

Time After Time

By August and Cynthia Hahn

The Cularin system is still reeling from the imposition of Martial Law and the loss of its long-time criminal "leadership." Many believe there is nothing left that can shock them any longer. Those folks would be wrong, and many are about to discover that error. When the entire Cularin system shifted forward 10 years in time, most thought that was as strange as their world could get. They, too, are wrong.

The effects of the Darkstaff, the Sith artifact at the heart of many of Cularin's woes, is still making its presence felt. Time, it would seem, is far more broken within the confines of Cularin than anyone realized . . .



Eventually, the boss told his pet thug to stop, and the Trandoshan's scaly fist ceased its seemingly constant assault. There wasn't a single part of the young Twi'lek's body that didn't hurt, especially around the face and lekku areas.

"So, tell me again, Guster," said the irritated Human, "how is it you're standing here -- well, kneeling and bleeding here -- while all my other men are so much lizard fodder out in the jungle?"

Guster, or Gust Toruna to the parents who disowned him years ago, just shook his head -- an action that hurt all the way down. "I -- I -- just don't know," he stammered through swollen lips. "I swear I'm telling you the truth. Please -- please don't hurt me no more, Vex." Of course, with his face feeling like one big bruise, Guster couldn't be sure how much of that could be understood.

Apparently, Vex was well versed in the language of pain. "But with my shipment in the hands of Riboga's goons and all my other couriers dead because of them, you're the only entertainment I can buy with all those lost creds, Guster." As the crime boss gestured, his Trandoshan enforcer raised its brutal fist once more.

"Wait!" Guster screamed. "I swear I'm telling you the truth. I *did* die, Vex. I could feel it! I swear!"

Vex smoothed down the front of his rancor hide trench coat, signaled for the Trandoshan to punch Guster once more, and then watched as the thug hoisted the Twi'lek off the ground. "And yet you're still here, breathing and bubbling and pleading for your worthless life. So tell me, slay-mo, how exactly am I supposed to believe you?"

"Because --" Guster's vision was fading, but he shook his head and it cleared for a few moments, "Because it's the truth." He spit bluish blood onto the alley floor. "Could I make up a story like that?"

Vex considered that, steepling his fingers together in thought. The Trandoshan looked at him quizzically, but he gestured for the big thug to drop Guster onto the pavement. The Twi'lek was in such rough shape, he wouldn't be running anywhere for a long while.

"All right, Guster. You've said something intelligent -- finally. You're a coward and a cheat, but you aren't entirely stupid. If you were going to lie to me, you'd have made up a better story."

Hope dawned in Guster's one visible eye, but it dwindled again as the red-haired Human whirled around to glare at him. "Tell me again, word for fraggin' word, everything that happened out there, and if even *one word* doesn't match what you said before, I'll have Raptor here finish what she's started."

Guster nodded. He almost thanked Vex for his life, but thought better of it. All the crime boss wanted was his story again, so that's what he'd tell. He knew it would match, word for word, because for the first time in his miserable life, it was the utter and entire truth.

It took a while for him to calm down and clear his mouth enough to talk, but the swig of Hedrett oil-rig whiskey -- so magnanimously provided by Vex -- helped even as it burned like crazy. Eventually, though, his words didn't sound like he had a maw full of marbles. As the leather-clad criminal and his overly hostile bodyguard listened closely, Guster's fantastic tale unfolded again.

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"So we were at the drop point just like you told us to be, right? There was Kello and Dusty on their swoops, Nardakka in the transport, and me and Shilly in her custom speeder. Everything was going right, you know? Plenty of sun and lots of visibility. It was a perfect clearing. Frells, even Dusty said so.

"Anyways, we'd been there maybe twenty ticks and Kello was starting to get nervous, like maybe the marks weren't going to show. I know he didn't want to come back empty handed like we did on that Merr-Sonn run, so everyone was worried the deal wasn't going down. Dusty kept checking his comm to make sure no one was trying to call, but we were getting good signal.

"The whole deal seemed like a no-show. We should have aborted when it hit half past the hour and still no one was there, but Kello kept saying, 'Just a few minutes, just a few more minutes.' I started to get that feeling again, you know, like all Nar Shaddaa was about to break loose. I should have listened. We should have left.

"Riboga's people sprung their trap on us as soon as we let our guard down. Dusty jumped off his swoop to go handle 'business' in the trees and next thing we know, there was this strangled cry and the a blaster whine. Then Dusty's body fell back into the clearing, smoking from the crater in his face.

