

STAR WARS: THE CLONE WARS

THE WILDERNESS OF DEATH

A story by Scott Weller

Based on characters and situations created by George Lucas

Ahsoka Tano *hated* this dark grey world of Descea, and she was sure it felt that same way about her, too. She had been stranded on the planet for six cycles now and it seemed that it had been punishing her for that reason ever since. As the cold winds turned and the days grew darker, her hopes of a Rescue EVAC transport coming to spirit her away from this pit of misery she now found herself unwillingly trapped in seemed ever more sparse and unlikely.

To Ahsoka, despite the continued thrill she had of setting foot on other worlds, the idea of being held within the dark and heavy militaristic colours and controlled features of *any* Republic star cruiser had never felt more comforting as of this moment. This world was too different, too extreme, and too strange to cope with after being stranded on it for so long. And there were times, strange times in the night when her subconscious was playing tricks on her, when she thought she may never leave it, either. That this could be the final resting place of the young Jedi Knight who almost was...

Frighteningly, in the short space of time, Ahsoka had found that her highly tuned Togrutan visual awareness had been quickly compromised and that her life essence within the Force seemed to be diminishing day by day-her weight loss was certainly noticeable and her skin colour was no longer its natural bright orange hue, her white facial skin markings no longer so defined. No, diminishing was not the right word for what she was going through right now. It was as if her Force essence were being *eaten away* by something so far undiscoverable and unreachable-bad enough were the times when she was under this new and unusual kind of attack seemingly indicative to this world, but those brief periods when it wasn't occurring were equally dangerous, and had usually seen her on the run and being hunted like an animal by the Sep forces that had killed her men and trapped her on this bitter world. The briefest chances she had had to try and merge with the Force to find out more about the *presence* affecting her-*presence* being the only word she could find to describe it-had brought little traceable or tangible results. And yet, how could that be?

Despite her apparent physical condition, if Master Skywalker had been here he would have dismissed her claims of being mentally attacked and said she was imagining things-that, alongside the lack of sustainable amounts of food and water, it was only this enforced period of isolation that was getting her down. Ahsoka knew that in these dangerous days she had now found herself in, Anakin would stay positive for her, and be as encouraging as he could be; he'd tell her, nay demand, that she stayed strong, for him, for herself, and for her mission- that she fought against the odds as they always did when they were together, to stay alive in her current predicament, no matter how dire it so far looked.

Oh, how she missed her Master, currently assigned, or was that a case of assigning himself, to the planet Naboo for the re-arming of the planet's defense systems against a brand new Separatist counter attack, of which all hell had broken loose in the nearby Atamari system and was spreading its way, despite all of General Kenobi's best intentions and retaliatory Republic strike force action, into Naboo space-that beautiful pacifist planet could no longer hope to be ignored for its part in the Trade Federation battle all those years ago when her Master had been a boy. Naboo, and Senator Padme Amidala, had been

instrumental in working with the Jedi to further the cause of peace over the last ten years, especially with the outbreak of the Clone Wars, and now the Neimoidians and the rest of the Trade Federation wanted true revenge-to obliterate the world and it's ex-Queen -a situation that both Anakin and the Jedi were determined to stop from happening at all costs-the world, the Senator and her people being too important to them, on both a personal and strategic level, that they couldn't afford to lose it. In fact, looking at the early Holonet tapes, at times it was hard for her to believe how Anakin, the hero who destroyed a Droid control ship, could ever have been a little boy-this incident, and his further adventures in training under Master Kenobi's tutelage having become the stuff of legend. And then some. Looking at him, now, after all these months of combat, she had seen the young man age, as if the entire galaxy rested on his shoulders. How long could he carry the burden? Her friends and battle mates in the Jedi Order were respectful but also, perhaps, fearful of The Chosen One. She had tried to help him through the difficulties, through the anxieties he often had with the Order, as best she could-and she sensed the mounting mistrust he was showing towards them and their decisions, which he felt were frustratingly holding him back. She had tried to reassure her friend that the Council had no reason to hide/keep things away from him during this devastating conflict-that everyone was doing the best they could in such difficult times. And Anakin could certainly be mistrustful-something that Ahsoka had truly had first hand experience of. At the beginning of their Master/Apprentice relationship, Anakin hadn't been too fond of her. She recalled their first meeting on Christophsis- he had originally shunned both her and her growing abilities, not ready to accept the assignment of taking a Jedi youngling and having her as a Padawan. Ahsoka had, however, given as good as she got to him in those difficult early circumstances, and their relationship had been tense, but time had handled, and healed, all wounds. Now, at times, she seemed naturally joined in symbiosis with him, almost inseparable until some recent months-she often liked to think that some of her instincts and powers for good had also rubbed off on both her Master and her friends as well. Together in battle she felt that they were an invincible team- even stronger when Obi-Wan was with them. They were almost like a small family.

Yet there were times where Anakin would continue to shut her out, not just from any dangerous plans that he had hatched, but also in other areas, too. Whereas she had almost always held her heart on her sleeve and never was one to shy away from saying what she felt, with Anakin she knew that he had his own demons to fight-that there were things-a terrible sadness- that he was deliberately keeping away from her. Tatooine, for one, had been a thorny subject from the moment they had been forced to arrive there with Rotta "Stinky" the Huttlet (even now, she felt she could sense old Stinky's traces on her!!). And there were other things, too- undercurrents, a mixture of emotions and other pent up frustrations that she worried might reach boiling point. Things that, at this time, she dared not unravel about her master...her friend. If only Anakin could confide in her more. Equally adding to the confusion in her friendship with her Master was that little matter of Padme Amidala-the rest of the Jedi Council may be blind, or purposefully blind, as in the case of Master Obi-Wan, but a bond existed between the ex-Queen and Anakin, of that she was certain, that went beyond ambassadorial and political duties. Anakin and Ahsoka had been close, but with Padme... well... Ahsoka would never say it- that it was forbidden for a Jedi to have a relationship- but here she was, with her own sisterly affection for him, now caught in the middle of it all!! Despite some recent signs of maturity, there had been talk within the halls of the Jedi Order of Anakin having problems regarding personal attachment-but was it really that wrong to care for people? Especially in this time of war.

With such a mixture of emotions unsettled within her, Ahsoka knew that she was still young and impressionable, and, when she saw Anakin bend the rules to his advantage, some of those instincts had rubbed off on her, too, and not always in a good way, as Captain Rex liked, and made it his business, to remind her at varying times, and often in the midst of battle!! Her rashness and spirited to action eagerness had also got her into similar scrapes and troubles as Anakin once did with the Council. Perhaps that was one of the reasons why Yoda had wanted her to be his Padawan learner from the start. Was their pairing an attempt at creating a convenient case of one personality containing the other, and vice versa?

It was in part due to that impulsive streak of hers that, acting on her own initiative, Ahsoka's already heightened Force senses had even cheekily tried to probe Supreme Chancellor Palpatine's mind-it wasn't every day someone like herself got to meet the Leader of the Republic. Feeling shut out of important matters and decisions at times, she had wanted to get an understanding of the Republic Leader's own feelings of the

war and how he saw the ongoing situation-his experience and talents in negotiating, his admired command of the spoken word- and hoped that, even in that briefest, gentlest of mind touching, that some of his skills may yet rub off on her in her continued life and duty as a Jedi and understanding the living Force of which all beings were a part- in fact, from her point of view, Anakin was always telling her to learn from the best. And yet, despite her singular efforts, she had been unable to probe him for even the merest thought-there was quite clearly a precise and controlled mind within the old man that seemed to block her thoughts-nothing Force-like, merely a well-ordered, controlled mind, yet also clearly a determined one, too. Despite her inability to discover the man behind the politician, one thing that stood out like a beacon at all times was Palpatine's admiration of Anakin, and what could be seen and felt as the continuing strength of his powers within the Force, how his heroic deeds seemed to have no limits - his growing abilities in battle. Even more clearly evident than Anakin's relationship with Padme was the almost father and son connection between him and the Supreme Chancellor in the way talked with one another, a relationship that was far different than the friendly but often tense relationship between Anakin and Obi-Wan. If Anakin had found out she had tried to tap into the Supreme Chancellor's mind, he surely would have been angered and have grumpily chastised her for her actions towards him-worse, the Jedi Council frowned greatly on this sort of mental manipulation and, with the increasing state of the war, only in the worse cases would they use this ability- free will being sacrosanct to the Jedi's protection of the Republic and its inhabitants-one of the very reasons they had become involved in the war, despite the controversy they brought with the very peoples they were fighting to save.

