

Home Again

By August and Cynthia Hahn

Homecomings are interesting things. Sometimes, they are joyous and a cause for celebration. Sometimes, they are occasions for dread and fear, a time for worry about one's reception or consequences for one's deeds while away. Sometimes, they are yearned for and anticipated, while other times, they must take place in absolute secrecy for fear of discovery -- or worse.

And sometimes, they're all of the above. Once in a great while, a homecoming occurs that is so complicated that it leaves those returning, and the others who expect them, with no clear idea of how they should feel.



Everything was wrong with his universe.

He had to duck away from the sparks, a maneuver that cost him a precious fraction of a second. Gunfights were full of those instantaneous decisions, just one more reason he preferred life with his blaster in its holster. That wasn't an option right now.

Of course, Warlan Tosk had lots of reasons to hate his present situation, but there was no time to dwell on any of them. Right now, there was only time to breathe and squeeze, breathe and squeeze. His blaster was getting hot in his hand; that was not a good sign. A fine weapon, its custom grips only let heat build up when he was using it too much or when it was firing off the last of its power pack.

Right now, both were happening, and Warlan didn't have a spare -- a spare power pack or a spare blaster. "When I'm out of shots, they'll stroll right up and --"

"I'm working as fast as I can," she grumbled. "I'm a Senator, not a slicer!"

He sighed and nodded to himself. Less chatter, more combat. His next few shots would be his last, so they had to count, or else both he and Lavina were dead. Warlan breathed deeply and drew a bead, then fired a brilliant beam of yellow-white light that hit one of their assailants in the throat. The result was . . . messy.

Unfortunately, another result was a barrage of incoming fire that took centimeters off the steel barrier he was using for cover. The squad in front of him had already lost eight of their number, and number nine going down didn't sit too well with them.

"They don't like you much!" he heard from behind him, where, if the universe had any mercy, Ms. Wren was boosting open the doors to their ship. Correction: the ship they were stealing.

"They don't seem to be your biggest fans either, Senator! Or should I remind you that *I* rescued *you* from *them*?!"

"Don't remind me!" She sounded disgusted. "I've almost got this lock! If this datapad of yours was worth a womp rat's spit in the sand, we'd be in the fragging ship already!"

Warlan couldn't help but smile at the colorful language. He popped off two more shots into a foe as the soldier stood up to throw a grenade. He'd only meant to shoot once, but the first hit didn't drop the poor bleeder. He'd have cursed his sorry luck, but the dropped grenade's blast took out at least two other opponents. Warlan marked that down in the "win" column and ducked for cover again.

"Is that any kind of language for a Senator to be using?" He allowed himself a moment of levity -- his father had taught him that in life or death situations, the winner was usually the person who panicked the least. A level head is vastly more likely to stay on someone's shoulders.

"I'm sure that's ex-Senator by now," she spat. "And no, this isn't diplomacy speaking. You heard that on [the recording](#) you delivered to the Senate!"

Warlan cringed. That recording had earned him a leg wound and likely his position as a Republic Protector, but his first duty was to his charge. Lavina had asked him to carry the message directly to the Senate's holofeed. Well, she got her wish -- and now they had this lovely "escort" all the way to the hangar.

"You know, Tosk, this is never going to work if that flight window isn't open when we take off! They'll send Jedi Starfighters after us!"

"I've been assured no Jedi will move to stop us, and they've got the only fighters fast enough to catch us! She may look like a piece of junk, but this ship's the fastest thing in the Core!"

His words were punctuated by two things. The first was the death rattle of a faceless soldier hitting the dock plates in front of his barrier, streamers of melted helmet flying through the air. The second was the distinctive whine of his pistol running out of power.

Warlan drew his vibroknives and crouched, ready to spring at the first clone past his hiding spot. He wouldn't last long against these vat-bred killing machines, but maybe he could buy Lavina enough time to escape.

"There!"

The sound of a portal hissing open behind him was enough to spur Warlan into action again. He leapt across the barrier's one opening toward the lowering ramp of the transport. The Senator was already scrambling aboard, and as soon as he hit the lip of the boarding gantry, he did the same. The leap in front of the gap cost him a grazing shot across his shoulders, which he did his best to ignore. Better pain than recapture any day.

