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Star Wars: The New Jedi Order: Dark Tide 1: Onslaught

By Michael A. Stackpole



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In this epic of unsurpassed action and imagination, Michael Stackpole helps to launch an exciting new era in Star Wars® history. ONSLAUGHT pits the battle-tested heroes of the past--Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, and Leia Organa Solo--along with the next generation of Jedi and droids, against fearsome never-before-encountered enemies from beyond the galactic rim . . .

It is a perilous time for the New Republic. Just when unity is needed most, mistrust is on the rise. Even the Jedi feel the strain, as rogue elements rebel against Luke's leadership. When alien invaders known as the Yunnan Vong strike without warning, the New Republic is thrown on the defensive. Merciless warriors, the Yunnan Vong glory in torture. Their technology is as strange as it is deadly. Most ominous of all, they are impervious to the Force.

Now Luke must wield all the awesome powers of a Jedi Master to defeat the gravest threat since Darth Vader. As Leia and Gavin Darklighter lead desperate refugees in a fighting retreat from Yunnan Vong forces, Mara Jade, Anakin, Jacen, and Corran Horn find themselves tested as never before by a faceless, implacable foe determined to smother the light of the New Republic forever beneath a shroud of darkest evil . . .



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Editorial Review

About the Author

Michael A. Stackpole is the author of the New York Times bestselling Star Wars X-wing novels. Dark Tide: Onslaught is the first of two new Star Wars novels he is writing. When not chained to a desk madly fighting deadlines, he plays indoor soccer, rides a mountain bike, and reads, but not all at the same time. He lives in Arizona with Liz Danforth and a small pack of Welsh Cardigan Corgis.

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CHAPTER TWO

Snug in the X-wing simulator cockpit, Colonel Gavin Darklighter, Rogue Squadron's commanding officer, flicked his right thumb against the ring he wore on that hand. Apprehension gripped him, but he knew there was no sense in stalling a second longer. He glanced over his shoulder at the R2-Delta astromech droid sitting behind him. "Okay, Catch, run the simulation designated 'skipchaser.'"

The little gold-and-white droid tootled pleasantly, and the simulator cockpit came alive with lights and data scrolling on the primary screen. Despite the years of refits the little droid had undergone in Gavin's service--including requisite memory wipes and programming upgrades--it always greeted him with a brief summary of the weather on Tatooine and Coruscant. Gavin appreciated that little bit of pleasantries, which is why he'd not traded the droid in for a newer model--though the Delta upgrade had been most welcome for speeding up navigational computations.

The biggest change in his relationship with the droid had been its name. In the early days he'd called it Jawaswag, figuring that any Jawa would love to have the droid. Later, after the Thrawn crisis, a group of Jawas had tried to steal Jawaswag, but the droid had fended them off and actually hurt one. From that point forward Gavin had taken to calling the droid Toughcatch, which had just become shortened to Catch.

The simulator's visual field filled with stars and then an asteroid belt, into which Gavin guided the X-wing. It felt much like the old T-65s Rogue Squadron used to fly when he'd first joined the Rebellion, but the T-65A3 model was a couple of generations advanced over the original models. While not as slick as the new XJ model, the A3 had improved shields and lasers that boasted improvements in accuracy and power. The peace reached with the Imperial Remnant meant that there were few competent foes to test the new fighters against--and the fighter had proved quite lethal when unleashed on pirates in the Rimward regions of the New Republic.

Gavin glanced at his primary monitor, but nothing was popping up as a threat. He punched up a supplemental data plug-in that expanded the available target profiles. "Catch, give me biologicals down to the size of mynocks and anything that appears to be moving erratically or on a course that is beyond norm for orbital debris."

The droid whistled an acknowledgment, but still nothing showed on Gavin's screen. He frowned. What is it I'm supposed to be seeing? It makes no sense for Admiral Kre'fey to have given me access to this simulation if there is nothing out here.

Gavin hesitated for a moment. He knew that his idea of what made sense and a Bothan admiral's idea of same could be vastly different. Many times he'd had to deal with Bothan manipulation of himself or his

command, and most of those times had been a disaster. Yet, despite the Kre'fey clan having a negative association with Rogue Squadron because of events over two decades old, Gavin had found young Traest Kre'fey to be remarkably straightforward in general, and very much more so when dealing with the Rogues.

The primary console beeped, and a small box appeared around a distant object on the X-wing's heads-up display. Gavin selected the object as a target and glanced down at its profile and image on the secondary monitor. At a quick glance it could have been mistaken for an asteroid and dismissed easily, but to Gavin it looked far too symmetrical. It reminded him a great deal of a seed--a bit bulbous in the middle, but tapered at both ends. The rear had a couple of recesses in it that could have hidden propulsion exhaust units, and a couple more up front that could house weapons.

Gavin shivered, then nudged the X-wing's throttle forward. "Catch, start recording this run. I want to be able to study the playback." Applying a little etheric rudder, Gavin pointed the X-wing's nose on a course that would cut behind the seed. Reaching up to his right, he flipped a switch that locked the S-foils in attack position. With a flick of his thumb, he shifted his weapons control to lasers and quadded them up so all four would fire with a single squeeze of the stick's trigger.

