

Dark Heart

By August and Cynthia Hahn

There is no escaping it -- war is a terrible thing. Behind the glamour of parades and the order of military formations lies the reality that when battle is joined, the only truth is kill or be killed. While the majority of the Clone Wars has been fought against a mechanical enemy that can't really "die," the clone troopers who fight them are very real and end up very dead each time the Republic and the Separatists clash. The Separatists aren't limited to their metal monstrosities, however. Some of their soldiers are quite alive and, in many cases, that life only serves to make them deadlier . . .



He hadn't intended it, but his near-panicked run through the jungle had brought him right back to the crash site. She wouldn't be fooled by his retracing his steps for long; she was too canny for that. Jeht took a moment to lean heavily against the wreckage of his fighter, its black metal serving to keep him upright when his muscles were almost too weak to do the job themselves.

The mist was his ally right now. It made everything indistinct and hard to see, but it masked him just as well as it concealed her. And with his lightsaber off, he wasn't making the same sharp hissing noises that she was. She didn't seem concerned with stealth; she was stalking him like a tiger, and every time she struck, it was with full, terrible warning. With her ferocity and skill, the cunning huntress didn't truly need stealth. That made her all the more fearsome.

Darrus took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and reached out with the Force. He couldn't see her coming, but if he could become truly calm, truly centered, perhaps he could sense her approach. Useful in theory, this had been less than effective so far; the woman seemed extremely skilled at cloaking herself from his farsight.

It wasn't the Force that warned him to lunge forward and roll out of the way; it was the snap-hiss of twin lightsabers erupting through the metal at his back. The hull of his shattered starfighter was just thick enough to afford him the split second he needed to evade the pair of crimson blades as they surged through the plating and cut a swath that would have been the death of him had he not moved.

The woman emerged from within his fighter where she'd been lurking. A cruel sneer graced her black lips as she raised her pair of curved lightsabers in a mocking salute. "Are you tired of running yet?"

Jeht stood to face her, igniting his saber in a wash of violet light and sizzling steam. Then he shook his head, "No, I'm not," and sent a wave of Force energy into the muddy ground between them. There was a snarl of rage from the woman as hundreds of pounds of muck and soil flowed over her -- an impromptu grave for someone who already looked gray and cadaverous.

He knew it would only buy him a few moments, but those were all he needed to sprint away as fast as the Force would take him. He'd managed to drop a transponder buoy before crashing on this forsaken planet and, if he could just reach it, that's where his troops would attempt a rescue. He could track the buoy on his armor's wrist comp, but he had to get to it. That was proving difficult with the woman who shot him down in the first place dogging his every step.

For more than a minute, he ran with the Force speeding his pace. This was exhausting to be sure, but drained was better than dead at the hands of an opponent he didn't think he could beat. She was so quick, so deadly. The brief duel they'd fought when he first emerged from his crippled ship had shown him that -- and given him a burning chest slash to remember it by. He needed proper medical attention and soon.

Suddenly, his instincts screamed at him to stop, and he obeyed without hesitation. No more than a meter in front of him, a massive tree came toppling down, smashing into the bog with a sickening thud. Then, from its severed stump, a figure leaped out of the mist and onto the tree's trunk, facing him.

"Swamp? A mighty Jedi Knight is reduced to slinging swamp at me like a child? How pathetic. No wonder so many of you have fallen."

That taunt snapped something inside Jeht. He'd been trying to avoid conflict, act like a proper Knight, but the woman's leering grin drove home another truth. Many of them had fallen; too many to be counted. And most at the hands of killers like her.

His eyes blazed as he growled at her, his own hunter's snarl to match her own. The tree she was on tore free from the ground and hurtled into the air. She leaped free and bore down on him, expecting a similar response from Jeht, but she was completely blindsided when the huge trunk stopped and pivoted in midair without the slightest pause in momentum. It caught her full in the body, sending her sailing with a curse of pain and rage sideways into the misty mire.

Darrus was caught for a moment between the desire to hunt her down and the knowledge that he needed to get to the rendezvous point before his men landed and exposed themselves to counterattack. He was riding high on something deeply

primal, but he was able to push it aside and do the responsible thing. He spared a last look the direction in which his assailant had been sent flying, and then began running again.

A few minutes later, he found the beacon -- luckily, before the rescue ship had arrived. He approached the beacon, knelt beside it, and meditated both to recover his strength and to pass the tense moments until his troops could land. He could feel that they were on their way; it wouldn't be long now.