Warlan dragged himself into the ship's entry bay and smacked the close button with the butt of a thrown knife. Almost immediately, the sound of armored fists and gunstocks slamming into the door's plating filled the ship.

"It won't take them long to get in!" he warned.

"Let's see if this datapad was worth what you paid for it, then!" Lavina's voice came from the cockpit, where he could also hear a flurry of tiny beeps and whistles. That meant the astromech was on board, just as the coded message had promised.

He backed away from the cacophony at the ramp and staggered to his feet. He was shot up fairly badly, but nothing was critical. He'd live -- assuming they ever got off the ground. Outside, he could faintly hear one of the troopers shouting orders:

"Bring in docking clamps. Contact the Jedi and set up a defense perimeter in orbit. I want two E-webs set up there and there and I want them yesterday!"

Warlan cursed under his breath. He had to give these tubeborn credit; they were competent. "The best soldiers science can grow," he muttered to himself. Then, much louder, "I didn't buy that pad. It's a gift from a concerned citizen! His name's on the software tag!"

A sputter of disbelief issued from the cockpit. "He *exists*?"

Silently, Warlan counted the seconds ticking by, weighing how long it would take *him* to set up a tripod mount. "Yes, but if this ship doesn't take off in less than a minute, we won't!"

Even as he spoke, there was a thrum through the vessel as its engines came to life. "I got it! Everything's online!"

"Fantastic," he groaned, hobbling as fast as he could to the cockpit. Sliding into the pilot's chair, he flipped the switch on the automatic belly gun he'd been told about. Outside the ship, unfortunate things happened to the clone troopers around the loading ramp.

With a deep breath to dull the pain along his back, he told the red-and-white droid to take off and follow the flight plan on the datapad rather inelegantly plugged into its chassis. With a quick dash of boops and clicks, the astromech complied, and the ship began to move. The moment the nose of the YT-1300 was past the hangar doors, he closed his eyes and leaned back. . .

. . . into Senator Wren's waiting hands. He opened his eyes in surprise. Lavina was standing behind his chair with a medkit. "You're hurt, Warlan. Let me look at it."

He groaned again but knew better than to argue with her. The last two weeks of hiding and running had made that perfectly clear. The Senator got what the Senator wanted. End of story. "Yes, ma'am."

She treated his burn scar with fairly expert skill and dabbed it with a painkiller. She'd been a quick study since he pulled her out of the rubble of that "safehouse."

"Other than this, how are you?" she asked in a surprisingly gentle voice.

"Physically? I'm five stars. No worries."

She sighed and started wrapping a bandage across his upper torso. "And mentally?"

He echoed her sigh and looked down at his hands. "How should I be? I've committed treason three times, killed more soldiers of the Republic than I can count, lost the only job I was ever good at, and as soon as we break through Coruscant space, I'll be a wanted fugitive. I feel . . ."

She finished his sentence as her hands brushed his chest. "Lost. Like everything's been pulled out from under you. The good guys have become the bad guys, and the bad guys are even worse. There's no one to trust, nowhere to turn. The only path open is home, and the people there might be just as hostile as the people we just escaped."

He put his hand over her fingers and nodded. As her voice trailed off, he could hear that she was crying behind him. She was a brave woman, perhaps the bravest he'd ever known, but everyone had a breaking point. Her words had marked the passage of hers.

It hurt, but he turned to face her and did the only thing that made sense. He pulled her into his tired arms and kissed her.

She kissed back.

And suddenly, no matter what else happened, all was right with his universe again.

Living Force Game Notes

Effective immediately, there is a galactic bounty with the Office of Republic Justice on the persons of Lavina Wren and Warlan Presvere Tosk. These two fugitives are wanted for the murder of numerous Republic personnel, the destruction of a government holding facility and the theft of an undisclosed starship. Subjects are wanted alive and unharmed for full receipt of the bounty (35,000 credits for the former Senator; 20,000 credits for her co-conspirator). Alternatively, half these bounty amounts will be paid upon receipt of their demise.

In addition, heroes in the **Living Force** campaign receive a —4 penalty to all Charisma-based skill and attribute checks while interacting with any soldier of the Republic or member of the Senate, or while on Coruscant for any reason. The reaction of loyal members of the Republic to citizens of Cularin, regardless of its "independent" status, is not a warm one at the current time.