For the moment, though, that conflict seemed a long way away. And right now a smaller war was being fought by Ahsoka on this nightmare world-a place of all kinds of physical and mental attack. The shockwaves that plagued her had almost destroyed her. She had been inflicted with them after the first day of battle here. They had been quick and subtle at first. Not painful, but they made her shudder nonetheless-brief images of a humanoid alien race-of men, women and children-of the civilization on this world, of a type she'd never before seen. Then, several days later, as she continued her subtle hit and run attempts at destabilizing the Sep forces, they seemed to get worse and worse -getting longer, more protracted, and more painful-the glimpses of this race-from a past that felt so long, long ago. No longer benign, through the images she felt their escalating tensions, fears, and the rising emotional state of the children as their parents lives crumbled...as the first steps of their planets war began.

And then there were the ghosts. Perhaps Ahsoka was hasty in calling them that. Ghosts didn't exist to her knowledge. The Force existed and was the one constant that gave the universe its life. The idea, however, of a condition beyond the natural state of death, and becoming one with the Force, was a question that seemed unanswered. In one of her early teachings in Temple with Master Yoda, one of her fellow classmates had asked their beloved leader if ghosts did indeed exist-the story of the spirit of Jedi Master Kalathi walking around the heavy pillars and data storage areas within the Archives having been a persistent one that she'd heard when growing up. Yoda seemed to approach the boy's question with clarity, but with a tinge of hesitant, held back answering-that there was perhaps more to it all than he had revealed. Perhaps Master Yoda knew that we were all too young to know and accept the full truth. Whatever these *ghosts* were on this world, they certainly weren't a part of the Force- they had appeared to her almost like visions, barely visible in moments but physically consuming her as they literally came into being, crippling her and taking her out of her current reality- and they could happen at any moment-mostly at the worst times when in hit and run tactics against the enemy. So far, she counted nine of these shocks to have happened since her arrival on Descea. The after effects of these encounters weren't exactly fun, either, temporarily destroying not only her Force abilities but her natural instincts for a few lingering moments. Thank the Force, these shocks had not happened whilst she had been in the true depths of battle-they had occurred, so far, whilst she had been running or traversing her environment, or hiding from the Droid troop transports... but the shocks were getting longer... the worst had been two cycles back... and in a period that seemed to last forever-she had never felt so a part of the tragic events unfolding in the strange ethereal environment around her. Deep down and un-nerved, Ahsoka felt that the truth of Descea would soon be revealed the longer she was trapped there but, with the severity of these shock "attacks," would she survive long enough to discover it?

As she had emerged from an ash landed ground camouflage, watching the stillness of the air around her and surveying the plots of dead fractured trees, whose brittle limbs outstretched to the limits of their terrible

pain- the miserable grey sky seemingly ever closer than ever before, Ahsoka recalled the chilling incident that had occurred only minutes earlier. As the Droid tank had hovered and moved above her camouflage, mere inches from detecting her presence, there had suddenly been another sensation vying for her attention. An uneasy feeling- a presence. A deep and consuming coldness now ran through her skin-that she was no longer alone. Of someone, or *something*, beside her as she lay amongst the ash. An instinctive feeling, almost beyond anything that felt natural to her. A presence she was unable to decipher.

Anakin had never really listened or believed those stories of the ghost of Master Kalathi in the Archives, and had easily dismissed them, telling Ahsoka that he preferred to keep his mindset and focus on the here and now-how the individual focus had determined his reality. People had to exist in this reality, not think of another, he had said. Live in the moment not in the past. *Wise words, Master, but I think even you would find it difficult if you were stuck here!!*

There had been no information about this world in the Jedi Archives bar it's name and location in the galaxy, and she had double checked with the always supreme archivist Master Jocasta Nu –a woman capable of destroying any doubts as to what you knew against her knowledge-whether you liked that fact or not. Descea had no history of starship visitation, and seemed completely barren of life. Over one million years of recorded data, but time and evolution had seemed to ignore its shadow- a world that had bypassed everything for so long. What crime had Descea committed to be so unloved and so lonely within the vast depths of the habitable, life evolving universe- like an unusual blemish on the periphery of the Outer Rim, in the realms between realms one might say. Yet Descea had been important once, a long time ago, of that Ahsoka had been sure. It had teemed with life. She had seen that life in those shocks. She had experiences, even if for the briefest few moments, of their existence on this world. The experiences were like a rushing explosion within her soul-the feelings of love, the passion of exploration, of courage and adventure, as well as the other purest forms of emotion. Yet there had also been hate, anger and violence of the most savage kind in those flashes, too. The Force did not exist on Descea but the way those feelings touched what remnants of it still existed within her-almost akin to the feeling of drowning in them- made her hope that no other Jedi or Force sensitive would ever experience such unsettling discomfort. Perhaps it was the quick animalistic instincts, a natural state within her, and one which had needed controlling, that had particularly appealed to the feeling of violence and anger that had inhabited her during these escalating shockwaves. The basic mental exercises of the last four cycles which she had undertaken would help relieve her of her anger and her fear on this world for a time, but it would all soon creep back on her. Over a period of time, these continued visions would have driven a normal, non-Force sensitive person mad- Ahsoka could fight it but it was taking everything she had to stop them from consuming her. And then came more images of their war, the most violent conflict her visual senses had ever seen or felt-a war, on a scale the likes of which she had never before witnessed or felt, waged first on the once hallowed and life affirming lands and shores of this world, it's atmosphere, and then followed by the piercing screams of millions- of voices and eyes crying out and suddenly silenced. Their bodies torn to bloodied shreds, the faces, all the faces-the women, the children- screaming and shouting in the most absolute of terror, the nightmare inescapably around them, and then the intense suffering and pain enveloping this planet, now totally consumed in fire and death. Certainly, this was a war beyond anything she had so far experienced during her battle against the Separatists, on a planet that was now an ash strewn graveyard.

A memorial to no one.

“When will we be able to leave this accursed planet??!!”, the bat-like Separatist commander known as Sy'Zarak pondered to himself from the interior of the cramped AAT tank which he now found himself trapped in. Almost like a mobile prison within a prison of sorts, this attack vehicle had been designed for droids not for aliens of the caliber of his great self. He had been forced to reside within it for seventeen cycles now as it moved slowly and fitfully along it's assigned search parameters, it's many recent breakdowns and mechanical faults through the heavy ash field damaging the creatures pristine natural sensory apparatus and sending its interior occupants, including the other droid occupants around him, slamming all over its interior, its body now feeling like a punching bag, from one direction to the other and

from side to side by the continual chopping of the tanks floating gravity generators, vibrations almost violent enough to penetrate him through his protective atmosphere shielding. Not only were the grav motors de-stabilizing, the tanks weapons systems were always in a sense of disarray, too, with ever fluctuating readings of power. *I'm living in a death-trap!*, he thought to himself. Fortunately, the protective atmosphere/defense shield Sy'Zarak emanated was of a specially secreted resin intermixed within a power source controlled naturally from its own body, which, thankfully, and so far, was still working properly. Yet there were times that he thought a force of some other kind was poking and prodding him through it, testing its shield to get to him, determined to agitate him if nothing more. *This invisible ghost.* No, Sy'Zarak didn't believe in ghosts-those were things for children and the minds of the foolish- but the more he stayed on this world, the more the doubts had crept into his mind...

My body shield is supposed to be un-penetrable and yet everything seems to have been affected with entropy and decay since we've been stuck on this stink hole of ash and death!! Killing a few Clone Troopers had not been enough to satiate its growing rage right now-only the blood of a Jedi would be sufficient-and Sy'Zarak swore he would have that soon.

