

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Star Wars: Medstar
II – Jedi Healer

Michael Reaves & Steve Perry

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About the Book

The second of a mass-market original Star Wars duology in which *M*A*S*H* meets the Clone Wars, as a small group of medics, including Jedi Bariss Offee, struggles to save lives amidst impossible circumstances.

About the Author

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. 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 Michael Reaves & Steve Perry

By Steve Perry

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: Shadows 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)

By 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)

By Michael Reaves

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)

By Michael Reaves & Steve Perry

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

STAR WARS®

MEDSTAR II: JEDI HEALER

A Clone Wars Novel

Michael Reaves and Steve Perry



arrow books

For my son Alexander:
“The Force will be with you—always.”—M. R.

For Dianne—S. P.

CLONE WARS TIMELINE

WITH THE BATTLE of Geonosis (EP II), the Republic is plunged into an emerging, galaxywide 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 REPUBLIC COMMANDO**
Star Wars: Republic Commando (LEC, Fall '04)
- 0 THE SEARCH FOR COUNT DOOKU**
Boba Fett #1: The Fight to Survive (SB, April '02)
- +1 THE DARK REAPER PROJECT**
The Clone Wars (LEC, October '02)
- +1 THE BATTLE OF RAXUS PRIME**
Boba Fett #2: Crossfire (SB, November '02)

- +1.5 CONSPIRACY ON AARGAU**
Boba Fett #3: *Maze of Deception*
(SB, April '03)
- +2 THE BATTLE OF KAMINO**
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)
- +3 MISSION ON QIILURA**
Republic Commando: Hard Contact (DR, November '04)
- +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 Jabiim* (DH, February '04)
- +6 ESCAPE FROM RATTATAK**
Clone Wars V: *The Best Blades*
(DH, November '04)
- +24 THE CASURLTIES OF DRONGAR**
MedStar Duology: *Battle Surgeons* (DR, July '04)
Jedi Healer (DR, October '04)
- +29 ATTACK ON AZURE**

- Jedi Quest Special Edition* (SB, March '05)
- +30 THE PRAESITLYN CONQUEST**
Jedi Trial (DR, November '04)
- +30 LURE AT DJUN**
Yoda: Dark Rendezvous (DR, December '04)
- +31 THE XAGOBAN CITADEL**
Boba Fett #5: A New Threat (SB, April '04)
Boba Fett #6: Pursuit (SB, December '04)
- +33 THE HUNT FOR DARTH SIDIOUS**
Labyrinth of Evil (DR, February '05)
- +36 ANAK IN TURNS TO THE DARK SIDE**
Star Wars: Episode III (LFL, May '05)



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

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away

RMSU-7
The Jasserak Highlands of Tanlassa,
Near the Qarohan Steppes
Planet Drongar
Year 2 A.B.O.G.

I

IN THE MOMENT, there was little time for thought. No real space to let the conscious mind judge action and reaction, no time for decisions about form and flow. The mind was far too slow to defend her in this life-or-death situation. She had to trust muscle memory, had to let go of any connection to past or future concerns. She had to be totally and completely in the *now*, if she was to survive this battle.

Even these thoughts passed in the space of no more than a heartbeat.

Barriss Offee cut and slashed with her lightsaber, whirling and twirling it, her movements weaving a shield of luminous energy before her, stopping blaster bolts, arrows, swords, even a few slung rocks, without reflecting any directly back toward the attackers. That was of vital importance, and the hardest part of the battle—*don't kill any of them*. Master Kenobi had been adamant on that. Do not lop off arms or legs or heads; do not thrust through the bodies of their attackers. Not those of the Borokii, nor those of the Januul.

It was much harder to fight and disarm or wound than to maim or kill. It was always harder to do the right thing.

Barriss fought—

Next to her, Anakin Skywalker was displaying a fair skill with his lightsaber, though his technique was still somewhat rough. He had come into training much later than had most Jedi Padawans, but he was managing quite well. She sensed through the Force that he wanted to do more, that he wanted to strike them all down, but he held himself in check. She could feel the difficulty he was having in doing so, however. And that slight smile on his face as he wove a defensive energy web before him bothered her just a bit. He seemed to be enjoying this far too much.

