

STAR WARS



RED HARVEST

JOE SCHREIBER

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

3/Deep-Down Trauma Hounds

NICKTER AWOKE IN THE CAGE.

He had no memory of how he'd gotten here, or how long he'd been inside. The last thing he remembered was sitting in the infirmary, waiting for Arljack to come back and check the wound on the back of his neck. And in fact, for one disoriented moment, he thought he was still there. *It's cold in here*, he'd started to say. *Hey, Arl, you mind turning up the heat a little bit?*

But this was not the infirmary.

He tried to sit up and slammed his head against the metal bars above him hard enough to make him let out an angry moan of pain. Just exactly what was going on here? The cage was small, forcing him to remain hunched forward, either on his hands and knees or in a slouch-shouldered sitting position. The top part of his tunic had been ripped away, leaving him naked from the waist up. His back hurt, *really* hurt, from the base of his skull all the way down to the bottom of his spine—a low, steady throb that made his molars ache.

As if to mock his immediate claustrophobic situation, the room outside the cage was very large, and very dark. From inside, Nickter could see almost all of it. It was a circular space, perhaps fifty meters across, illuminated by an irregular assemblage of flashing monitor equipment, candles, and torchlight. Laboratory equipment crowded every available surface and corner. Pipes and wires were draped from tables and desks, connecting odd piles of disjointed equipment, condensers, flasks, beakers, and burners. The walls were glass, and although he couldn't see anything out there but darkness, Nickter had the vague feeling that he was very high up.

Sudden realization blindsided him.

He was at the top of the tower.

"You're awake," a voice said.

Nickter jerked upright at the sound of the voice and very nearly screamed.

Standing outside the cage, staring down at him, was a tall, broad-shouldered, black-robed figure that blended almost imperceptibly into the shadows. Nickter already knew exactly who it was, even before the flickering torchlight of the room revealed the man's face—a long, bony sculpture of bone and half-lidded eyes, the famous curvature of the peaked upper lip, how it always seemed to be smiling slightly at some secret thought. A fresh spasm of apprehension leapt through him, raising hackles across his back. The eyes were the worst part, he thought: how almost silver they were, how they seemed to glitter with a feverish accumulation of ambition and indifference.

"Lord Scabrous," he said, or tried to say. His mouth felt parched, and his lungs couldn't seem to get enough air. "What am I doing here?"

The Sith Lord didn't answer. But the eyes kept staring down at him . . . past him, somehow, as if there were something else inside the cage with him.

He could smell himself, the stale cheap grease of panic and perspiration seeping through his skin. The pain in his back had intensified from a throb to a sharp stabbing agony that shot down his ribs and up into his neck. It was getting worse by the second, like the sting of sweat in an open wound. Whatever injury had been inflicted upon him, it was deep, and whole packs of nerve receptors—those obedient trauma hounds—were circling back and forth, busily delivering the bad news.

Groping around behind him, Nickter felt something cold and smooth and hard sticking out of his skin just above the base of his spine. He looked around and saw what Scabrous had been looking at—it was some kind of tube, implanted directly into a vertebra. The sticky ring of exposed flesh around the wound site felt raw and hot, swollen, and it burned when he touched it. Sliding his hand upward, he felt another tube above it, and another, coming out of his back, all the way up to his neck. There were at least six of them protruding out of him, as big around as his finger. He realized that he could feel them pulsating inside his spinal canal—that was the source of the gnawing pain.

“What . . . what is this?” he asked, aware of how different his voice sounded already, high-pitched and wobbly. “What did you do to me?”

Scabrous still didn’t answer. He wasn’t even looking at Nickter anymore. He had walked around behind the cage now, where the tubes ran between the wire bars into what looked like some kind of mechanized pump with a wide flask mounted on top.

Rattling around inside the cage, Nickter stared at it. The flask was full of murky reddish yellow liquid. Next to the pump sat a small black pyramid covered in lines of engraved text—what he realized, through his pain and fear, had to be a Sith Holocron. They’d learned about it at the academy, but he’d never actually seen one before.