Such thoughts of killing his prey should have warmed what little there was of its heart, and yet the coldness within his body still continued, though thankfully not at a dangerous level to affect his metabolism. At times, though, he had felt emotionally unstable-sometimes anxious. There was a feeling of dread, too, yet he was determined to rise above it, determined to prevail with the strength of purpose he had shown ever since he was a child. The will to succeed at all costs.

He was allergic to this planet, of that he was sure. And it's atmosphere. The way it looked, the way it smelt, the way Descea breathed its dying residues of air. He hated every last despicable minute trace of it-even down to the molecules that he knew he was somehow breathing, however unlikely, in that hybrid delicate/tough internal system of his that was recalibrating and changing to help keep him alive, though such feelings and frustrations went beyond the normal allergic reactions that aliens and humanoids had in their lives. The shield over his body also stopped him from taking flight-oh how much easier it would be to spread out his restricted wings and begin an aerial search for himself of their elusive Jedi prey-he knew he could do so much better than all of the accursed droids and their equipment that had so far failed to find the last surviving member of the Republic group sent to this world. The thirty STAP fighters at his command had not performed well in this atmosphere after the first two cycles here and were now totally out of action-though their systems *should* have been working-the droid technicians themselves had said as much before they too had started to break down. Despite its overwhelming numbers, how could our Separatist Alliance win this war with technology which seemed so clumsy and inefficient? At times, that ineffectiveness had been clearly shown even when they had outflanked and surprised that little Togruta brat. Cornering her at numerous times in a position that seemed truly inescapable, she had beaten the overwhelming odds, in part from her skill but a lot of the time due to the mechanical breakdowns, though he had also noticed that, for a Jedi, especially a young Jedi, she too seemed to be affected by this planet and its unusual environment, that she didn't seem to find it easy to function here, either-the fighting moves she made, though successful enough to take out his forces, looked heavy, less than graceful-more of getting it done to survive than anything else.

Whatever the problems, overwhelming numbers will eventually have to prevail. You may think you have the advantage little one-your camouflage and sneak attack tactics have worked thus far, but not for much longer-my re-enforcements will soon arrive on this world and your life will cease at the end of my wing blades!! This precious thought alone continued to sustain him for the necessary trials that lay ahead on this world. Trials that would be overcome. His triumph as a leader of the mighty Separatist Alliance would be confirmed.

Many peoples within the vast galaxies of infinite space had merely dreamed of the richness of power and conquest that they desired, yet at the ripe young age of 13, Sy'Zarak had achieved these aims...and much more. His ambition and lust for such glories knew no bounds, and, with the outbreak of the Clone War, the new opportunities that had presented themselves to him for the continued pursuit of those aims would be taken firmly and with relish.

The Republic spy from his S'Zakirizi race had been intercepted and routed out quickly, yet Sy'Zarak had decided to allow it to keep his information, which contained detailed schematics for the next Separatist push into the Reldapa system with their new weapons platform, and for it to contact Republic forces. He had allowed the spy to set a rendezvous with them and had felt like an eager fisherman now waiting to reel in the bait. Once the agent had sent the signal, he had personally surrounded his lair on their home world and he and his army had swiftly broken in. The interrogation had been quick and deadly. As he committed his worlds greatest offense to a fellow race member, that of breaking the life sustaining wings from its body, Sy'Zarak then went on to make the final killing moves as it's slit the spies body in mid-section with a quickness that even his fellow Assassin's Guild members had never before seen done with such relish and viciousness. The kill, sadly all too brief while it lasted, had been a sweet sensation for him and he had tried to savor that power as much as possible. Yet, it was not enough. He wanted more, and was eager to recapture the helplessness of his victims, to embrace the power of his instincts in the kill, the sensations of joy he felt when he saw the life extinguished from his prey's eyes. Now, with the Separatists, he would enjoy more killing, and hoped that amongst his prey would be a Jedi, perhaps many Jedi... it would be a pleasurable gift for his amazing natural skills at death.

And this mission would give him the chance to realize those ambitions!

In such a simple task against one Jedi and a platoon of troops, Sy'Zarak had at first wondered if such a huge compliment of accompanying Separatist forces was really necessary for this trap and destroy mission, on a world as lonely and dead as this one. Now he was starting to chew on the stupidity of his own words. It had been five cycles before the Jedi had arrived on this seemingly insignificant, out of the way world. And the trap had seemed to have proceeded well at first-when the female, soon identified as Ahsoka Tano, and her Republic Forces arrived to discover a corpse holding a tracking signal, and no evidence of the secret plans. Yet, against overwhelming odds-the death of her entire Clone assault squad and her squad ship within four or five minutes of their arrival- the young Jedi's quick instincts had seemingly helped her escape the fire and carnage around her as her surprised troops died quickly in the final round up and slaughter-though it later became evident that two Republic Troopers had managed to evade the killing ground and had now joined her in the hit and run battles that were now taking place. Sadly, he had been located in a position too far away to be personally involved in the blood sport from the opening salvos, but this was something he now wanted to rectify at all costs. He was destined to kill this Jedi, not only was there the rarity and prestige of the capture and slaying (one already so uncommon, like the Akaarti salmon that swim upstream and die out so quickly once they have released their young), but his name would join the annals of those within the Separatist forces to be feared forever. He had not yet told Count Dooku that his prey was still alive and active on this planet-and he would only be told what he *needed* to be told and *when* it was absolutely necessary-but it wouldn't be long now before Sy'Zarak would be able to impart news of his incredible success on Descea. Now that the second half of his taskforce was hopefully in its pre-arranged last phase en route to this world-a now significantly wise precaution to have taken after all-this game was now entering its finale. Victory was assured and all that Dooku need know was that the plan had been a success from start to finish.

Success *was* inevitable-it had been a part of him for so long. A high leader in the long living and well established clan of the Makarak Pesza core family-who controlled the lives and destiny of the 40 billion creatures that existed on their asteroid ravaged cave world and the colony worlds supporting it-Sy'Zarak always possessed great ambition, and a strong part of his genetic make up had sought it no matter what the cost or consequence, of which Count Dooku and the Separatists had provided him with the promises of expanding his power base beyond his current dominion. And it would be a wonderful union. He had already lied, deceived, blackmailed, murdered, or engineered murder, on his way to being the head of the family line, and he had conquered his people into allegiance. For him it had been the thrill, the thirst, for control and significance-all for the good of his people, whether they thought they liked it or not- and it was his will, now, that would propel their expansion and development back out into the universe, from which the Galactic Republic had previously shunned them.

That the Count and his allies had "encouraged" and helped him on his powerful "endeavours" against the Republic had been a wise move on their part. Their relationship was new, however, and Dooku would have to trust him that things were going according to plan. To his bat-like mind, they were. Though Dooku was

not a foe to be under-estimated at all, and, deep down, he had the sneaking feeling that the grey haired, dagger inverted face of his, with the equally razor sharp mind, was probably aware of everything that was going on at this instant on Descea anyway- the Battle Droids he was using may well have had surveillance equipment built in to their components that were right now relaying info onto the Sith Lord at his secret hidden base somewhere out there in the Outer Rim. But no matter. Sy'Zarak knew what he had to do, and achieve it he would. If Dooku was unhappy then the time would come when he would make preparations against him. *And there will come a time, my dear Count, when you and your Sith master will underestimate my abilities. It will be then that I strike...*

