

# **SHOCKTROOPER**

By Jack Freeman

(Bale Andros - 826)

One massive Zabrak fist came crashing down on the Mandalorian helmet, ripping it clean off the Weequay's head with the resounding ring of metal. Lon Osul fell back a single step before rushing his adversary with a roar, the loss of his helmet doing nothing to phase him. The two giants clashed with thunder and fury, locking hands, two pugilists looking to overpower the other. There, they remained locked in a show of strength and clenched teeth, groaning and growling at the forefront of the vanguard, surrounded by open war as it ripped through the streets of Cheron, a battle that looked as if it had been ripped from the annals of the Clone Wars.

Muscles quaking, the two pushed back desperate to gain leverage over their enemy. It was the hulking Zabrak, Bale Andros, tall and powerful to match a Wookiee, that had the upper the upper hand. Slowly he pushed down, twisting Osul's hands back, bending his wrists without mercy. But before Bale could grapple the leather-faced warrior, Lon dropped his hold and dodged sideways. The Weequay spun on his heels as the Zabrak stumbled past him, then pulled a riot baton from its sheath on his back. The handle locked beneath his elbow, his brought the great crackling weapon in a spinning taunt as he his opponent recovered. They stood there for a moment, squaring off amidst the chaos, a wicked smile hanging on the Weequay's lipless excuse for a face. Bale thumbed his nose, spat, then dropped low, feet wide, fists up and ready to deliver crushing pain. All around them, the battle was gaining intensity. From the corner of his eyes, the spotted Zehsaa Hysh's lightsaber as it spat to life, hacking through Collective forces with biting efficiency. A flash of white light led his gaze to Zentru'la in his pristine battle armor wielding weapon and body as a battering ram, sending countless grunts flying before him. The Mandalorian Ala'ar shot out above the mayhem, his jetpack flaring as he rain death from above. Seeing his battleteam fighting by his side only fed Bale's bloodlust.

His eyes finally locked on the Weequay's black gaze as the Liberation Front soldier came stomping up to him, riot baton now firmly in both hands. Bale could only duck beneath the great, screaming arc as Osun brought his weapon down like a great club. The baton hit the ground in a crash of lightning, then brought the weapon shrieking around in a full circle, nearly catching the Zabrak as he sought to outflank his enemy. Lon moved with speed that belied his great size, swinging the blunt weapon with reckless abandon, its reach alone keeping Bale backpedaling on his heels, dodging and rolling outside striking distance. The Collective warrior kept the pressure on the Zabrak, hammering air and earth tirelessly, thumping and slamming his way through the chaos after his prey.

“Come here, *sleemo!*” the Weequay taunted, his tone mocking, “Come to Lon!”

Then he swung. “As,” Bale spat as he dodged. “You,” he continued, sidestepping a second strike. “WISH!” he roared as he launched over the third strike, crushing his fist into the Weequay’s cracked face. Again the Weequay staggered, blood already gushing from his flat nose and nearly toppled as he tripped over debris. Bale, aiming to capitalize on his gain, tried to tackle Lon off his feet. Instead, he was met with a crack of lightning that sent him flying to his back.

He gasped, his body afire from the weapon’s electric discharge. The world spun around and around overhead, the idea of war and glorious battle knocked from his head. He’d been assigned to assassinate Lon Osul, and he could have done it with a sniper rifle from one of the countless rooftops now spinning over him. He’d argued he wasn’t an assassin, that he and his new battleteam could meet his forces head-on, that he’d take him out when he crushed their forces. As always, in her endless patience for his shenanigans, the lady Seraine had relented. Now pinned to his back by the effects of his adversary’s attack, he wondered, as he so often did these days, if he had made a mistake.

*Get a grip, you blasted fool, he screamed at himself. Get up! You are Bale Andros. The Iridonian Hammer! You are so much more than this!*

The words rang hollow in his mind, their meaning all but lost to him as if they belonged in another lifetime. Elinacia Rei’s attempt on his life, the months in a coma, the rude awakening and all that ensued, it had changed him, diminished him. He was not the man that he used to be. He was not that man he *needed* to be. The cunning bounty hunter, the undefeated pit fighter, the fearsome mercenary. What was he now? A two-bit mechanic with a shoddy cybernetic leg, delusions of grandeur, and a penchant for disaster?

Something seemed to snap into place inside him. He couldn’t have explained it even if he’d tried. It just *was*, and when Lon Osul scooped him up by the collar of his breastplate, screaming obscenities in his place, he was greeted by a very different Zabrak and a handful of dirt in his eyes. Lon recoiled, swearing, swung his weapon blindly. Bale rolled under the weapon and up to his feet, took hold of the Weequay’s arm and, in one fell swoop, wrenched it back with a

resounding crack of bones. Osul howled in pain, the riot baton tumbling from his free hand as it shot instinctively to his broken shoulder. Squinting through watering eyes and shocked by the sudden rehearsal, Lon didn't even notice as Bale snatched the blunt weapon off the ground and smashed it into his armored chest like a sledgehammer swung with all the finesse of a drunken construction worker. The raw strength of the impact shattered the breastplate and sent the Weequay flying.

Bale walked up to Lon, who was crawling away on his one good arm, his laborious breathing audible even in the midst of battle. *A fair fight*, he remembered himself saying as he discussed the mission with Zentru'la. What a load of *Bantha poodoo* that was.

He snatched the blaster pistol from his belt. He could have done it at any time during the fight. Now it seemed like someone else had held him back.

He brought the pistol to a bare, trained it on the Weequay's forehead.

"Please! N—" A flash of red. Lon Osul fell back, tendrils of smoke swirling from the carbonized hole in his forehead.

"I'm Bale Andros. The Iridonian Hammer," the Zabrak said allowed, with grim determination on his battle-worn face. "I'm done failing.

He stepped over the steaming corpse of Lon Osul without another glance as if it were no more than a pile of trash. *I need a blasted drink*, he thought as he joined his comrades in crushing the Collective. They were victorious on the hour, driving the Liberation Front away from the Taldryan sector.