

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Star Wars: Medstar I – Battle Surgeons

Michael Reaves & Steve Perry

Contents

About the Book

About the Authors

Also by Michael Reaves and Steve Perry

Title Page

Dedication

Clone Wars Timeline

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Chapter 39
Chapter 40

Epilogue
Copyright

About the Book

A novel of healers in wartime, in which a unit of medics struggles against the worst possible circumstances to save lives as the Clone Wars rage around them. With a special appearance by Jedi Padawan Barriss Offee, who will gain her Knighthood in the course of this exciting duology.

About the Authors

Michael Reaves is a screenwriter who has written, story-edited, and/or produced hundreds of teleplays for various television series, including *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *The Twilight Zone*, *Sliders*, and *Monsters*. He was also a story editor and writer on *Batman: The Animated Series*, for which he won an Emmy Award for writing in 1993. He has worked for Spielberg's DreamWorks, among other studios, and is the author of several fantasy novels and supernatural thrillers. He is also the author of *Hell on Earth*, and, along with John Pelan, edited the *Shadows Over Baker Street* anthology (Del Rey, 09/03). Michael Reaves makes his home in Los Angeles.

Steve Perry was born and raised in the deep south and has lived in Louisiana, California, Washington and Oregon. He is currently the science fiction, fantasy, and horror book reviewer for The Oregonian. He has published dozens of stories, as well as a considerable number of novels, animated teleplays, non-fiction articles, reviews and essays. He wrote for *Batman: The Animated Series* during its first Emmy Award-winning season, authored the NY Times bestseller *Star Wars: Shadows of the Empire*, and also did the bestselling novelization for the blockbuster movie *Men in Black*.

Also by Steve Perry & Michael Reaves

The Tularemia Gambit

Civil War Secret Agent

The Man Who Never Missed

Matadora

The Machiavelli Interface

The 97th Step

The Albino Knife

Black Steel

Brother Death

Conan the Fearless

Conan the Defiant

Conan the Indomitable

Conan the Free Lance

Conan the Formidable

Aliens: Earth Hive

Aliens: Nightmare Asylum

Aliens: The Female War (with Stephani Danelle Perry)

Aliens vs. Predator: Prey (with Stephani Danelle Perry)

Spindoc

The Forever Drug

Stellar Rangers

Stellar Rangers: Lone Star

The Mask

Men in Black

Leonard Nimoy's Primortals

Star Wars: Shadow of the Empire

The Trinity Vector

The Digital Effect

Windowpane

Tribes: Einstein's Hammer

The Musashi Flex

Titan AE (with Dal Perry)

Isaac Asimov's I-Bots: Time Was (with Gary Braunbeck)

Steve Perry with Tom Clancy & Steve Pieczenik

Net Force

Net Force: Hidden Agendas

Net Force: Night Moves

Net Force: Breaking Point

Net Force: Point of Impact

Net Force: CyberNation

Net Force: State of War (also with Larry Segriff)

Net Force: Changing of the Guard (also with Larry Segriff)

The Burning Realm

The Shattered World

Darkworld Detective

I - Alien

Street Magic

Night Hunter

Voodoo Child

Star Wars: Darth Maul—Shadow Hunter

Hell on Earth

Armageddon Blues (Forthcoming)

Dragonworld (with Byron Preiss)

Anthologies

Shadows Over Baker Street (co-edited with John Pelan)

Sword of the Samurai

Hellstar

Dome

The Omega Cage

Thong the Barbarian Meets the Cycle

Sluts of Saturn

Star Wars: Medstar I: Battle Surgeons

Star Wars: Medstar II: Jedi Healer (Forthcoming)

*A long time ago in a galaxy
far, far away...*

STAR WARSM

MEDSTAR I: BATTLE SURGEONS

A Clone Wars Novel

Michael Reaves and Steve Perry



arrow books

For my son Dashiell
"Never tell me the odds."—M. R.