As for the rest of his "allies", well, they meant nothing to him-all acting like eyes wide Crannti sheep terrified in their pens. And so spineless they were. Oh how he had enjoyed the look of fear and revulsion on Trade Federation Viceroy Nute Gunray's face when he witnessed the data tapes he had supplied them showing how he had murdered so quickly, and enjoyably, the Republic spy operating within his race's midst, and how he had feasted on the select parts of its remains. How, in his race's blood curdling descriptions, Sy'Zarak had previously enjoyed applying the same murderous and cannibalistic techniques to his mother (in a bid to stop her from producing any further offspring that may prove a threat to his chances of being the leader of his people), and the further repelled look the Neimoidian's face betrayed, so much so that he took two large steps back from the creature whenever he had been in its company. Dooku, however, had proved a different story- remaining totally unaffected and simply smiling at the carnage, enjoying both the displeasure of the Trade Federation executive whilst, at the same time, admiring the manner of Sy'Zarak's skills and abilities-knowing that he had found a true convert to his forces of chaos, and that the Makarak Pesza would prove even more resourceful than first thought. Gunray had shown fear and had proved insecure and vulnerable- a weak fool who could be exploited to the full, to the point where he would eventually make himself so redundant that his death would ultimately be another pleasure on the road to career advancement. *Concerned you should be, Viceroy, the creature thought to himself, you are only one step from being devoured yourself. I have killed many to get to where I am now and I will not stop. I will step on you easily in my quest for absolute dominion. Then it will be your turn, Dooku, and even your Jedi skills will be no match for the machinations I plan to unleash against you when I become absolute leader of the Separatists. It may take time, but the galaxy will feel my rein, and the many wrongs committed against my people will be righted...*

An unexpected atmospheric blizzard of enormous size and power suddenly interrupted his thoughts, reminding him of the same intensity storm that had plagued their first partially successful sneak attack on this world, and which now seemed to be deliberately conspiring against him once more to free the little girl Jedi from his deadly grasp and additionally help her hide within the planets many forests of un-scanable ash.

Despite his hatred of her, and what she stood for, Sy'Zarak had an unusual admiration for this girl Ahsoka, up to a point-she certainly showed the courage and agility of which the Jedi-the first Jedi he has ever witnessed- have been talked about for millennia, and showing such skills the likes of which he had never truly seen before first hand, almost God-like in power if he had been one of the early primitives of his race twenty million years ago. This Jedi was still just a child, though. A creature that bleeds. And if it bleeds it can be killed-to Sy'Zarak the hunt for her had become just another type of blood sport-though a superior one at that.

In the days since the opening salvo, that hunt had been disrupted, though-they had lost many Battle Droids-some from the Jedi but too many of them, and often at the most unexpected moments, from these outside influences. The flying STAPs had all malfunctioned from magnetic interference and many had crash landed, and the varying Battle Droids were now working, but only just, despite other undetectable and unusual natural sabotage that had quickly befallen them, whilst the scanners were now plagued with severe interference and unusual images that randomly appeared and disappeared before their meaning could be deciphered. The Separatist communications frequencies had been equally disrupted, and selected nights inside the tank had been plagued with unknown vocal communications involving a strange, almost deafening and piercing noise at intermittent times-almost like something was making inhuman cries of pain.

Being hammered away with continued headaches, the creature's instincts and panoramic vision were fighting to resist the unusual mind pressures from the world around him, which seemed more and more threatening and claustrophobic as time wore on. Bar the emotionless droids, destined to live out their lives in servitude and as battle fodder, there was no one he could confide in with his strange interpretations of the environmental reality around him, of which the atmosphere now seemed more enclosed and claustrophobic than ever before-almost as if the sky was trying to fall in on them. The nightmares continued in his head. *What if he were never able to use his wings again? What if he be forever trapped to extinction here?* No, Sy'Zarak shook itself loose from such dread and painful anxiety. This mission will succeed. This Jedi will fall. *I gather Togrutas are adaptable, he thought to himself. You'll have to be, my child, if you think you have a chance of surviving this encounter. Believe me, you won't. Your destroyed carcass will be paraded through a thousand worlds-a victory seen on the HoloNews vids by millions of races who will fear my arrival and soon inauguration as a leader of the Separatist forces. Mark my words, little girl.*

Once the Jedi has been captured, there will be much delight-there may be the opportunity to have fun with her for a little while, also. At first he wouldn't break her too much-there was much information on Republic military activity to be gleaned, but there would be a foreplay of torture of a kind that will keep him nourished and satisfied until she reaches the brink of death- and he will enjoy making those delicate promises in keeping her alive, before abandoning such words with the final devastating, highly satisfying, kill thrust. It shouldn't be too long now before he would deliver that little Jedi animal in pieces on a beautiful solid gold trophy platter. *And I gather the Togruta's head shell is worth a tidy price on the black market...*

"We're depending on you, Snips. We have so few ships and manpower to spare right now, so make what you have count."

Ahsoka opened her eyes from the ash snow that now floated down around her and remembered how Anakin had given her a look of total confidence when saying those words to her, and how his face had showed a rare, easy smile that had been so nice to see. She had looked towards him and waved as he and his trusty Artoo Detoo moved quickly to their Starfighter. "I'll see you at the rendezvous point in the Chagara nebula," he shouted whilst leaping into its cockpit, the Astro Droid following him with an equally large leap, almost Force-like in itself, into its accompanying front port area.

She smiled with pride and confidence to him as his one man ship took off through the thin blue shield membrane between the docking bay and deep space, and shouted, *"I won't let you down, Master!"*

And yet, despite all her training and growing abilities within the Force, she had indeed failed, and so badly-unable to see the trap that lay ahead...

Her small platoon had landed on Descea quickly, without incident and no sign of any enemy forces. Then, within moments of their disembarking their troop carrier came the discovery of the severed, burned and charred body of their barely known spy contact and its homing beacon. Only it wasn't just a homing beacon-soon becoming a thermal detonator and instantly killing four of her men. From then, the madness had begun, as several hundred Battle Droids and a dozen Separatist tanks seemed to have come out of nowhere, followed by the whiny sounds of several dozen STAP droids above their heads merciless in their killing sprays of blaster fire. Her troops had put up a valiant flight and Ahsoka had done her best to protect them, lightsaber shielding them from the worst of their fire, but by then it was too late to reach their transport, helplessly watching the unpleasant reality playing out all around her as the overwhelming enemy blew her platoon to smithereens so quickly and so devastatingly, all against the magnified sound, coming over the droid command frequencies from within one of the untouchable foreground Sep tanks, of guttural inhuman squeals of laughter enjoying the carnage-her Force instincts revealing a creature the likes of which she had not encountered before-and a new threat to the Republic. Her last men viciously cut down by two Spider Droids, she had Force leaped the biggest maneuver of her life into the ash strewn petrified jungle

and had then begun her one warrior counter attack whilst continually camouflaging herself in and out of the environment that she had now become stranded in.

Though tired from combat, and from what had been the beginning of the shockwaves that had been affecting her, the Togrutan was determined to fight on, in honour of her fallen comrades. It was not the Jedi way to feel the need for vengeance but she knew that the dishonorable way in which they had been killed deserved some kind of payback against the traitorous forces that bore their cowardly signature of loyalty towards Count Dooku.

And so she had played this unhappy game within her surroundings, which, though visually uninteresting to the naked eye, were now strangely affecting her mental and physical abilities within the Force to staggering, and painful, degrees, and making her unpredictable in mood and often dark and negative in thought.

So badly would she be affected by them, that, seven cycles into her seek and destroy mission, she had almost paid the ultimate price-successfully destroying the Spider Droids that had cornered her, despite her weakened condition, a shockwave of great intensity had almost paralyzed Ahsoka for several devastating moments, leaving her wide open to the final kill by two Separatist tanks. As her eyesight returned to the normality of the universe around her, their gun turrets had her almost in range when two blasts had come out of the dense ash fog behind her and rammed into the approaching enemy with lightning accuracy-the splinters of debris and droid parts from the explosions spraying the area, with the weakened condition Jedi caught in the blast radius, knocking her to the ground. A black gloved muscled hand was soon reaching out, pulling her frame upwards with great strength, and Ahsoka warmly found herself looking into the helmeted, inverted triangular black slit eyes of two Clone patrol soldiers, their heavy rocket launcher weapons slung across their shoulders still steaming from their seconds ago usage, with the dirtiest looking of the armoured pair, and the one bearing the most droid kill markers on his equally grubby helmet, declaring enthusiastically, "You didn't think we'd miss that party did you, sir?"