To her left, Master Kenobi's buzzing energy blade stitched an ozone-scented tapestry of blurred light, knocking blaster bolts into the ground, blocking incoming arrows, and shattering durasteel blades almost too fast for the eye to follow. His expression was set, grim.

Moving with that incredibly supple grace that was her hallmark, Master Unduli danced her defense, deflecting the attacks with ease. Barriss stood beside her tutor, her blue blade moving in perfect synchronization with the pale green shimmer of her Master's lightsaber. Separately, each was an opponent to be reckoned with; together, merged by and in the Force, they were a fighting unit far stronger and faster than the sum of its two parts. So thoroughly and completely did they complement each other's feints, parries, and blocks that many of the wild Ansionian plainsfolk stared in disbelief even as they pressed their attack.

When the howlpack had first advanced despite her practiced skill, Barriss had felt a surge of fear; there were so many of them, and to control without killing was much, much harder. But now, as she leapt and parried and swung her weapon, the Force guiding her every move, the initial panic was gone. With the four of them together this way, she had never felt the Force flow as strongly as it did now. She was with Anakin and Master Kenobi, nearly as completely as she was with Master Unduli. It was an

unbelievably powerful, heady sensation, intoxicating, overriding, filling her with confidence: *We can do it—we can defeat both armies—!*

Rationally, she knew this could not be, but the conviction was a thing of the heart, not the mind. They were invincible. They batted death from the air: full-power particle beams, needle-tipped arrows, swords sharp enough to shave the Ansionians' long manes . . .

It seemed to go on for a long time—hours, at least—but when it was at last done, Barriss realized that the entire encounter had taken perhaps ten minutes or less. Dozens of shattered weapons lay at their feet, and the surprised combatants surrounded them, plainly in awe of the fighting skills of the Jedi.

As well they should be . . .

Barriss smiled at the memory of the encounter on Ansion. She had felt the Force many times, before and since, but never had it been that . . . *compelling*. Even when they had demonstrated their “spirit” for the Alwari—she with her compass dance, Anakin with his singing, Master Obi-Wan Kenobi with his storytelling, and Master Luminara Unduli with her Force-sculpture of whirling sand—she had not felt so alive as during the battle, fighting alongside her Master and the others. Fighting alone was one thing, but fighting in tandem or in a group? That was much, much more.

But that was the past, and if she had learned nothing else from her years in the Jedi Temple, she had learned that the past could be revisited, but not relived. She was no longer on Ansion now, but on Drongar, that humid hothouse of a world, and even though her mission to find the thief who had been stealing the valuable bota crop grown here was over, she had yet to hear from her Master as to the next step in her training.

Even as she felt frustration rising again within her, her desktop comm unit warbled. She activated it, and a small

holoproj image of her teacher shimmered into view in the warm air. The comm unit was small, and it seemed to have a slight malfunction; aside from the usual blinking and ghosting common when communicating across many parsecs, some element in the power amplifier seemed to be emitting a too-warm-circuit smell, so subtle that she was uncertain if she was actually sensing it or simply imagining it. It was a not-unpleasant odor that reminded Barriss of roasted klee-klee nuts.

Master Unduli was lightyears away now, back on Coruscant, albeit her image was close enough to touch. The three-dimensional likeness was insubstantial, though, and it would be like trying to touch a ghost.

Barriss sighed, feeling tension loosen within her. Here on Drongar she had felt the separation from her instructor keenly. Just the sight of Master Unduli, even in a flickering, low-res holocast, was enough to help center her. And she badly needed centering. What with the Rimsoo's recent forced relocation, some fifty-odd kilometers to the south to avoid being destroyed by Separatist battle droids, along with Zan Yant's death and the nonstop batches of incoming wounded, she felt badly in need of the calming, centering influence that her teacher always brought with her.

After a mutual greeting, Barriss said, "So, I suppose my mission here on Drongar is finished."