And then he saw other things, dozens of them, in glass bottles lined up across the wide platform next to the pump.

Flowers.

All black.

All different.

All dead.

Nickter squirmed in the cage. None of this made any sense, and the irrationality only intensified his mounting terror. He was sweating profusely now—it was *dripping* off him in big, oozing droplets. The urge to beg, to grovel, to bargain for his life, or at least for an end to the pain, was almost irresistible. The only thing that stopped him was the suspicion, based on everything he'd heard about Scabrous, that the Sith Lord wouldn't even listen. Scabrous stood behind the cage, alternating his attention between the flowers and the Holocron. Finally he selected a flower, opened the glass chamber on top of the pump, and dropped it inside.

“What is that?” Nickter asked. “What are you doing?”

Scabrous glanced at him, as if hearing him for the first time. When he finally spoke, his voice was low and resonant, deeper than Nickter remembered. There was an awful intimacy to it, as though the Sith Lord were whispering directly in his ear.

“You were humiliated today at the temple, Wim Nickter—humiliated *badly*. You have shown yourself to be weak and easily defeated.”

“It was Lussk!” Nickter burst out. “He used the Force on me, he—”

Scabrous lifted his hand. “There is still one way in which you may yet prove useful. That is the offer I make to you, one of redemption.”

Then he pressed a button on the pump.

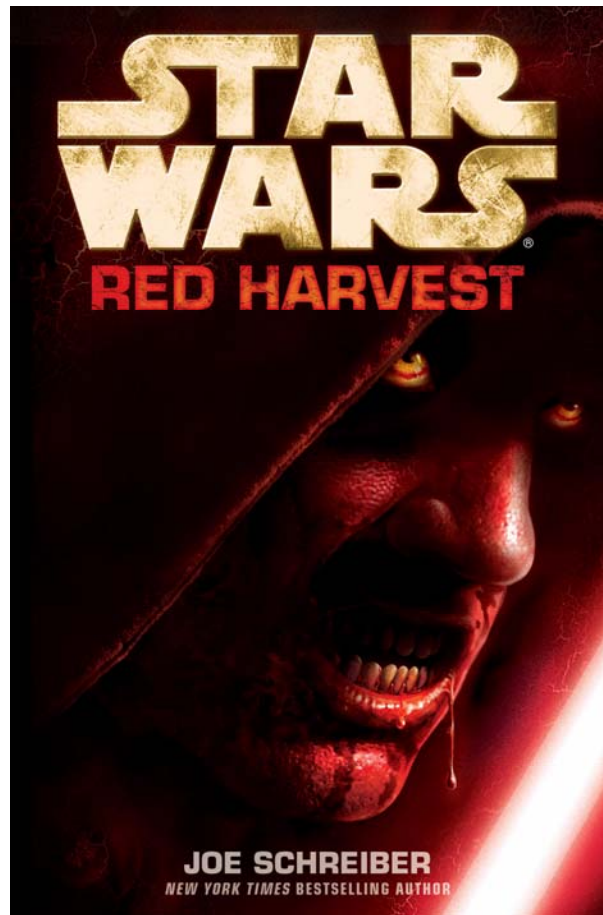
Staring at it, Nickter saw the black flower swirling in the reddish yellow fluid, its petals shredding as it dissolved. The pump let out a faint whining noise, like half a dozen odd vacuum parts called into dubious service. At first he felt nothing except for the odd vibration of the tubes in his back.

Then the pain he'd been enduring up till now became abruptly, horribly worse. It slammed through his body, gouging through every millimeter of his nerve endings, turning them white-hot.

Nickter arched forward and screamed. The pain owned him: he surrendered to it utterly. It became a vast, all-encompassing neutron star,

and as it sucked him forward he saw Scabrous watching him through the cage.

The last thing Nickter saw before he blacked out was Scabrous turning away from him, swinging his arm across the long counter above the pump, sending the flowers and their vessels crashing to floor.



Pre-order STAR WARS: RED HARVEST today:

[Amazon](#)

[Barnes & Noble](#)

[Borders](#)

[Powell's](#)

[IndieBound](#)

[Other Retailers](#)