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Hard Contact (Star Wars: Republic Commando, Book 1)

By Karen Traviss



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As the Clone Wars rage, victory or defeat lies in the hands of elite squads that take on the toughest assignments in the galaxy—stone-cold soldiers who go where no one else would, to do what no one else could. . . .

On a mission to sabotage a chemical weapon research facility on a Separatist-held planet, four clone troopers operate under the very noses of their enemies. The commandos are outnumbered and outgunned, deep behind enemy lines with no backup—and working with strangers instead of trusted teammates. Matters don't improve when Darman, the squad's demolitions expert, gets separated from the others during planetfall. Even Darman's apparent good luck in meeting an inexperienced Padawan vanishes once Etain admits to her woeful inexperience.

For the separated clone commandos and stranded Jedi, a long, dangerous journey lies ahead, through hostile territory brimming with Trandoshan slavers, Separatists, and suspicious natives. A single misstep could mean discovery . . . and death. It's a virtual suicide mission for anyone—anyone except Republic Commandos.



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Editorial Review

From the Inside Flap

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About the Author

A former defense correspondent and TV and newspaper journalist, KAREN TRAVISS has also worked as a police press officer, an advertising copywriter, and a journalism lecturer. She has served in both the Royal Naval Auxiliary Service and the Territorial Army. Since her graduation from the Clarion East class of 2000, her short stories have appeared in *Asimov's*, *Realms of Fantasy*, and *On Spec*. Her first novel, *City of Pearl*, was published in 2004 to critical acclaim; her second novel is *Crossing the Line*.

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Think of yourselves as a hand. Each of you is a finger, and without the others you're useless. Alone, a finger can't grasp, or control, or form a fist. You are nothing on your own, and everything together.

--Commando instructor Sergeant Kal Skirata

Darman moved on fast, up a tree-covered slope a kilometer south. He planned on spending the rest of the daylight hours in a carefully constructed hide at the highest vantage point he could find, slightly below the skyline.

He concentrated on making a crude net out of the canopy cords he had salvaged. The activity kept him occupied and alert. He hadn't slept in nearly forty standard hours; fatigue made you more careless and dangerously unfocused than alcohol. When he had finished tying the cord into squares, he wove grass, leaves, and twigs into the knots. On inspection, he decided it was a pretty good camouflage net.

He also continued observation. Qiilura was astonishing. It was alive and different, a riot of scent and color and texture

and sounds. Now that his initial pounding fear had subsided into a general edginess, he began to take it all in.

It was the little living noises that concerned him most. Around him, creatures crawled, flew, and buzzed. Occasionally things squealed and fell silent. Twice now he'd heard something larger prowling in the bushes.

Apart from the brief intensity of Geonosis, Darman's only environmental experience had been the elegant but enclosed stilt cities of Kamino, and the endless churning seas around them. The cleanly efficient classrooms and barracks where he had spent ten years turning from instant child to perfect soldier were unremarkable, designed to get a job done. His training in desert and mountain and jungle had been entirely artificial, holoprojection, simulation.

The red desert plains of Geonosis had been far more arid and starkly magnificent than his instructors' imaginations; and now Qiilura's fields and woods held so much more than three-dimensional charts could offer.

It was still open country, though--a terrain that made it hard for him to move around unnoticed.

Concentrate, he told himself. Gather intel. Make the most of your enforced idleness.

Lunch would have been welcome about now. A decent lunch. He chewed on a concentrated dry ration cube and reminded himself that his constant hunger wasn't real. He was just tired. He had consumed the correct amount of nutrients for his needs, and if he gave in to eating more, he would run out of supplies. There was exactly enough for a week's operations in his pack and two days' worth in his emergency belt. The belt was the only thing he would grab, apart from his rifle, if he ever had to make a last-ditch run for it without his forty-kilo pack.

Beneath him, farm transports passed along a narrow track, all heading in the same direction, carrying square tanks with security seals on the hatches. Barq. Darman had never tasted it, but he could smell it even from here. The nauseatingly musky, almost fungal scent took the edge off his appetite for a while. If he had his holochart aligned correctly, the transports were all heading for the regional depot at Teklet. He twisted the image this way and that in his hands and held it up to map onto the actual landscape.

Yes, he was sure enough now where he was. He was ten clicks east of the small town called Imbraani, about forty clicks northeast of RV point Beta and forty clicks almost due east of RV point Gamma. They'd picked RV points along the flight path because the Separatists would expect dispersal, not a retracing of their steps. Between RVs Alpha and Beta was a stretch of woodland, ideal for moving undetected by day. If the rest of his squad had landed safely and were on schedule, they would be making their way to Beta.