The Clone duo-named Ammo and Stealth- had luckily managed to evade the previous sneak attack, and, like Ahsoka, had gone to ground- having made a rough triangulation of where she had leaped to and then trying to catch up with her these last few cycles, but not before they had returned to the remains of the destroyed ship to see if any of their weapons or supplies could be salvaged.

In all, there would be surviving emergency food provisions to last another four to five cycles and Ahsoka had decided that she would go into a Jedi fast so as to stretch what food they had further. Weapons wise, the situation was not quite so good. Two fully primed blasters each with three reserve power packs, several more shells for the rocket launchers, six pulse bombs, a damaged communicator which Ammo was continually trying to repair, and one long range heavy blaster perfect for sniper/long distance reconnaissance work. Used sparingly, they could hold fate off for a while-they'd have to if they were to find a Separatist transport to escape. "Look on the bright side," Ammo had told them, "There's still enough power left in the blasters to seriously level some clankers!!"

Three further cycles on and their search for an escape had so far proved useless and, unless they were underground somewhere, the Separatists had disembarked their ships and sent them away prior to the Republic's arrival, so as to avoid scanner detection. If that were so, how long would it be before their reinforcements showed up?

Despite the anxieties, the Clones battle support and servitude to Ahsoka over this difficult time, having accepted their fate and ready to fight to the end, had, as usual, been nothing more than exemplary, and they had kept her spirits up no end with their humour and stories of their most recent conflicts and travels to other worlds within the Republic. With no sign of rescue on the horizon-presumably something major having occurred in the Outer Rim to prevent their friends arrival- the Clones had even showed disappointment at the fact that there might be an even bigger battle going on somewhere else in the galaxy, and, just their luck, they were missing it!!

Beyond Ammo and Stealth, nine months into the Clone War and the Clone Troopers unswerving dedication to the Republic had proved as solid as the very foundations of the Jedi Temple. They had been bred for the ultimate conflicts- they existed for war, she knew that, but what would happen to them when that war was eventually won? Would the troopers remain in service to the Republic, as Palpatine had previously, and controversially, insisted that they should be? And if so, how would the member worlds react to their sustained presence? On some occasions, the Troopers had been termed the *Slaves of the Republic* by some of the hard line Pacifist parties littered throughout the political avenues of Coruscant, and Anakin in particular had seen their point and reacted to it-going out of his way as best he could to make sure that the loyal men under his command weren't treated as cannon fodder. And then there was the Jedi-how exactly would they respond if and when the situation was over? There had also been horrific rumours that the soldiers would be re-engineered for other purposes by the Kaminoans-wouldn't that be tantamount to murder? Despite the dangerous warrior turned bounty hunter they had originally been created from- Jango Fett- the Troopers were still human, they had emotions, they showed thought, intelligence and devotion- attributes that they were using to the full to work so well for us in battle. Wouldn't any act of inhumane treatment against them result in the absolute murder of their humanity, of what they would call their souls?

There were times when Ahsoka hated to see them doing the dirty work for the people that would never care about the sacrifices they had made in order to protect them, and their worlds, from harm. To the many they were no more than humanoid Battle Droids-the ultimate expendable/disposable troops that could be re-ordered and re-grown, in a basically short time, to die, and then keep coming back for more. The Republic's new secret Clone creation plants on Kamino's far distant sister world on Kantrino had not yet been found by Separatist forces, but it would be only a matter of time-another defense for Anakin and Obi-Wan to shore up.

Watching the two troopers now going through their hourly ritual of checking and cleaning their weapons, working almost totally in the dark within their camouflaged nest, but still with such precision and care, and seeing a strict and exact mental focus that was fascinating to behold, Ahsoka continued to think about them. Apart from the basic requirements needed for day to day living in the environment of war, had the Kaminoans bestowed upon the Clones the ability to think beyond it, and their duty to the Republic? Bar her few conversations with Rex, what did the other loyal commanders, senior men like him and Cody, really think, deep down, emotionally, about this mess we've all been landed in? How would it affect their duty and honour to the people they've sworn to protect? Did they believe in the living Force, and, though it sounded perverse to even think about it, just what did they feel and think about when they died? Honour, duty, friendship? Or did they just accept that there was nothing out there beyond their once lives?

Even more dangerous undercurrents of thought had formed in Ahsoka's mind. How long could this present form of servitude last? Over time, what if they weren't all as resilient and tough- as loyal to the core- as Rex and Cody? Already there had been one traitor within the Clone ranks on Christophsis- will others eventually follow in greater numbers as war time wore uncomfortably on?

Too many questions, she thought to herself, realizing that all may never truly be answered- she should just enjoy her friends company and their clarity of purpose in what could be the final moments of their young lives on this distant world of pain. These last days of battle, defending themselves for the Republic, for the honour and loyalty in which they all served.

And it was in such battle to which Ammo and Stealth thrived. So in tune with one another, it looked as if they fought as one entity, their capacity for droid destruction knowing no bounds as they manipulated their bodies through the enemy fractions, blasting away with the kind of physical and psychological conditioning hard for any inhuman, un-adaptive Battle Droid to match. And when the weapons were running dry, well then there was good old fashioned bare knuckle blows and limb disabling foot work that could come into play.

So far, their hit and run battles had been a success, at least when Ahsoka hadn't let them down from the shockwaves, their effects often altering her sphere of perception for seconds and then for minutes of time. Her men had spoken of her suddenly stopping, almost zombie-like, sometimes disrupting her words in mid sentence as she had been "taken over"-a feeling that had left them with an unusual kind of creeping dread

in their hearts. They didn't believe in ghosts either, but the way that she seemed to be under this planet's influence had proved un-nerving to them- to see a Jedi, so powerful in battle, be toppled like this was beyond belief to them. This was a world that seemed to absorb all light, colour and life, the goodness of everything within it, and yet to Ahsoka it also felt like Descea was in some kind of stasis... as if it was waiting for something.

In her field of vision ahead there should have been black ash covered mountains, seemingly standing alone and defiant against the weary, creeping dark grey skies that seemed to be coming forward to engulf them, but Ahsoka's perceptions seemed to change on a regular basis. Suddenly, in their place she had seen decayed cities against a crystalline cracked sky, but then there was a sun flash of brightness that, when she had turned away from its vast spectacle, had suddenly killed the image and the familiar planetary mountain-scape of the here and now would return. Her uneasiness continued. *This is a ghost planet*, she thought to herself as she stopped for a few seconds to adjust her damaged belt pack and check the condition of the lightsaber almost seemingly surgically attached to her hand these last few cycles, the men gingerly following on for a few seconds before regaining their full battle readiness with her in trudging through eight inches of newly formed ground ash, their heavy combat boots sounding like giant earthquakes through the now crunchy ground covering.

A cold breeze seemed to flow through her body. The feeling of dread mounting-the unseen force whispering its differing voices. Was it her imagination or were her hands trembling as she held the lightsaber? There had been a wavering sense of anxiety about her person over the last few days of the intensified attacks against the Seps. Even in her recent face off against the vicious Jedi killer, General Grievous, Ahsoka had never been truly scared of anything...until now. That ominous feeling of dread seemed to reside in every genetic piece of this world and now it was affecting her ever more rapidly. *Control, control*, she thought to herself. *I must have control!!*

Beyond these disturbances, there were also times subconsciously when she felt like she was continually being watched, or that there was someone distant –perhaps a shadow of a person, or persons right on the edge of her vision, never moving, but always a presence in observation-even in battle there was a feeling that others were also present near her and her men, but when she tried to focus in the person/collective had vanished... yet another element to add to her list of discomforts. It was as if the planet were responding to its visitors as intruders, like a biological or mystical force was at work, almost like anti-bodies attacking a disease.

During the course of each short, critical battle, it was not only the possessive nature of the shockwaves that were showing. Her physical frame and strength continued its dangerous entropy. Each move of her saber arm, every swing of the blade, was an act of increased pain –her body continuing to feel heavier and heavier. It was getting harder and harder for her to find the energy to combat not only her environment but the Battle Droids she once cut through with ease.

