

Grudge Match

By August and Cynthia Hahn

Not everything involving the green world of Cularin is about galactic events or epic struggles. Many of the conflicts that play out every day within the system are far smaller and meaningful only to those involved. What transpires in the city depths may not shake the heavens, but such events are no less important to the men and women fighting for survival in a universe turned against them.



Indeed, many of the battles that take place on Cularin have little to do with the darkening of the shadows in the galaxy. Most are about nothing more important than an old gambling debt or a dimly perceived insult across a noisy cantina. Not every fist raised in anger does so against the oppression of the Senate or the rabble-rousing of the Separatists. Sometimes, a raised fist is just looking for a face to punch for the pure, uncomplicated joy of punching it . . .

Try as she might, her footfalls echoed all the way down the alley. In Hedrett, the majority of the roadways were made from the recycled decking of hundreds of old starships. It was a wonderful "waste not, want not" policy, but the clanking of her armored boots on the plate steels was liable to get Caranna just that -- wasted.

For two days now, she'd been on the run. No rest, no sleep, and a blaster graze across the shoulders that kept aching were constant reminders of how dogged her pursuer had proven itself. She had to think of the person hounding her as an "it" because the few glimpses she'd seen had only been of metal armor and an insanely oversized pair of handguns.

When she saw it at all, that was. She'd been chased all over civilized Cularin, back and forth between the twin cities, and from one corner of the industrial center of Hedrett to the other. She'd run out of places to hide. All of her usual shadows were either smoldering piles of rubble or she'd worn her welcome out long before this mess started. It occurred to Caranna for a moment that perhaps, in a way, she'd brought this on herself by being every inch the stereotype of a back-stabbing Twi'lek. Fortunately for her sense of pride, such thoughts rarely stuck with her for long.

No, this was all the fault of the slime-spawn chasing her. It had interrupted a perfectly good dream about flying the Kessel Run in twelve parsecs by firebombing her apartment. It had changed the security codes on her rightfully stolen ship. It had run her ragged through street after street on this Maker-forsaken planet for days.

And now, it was going to pay.

Caranna's first impulse in any dangerous situation was to bolt like a razorcat in a hailstorm. Failing that, her next instinct was to exact dire revenge by any means necessary. The fact that it had taken more than fifty hours for her to get from one inclination to the other spoke leagues about her preference for running. Regardless, Caranna was tired and hungry, and her lekku ached.

This nerf herder was going down, one way or the other. She'd managed to get a little distance on her assailant by slipping into the sewers of the twin cities. She knew them fairly well and could usually pop up anywhere she wished, though in her mad dash she'd gotten a bit lost.

Being lost was worth what her trip into the muck had turned up. In one of the least tidy corners of the sewers, she'd come across the mostly eaten body of an old "working" associate of her. While she had to admit that Krael had looked better, the blaster rifle still strapped to his desiccating back was the best present he'd ever given her. Its power cells were missing, but that wasn't a problem. She had six stashed in the only thing she'd been able to save from her apartment -- a combat jumpsuit with roomy pockets.

Now the woman with power cells had a weapon and was armed and dangerous. Now the rules changed. She came up into the lights district of Gadrin, rifle in hand and looking to get even. The nice buildings here would all be closed to her right now; she smelled like a charnel heap and probably looked worse. That was all right; she didn't want inside. She wanted on top.

It was an easy climb to reach the nearest rooftop. She knew the roof landscape of Cularin almost as well as she knew the sewers below. OPS Speeders were almost all ground vehicles, and few officers were prepared to match her jump for jump up here. Of course, she usually had an ascension gun for those rare times when her agility failed her, but tonight she'd have to play things closer to the edge.

Standing in the middle of the roof, as equidistant to as many other buildings as she could be, Caranna's temper finally snapped. She'd been chased, wounded and now treed like some prize lakata on a nobles' hunt. No more. No more!

"I'm here! Come get me, you chuuu'reek!" she screamed at the top of her lungs.

It was possibly suicide to call the hunter's attention, but in her present state, starving and exhausted, she was about to fall over, anyway. At any rate, her pursuer probably couldn't hear the cry; she was eleven stories up, and there wasn't a soul to be seen in any direction. The shout was more a shriek of defiance than any real attempt to communicate.

Thus, when the concussive force of a heavy blaster shot slamming into the rooftop sent her sprawling, she was as surprised as she was suddenly terrified. The metal monstrosity, silver and black with ridged edges on its forearms and a pair of vibrating bayonets extending from each of its huge pistols, leveled both guns and fired again. The distance between Caranna and her attacker was enough that she rolled out of the way of the twin shots by pure instinct before they could land.