For Dianne, and for Cyrus, the new kid in town.—S. P.

CLONE WARS

TIMELINE

WITH THE BATTLE of Geonosis (EP II), the Republic is plunged into an emerging, galaxy-wide conflict. On one side is the Confederacy of Independent Systems (the Separatists), led by the charismatic Count Dooku who is backed by a number of powerful trade organizations and their droid armies.

On the other side is the Republic loyalists and their newly created clone army, led by the Jedi. It is a war fought on a thousand fronts, with heroism and sacrifices on both sides. Below is a partial list of some of the important events of the Clone Wars and a guide to where these events are chronicled.

MONTHS

(after Attack of the Clones)

- 0** **THE BATTLE OF GEONOSIS**
Star Wars: Episode II Attack of the Clones (LFL, May '02)

- 0** **THE SEARCH FOR COUNT DOOKU**
Boba Fett #1: The Fight to Survive (SB, April '02)

- +1** **THE BATTLE OF RAXUS PRIME**
Boba Fett #2: Crossfire (SB, November '02)

- +1** **THE DARK REAPER PROJECT**

The Clone Wars (LEC, May '02)

- +1.5 CONSPIRACY ON AARGAU**
Boba Fett #3: *Maze of Deception* (SB, April '03)
- +2 THE BATTLE OF KAMIND**
Clone Wars I: *The Defense of Kamino* (DH, June '03)
- +2 DURGE VS. BOBA FETT**
Boba Fett #4: *Hunted* (SB, October '03)
- +2.5 THE DEFENSE OF NABOO**
Clone Wars II: *Victories and Sacrifices* (DH, September '03)
- +6 THE DEVARON RUSE**
Clone Wars IV: *Target Jedi* (DH, May '04)
- +6 THE HARUUN KAL CRISIS**
Shatterpoint (DR, June '03)
- +6 ASSASSINATION ON NULL**
Legacy of the Jedi #1 (SB, August '03)
- +12 THE BIO-DROID THREAT**
The Cestus Deception (DR, June '04)
- +15 THE BATTLE OF JABIIM**
Clone Wars III: *Last Stand on Jabiiim* (DH, February '04)
- +24 THE CASUALTIES OF DRONGAR**
MedStar Duology: *Battle Surgeons* (DR, July '04)
Jedi Healer (DR, October '04)
- +30 THE PRAESITLYN CONQUEST**
Jedi Trial (DR, November '04)
- +31 THE XAGOBAN CITADEL**

Boba Fett #5: *A New Threat* (SB, April '04)



KEY:

DH = *Dark Horse Comics, graphic novels*

www.darkhorse.com

DR = *Del Rey, hardcover & paperback books*

www.delreydigital.com

LEC = *LucasArts Games, games for XBox, GameCube, PS2, & PC platforms* www.lucasarts.com

LFL = *Lucasfilm Ltd., motion pictures* www.starwars.com

SB = *Scholastic Books, juvenile fiction*

www.scholastic.com/starwars

RMSU-7
The Jasserak Lowlands of Tanlassa, Near the Kondrus Sea
Planet Drongar
Year 2 A.B.O.G.

1

BLOOD GEYSERED, LOOKING almost black in the antiseptic field's glow. It splattered hot against Jos's skin-gloved hand. He cursed.

"Hey, here's an idea—would somebody with nothing better to do mind putting a pressor field on that bleeder?"

"Pressor generator is broken again, Doc."

Republic battle surgeon Jos Vondar looked away from the bloody operating field that was the clone trooper's open chest, at Tolk, his scrub nurse. "Of *course* it is," he said. "What, is our mech droid on vacation? How am I supposed to patch up these rankweed suckers without working medical gear?"

Tolk le Trene, a Lorradian who could read his mood as easily as most sentients could read a chart, said nothing aloud, but her pointed look was plain enough: *Hey, I didn't break it.*

With an effort, Jos throttled back his temper. "All right. Put a clamp on it. We still have hemostats, don't we?"