Again, his instincts flared and again he obeyed, falling prone as a scarlet arc of light tore through the air where his head had been. She'd somehow gotten close enough to strike without being sensed and waited until the last moment to ignite her lightsaber. That was disheartening; she was learning. Jeht rolled clear of her riposte and leaped to his feet with his saber raised...

...a moment too late. With a lunge so blindingly fast that his eyes never tracked it, the Dark Jedi thrust her other lightsaber forward against his side and ignited the blade, impaling him. Jeht felt the shock of a hole drilled straight through his ribs and lung, felt the burning pain of instant cauterization.

His mind reacted in a flash and sent her hurtling away with an invisible fist of the Force. It smashed the air from her, sent the mud still caking her body flying in all directions, and pulled the blade straight back out of his chest. He wanted to drop to his knees, wanted to give in to the dizzying black that was filling his vision, but as he saw her stagger to her feet across the clearing, something else took hold.

There was no way he was going to let her win. There was no way he was going to become another victim. If she wanted battle, he'd give her one. If she wanted pain, he'd make her scream with it. If she wanted death, he'd force hers down her pale gray throat and make her choke on it.

The pain in his side vanished in that instant, and he rose to his feet but was not standing. Instead, he hovered nearly a meter over the ground, the mist around him whirling in a torrential cascade of shrieking winds and arcs of bright lightning. All he could see was the woman's face, all he could feel was her hated heartbeat, and all he could think about was tearing her limb from black-leather-clad limb.

Reaching out with the storm, his own howl of rage lending thunder to the tempest, he sent the full might of his fury crashing down over her. She screamed and turned to run as the maelstrom struck, coursing through her body with electric arcs of agony. Her lightsabers fell, lifeless, from her spasming hands as she flew backward and was pinned to a tree at the edge of the clearing. Buffeted by gale-force winds and racked by lightning, she could only writhe under the onslaught.

Jeht felt power unlike any he'd ever known. His wound was forgotten, his pain a dim memory. She would die; she would pay for all the lives she took. This was justice. This was righteousness. This was holy wrath, and he was its powerful instrument. He laughed at the sight of her twitching under the torment of his spiraling storm of retribution.

And then he couldn't see her as a huge metal ship landed between him and his victim. The connection broken, it was as if the strings holding him aloft had been cut. The whirlwind abated instantly, and he fell to the earth below. With a sudden gasp of pain, Jeht's mind cleared enough to realize what he'd done, what he'd unleashed. When his men finally rushed out of the gunship and hauled him aboard, his night-black eyes were weeping.

Some distance away, rasping for breath and barely able to move, the Dark Jedi huntress watched the Republic transport lift off into the air and rise up into the clouds. Every muscle ached, every bone felt broken, but she had a duty to fulfill. With one trembling hand, she pushed a button on her wrist and a hologram of a stately older man appeared in the air before her.

"It is done, my master."

The man's transparent face, difficult to make out clearly in the bright blue of the hologram, was obviously pleased. "And he survived?"

"I pulled my strike. He --" She nearly passed out from pain, but she locked down her will and forced herself to remain conscious. "He will live, though he'll remember this day for a long time to come."

"That was the point of this exercise. Our lord will be pleased. You have done well." The man seemed to consider for a moment, then nodded to himself. "I will reward you with one day to recover. Then you are to move on to your primary target. Understood?"

With a grimace of a smile, the woman nodded. "Thank you, master. It shall be as you command." And with that, she ended the transmission, crawled to her concealed fighter, and slipped away into the night.

Living Force Game Notes

Effective immediately, all Jedi characters with the Starship Operations (starfighter) feat may select a Delta-7 Aethersprite Jedi

starfighter for their personal use. This replaces any starfighter or transport they might otherwise possess, which is automatically donated to the war effort on their behalf -- they don't get a refund on it or the option to sell it back.

This opportunity is optional; Jedi heroes don't have to select a new starfighter if they don't wish to. The Delta-7 doesn't cost the Jedi any credits to own, but its advanced maintenance requirements cost 500 credits at the beginning of every adventure the Jedi hero plays after receiving the ship. If this fee can't be paid, the starfighter is not available for use in the adventure in question and can't be used again until all back fees have been paid in full.

Any Jedi heroes who miss this opportunity because they don't have the Starship Operations (starfighter) feat can receive an Aethersprite if they later acquire the feat.

Also, the growing darkness in the galaxy will have a detrimental effect on all Jedi as they constantly try to keep themselves pure amid a sea of difficult choices and mounting hostility. Any Jedi hero with one or more Dark Side Points gains another Dark Side Point immediately. This point can be atoned for in the normal fashion.