Master Unduli cocked her head. "And why would you suppose that?"

Barriss regarded the image, suddenly uncertain. "Well . . . I was sent here to find out who was stealing bota. The ones responsible for that, the Hutt Filba and Admiral Bleyd, are no longer doing so, being dead. The military has dispatched a new admiral to command MedStar and the Rimsoo facilities planetside—he should be here shortly, and I expect he's been selected for his honesty, given the value of the bota crop."

“That was only part of your mission, Padawan. You are also a healer, and there are still people there in need of that, are there not?”

Barriss blinked. “Yes, Master, but—”

There was a pause as her teacher regarded her. “But you don’t think that sufficient reason, do you?”

“With all due respect, I seem to be making very little difference here. It’s like trying to move a beach full of sand one grain at a time. I could be replaced easily by any competent physician.”

“And you think that your talents would be better utilized elsewhere.” It was not a question.

“Yes, my Master. I do.”

Master Unduli smiled. Even in the flickering projection Barriss could see those intensely blue eyes twinkle. “Of course you do. You are young, and your desire to be a shining force for good has blinded you somewhat to things all around you that still need attention. But I sense that you are not done there yet, my impatient Padawan. There are still lessons to be learned. Spirits require healing, too, as much or more than do bodies sometimes. I will contact you when I think it is time for you to leave Drongar.”

Master Unduli’s image winked out.

Barriss sat on her cot for a time. She reached for calmness of spirit and found it difficult to acquire. Her Master’s purpose in keeping her here eluded her. Yes, she was a healer, and yes, she had saved a few lives, but she could do that anywhere. There seemed little on this fecund planet that would help her become a fully fledged Jedi Knight. It seemed to her that her Master should be looking for some place to properly test her, to challenge all her skills, and not just those of a healer.

But instead, Master Unduli had decided to leave her on this soggy dirtball, where battles were fought as they had seldom been fought in the last thousand years—on the ground, between armies fielded to wage war cautiously to

avoid damaging the valuable bota plant that grew thicker here than anywhere in the known galaxy. Bota—a miraculous adaptogenic growth from which a variety of wondrous drugs could be made—was easily prone to damage, and even a mild concussion from an explosion too close could kill an entire field of it. Sometimes even the thunder from a nearby lightning strike—of which there were plenty, this being a young and volatile world—could damage the fragile plant. Neither the Republic nor the Confederacy wanted that, so the weapons and tactics of the war here were primitive in the extreme. Battle droids fought clone troopers mostly within hand-blaster range, in small numbers, and without much in the way of artillery or large power beams. When the plant over which both sides battled for control was worth its weight in precious gems, nobody wanted to shock it to death or set it on fire—which was all too easy to do in the high-oxygen environment, despite the swampy territory. While it was true that both sides had on occasion fielded heavier weaponry—witness the recent Separatist attack that had required moving the entire base—for the most part the infantries fought, and bled, for each precious centimeter of ground, all because of the kid-glove approach that bota required. Not for the first time Barriss wondered how an indigenous plant that was so fragile had managed to cling to its ecological niche for so long on such a tempestuous world.

Such questions did not matter now. All that mattered was that the bota thief was dead—and yet, Master Unduli still bade her stay. Why? What was the point?

She shook off the thoughts. Clarity of mind did not come with too much thinking—quite the opposite, in fact. She needed to empty herself, to allow the Force to provide the calm and serenity it always did—when she could reach it.

Some days, it was a lot harder than others.

LYING ON HIS bed, Jos Vondar glared at the young man in the lieutenant's uniform standing in the doorway to his kiosk. Hardly more than a boy, really; he looked like he was about fourteen standard years old.

"What?"

"Captain Vondar? I'm Lieutenant Kornell Divini."

"That's nice. And you're standing there in the open doorway, letting the heat into my humble home, because . . .?"

The boy looked slightly uncomfortable. "I've been assigned here, sir."

"I don't need a houseboy," Jos said.

The boy grinned unexpectedly. "No, sir, I don't expect you do—seeing how neat and clean your kiosk is."