At least it hadn't just been her that was being affected by this world. The enemy forces had also clearly been dwindling and dying out but in different ways contrary to their surprise attacks, and there had been times when she and the Clones had enjoyed making the most of their equally disorientated situation. But, as they were now entering their tenth cycle, for how much longer could they and their tactics truly hold out? Their meager rations had gone beyond extinction now and the water tubes pumping through the Clones armour could only be kept recycling to a certain point. Ahsoka's own Force meditations, keeping her in check against the planet shockwaves, were starting to fail as the Force's presence on this world, through her, seemingly started to diminish.

As some of the violent imagery of the shockwaves continued to enter her system, Ahsoka worried that she was now starting to border towards the Dark Side-her friend and teacher Jedi Master Plo Koon had had some trouble with the idea of her being partnered with someone still so uniquely different and controversial to the Jedi Order as Anakin Skywalker, especially so soon after their first pairing and during their encounter/ battle against General Grievous's deadly *Malevolence* fleet killer. Yes, they had been dark times indeed, but, regardless of Plo's fears, a great team she and Anakin had become-they had won through the

dark and her use of the Force had stayed clearly to the light. But here, now, on Descea, things were different.

Indeed, it wasn't just Plo Koon whose thoughts and attitudes had been affected by the events of the war. The mood of the Jedi Order itself had changed, and what visits she had made to the Temple on Coruscant over the last four months, since joining forces with her new Master, no longer felt like a return home-to a sacred place of sanctuary and peaceful meditation within the Force. Its radiant coloured halls, previously parked with shrouds of bright yellow sun light, were now darkened shells full of quiet apprehension and echoed with voices of war and talk of troop deployments, continued Jedi training and intelligence gathering-a place of peace, of contemplation and appreciation was now just an extension of the Republic war machine. And then there was the terrible realization upon those visits that so many of her friends had either died or disappeared on missions within this fractured Republic. With more casualties on a daily basis there was also the feeling within the Order, and certain un-named political fractions within the Senate itself, that the war was starting to drag on longer than originally anticipated. There had been no overtures of peace from either side and the Supreme Chancellor seemed strangely subdued in his wishes to cease the conflict, believing that, by pushing it out of the core systems, the wars would wither away and die, when the reverse seemed true. Despite the wavering views of his colleagues, Anakin had stayed loyal to Palpatine, believing that his friend since childhood's beliefs within the arena of politics would soon prove correct, and that the Republic would prevail. And, as far as she was concerned, if Anakin felt that, then she would back her Master up to the hilt one hundred per cent. So far, despite his occasional arrogance, his instincts had been true. With Anakin being The Chosen One, his status within the Force may yet help to simplify things for the better-in such a small space of time his quick thinking and selfless heroics have helped capture both the imagination of the citizens of the Republic and the holo-vid news people, who have made his face known quickly throughout the Outer Rim as "The Hero without Fear!!"

However long the war may last, Ahsoka knew that the Jedi's life mission in serving the Republic would escalate in its duties even further than it had before-and that it would take many more years to re-build the lives of the people who had lost so much so quickly. *Our presence in commanding the Clone Troopers has already created much anger and controversy. We'll all be blamed for this terrible chain of events and even Master Yoda must know deep down that we may never be truly trusted again by the very people we have sworn to protect with our lives. Obi-Wan has often said that time heals all wounds-as ever, we must persevere until the balance is restored.*

No matter how dire the predicament she was currently in, for the sake of her Master and for Plo Koon, she fought hard to maintain her control, keeping her fighting composure primed within the light side of the Force, and keeping their confidence in her as best she could. She owed it to them.

It would be on the fourteenth cycle, on the dawn of a new, even colder day, that Ahsoka and her men's enforced battle for survival on Descea would reach a critical nexus point.

Having previously decoyed a group of pursuing transports, she and the Clones had unintentionally blistered their way into another enemy search party two miles behind. Additionally, despite their best efforts, a faulty power cell in one of Stealth's heavy blasters had eventually been detected by the enemy. Only this attacking force would prove to be the main concentration of its strength-the lead tanks black striped markings betraying the enemy leader within. And Ahsoka was determined to capture it, and its occupants, at all costs-the only bargaining chip left on the table. The attacking forces, however, soon realizing her intentions, had moved their heavy weaponry tanks ahead of their leader, creating a multiple shield around it while the Battle Droids protected the core, with two of their forces breaking away and turning to encircle their attackers. Out in the open ground, Ahsoka and the Clone Troopers pierced the tank protection, the brave young Jedi finding the strength to leap from tank to tank disabling them and decapitating their various side Droid emplacements along the way. She had almost penetrated into the hull of the lead tank

and reached her prey when, at the wrong time and the wrong place, yet again, the worst that could happen to Ahsoka suddenly happened-another paralyzing shockwave.

Only this time the shockwave was different and far worse than anything she felt before-the circle of life and death on this world had finally been shown to her. In just the briefest of minutes, totally isolated from the laser fire, explosions and debris clouds around her, she experienced her longest past vision yet- seeing the armies of the dead-the men, women and children-the victims-their faces contorted in their final death throes from all those millennia ago, suddenly rising upwards from the dead grey ash- an inhuman sound-the unison call of a billion individual terrified screams-echoing throughout the world around her.

And for the first real time in her young life, Ahsoka felt truly afraid.

With their front protection paralyzed, the two troopers had no choice but to back down from their onslaught and retreat into a nearby tree skeleton remained woods, with Ammo throwing several grenades ahead of him, leaping through an almighty series of cover explosions and then onto the lead enemy tanks hull to retrieve his fallen Jedi friend, then, mission accomplished, literally throwing himself backwards into the mists of carnage behind him, still firing his weaponry with one hand, the other arm desperately wrapped around her small, once agile frame. Seconds later, he had managed to put her over his shoulder with the ease of a child holding a doll, though the short distance back to the increased supporting fire from Stealth now seemed like an eternity as the amount of blaster lines only just fell short of hitting him and Ahsoka. Almost reaching Stealth, Ammo would use the last of his pulse charges to tear a hole front ward and, in an amazing one hand over the left shoulder throw, take out the re-adjusting Battle Droid forces behind him, whilst Stealth's heavy cannon laid its last breaths into several Super Battle Droids maneuvering around a fallen tank to the right of its leader. Their desired hole now just about punched in the enemies forces, the Clones barely broke the line and fled as fast as their heavy frames could carry them.

Piercing the dark grey fog, with no time to work out a strategy bar retreat and find safe cover, the Clones, despite their lack of ascension equipment, quickly started traversing a steep hilled area ahead of them that looked like it led towards a new leveled off, tree lined valley above, but soon found it penetrated by more agile, faster paced Battle Droids eager to intercept them. Eyes awoken back to her environment, Ahsoka now embarrassingly found herself rested on Ammo's shoulders, though within seconds her Jedi reflexes had in part returned, using her right re-ignited saber clutched hand to deflect enemy fire, whilst her left pushed outwards with the Force in turning three huge layers of ground ash into a mini hurricane against the Battle Droids running around and jumping through trees, like spindly toy skeletons, to catch up with them-further hand movements from Ahsoka would send Force pushes into the droids legs, sending two layers of pursuers down onto each other like collapsed domino bricks, their shells falling back down the valley, catching others in their wake, followed by the briefest then heaviest sounds of crashed junk parts.