Things could be looking up again. All he had to do was get to RV Gamma and wait for his squad. And if they hadn't made it, then he'd need to rethink the mission.

The idea produced a feeling of desolation. You are nothing on your own, and everything together. He'd been raised to think, function, even breathe as one of a group of four. He could do nothing else.

But ARCs always operate alone, don't they?

He pondered that, fighting off drowsiness. Leaves rustled suddenly behind him, and he turned to scan with the infrared filter of his visor. He caught a blur of moving animal. It fled. His database said there were no large predators on Qiilura, so whatever it was could be no more troublesome than the gdans--not as long as he was wearing his armor, anyway.

Darman waited motionless for a few moments, but the animal was gone. He turned back and refocused on the road and the surrounding fields, struggling to stay awake. Lay off the stims. No, he wasn't going to touch his medpac for a quick boost. Not yet. He'd save his limited supply for later, for when things got really tough, as he knew they would.

Then something changed in his field of vision. The frozen tableau had come to life. He flipped down the binoc filter for a closer look, and what he saw made him snap it back and gaze through the sniper scope of his rifle.

A thin wisp of smoke rose from a group of wooden buildings. It was quickly becoming a pall. It wasn't the smoke of domestic fires; he could see flames, flaring tongues of yellow and red. The structures--barns, judging by their construction--were on fire. A group of people in drab clothing was scrambling around, trying to drag objects clear of the flames, uncoordinated, panicking. Another group--Ubese, Trandoshan, mainly Weequay--was stopping them, standing in a line around the barn.

One of the farmers broke the line and disappeared into a building. He didn't come out again, not as long as Darman watched.

Nothing in his training corresponded to what he was witnessing. There was not a memory, a pattern, a maneuver, or a lesson that flashed in his mind and told him how this should be played out. Civilian situations were outside his experience. Nor were these citizens of the Republic: they weren't anyone's citizens.

His training taught him not to be distracted by outside issues, however compelling.

But there was still some urge in him that said Do something. What? His mission, his reason for staying alive, was to rejoin his squad and thwart the nanovirus project. Breaking cover to aid civilians cut across all of that.

The Separatists--or whoever controlled this band of assorted thugs--knew he was here.

It didn't take a genius to work it out. The sprayer had exploded on landing, detonating any demolition ordnance that Darman hadn't been able to cram into his packs. The Weequay patrol hadn't called in when their masters had expected. Now the humans--farmers--were being punished and threatened, and it was all to do with him. The Separatists were looking for him.

Escape and evasion procedure.

No, not yet. Darman inhaled and leveled his rifle carefully, picking out an Ubese in the crosswires. Then he lined up the rest of the group, one at a time. Eight hostiles, forty rounds: he knew he could slot every one, first time.

He held his breath, forefinger resting on the trigger. Just a touch.

How many more targets were there that he couldn't see? He'd give away his position.

This isn't your business.

He exhaled and relaxed his grip on the rifle, sliding his forefinger in front of the trigger guard. What would happen to his mission if they caught him?

In the next two minutes, reluctant to move, he targeted each Ubese, Weequay, and Trandoshan several times, but didn't squeeze the trigger. He wanted to more than he could have imagined. It wasn't the hard-drilled trained response of a sniper, but a helpless, impotent anger whose origin he couldn't begin to identify.

Don't reveal your position. Don't fire unless you can take out the target. Keep firing until the target is down and stays down.

And then there were times when a soldier just had to take a chance.

They could be Republic citizens, one day.

They could be allies now.

Darman wasn't tired anymore, or even hungry. His pulse was pounding loud in his ears and he could feel the constriction in his throat muscles, the fundamental human reflex to flee or fight. Fleeing wasn't an option. He could only fight.

He targeted the first Weequay, a clean head shot, and squeezed the trigger. The creature dropped, and for a moment his comrades stared at the body, unsure of what had happened. Darman had nothing against Weequays. It was only coincidence that this was the third one he'd killed in a few hours.

And, suddenly unfrozen, the band of thugs all turned to stare in the direction of the shot, drawing their weapons.

The first bolt hit the bushes to Darman's left; the second went three meters over his head. They'd worked out where he was, all right. Darman snapped on the DC-17's grenade attachment and watched through the scope as the civilians scattered. The grenade sent a shower of soil and shattered wood into the air, along with four of the eight militia.

He'd certainly pinpointed his position now.