Jos didn't reply to that. It was true that things had gotten a little . . . disorganized of late. He glanced around the small living space. His last two changes of clothes were hanging on the back of a formplast chair, the drink chiller was dilapidated enough to make even a slythmonger think twice about imbibing, and the mold creeping up the walls was as thick as Kashyyyk wood-moss. Candidly, Joss had to admit that a marsh pig probably wouldn't live in a sty as dirty and cluttered as this place.

Of the two of them, Zan had always been neater. He would never have let it get this out of control. Jos could almost hear the Zabrak's voice: *Look, Vondar, I've seen garbage scows more aseptic than this. What're you trying to do, max out your immune system?*

But Zan wasn't here. Zan was dead.

The boy was speaking again. Jos tuned back in: “. . . been assigned to Rimsoo Seven as a surgeon, sir.”

Jos sat up on his cot and stared. Was he hearing right? This—this *child* was a doctor?

Impossible.

His disbelief must have shown, because the boy said, somewhat stiffly, “Coruscant Medical, sir. Graduated two years ago, then did a year of internship and a year of residency at Big Zoo.”

That did bring a smile from Jos. Big Zoo was the unofficial name of Galactic Polysapient, the multi-sentient-species medcenter on Alderaan, at which he himself had interned. It boasted no fewer than seventy-three separate environment zones and ORs, and treatment protocols for every known carbon-based sentient species in the inhabited galaxy, as well as most of the silicon- and halogen-based forms. If it was alive and reasonably conscious, sooner or later you’d see it at Big Zoo.

Jos gave the boy a closer, more appraising look. He was human—either Corellian like Jos or some other close variant—towheaded, with cheeks that looked like they had yet to experience depil cream. “You should have had three years of residency before they drafted you,” Jos said.

“Yes, sir. Apparently they were running short on doctors in the field.”

The vestige of Jos’s smile vanished. Zan had been dead only a week. And this boy was supposed to be his replacement? The Republic was getting desperate if it was snatching babies from their cradles this way.

Besides, nobody could replace Zan. Nobody.

“Look, Lieutenant . . . Divini, was it?”

“Uli.”

Jos blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“Everyone calls me Uli, sir. I’m from Tatooine, near the Dune Sea. It’s short for Uli-ah, the word for Sand People

children. How I got the nickname is kind of an interesting —”

“Lieutenant Divini, far be it from me to question the wisdom of the Republic—I don’t think anybody really could, since they don’t *have* any wisdom to question—so, fine, welcome to the war. You check in with the unit commander yet?”

“Colonel Vaetes, yes, sir. He sent me here.”

Jos sighed. “All right, I guess we’d better find you a place to stay.” He rose from his cot.

Young Divini looked uncomfortable. “The colonel said I was to bunk with you, sir.”

“Stop calling me sir. I’m not your father, even though I feel old enough for that these days. Call me Jos . . . Vaetes sent you to stay *here*?”

“Yes, sir. Uh, I mean, yes, Jos.”

Jos felt his bottom teeth settle firmly against his upper jaw. “Stay right here.”

“Okay.”

Vaetes was waiting for him when Jos arrived at his office. Before he could say a word, the colonel said, “That’s right, I sent the boy to your cube. He’s been assigned here as a general surgeon and I’m not going to have the construction droids drop everything and build a new kiosk when you have an empty bed in yours.” He raised a hand to forestall Jos’s comments. “This isn’t a debate class, Captain, it’s the army. You’re the chief surgeon in this unit. Show him the drill, get him set up. You don’t have to like it, but you have to do it. Dismissed.”

Jos stared at Vaetes. “What’s the matter with you, D’Arc? Someone split your head open and drop a regular army brain in? You sound like a character in a bad holovee. Have you taken a look outside recently? We’re not even totally relocated yet, only one bacta tank’s online, and we lost an entire case of cryogen during the move. Meanwhile, nobody told the enemy we’re having problems, so they just

keep shooting our guys and we have to keep patching them up somehow. I *don't* have the time to wet-nurse some rimkin kid!”

