The 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 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 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.”