When he sprang to his feet and began the run down the slope, the four remaining enemy stood and stared for a couple of seconds. He had no idea why, but they were transfixed long enough for him to gain the advantage. A couple of plasma bolts hit him, but his armor simply took it like a punch in the chest and he ran on, laying down a hail of particle rounds. The bolts came toward him like horizontal lumi-

nous rain. One Trandosha turned and ran; Darman took him down with a bolt in the back that blew him a few meters farther as he fell.

Then the white-hot rain stopped and he was running over bodies. Darman slowed and pulled up, suddenly deafened by the sound of his own panting breath.

Maybe they'd managed to report his presence via their comlinks in time, and maybe they hadn't. The information wouldn't have been much use on its own anyway. He ran from barn to barn, checking for more hostiles, walking through the flames unscathed because his armor and bodysuit could easily withstand the heat of a wood fire. Even with the visor, he couldn't see much through the thick smoke, and he moved quickly outside again. He glanced at his arm; smoke curled off the soot-blackened plates.

Then he almost walked straight into a youth in a farmer's smock, staring at him. The boy bolted.

Darman couldn't find any more of Hoka's troops. He came to the last barn and booted the door open. His spotlight illuminated the dim interior and picked out four terrified human faces--two men, a woman, and the boy he'd just seen--huddling in a corner next to a threshing machine. His automatic response was to train the rifle on them until he was sure they weren't hostiles. Not every soldier wears a uniform. But his instincts said these were just terrified civilians.

He was still trailing smoke from his armor. He realized how frightening he looked.

A thin, wavering wail began. He thought it was the woman, but it seemed to be coming from one of the men, a man just as old as Sergeant Skirata who was staring at him in horror. Darman had never seen civilians that close, and he'd never seen anyone that scared.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said. "Is this your farm?"
Silence, except for that noise the man was making; he couldn't understand it. He'd rescued them from their attackers, hadn't he? What was there to fear?
"How many troops has Hoka got? Can you tell me?"

The woman found her voice, but it was shaky. "What are you?"

"I'm a soldier of the Republic. I need information,

ma'am."

"You're not him?"

"Who?"

"Hokan."

"No. Do you know where he is?"

She pointed south in the direction of Imbraani. "They're down at the farm the Kirmay clan used to own before Hokan sold them to Trandoshans. About fifty, maybe sixty of them. What are you going to do to us?"

"Nothing, ma'am. Nothing at all."

It didn't seem to be the answer they were expecting. The woman didn't move.

"He brought them here looking for him," said the man who wasn't whining, pointing at Darman. "We've got nothing to thank him for. Tell him to--"

"Shut up," the woman said, glaring at the man. She turned back to Darman. "We won't say a word. We won't say we saw you. Just go. Get out. We don't want your help."

Darman was totally unprepared for the reaction. He'd been taught many things, but none of his accelerated learning had mentioned anything about ungrateful civilians, rescues thereof.

He backed away and checked outside the barn door before darting from barn to bush to fence and up the slope to where he'd left his gear. It was time to move on. He was leaving a trail behind him now, a trail of engagements and bodies. He wondered if he'd see civvies, as Skirata called them, in quite the same benign way in the future.

He checked the chrono readout in his visor. It had been only minutes since he had run down the slope, firing. It always felt like hours, hours when he couldn't see anything but the target in front of him. Don't worry, Skirata had said. It's your forebrain shutting down, just a fear reflex. You're bred from sociopathic stock. You'll fight just fine. You'll carry on fighting when normal men have turned into basket cases.

Darman was never sure if that was good or not, but it was what he was, and he was fine with that. He loaded his extra

pack on his back and began working his way to the RV point. Maybe he shouldn't have expended so many rounds. Maybe he should have just left the farmers to their fate. He'd never know.

Then it struck him why both the militia and the civilians had frozen when they first spotted him. The helmet. The armor. He looked like a Mandalorian warrior.

Everyone must be terrified of Ghez Hoka. The similarity would either work to his advantage or ge

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Peter Gomez:

Book is usually written, printed, or outlined for everything. You can know everything you want by a publication. Book has a different type. As it is known to us that book is important thing to bring us around the world. Beside that you can your reading expertise was fluently. A publication Hard Contact (Star Wars: Republic Commando, Book 1) will make you to always be smarter. You can feel much more confidence if you can know about everything. But some of you think this open or reading some sort of book make you bored. It is not necessarily make you fun. Why they are often thought like that? Have you seeking best book or suited book with you?

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Carolyn Lutz:

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