Vaetes looked at him mildly, as if they'd been discussing the weather. “Feel better now? Good. The exit's behind you. Just turn around, take a couple steps to trip the sensor. And you might want to hurry along, because—”

“I hear them,” Jos said in disgust. At least two medlifters were approaching. “But we're not done with this, D'Arc.”

“Hey, drop by anytime. My door's always open. Well, except when it's closed. Which you can see to on the way out.”

Jos stalked out of the colonel's office into the wet and smothering Drongaran afternoon.

This is just what I need, he thought. A youngling more naive than a freshly decanted clone. The kid might think he was ready for fieldwork, but those were long odds, in Jos's opinion. True, things could get intense in any big medcenter, but he'd seen hardened veterans with years of experience in all the myriad ways that sentients could die have to bolt from a Rimsoo OT to keep from upchucking in their masks.

“Mimn'yet surgery,” they called it, after a meat dish of questionable origin popular with the bloodthirsty reptiloids of Barab I. It was a vivid metaphor, illustrating the fast and furious patchwork pace that they had to follow. Stop the bleeding, slap a synthflesh patch or spray a splint, and move on. No time for niceties like regen-stim; if someone wound up with a livid streak of shiny scar tissue across the face, it didn't really matter—as long as he or she could still shoot.

There were times when Jos was on his feet twenty hours straight, his arms coated with red, with barely any time between patients. It was primitive, it was barbaric, it was brutal.

It was war.

And this was the sterile hell into which Vaetes had just plunged a kid who didn't look old enough to legally pilot a landspeeder.

Jos shook his head. Lieutenant Kornell "Uli" Divini was in for a rude awakening, and Jos did not envy him it.

On the other hand, there was one possible positive aspect to the situation: Tolk would probably love the kid.

Thinking of her did bring a genuine smile to his lips. His relationship with the Lorradian nurse was the one good thing that had come out of this war. The *only* good thing, as far as Jos was concerned.

Den Dhur was on a mission.

It was a mission that had little to do with the war between the Confederacy and the Republic, except in rather abstract terms. And, even though he was a freelance field correspondent, it was not something he was likely to file a story on. No, this quest was to aid a friend—someone whom he'd become acquainted with during his stay at Rimsoo Seven, and whom he'd come to consider a kindred spirit.

Those who knew the hard-bitten Sullustan of old would no doubt find it hard to believe that Den would profess friendship for any living thing. Which meant that their opinions of him could remain intact, since the being Den was undertaking this favor for wasn't a living one—not in the traditional sense, anyway.

Which made it all the more challenging.

Den was sitting with his comrade in the base cantina. He was nursing a particularly potent concoction of spicebrew, Sullustan gin, and Old Janx Spirit called a Sonic Servodriver; no one appeared to know why the drink was named that, and, after the first one or two had been imbibed, very few cared. His companion, as usual, was drinking nothing. This wasn't surprising, since he had no mouth or throat, and he'd managed to convince Den earlier

that pouring alcohol into his vocabulator was probably not a good idea.

Den focused his large eyes blearily upon I-5YQ. The droid had an annoying tendency—exacerbated by the polarized droptac lenses the Sullustan wore—to separate into multiple images. Other than that, all seemed normal enough. “We *gotta* get you drunk,” he told I-Five.

“And this is such an imperative because . . .?”

“‘S’not fair,” Den told him. “Ev’rybody else can get blasted outta their craniums—”

“Which they do with alarming frequency, I’ve noticed.”

“Ev’ryone ’cept you. ‘S’no good. Gotta fix that.”

“Assuming for a moment that intoxication is a state to which I aspire,” the droid said, “I see a number of problems that must be solved. Not the least of which is, I have no metabolism to process ethanol.”

“Right, right.” Den nodded. “Gotta work aroun’ that. Don’ worry, I’ll think of somethin’ . . .”

“At this point you’d be hard-pressed to think of your own name. No offense, but I wouldn’t trust you to rewire a mouse droid’s circuits right now. Maybe later, when you’ve —”

The Sullustan suddenly fluttered his dewflaps in excitement. “Got it! ‘S’ *perfect!*”

“What?” The droid’s tone was wary.