The seed shifted itself around so its nose swung into line with his approach vector. Sensors gave him no read on energy weapons powering up, which disturbed him less than getting no power readings for propulsion. How is that thing moving?

Before any answers suggested themselves, Gavin quickly kicked the X-wing into a barrel roll to starboard and leveled out with his crosshairs covering the seed. He triggered a quick blast and waited for the seed to explode, but that didn't happen. As the quad burst neared the target, the bolts all whirled into an invisible vortex and vanished into a pinpoint of white light. Emperor's black bones ...

The seed jetted forward, swinging around to bring its nose to bear on the X-wing. Gavin started to roll port and dive, but something shook his ship. In a heartbeat Catch started screeching and the X-wing's forward shields collapsed. Something dully red blossomed on the seed's nose, then shot toward the X-wing. It hit hard and splattered a bit, then what appeared to be molten rock started melting through the fighter's metal flesh.

Warning sirens blared, drowning out Catch's panicky tones. Bright red damage flags began to scroll up over the primary monitor, all but one of them moving too fast for Gavin to read. The one he could see reported a premature ignition of a proton torpedo's engine, which lit up the whole port magazine and tore the X-wing apart.

Stunned, Gavin sat back in his seat as the screens went black and the cockpit's hatch cracked open. He glanced at his chronometer and shook his head. "Catch, we lasted twenty-five seconds. What was that thing?"

A human orderly appeared at the edge of the cockpit. "Colonel Darklighter, the admiral sends his compliments."

Gavin blinked and stroked a gloved hand over his brown goatee. "His compliments? I lasted less than half a minute."

"Yes, Colonel, very true." The orderly smiled. "The admiral said he would meet you in your office in an hour and explain why you are to be congratulated on doing so well."

Gavin sat behind his desk, idly punching up holographic images on his holoprojector plate. The first picture showed him and his two sons--orphaned boys who had lived near the Rogue Squadron hangar after the Thrawn crisis--all smiles. The next showed the boys two years older, still smiling despite being all dressed up, standing with Gavin and his bride, Sera Faleur.

She'd been the social worker who had helped him through the adoption process for the boys. Gavin smiled as he remembered squadron mates telling him that their mixed marriage couldn't last. They were both human, but she came from Chandrila, having grown up on the shores of the Silver Sea, and he was from Tatooine, yet despite the differences in their homeworlds, they easily made a life together.

The next image showed Sera and Gavin with their first daughter; after that came shots of them with their new son and then another daughter. An image made as a New Year's greeting card showed all seven of them together. Gavin easily remembered how happy they'd all been together. Prior to meeting Sera he'd pretty much resigned himself to never finding someone to love, but she'd been the balm to heal his broken heart. She'd not made him forget the past and the lover he'd lost, she'd just helped him recapture the joy of life and all its possibilities.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything, Colonel."

Gavin looked up through the image of his family and shook his head. "No, Admiral, not at all." He shut off the holoprojector, relieved that the Bothan admiral's arrival had stopped the cycle of pictures right there, at the happy times.

Admiral Traest Kre'fey bore a striking resemblance to the other members of the Kre'fey family Gavin had seen: the late General Laryn--the admiral's grandfather--and the admiral's brother, Karka. Despite having spent a certain amount of time in the company of Bothans, Gavin couldn't remember any outside the Kre'fey family whose fur was pure white. Traest didn't have the golden eyes the other two had; instead his were mostly violet with flecks of gold. Gavin assumed the violet came from Borsk Fey'lya's line, since he knew the two of them were related through some complicated tangle of marriages between the two families.

Traest wore a black flight suit that he'd unzipped down to midchest. He closed the door to Gavin's office, then unceremoniously plopped himself down on the couch to the left of the door. Gavin moved from behind his desk to one of the two chairs making up the conversation nook in his office.

He sat and rested his elbows on his knees. "It killed me in twenty-five seconds. What was it?"

The Bothan smiled. "Congratulations. I died in fifteen in my first engagement. Pulling the biological targeting data on-line is what gave you some warning."

"If I weren't dead, I'm sure that would make me feel better." Gavin frowned. "Do we know what it was?"

The Bothan admiral raked claws back through his pale mane. "Two days ago Leia Organa Solo spoke to the senate and tried to warn them about an unknown alien force that had attacked several worlds on the Rim, out beyond Dantooine. She didn't get a very warm reception. She left data behind, from which the simulation was created."

Gavin sat back in his chair. "You're telling me that seed, that 'thing,' is a starfighter being used by folks who attacked the Outer Rim?"

"Yes. Technically it's called a coralskipper by the species that created it. They grow them out of something called yorick coral. I know the name is not terribly inspiring of fear, but I assume it loses something in the translation from their tongue. I've designated them 'skips' for our purposes."

"And the pri...

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