With only seconds to spare, a now dismounted Ahsoka leapt back from Ammo's shoulder, in front of the troops now as she covered their fast moving rears. Whilst still facing the oncoming attackers coming up behind her, her back to the soldiers ascending, she then edged upwards using her instincts in the Force to see behind her whilst still providing the frontal blocking fire support for her friends as they pushed upwards, determined to escape before any more enemy combatants could try and converge into them. Almost at the top, it was the sudden tragic loss of Stealth that would dangerously stop them in their tracks, the valiant officer devastatingly falling after an unexpected sneak attack, through a broken tree frame, from two blasts to the chest armour coming directly from the heavy weaponry of a Super Battle Droid, leading to the Clone's fast collapse part way down the hill. With no time to think, Ahsoka, making a flying leap, turned the Super Battle Droid, before it could round to a new aim, into a severed hulk, then rolled down the hill to reach the rapidly distant rolling body of Stealth, her lightsaber piercing two further Battle Droids as she did so-in a beautifully precise slashing movement that caught them totally off guard. Meanwhile, Ammo laid down the final supporting fire from one side to the other of the hill tree level below him, making the most of several now out of ammunition weapons, before reaching what seemed to be comparative safety at the hill's eventual top. Picking herself up with an upward slash that literally tore a towering Super Battle Droid into two pieces from the bottom up, Ahsoka, now picking up her fallen friend and carrying him in her arms, found the strength to make blistering Force jumps until she finally, slightly winded, reached the top, using her Force senses once more to deflect as many of the upwards blaster bolts

attempting to get at them. Now joined with Ammo, but time factor unable to tend to their fallen friend carried on Ahsoka's shoulder, the pair burst out of the tree line, heading out into a vast new expanse of grey/white ash ahead and a lower mountain area beyond that. Sadly, no sooner than fifty yards into their new depressing surroundings, and piercing the grey mists around them, escape from the Separatists ultimately proved impossible, as, from a new swathe of clearing mist, the little trio soon found themselves in front of one of the very Separatists battle groups they had earlier shaken off, now joined with an additional force so large that Ahsoka, deflecting attacking blaster weapons from the rapidly approaching, target strengthening enemy, could only determine were newly arrived re-enforcements. And now the attacking forces previously coming up the valley behind them would soon reach the top of the hill and press in their ultimate killing jar.

If this had been the world in which the Force had pre-ordained her to die on then so be it, Ahsoka thought to herself, now dropping Stealth to her left side in a position so as to protect him from attacking fire. She was now prepared to be with the Force, but it would certainly not be without a fight!! And Jedi never ran!!

Ahsoka's skill of the blade would continue to hold, swirling it around her body in all directions, not only to try and protect herself but also Ammo and the fallen Stealth. Sadly, it would not be much longer before Ammo, too, fell from the deadly red blazes of energy, as multiple targeted hits pierced his chest and forehead area. Ahsoka could hear the blasts smash the armour and the unmistakable smell of destroyed flesh coming from her friend.

With the plains around her now a full sea of converging Separatist forces, with no means of escape, and only her small orange framed body acting like a beacon against an image of metal and entropy, it was now that the battle suddenly seemed to stop, as the long cylindrical emotionless faces of her droid attackers became immobile and positioned their guns downwards, whilst the lead black striped hull of the enemy tank maneuvered clunkily through its once protective flank.

It would be in the midst of those few seconds that Ahsoka, in what seemed a temporary respite before her ultimate demise on this miserable life draining world, now saw the true horror of her friend Ammo's injuries- how half his armour had been fully blown away, his skin covered in shrapnel and blood, the singed flesh and the smell of stale blood now permeating her nostrils. She cradled him in her arms, tears flowing like rain down the trooper's dirt and ash covered armour, watching the fluid branching off into all directions onto the ashen floor beneath, becoming part of its own small unique world of sadness.

His helmet shattered in two, its right side hanging off, his cropped bleached fair hair covered in blood, and his visible eyes, lit with loyalty and duty-staying true to the end- sadly now beginning to extinguish themselves. And there was nothing she could do to stop it. "It was an honour to fight alongside you, Sir," he told her warmly, his dying whispered words now starting to trail off through his helmet's partially active microphone system...

And then she looks towards the body of Stealth-she had felt him die minutes ago but, trying desperately to protect Ammo, had been unable to do anything to help him in his own final moments. The sadness within her was now almost unbearable-she has lost soldiers and pilots in this war but nothing seemed more personal, more horrifically shattering to her than what has happened here, now, on Descea-the true personal horror of war and loss in this insane intergalactic conflict.

As the heartfelt tears of Ahsoka's suffering melted away, and her eyes hardened anew at the thought of attacking her enemy, the face of evil, the cowardly Separatist mastermind facing her, once hidden behind his legion force, determined to hunt them down, would now finally reveal himself. The circular top hatch at the top of the tank now opened back to reveal a hybrid bat-like creature, its cruel inhuman facial features, almost overshadowed by gigantic ears, its smaller slit-like eyes piercing with intense awareness and a smashed in pig-like nose, of which below that was a mouth seemingly opening ever wider with every second, its rear top and bottom side fangs sharp tipped and now loosing dripping saliva onto its dark black/grey furred chin. Its frame, wings restrained and barely adequate in fitting its military uniform, now smudged with its own dripping mucus residue, and now trying to adjust itself to its new surroundings, protected by a thin membrane like atmosphere shield, obviously designed to keep back this worlds harsh

climes. Enthusiastically trying to break its enclosure, its head seemingly nodding up and down in eager anticipation, it's inhuman features proudly surveyed the armies of inhuman metal monsters surrounding her, then, licking its lips in satisfaction, its pure black, pupil-less eye slits started to open further at its prey now finally ensnared, showing it's intense satisfaction and ready bloodlust at seeing the broken soldiers near her feet.

As its cruel, sadistic eyes burned into her, Ahsoka tried to fight back at it with an equally battle hardened stare, but the look of utter defeat and pain within her wasn't hard to hide. And then came its laughter, the most vicious noise she had ever heard in her life so far. Deep welled, mocking humiliating shrieks directed toward her, now echoing all around her environment and piercing her senses, her weakened frame bruised and hurt as the Battle Droids and Super Battle Droids re-activated, weapons arms raised upwards for the final, inevitable kill.

Her figure fitting dark red combat outfit now black and brown with pitted burn marks and traces of blood- not all of it her own- she stands now, her green coloured blade activated and piercing the air with its intensity, her body seemingly no longer as weak and ravaged by the psychic shockwaves, becoming more primed and defiant. There was now a different aura to this female Togruta. Something beyond being a Jedi. The Togrutan instincts she bore as such a very young child had now returned, and, it seemed, with more of a vengeance than previously witnessed. Her eyes were now savage, truly animalistic, as her feral scream of retaliation suddenly raged through the air around her as she charged forward, weapon outstretched, with all her might.

Sy'Zarak's eyes no longer showed the confidence of battle, nor of the joy of upcoming victory at seeing the crumbled Jedi's ultimate demise within its blades. Instead, his face would soon show an amazing variety of emotions within a mere few seconds- individual courage had quickly disappeared, followed by a look of fear, then anger that his prey couldn't accept the inevitable. He too screamed an inhuman response to hers, and ordered the Battle Droids to charge.

The inhuman machines raced forward- their blasters primed, their singular target acquired.

Ahsoka had reached the point of no return, her blade now about to taste a new sampling of Battle Droid metal exo-skin.

And then, unimaginably, the final battle was never joined.

Suddenly, a wave of searing light seemed to erupt from the ground between them. A searing light that swarmed outwards growing exponentially, and absorbing everything within it, soon piercing and enveloping the sky- Ahsoka was knocked to the ground by the sudden energy wave eruption, then could only watch incredulously as her eyes focused into the energy and looked beyond it- she gasped as she saw its composition- the long dead faces of those screaming men, women and children of this world of Descea that she had seen earlier, now merging manifold from the ash debris blowing upwards within the energy field- their screams now piercing the world. So powerful was the noise they made, it was as if it were enough to crack the planet in two- the most incredible torturous screams of hysteria and anger packed into an explosive force on a scale that she found previously unimaginable. In its outward expansion, the wave of energy and noise had torn into its true target- the huge Separatist forces, and went on to shatter weaponry, technology and metal limbs into disintegrated fragments within its mighty wake- for a second it looked as if the Battle Droids had all shown emotional expression on their faces- of immense terror and panic- before being completely pulverized. Her ultimate alien foe, unable to reach the shelter of his tank, now completely engulfed in it as he too was annihilated- the force quickly piercing through its shield and then decimating it, burning the creature alive from top to bottom, inside and out, without even a chance to scream, before the shield housing its dead carcass then popped like a balloon and merged into the unleashed power of the planet's hate.