But she was ahead of him, already locking the steel pincer on the torn blood vessel and using a hemosponge to soak and clear the field. The troopers of this unit had been too close to a grenade when it exploded, and this one's chest had been peppered full of shrapnel. The recent battle

in the Poptree Forest had been a bad one—the medlifters would surely be hauling in more wounded before nightfall to go with those they already had.

“Is it just me, or is it hot in here?”

One of the circulating nurses wiped Jos’s forehead to keep the sweat from running into his eyes. “Air cooler’s malfunctioning again,” she said. Jos didn’t reply. On a civilized world, he would have sprayed sweat-stop on his face before he scrubbed, but that, like everything else—including tempers—was in short supply here on Drongar. The temperature outside, even now, near midnight, was that of human body heat; tomorrow it would be hotter than a H’nemthe in love. The air would be wetter. And smellier. This was a nasty, nasty world at the best of times; it was far worse with a war going on. Jos wondered, not for the first time, what high-ranking Republic official had casually decided to ruin his life by cutting orders shipping him to a planet that seemed to be all mold and mildew and mushroomlike vegetation as far as the eye could see.

“Is *everything* broken around here?” he demanded of the room at large.

“Everything except your mouth, sounds like,” Zan said pleasantly, without looking up from the trooper he was working on.

Jos used a healy gripper to dig a piece of metal the size of his thumb from his patient’s left lung. He dropped the sharp metal bit into a pan. It clanked. “Put a glue stat on that.”

The nurse expertly laid the dissolvable patch onto the wounded lung. The stat, created of cloned tissue and a type of adhesive made from a Talusian mussel, immediately sealed the laceration. At least they still had plenty of those, Jos told himself; otherwise, he’d have to use staples or sutures, like the medical droids usually did, and wouldn’t *that* be fun and time-consuming?

He looked down at the patient, spotted another gleam of shrapnel under the bright OT lights, and grabbed it gently, wiggling it slowly out. It had just missed the aorta. "There's enough scrap metal in this guy to build two battle droids," he muttered, "and still have some left over for spare parts." He dropped the metal into the steel bowl, with another clink. "I don't know why they even bother putting armor on 'em."

"Got that right," Zan said. "Stuff won't stop anything stronger than a kid's pellet gun."

Jos put two more fragments of the grenade into the pan, then straightened, feeling his lower back muscles protest the position he'd been locked into all day. "Scope 'im," he said.

Tolk ran a handheld bioscanner over the clone. "He's clean," she said. "I think you got it all."

"We'll know if he starts clanking when he walks." An orderly began wheeling the gurney over to the two FX-7 medical droids that were doing the patching up. "Next!" Jos said wearily. He yawned behind his face mask, and before he'd finished there was another trooper supine in front of him.

"Sucking chest wound," Tolk said. "Might need a new lung."

"He's lucky; we're having a special on them." Jos made the initial incision with the laser scalpel. Operating on clone troopers—or, as the staff of Rimsoo Seven tended to call it, working the "assembly line"—was easier in a lot of ways than doing slice and stitch on individuals. And, since they were all the same genome, their organs were literally interchangeable, with no worry about rejection syndrome.

He glanced over at one of the four other organic doctors working in the cramped operating chamber. Zan Yant, a Zabrak surgeon, was two tables away, humming a classical tune as he sliced. Jos knew Zan would much rather be back in the cubicle the two of them shared, playing his quetarra,

tuning it just right so that it would produce the plangent notes of some Zabrak native skirl. The music Zan was into lately sounded like two krayt dragons mating, as far as Jos was concerned, but to a Zabrak—and to many other sentient species in the galaxy—it was uplifting and enriching. Zan had the soul and the hands of a musician, but he was also a decent surgeon, because the Republic needed medics more than entertainers these days. Certainly on this world.

