

Star Wars

Short Story Collection

Storm Fleet Warnings

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updated : 11.XI.2006

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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 hydrosponder 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 hydrosponder. 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.