She had seen that energy wave before- it had been the final one that this planet's inhabitants had witnessed before their demise- only this was different in feeling. This was a wave of spiritual *defense* rather than

attack. The ghosts of Descea had returned to reclaim their world, and were now screaming their rage of defiance against the intruders that had set foot on their world.

The wave slammed ever outwards, expanding like a flower spreading its petals in a deadly scorched summer, reaching and reaching until the whole landscape within Ahsoka's field of vision stayed encapsulated, yet leaving her and the two fallen bodies of her comrades safe within its centre.

The event could not have lasted more than twenty seconds-but it seemed like several lifetimes to Ahsoka, still in shock by what was occurring around her, and still desperately holding on to her fallen comrade Ammo, not just in supporting him, but desperately hoping he was still alive-that this amazing life force of energy might decide to bring him back to her once more, so that he could hold on to her, help support her, help her overcome her fear.

The storm of death would soon subside then blink out of reality, and then the ash around them began to settle- a brief stirring then the sound of silence once again, as if the whole event had never happened. Ahsoka now suddenly felt able to truly breathe again, and her heightened Force senses were now beginning to flow once more, like water breaking free from a dam, returning to a full state of awareness within her. She felt as if she were taking large gasps of fresh re-vitalizing air within her chest: that the forces of this world were now allowing her to return to normal.

"We've survived," Ahsoka mumbled to herself, to her injured friend, to anything that might be able to hear her within the surrounding quiet wilderness. The shock of her continued existence still resonated through her mind. Though her face looked ravaged, her skin brittle and pallid, her eyes betraying the strain of years, rather than days, of battle, she smiled the most supporting of smiles, then realized the worst, her hand clenching Ammo's, her returning Force energies revealing the terrible information that she didn't want to know. She gently looked towards her fallen comrade, her friend, and totally removed the fractured helmet. His eyes now closed forever, Ammo displayed a strong face signaled in a final defiant expression-the expression of a soldier entering into the warrior's night.

Ahsoka continued to hold him for a little while longer, determined not to leave Ammo, or Stealth, alone within the enormous circular trail of deeper than black ash destruction of which they were embedded.

And, for almost an hour, Ahsoka wept.

In her singular grief, she could still feel *their* presence, though it no longer totally permeated the world around her, and its residue was starting to disappear back to wherever it previous had lain. The quiet all around her was of the most distinct nature she had ever felt. A feeling beyond calm around her that seemed almost respectful. The dead would no longer be disturbed on this world, and Ammo and Stealth-their battles fought- would finally share the air of peace they had deserved.

As the briefest winds began to settle, Ahsoka saw the last small wisps of ash, now looking like beautiful snowflakes, float down from the sky, though one seemed to stay in mid-air a little longer, then seemingly move away from its natural trajectory. Looking more clearly, her eye sight sharpening, the ash was moving towards her, faster and faster, now transforming into the approaching reality of a Republic EVAC pick-up transport, its steady mechanical hum now starting to pierce the quiet all around her-a smile now radiating on her face as it began its touch down to the surface- its sight, and the noisy ear drum rolling engines emanating from it like an angry beast, the best she had experienced for a long time...

Within seconds of arrival the equally beautiful sight of glistening white, shiny armoured Clone Troopers, as efficient as ever, had fanned out within a circular perimeter defense, whilst other troopers within that same parameter leapt out of the transport a few moments behind in a quick rush to aid Ahsoka, two of them picking up her frail frame between them and helping her gently to the craft. Four others took away the bodies of her comrades-her friends. Their face masks may shield their thoughts and feelings during this war, but Ahsoka shared the silent dignity felt by the Clone recovery force as they carefully took away their honoured dead, preserving them in black protective bacta wrappings to a secluded area at the back of the EVAC transport.

Ahsoka looked towards the two bodies in her silent grief. *May the Force be with you...always*, she whispered respectfully.

Her thoughts now broken, Ahsoka could hear some of the ground communication equipment and personnel chattering away behind her revealing that, with Admiral Yularen's rescue force pursuing an escaping Separatist warship from the system, several other troop transports were planet bound to collect the rest of the brave and the bold scattered around Descea that had died so quickly on its grey/white continent. *This world will not have my men*, she thought to herself- there would be no more bodies for them to absorb into its shrine of destruction.

Ahsoka's mind raced through the final moments of the battle that never was. Her Jedi abilities had been overshadowed and circumvented by her animalistic instincts-her race's early inheritance. And from that return, for the first true time, she had found the Dark Side of the Force within her. And she had touched it. That irresistible, needing lure that it had radiated- what *it* considered the only true power in the universe. The temptation of that power within her to be tamed and utilized. A frightening realization for anyone, let alone a Jedi, to face.

Obviously different to the Light Side of the Force used and radiated by the Jedi for good, Ahsoka knew that she could, in that briefest, barest of contact with it, see how the path of the Dark Side could intersect itself with that of its counter-part. The Dark wanted to cancel out the light. But could one really exist without the other?

Certainly, its potential power for use in battle was incredible –she could see how Jedi, like the once revered Count Dooku, could so easily fall under its beguiling spell, but at the same time saw that those who succumbed to it were ultimately victims of their own making-victims of life, of circumstance, of longing. She had seen the Dark Side's raw power, its strength and singular clarity of purpose. And it was a foolish individual that thought they could tame its guiles-a pure impossibility of the mind to resist. Pity those that had tried and failed.

But, as a free thinking individual, Ahsoka had resisted its pull, and knew that she would never succumb to it- that she would never believe in it or accept it. It would no longer find any further solace within her mind- she had had the power to see through it and make her way back to the light. And, fortunately, she hadn't had to put that willpower to the test-she had escaped its clutches unscathed due to the violent intervention of the planet itself at the critical point she could have been affected.

It would be an experience that she would not allow herself to forget, though, pledging that, upon her eventual return to the Jedi Temple, she would fulfill her earlier promise to herself to continue refining and improving her unique private mental techniques and disciplines to keep the experience of the Dark Side from ever entering her consciousness again. But with the Clone War still raging, how could she not expect further temptation to come. Whatever may happen down the long road ahead, she would continue to be prepared for the worst as best she could.

As the young Jedi made ready to leave this world, she wondered what was happening with her friends far away. Re-united with her Master, would Anakin believe the incredible tale of what happened to her on Descea? Of how its dead had returned to re-claim their world from war. He probably wouldn't-even she would have had trouble accepting it if it hadn't happened directly to her-but he would have no choice but to at least *listen* to her incredible story of survival. As would the Jedi Council, who would probably feel it necessary to keep the incident secret from the Republic for the rest of time, for fear of the consequences of such a tale, and its ramifications, linked to the Force. Even when the Separatists eventually discover what's happened here, they too are bound to stay away. This world is a power that will prove un-tameable. This dark chapter quickly coming to a natural close.

Whatever history would finally say of events that had taken place here, Ahsoka Tano would always know the truth of the dead world of Descea...

The planet had equally given her a subconscious warning for the future-that no one should ever set foot on this world again-and that no more war would be tolerated on their sacred ground. Their testament to a dead world.

The experience of the shockwaves and of those final images of destruction wrought by this world would forever cement themselves in Ahsoka's mind, and would make her ever more determined to end the galaxy involving battles that were taking place around her as quickly as possible. Alongside her Master and her Jedi friends, she knew that they could win. They had to. The lessons of this world must be learned. Perhaps some good had come out of this terrible nightmare after all...

As the transport pulled up and veered into the atmosphere, Ahsoka, looking out from her open pod compartment, took in one last breath of cold fresh air and made a final view at the harsh surface that had once been beneath her feet, witnessing the huge circular debris field she and her fallen men had been embedded within, and now realized that she would be more than happy to relay Descea's message of defiance-that war could no longer be tolerated- across the stars. As the transport began to accelerate ever upwards to take her away from the world she had been mentally and physically enslaved to, she could not help but remember Ammo and Stealth, nor the millions of people that had perished in pain and despair in that final battle so long ago, and shed one final tear for all of them. A single lone tear that descended from the ship and splashed to the ash below, the small water capsulet soon coalescing into the ground-it too now becoming a part of the ash, as if it had almost never existed.