The remaining six surgeons in the theater were droids, and there should have been ten of them. Two of the other four were out for repairs, and two had been requisitioned but never received. Every so often Jos went through the useless ritual of filing another 22K97(MD) requisition form, which would then promptly disappear forever into a vortex of computerized filing systems and bureaucracy.

He quickly determined that the sergeant—the remnants of his armor had the green markings that denoted his rank—indeed needed a new lung. Tolk brought a freshly cloned organ from the nutrient tanks while Jos began the pneumonectomy. In less than an hour he had finished resecting, and the lung, grown from cultured stem cells along with dozens of other identical organs and kept in cryogenic stasis for emergencies such as this, was nestled in the sergeant's pleural cavity. The patient was wheeled over for suturing as Jos stretched, feeling vertebrae unkink and joints pop.

"That's the last of them," he said, "for now."

"Don't get too comfortable," said Leemoth, a Duros surgeon who specialized in amphibious and semiaquatic species. He looked up from his current patient—an Otolla Gungan observer from Naboo, who had had his buccal cavity severely varicosed by a sonic pistol blast the day before. "Word from the front is, another couple of medlifters will be here in the next three hours, if not sooner."

“Time enough to have a drink and file another pathetic plea for a transfer,” Jos said as he moved toward the disinfect chamber, pulling off the skin-gloves as he went. He had learned long ago to cope with whatever was wrong now and not worry about future problems until he had to. It was the mental equivalent of triage, he had told Klo Merit, the Equani physician who was also Rimsoo Seven’s resident empath. Merit had blinked his large, brown eyes, their depths so strangely calming, and said that Jos’s attitude was healthy—up to a degree.

“There is a point at which defense becomes denial,” Merit had said. “For each of us, that point is positioned differently. A large part of mental hygiene lies simply in knowing when you are no longer being truthful with yourself.”

Jos came out of his momentary reverie when he realized that Zan had spoken to him. “What?”

“I said this one has a lacerated liver; I’ll be done in a few more minutes.”

“Need any help?”

Zan grinned. “What am I, a first-year intern at Coruscant Med? No problem. Sewn one, sewn ‘em all.” He started humming again as he worked on the trooper’s innards.

Jos nodded. True enough; the Fett clones were all identical, which meant that, in addition to no rejection syndrome concerns, the surgeons didn’t have to worry about where or how the plumbing went. Even in individuals of the same species there was often considerable diversity of physiological structure and functionality; human hearts all worked the same way, for example, but the valves could vary in size, the aortal connection might be higher in one than in another ... there were a million and one ways for individual anatomies to differ. It was the biggest reason why surgery, even under the best of conditions, was never 100 percent safe.

But with the clones, it was different—or, rather, it *wasn't*. They had all been culled from the same genetic source: a human male bounty hunter named Jango Fett. All of them were even more identical than monozygotic twins. *See one, do one, teach one*, had been the mantra back on Coruscant, during Jos's training. The instructors used to joke that you could cut a clone blindfolded once you knew the layout, and that was almost true. Ordinarily Jos wouldn't be working on line troops, but with two of the surgical droids down for repairs, the only option was to let the injured triage up out in the mobile unit's hall and die. And, clones or not, he couldn't let that happen. He'd become a doctor to save lives, not to judge who lived and who didn't.

The lights abruptly blinked off, then back on. Everyone in the chamber froze momentarily.

"Sweet Sookie," Jos said. "Now what?"

In the distance, explosions echoed. *It could have been thunder*, Jos thought nervously. He hoped it had been thunder. It rained here pretty much every day, and most nights, for that matter; big, tropical storms that tore through with howling winds and lightning strikes that lanced at trees, buildings, and people. Sometimes the shield generators went down, and then the only things protecting the camp were the arrestors. More than a few troopers had been cooked where they stood, burned black in a heartbeat by the powerful voltages. Once, after a bad storm, Jos had seen a pair of boots standing with smoke rising from the hard plastoid, five body-lengths away from the blackened form of the trooper who had been wearing them. Everything in the camp worth saving had arrestors grounded deep in the swampy soil, but sometimes those weren't enough.