Den knocked back the rest of his drink, then had to hang on to the edge of the table for a moment until the entire cantina, which had suddenly and unaccountably launched itself into hyperspace, steadied. “W’do a partial power-down on your core. Scramble th’ sensory inputs a li’l bit, loosen up those logic circuits.”

“Sorry. Multiple redundancy backups. They’re hard-wired—I could no more voluntarily interfere with them than you could stop breathing.”

Den frowned at his empty mug. “Blast.” He brightened. “Okay, how ‘bout we realign the circuitry directly? Jus’

temporarily, o'course . . ."

"That might work—if you had the picodroid engineers needed to do the realignment. Which are only available at Cybot Galactica repair centers or their authorized representatives. I believe the nearest one is approximately twelve parsecs from here."

Den belched and shrugged. "Well, we'll figure som'thin' out. Don' worry—Den Dhur's no quitter. I'm on it, buddy." His head dropped to the table with an audible *thud*, and a moment later he began to snore.

I-Five stared at the unconscious reporter, then sighed. "Something about this," the droid murmured, "feels *so* familiar."

3

JOS WOULDN'T HAVE started the kid off this way, had there been any choice, but the operating theater was full of wounded clone troopers, the drone of the medlifters bringing in new injuries seemed as constant as a heat exchanger as they arrived, and anybody who could lift a vibroscalpel was needed. *Now.*

He didn't have time to watch the kid—he was up to his elbows in the chest cavity of a clone full of shrapnel. Count Dooku's weapons research group had come up with a new fragmentation bomb, called a weed-cutter—a smart bomb that, when launched, arced up and over any and all defensive grids, came down in the middle of a trooper force, and exploded at thoracic level above the ground, sleeting tiny, smart, razor-sharp durasteel flechettes in a circular pattern. The weed-cutter was deadly for two hundred meters against soft targets, and the clone trooper armor didn't stop much, if any, of it.

Whoever had designed and produced the clone armor had much to answer for, in Jos's opinion. The Kaminoans might be geniuses when it came to designing and sculpting soft tissue, but the armor was, as far as he could see, practically useless. The nonclone field troops referred to the full-body suits as "body buckets." It was an aptly descriptive term.

He started to ask for the pressor field to be stepped up a notch, but Tolk beat him to it: "Plus six on the field," she said to the 2-1B droid managing the unit.

Tolk le Trene was a Lorradian; her kind had an uncanny ability to read most species' microexpressions and to

somehow sense emotions, to the extent that it almost seemed like telepathy. She was also the best surgical nurse in the Rimsoo. And more, she was beautiful, compassionate, and Jos's sweetheart, despite her being *ekster*—*non-permes*, an outsider, not of his homeworld clan—which meant there wasn't supposed to be any future for their relationship. The Vandars were *enster*, and that meant marriage had to be with someone from one's own system, preferably one's homeworld. There were no exceptions.

Temporary alliances with *eksters* were allowed, with a wink and a nod about sowing-one's-wild-grains and all, but you didn't bring a *non-permes* girlfriend home to meet your kinfolk, not unless you were willing to give up your clan and be permanently ostracized. Not to mention the infamy such an act would offer your family: *He married an ekster! Can you imagine? His parents keeled over dead from shame!*

Jos glanced at Uli, and then at Tolk, who said, "Uli seems to be doing okay. The orderly droids just wheeled his first patient out and they weren't heading toward the morgue. He's a cute kid."

Jos shook his head. "Yeah. Cute."

He risked a quick look around. They were still two doctors and three FX-7 surgical droids short of a full unit, and that was going to cost them today—

Even as he thought his, he saw a masked-and-gowned figure step up to one of the empty tables. The sterile field kicked on, and the figure gave a *bring-'em* gesture to the orderly droids.

"I don't know who that is," Tolk said as Jos was about to ask.

After months of work in this tropical pesthole, the OT doctors could recognize each other even when faces and heads were covered with surgical masks and caps. Which meant this was a new player. And that raised the question: