic.

A gunboat glided into view from downstream, maneuvering to where the Jedi were waiting. Standing in the bow, a clone commander named Cody waved hand signals to the troopers on shore and to others in the gunboat, who immediately fanned out to create a safe perimeter.

Troopers could communicate with one another through the comlinks built into their T-visored helmets, but the Advanced Recon Commando teams had



created an elaborate system of gestures meant to thwart enemy attempts at eavesdropping.

A few nimble leaps brought Cody face-to-face with Obi-Wan and Anakin.

"Sirs, I have the latest from airborne command."

"Show us," Anakin said.

Cody dropped to one knee, his right hand activating a device built into his left wrist gauntlet. A cone of blue light emanated from the device, and a hologram of task force commander Dodonna resolved.

"Generals Kenobi and Skywalker, provincial recon unit reports that Viceroy Gunray and his entourage are making their way to the north side of the redoubt. Our forces have been hammering at the shield from above and from points along the shore, but the shield generator is in a hardened site, and difficult to get at. Gunships are taking heavy fire from turbolaser cannons in the lower ramparts. If your team is still committed to taking Gunray alive, you're going to have to skirt those defenses and find an alternative way into the palace. At this point we cannot reinforce, repeat, cannot reinforce."

Obi-Wan looked at Cody when the hologram had faded. "Suggestions, Commander?"

Cody made an adjustment to the wrist projector, and a 3-D schematic of the redoubt formed in midair. "Assuming that Gunray's fortress is similar to what we found on Deko and Koru, the underground levels will contain fungus farms and processing and shipment areas. There will be access from the shipping areas into the midlevel grub hatcheries, and from the hatcheries we'll be able to infiltrate the upper reaches."

Cody carried a short-stocked DC-15 blaster rifle and wore the white armor and imaging system helmet that had come to symbolize the Grand Army of the Republic-grown, nurtured, and trained on the remote world of Kamino, three years earlier. Just now, though, areas of white showed only where there were no smears of mud or dried blood, no gouges, abrasions, or charred patches. Cody's position was designated by orange markings on his helmet crest and shoulder guards. His upper right arm bore stripes signifying campaigns in which he had participated: Aagonar, Praesitlyn, Paracelus Minor, Antar 4, Tibrin, Skor II, and dozens of other worlds from Core to Outer Rim.

Over the years Obi-Wan had formed battlefield partnerships with several Advanced Recon Commandos-Alpha, with whom he had been imprisoned on Rattatak, and Jangotat, on Ord Cestus. Early-generation ARCs had received training by the Mandalorian clone template, Jango Fett. While the Kaminoans had managed to breed some of Fett out of the regulars, they had been more selective in the case of the ARCs. As a consequence, ARCs displayed more individual initiative and leadership abilities. In short, they were more like the late bounty hunter himself, which was to say, more



human. While Cody wasn't genetically an Advanced Recon Commando, he had ARC training and shared many ARC attributes.

In the initial stages of the war, clone troopers were treated no differently from the war machines they piloted or the weapons they fired. To many they had more in common with battle droids poured by the tens of thousands from Baktoid Armor Workshops on a host of Separatist-held worlds. But attitudes began to shift as more and more troopers died. The clones' unfaltering dedication to the Republic, and to the Jedi, showed them to be true comrades in arms, and deserving of all the respect and compassion they were now afforded. It was the Jedi themselves, in addition to other progressive thinking officials in the Republic, who had urged that second- and third-generation troopers be given names rather than numbers, to foster a growing fellowship.

"I agree that we can probably reach the upper levels, Commander," Obi-Wan said at last. "But how do you propose we reach the fungus farms to begin with?"

Cody stood to his full height and pointed toward the orchards. "We go in with the harvesters."

Obi-Wan glanced uncertainly at Anakin and motioned him off to one side.

"It's just the two of us. What do you think?"

"I think you worry too much, Master."

Obi-Wan folded his arms across his chest. "And who'll worry about you if I don't?"

Anakin canted his head and grinned. "There are others."

"You can only be referring to See-Threepio. And you had to build him."

"Think what you will."

Obi-Wan narrowed his eyes with purpose. "Oh, I see. But I would have thought Senator Amidala of greater interest to you than Supreme Chancellor Palpatine." Before Anakin could respond, he added: "Despite that she's a politician also."

"Don't think I haven't tried to attract her interest, Master."

Obi-Wan regarded Anakin for a moment. "What's more, if Chancellor Palpatine had genuine concern for your welfare, he would have kept you closer to Coruscant."

Anakin placed his artificial hand on Obi-Wan's left shoulder. "Perhaps, Master. But then, who would look after you?"