Even as these thoughts went through his head, he heard the staccato drumming of rain on the OT roof begin.

Jos Vondar had been born and raised in a small farm town on Corellia, in a temperate zone where the weather was pleasant most of the year, and even during the rainy season it was mild. When he was twenty he'd gone from there to Coruscant, the planetary capital of the Republic, a city-world where the weather was carefully calibrated and orchestrated. He always knew when it would rain, how much, and for how long. Nothing in his life up to now had prepared him for the apocalyptic storms and the almost vile fecundity of Drongar's native life-forms. It was said that there were places in the Great Jasserak Swamp where, if you were foolish enough to lie down and sleep, the fungal growth would cover you with a second skin before you could wake up. Jos didn't know if it was true, but it wasn't hard to believe.

"Blast!" Zan said.

"What?"

"Got a chunk of shrapnel intersecting the portal artery. If I pull it loose, it's gonna get ugly in here."

"Thought you said you had this one signed, sealed, and transported." Jos nodded to Zan's circulating nurse, who opened a fresh pack of skins for Jos to slip his hands into. He wiggled his fingers, then stepped in alongside his friend. "Move over, horn head, and let a *real* doctor work."

Zan looked around. "A real doctor? Where? You know one?"

Jos looked down at the patient, whose interior workings were brightly illuminated by the overheads and the sterile field. He lowered his hands into the field, feeling the slight tingling that always accompanied the move. Zan pointed with the healy grippers at the offending chunk of jagged metal. Sure enough, it was angled into the portal vessel, blocking it. Jos shook his head. "How come they never showed us stuff like this in school?"

"When you get to be chief of surgery at Coruscant Med, you can make sure the next batch of dewy-eyed would-be

surgeons has a better education. Old Doc Vondar, nattering on about the Great Clone Wars and how easy these kids today have it.”

“I’ll remember that when they bring you in as a teaching case, Zan.”

“Not me. I’ll dance at your memorial, Corellian scum. Maybe even play you a nice Selonian *étude*, perhaps one of the Vissëncant Variations.”

“Please,” Jos said as he gingerly spread tissue apart to get a better look. “At least play something worth hearing. Some leap-jump or heavy isotope.”

Zan shook his head sadly. “A tone-deaf Gungan has better taste.”

“I know what I like.”

“Yeah, well, *I* like keeping these guys alive, so stop embarrassing yourself in public and help me get this liver working.”

“Guess I’d better.” Jos reached for a set of healys and a sponge. “Looks like it’s the only way he’ll have a fighting chance, with you as his surgeon.” He grinned behind his mask at his friend.

Working together, they managed to extricate the shrapnel from the artery with minimal damage. When they were done, Jos looked around with a sigh of relief.

“Well, kids, looks like a perfect record. Didn’t lose a single trooper. Drinks are on me at the cantina.”

The others grinned tiredly—and then froze, listening. Rising over the steady pounding of the rain on the foamcast roof was another sound, one they knew very well: the rising whine of incoming medlifters.

The break was over, as most of them were, before it had begun.

2

THE DROP FROM orbit to the planet was faster than normal, the pilot explained to her, because of the multitude of spores.

“Dey gum up *everyt’ing*,” he said, in thickly accented Basic. He was a Kubaz, gray-green and pointy-headed, a member of the long-snouted species whose enemies referred to them derisively as “bug-eating spies.” As a Jedi Padawan and a healer, Barriss Offee had learned early not to be judgmental of a species because of its looks, but she knew that many in the galaxy were less open-minded.

“Specially d’ve ventilators,” he went on. “D’rot’ll eat t’rough d’best filters we got in a hour, mebbe less; y’got to change ‘em every flight—you don’t, d’Spore Sickness get into d’ship and get into *you*. Not a good way to go, b’lieve it, coughin’ up blood ‘n’ cooking in y’own juices.”

Barriss blinked at the graphic scenario. She looked out of the small shuttle craft’s nearest viewport; the spores were visible only as various tints of red, green, and other hues in the air, and an occasional spatter of minute particles against the transparisteel, gone before she could see them clearly. She probed a bit with the Force, getting nothing like a sentient response, of course, merely a chaotic impression of motion, a furious mutability.

“D’spores are, um, adepto ... uh ...”

“Adaptogenic,” she said.

“Yeah, dat’s it. Every time d’m mechanics and d’medics come up wit’ new treatments, d’spores *change*, y’know? And d’treatments, dey stop workin’. Weird t’ing is, dey

don't cause problems at ground level, only when y'get up above d'trees, y'know?"

Barriss nodded. It didn't sound pleasant. In fact, very little about this planet sounded pleasant, even though her information on it was still sketchy. According to the hurried briefing at the Temple on Coruscant, the Republic's forces and those of the Separatists were more or less evenly balanced on Drongar. The war here was limited mostly to ground troops; very little fighting took place in the air because of the spores. On the ground, things were even worse in many ways. Among the problems the forces on both sides encountered were monsoons with devastating electrical storms, soaring temperatures, and humidity over 90 percent. As if that weren't enough, the atmospheric oxygen level was higher than that found on most worlds habitable for humans and humanoids. This often caused dizziness and hyperoxygenation for nonindigenous life-forms, and, for the Separatists' battle droids, rust. Hard to believe, Barriss thought, but even the incredibly tough durasteel alloy of which the droids were constructed would oxidize if conditions were extreme enough. The high oxygen content also limited military engagements, for the most part, to small-arms fire: sonic pistols, small blasters, slugthrowers, and the like, because of the high risk of fire from laser and particle beam armament.

What kept both sides struggling for control of this pestilential quagmire of a world was bota, a plant somewhere between a mold and a fungus, which, to date, had been found almost nowhere else in the galaxy. It grew thick on this backwater planet, but all attempts to transplant it offworld had failed. The plant was extremely valuable to both sides, because, like the spores and other flora and fauna on Drongar, bota was highly adaptogenic in its effects. Many species could benefit from it—humans used it as a potent broad-based antibiotic, Neimoidians sought it as a narcotic painkiller, Hutts utilized it as a

valuable stimulant almost as powerful as glitterstim spice, and many other species found it useful for still other functions. Moreover, the stuff had virtually no side effects, making it a true wonder drug.

Processed by freeze-drying, the resulting product was readily transportable. Its only drawback was that, once harvested, it had to be processed quickly or it degenerated into a useless slime. And, to make things worse, the plant was quite delicate. Explosions going off too close to it could shock it to death, and it apparently burned like rocket fuel when ignited, despite the general dampness of the landscape. Since bota was the reason both sides were here, this was yet another reason for military engagements to be limited—fighting over a field of the stuff would be useless if it burned up, died, or went sour before it could be collected.

Bota was also one of the main reasons Barriss was here. It was true that her primary mandate was to augment the doctors and surgeons who cared for Republic troops, using her skills as a healer, but she was also supposed to keep an eye on the harvesters, to make sure that the bota was being packed and shipped to offworld Republic ports as it was supposed to be. The harvesting operations had been folded in with the Rimsoo procedures to save money and expedite shipment. Neither she nor her superiors had any problems with that. Any advantage the Republic could gain over the Confederacy was valuable and desirable—the Jedi certainly had no love for the rogue Count Dooku, who had caused the deaths of so many of them two standard years earlier on Geonosis.

She strongly suspected that she was here for another reason as well: that this assignment was part, or all, of her trials. Her Jedi Master, Luminara Unduli, had not told her that such was the case, but not all Padawans were warned in advance that they were about to be tested. The nature of the trial, and whether or not the Padawan would know

about it beforehand, were matters left entirely to the discretion of the Jedi Master.

Once, about six months ago, she had asked Master Unduli when she could expect to begin her Jedi trials. Her mentor had smiled at the question, and said, "Anytime. All the time. No time."

Well. If her sojourn on this world was to be her trial by fire, the test that would determine whether or not she had what it took to be a Jedi Knight, she would probably know before too—

The transport slewed in a sudden yawing turn, inertia shoving Barriss hard into the seat. The ship's internal gravity field had obviously been turned off.

"Sorry 'bout dat," the pilot said. "Dere's a Sep'ratist battery in dis sector, an' every now and den dey try t'track one'a us an' knock us down. Standard procedure to t'row in a few 'vasive maneuvers on de way down. *Kanushka!*"

The exclamation of surprise in the Kubaz's native tongue drew Barriss's attention. "What?"

"*Big* battle goin' on, off t'starboard. Coupla mech units an' troops goin' at it—dere, y'see? I'll do a flyover—we're high 'nough, dey can't hit us wit' hand weapons. Hang on."

The pilot made a broad turn to the right. Barriss looked down at the scene. They were, she estimated, about a thousand meters high, and the air was reasonably clear; they were below the main spore strata, with no clouds or mist to block her view.

As a Jedi Padawan, she was knowledgeable in the ways of war. And she had been trained in personal combat with her lightsaber from an early age, so her observation was more critical than most.

The trooper units moved across a field of short, stubby plants, with the sun at their backs—a sound tactical move when facing biological opponents, but of little use against battle droids, whose photoreceptors could easily be adjusted to tune out glare. There were perhaps two

hundred troopers; they had a slight numerical advantage over the droids, which, Barriss estimated, had maybe seventy or eighty units on the field. From this height, the crescent attack formation of the Republic force was apparent as it sought to envelop the droids and gain superiority in field of fire.

The battle droids were mostly of the Baktoid B1 series, as nearly as she could tell from high overhead. There were also several B2 super battle droids, which were basically the standard model with an armored casing overlay and more weaponry. They had broken into quads, each unit of four fanning out to deal with the tactic of envelopment, concentrating its fire on the same section of troopers.

Classic formations on an open battlefield, she knew, just as she knew that the outcome would be decided by which side could instigate the most accurate firepower the fastest. She could almost hear the voice of her Master echoing in her memory:

It does not matter how fast you are if you miss the target. It is the one who hits the most who will have the victory ...

Blaster beams lanced through the engaging forces, which were now separated by no more than a short sprint's distance. Vapor boiled up from misses that hit vegetation, and small fires quickly flared here and there. Troopers fell, seared black and smoking, and battle droids ground to a halt, scorch marks and flashes of electricity on their white metal chassis marking where blasterfire had struck.

It was all eerily silent, no sound reaching this height as the pilot slowed to give her a longer look.

It appeared that the Republic forces would win this engagement—both sides seemed to be losing combatants at the same rate, and in such a case, the side with the larger force would win—though the victory would be costly. A unit that lost eight out of ten troops won only in the technical sense.

“We can’t hang ‘round,” the pilot said. “D’filters’ll be in d’red in ‘nother fifteen minutes an’ we’re five away from Rimsoo Seven. I like t’have a margin ‘f error.”

The shuttle craft gained speed, and they left the battle behind.

Barriss mused on what she had seen as the transport shot over lowland vegetation and steaming, miasmatic swamps. Whatever else this assignment might be, it certainly was not going to be dull.

* * *

Jos was snatching a few precious moments of sleep in the cubicle he shared with Zan when he heard the transport’s approach.

At first, only half awake, he thought it was another medlifter bringing in more wounded, but then he realized the repulsor sound was pitched differently.

It has to be the new doc, he thought. No one else in their right mind would make planetfall on Drongar without being ordered to.