"The next thing I knew, the transport was flipping end over end, bits of Wookiee fur and worse everywhere. Nardakka had been sitting on a thermal mine the whole time we'd been there and didn't know it. They must have had the thing on remote, because Kello almost lost his swoop to another mine but pulled away at the last minute -- not that it saved him. A second later, massed blaster fire came pouring out of the tree line. Kel-kel went down in the first volley, all that nice new armor you bought him fragged to splinters. It was -- untidy.

"So Shilly yells, 'Echoota this!' which was the first intelligent thing I'd heard all day, and guns the speeder. It took a bunch of blaster shots to the side, but we managed to get out of that clearing of death. Shilly got us onto a trail and opened up the speeder's engine. I spared a little hope that maybe we'd gotten away clean and free.

"I was wrong.

"The gunmen, all wearing combat fatigues and blast helmets, took off after us, chasing us down on military-grade combat bikes. This was real hardware I'm talking, with onboard guns and targeting computers and such. Shilly was good, real good, but we were just outgunned. We must have made it almost back here to Hedrett before they finally caught us, but eventually they burned us down. I remember the back of the speeder exploding and Shilly disappearing in a blast of fire and molten metal. Ugly way to go.

"Next thing I knew, I was busted up and leaning against a tree with all these bikes zipping past. I had a fleeting thought that maybe they'd think I was dead and move on, but it just wasn't my day. The last bike slowed down just long enough to swivel its gun around and blow me into the next life.

"Which, apparently, is this one, Vex. I remember the gun coring me straight out. My chest lit up and I know -- I mean *I know* -- that I was dead. Except that one second I was, and the next I wasn't. The world went black and then, just as fast, it came back. I was still sitting against the tree, the trunk behind me burned and my clothes shredded, but I was intact. Totally unhurt. Never felt better in my life. Well, until I walked back here.

"That's how it happened, Vex. I swear on my mother's lekku, I ain't lying. I can't explain how it went down or why I'm still breathing, but it's the pure-as-blue-ryll truth!"

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Vex considered each word of the story. If nothing else, it matched exactly what the worthless bagman had said when he first stumbled incoherently into the office. Vex pointed his blaster pistol at the Twi'lek. "You know what, Guster?"

The pale-blue petty crook looked up from where he was still kneeling on the ground, and then closed his one good eye. "Wh -- wh -- what?"

The crime boss dropped his arm, letting the pistol point toward the floor, and smiled calmly. "I believe you. That's just too fantastic a tale to make up, especially for a two-bitter like you with no imagination."

The Twi'lek nodded. "Right, Vex! Just like I said!"

Vex tossed the pistol to Raptor, a slow and easy throw that the female Trandoshan caught with no effort at all. "Even so, I'd like to see this immortality of yours for myself. Rapt, if you would do the honors?"

The Trandoshan thug smiled a toothy, lethally wide grin and aimed the pistol at Guster's head.

In a panic, the Twi'lek held up his hands and shouted, "But -- but -- Vex, I don't know if it'll happen again!"

The crime lord flipped up the collar of his trench coat. "Exactly, Guster. Let's find out."

And before the cringing thief could protest further, Raptor squeezed down on the burnished chrome trigger of Vex's custom

blaster. For Guster, the world went dark for a second time . . .

Living Force Game Notes

At the end of the **Living Force** scenario "Philanthropy" (part 3 of the 2002 "Below the Belt" trilogy), characters made a d100 roll on the Time Effects chart. Effective immediately, all characters who rolled 100 on that chart suffer a latent consequence of the 10-year jump in Cularin's timeline. Those characters are affected by a timeshadow.

A timeshadow is an alternate-timeline version of an existing person. The shifts in Cularin's timestream have caused some residents to develop alternate versions of themselves. Timeshadows exist simultaneously with the original heroes and are in every way exact copies of the originals. However, when an original hero dies, that person vanishes and is instantly replaced with his or her timeshadow. The replacement is disconcerting to the hero, but otherwise has no detrimental side effects.

In game terms, if a hero with a timeshadow -- that is, a hero who previously rolled 100 on the Time Effects chart in the "Philanthropy" scenario -- drops below 0 Wound Points for any reason, that hero is instantly healed of all Wound and Vitality damage and left completely healthy and rested. This effect can occur at any time until the end of the campaign. However, the effect can occur only once, because the timeshadow is consumed in restoring the hero to life.

No hero is aware of this effect until it occurs for him, and players should not use the timeshadow willingly. It should come as a total surprise to each hero. Gamemasters are encouraged to penalize any player who fails to roleplay this aspect of the timeshadow effect appropriately by reducing or negating any roleplaying award for experience points accordingly.