He pushed through the osmotic field that covered the cubicle’s entrance; it had been set to let air circulate freely, but it kept out the eight-legged, bi-winged insects they’d come to call “wingstingers” that constantly buzzed about the unit. He’d heard that the newer-model fields came with an entropic overlay feature that bled energy from the air molecules as they passed through the selective barrier, thus lowering the inside temperature by a good ten degrees. He’d put in a requisition for a batch of them; with any luck, they might arrive a day or so before the war ended.

Blinking in the harsh light of Drongar Prime, he watched the transport spiral down to the pad. He noticed Zan, Tolk, and a few others emerging from the OT as well. It was a time of relative quiet at Rimsoo Seven, which meant that triaged patients weren’t queued up, waiting for surgery

and treatment, and that the surgeons weren't in a life-and-death race with time to save them. They were enjoying the respite while it lasted.

A couple of Bothan techs ran up to the shuttle and sprayed the exterior with spore disinfectant. This particular batch of chemicals, Jos knew, would probably be good for another standard month; it took about that long for the spores that attacked the craft's seals to develop immunities to the spray. Then various chemical precursors would have to be altered, and molecular configurations shifted just enough to produce a new type of treatment that would once again be effective—for a time. It was a constant dance that went on between the guided mechanisms of science and the blind opportunism of nature. Jos wondered, not for the first time, what the odds were of the spores mutating into a more virulent pathogen that could strip-mine a pair of lungs in seconds instead of hours.

Then the shuttle's hatch opened, and so did Jos's mouth—in surprise.

The new doctor was a woman—and a Jedi.

There was no mistaking the simple dark garb and accoutrements of the Order, and certainly no mistaking the shape beneath them as anything other than feminine. He'd heard that the latest addition to the team was a Mirialan—which meant human, basically—a member of the same species as himself, whose ancestors had spread in several ancient diasporas across the galaxy, colonizing such worlds as Corellia, Alderaan, Kalarba, and hundreds more. Humans were ubiquitous from one spiral arm to the other, so to see another one—male or female—arrive here was no great surprise.

But to see a Jedi, here on Drongar—*that* was surprising.

Jos, like most other beings intelligent enough to access the HoloNet, had seen the recorded images of the Jedi's final stand in the arena on Geonosis. Even before that, the Order had been spread mighty thin across the galaxy. And

yet one of them had been assigned here, to Rimsoo Seven, a ragtag military medical unit on a world so far off the known space lanes that most galactic cartographers couldn't come within a parsec of locating it on a bet.

He wondered why she was here.

Colonel D'Arc Vaetes, the human commander of the unit, received the Jedi warmly as the latter disembarked from the transport. "Welcome to Rimsoo Seven, Jedi Barriss Offee," he said. "Speaking for everyone here, I hope you will be—"

But before he could finish his sentence, Vaetes stopped, for a sound was rising in the thick, humid air—a sound every one of them at Rimsoo Seven knew very well.

"Incoming lifters!" shouted Tanisuldees, a Dressellian enlistee. He was the aide-de-camp to Filba, the Hutt supply officer. He pointed to the north.

Jos looked. Yes, they were coming, sure enough—five of them, black dots against the sky, which at this time of day was a faint verdigris in color, like the algae that coated the surface of the Kondrus Sea. Each medlifter could carry up to six wounded men—clones and possibly other combatants. That meant at least thirty injured, possibly one or two more.

After the first moment of realization, everyone began moving purposefully, each doing his, her, or its duty to prepare. Zan and Tolk headed for the OT at a run. Jos was about to follow, but instead he turned and moved quickly to where the Jedi, looking slightly confused, was standing.

Vaetes took her hand and gestured toward Jos. "Jedi Offee, this is Captain Jos Vondar, my chief surgeon. He'll get you briefed and prepped for what's coming." The colonel sighed. "It's something we're all quite used to, sadly. What's even more sad is that you'll get used to it as well, very quickly."

Jos wasn't quite sure what the proper protocol for greeting a Jedi was, but he didn't see much point in