With the soft whine of servos kicking in to augment its strength, the walking specter of steel-clad doom easily made the leap onto her rooftop. She vaulted to her feet, sought cover behind a heat exchanger, and squeezed the trigger of her new rifle. There was a high-pitched warble inside the gun, and its venting blew out sideways. Then the power clips fell out. Finally, the entire front of the rifle fell off.

"Frazlat!" She threw the handle at her would-be killer out of sheer frustration. She connected, at least, though the bit of metal and formed plastic served as little more than an amusement to her attacker. As it started to move toward her, pivoting on heavily piston-wreathed legs, she tore the meter-long retaining bolt out of the exchanger and held it up like a weapon. Right now, it was the closest thing she had.

The figure lifted both guns and, with the flip of a switch on the handle of each, their barrels extended, spun backward, and resealed into the main body of the weapon. This protected the apertures of the blasters and turned them into a pair of frighteningly lethal-looking double-bladed punch daggers. Then a whirring trill updated her mental picture -- they were double-bladed *vibro* punch daggers.

Caranna wasn't going down without a fight. She'd been fighting all her life, and she wasn't going to have it end with begging. Two days ago, when she was well-fed, rich and happy, she'd have begged. Right now, there was nothing in her but animal anger. There was no way this Bantha chod was getting the thrill of an easy kill.

She came in swinging, diving low and lashing out with the steel rod. It collided with the hip seam of the powersuit, sending up a loud clang and spraying sparks from the impact of metal on metal. Her attacker retaliated with a backhand that missed by only a scant inch, forcing her to roll wide or get impaled.

She came back up and, for a moment, was tempted to throw the rod. Her common sense -- what was left of it, anyway -- screamed for her not to, because even if she hit, she'd be weaponless. Instead, she went on the defensive and blocked the sudden onslaught of vibrating dagger strikes. Each time, she was forced to give up a little more ground.

As she took the third of a string of ineffective blows against the figure, it occurred to her that a rooftop had a finite amount of ground to give up. The realization came a split second too late. Already swinging wide, her foot stepped backward into nothingness, and she plummeted backward off the building . . .

. . . or *should* have plummeted. Instead, the attacker's metal hand shot out and grabbed her by the front of her battered jumpsuit. Caught, her feet still touching the roof as she hung over the edge at a dizzying angle, Caranna could see it raise its other fist and aim its blades at her throat.

"Don't I even get to see your face, Sith-slug?"

The head tilted for a second and, with a low hiss of environment-sealing gasses escaping the cowl, its faceplate opened. Caranna's eyes widened. Staring back at her was an angry-looking bounty hunter of her recent . . . acquaintance.

"Razzie?" she said in disbelief. "Is that you?"

The man's jaw set and his eyes flared. "That's Razor, you lavender harridan, and yes, it's me. It's me after months of working for those thrice-blasted droids just to earn enough credits to leave their planet." The blades started vibrating faster and with a vicious slash, he tore his fist downward. The stroke was not at Caranna herself but instead at her steel club. Easily severed, the glowing stump of metal in her hand vibrated with the force of the impact.

"It's me after doing work I don't even want to think about in return for a new combat suit, a new ship, and all the tech I needed to track you down for some much-needed payday." He scowled, raising his fist again. "How's it taste?"

Caranna shuddered and looked into his eyes. "Truthfully?" she asked, a little dazed and a lot scared.

"Might as well start telling the truth now, since your time's almost up."

She looked at him, her eyes widening slightly. "No one's ever beaten me before. It's -- fantastic!" She ran her hand over his steel-plated forearm. "You've never looked better, Razor. Revenge really suits you."

He blinked. Then he blinked again.

Then he was seeing stars, a hand-sized piece of steel smashing into his forehead. Staggering back, he waved his blades wildly but connected with nothing. The blood in his eyes made it hard to see, but he lowered his faceplate with a roar of anger. "Woman!"

"Come on, gorgeous! Chase me some more!" She'd vaulted off the rooftop onto another and was running away as fast as she could. He watched her go, his rage boiling over as he kicked on his boot jets and joined the hunt. He tried not to admire her, desperately tried not to think about how appealing she suddenly looked.

"When I catch you . . ." he shouted after her fleeing form. In truth, he had no idea how to finish the sentence.

Living Force Game Notes

Effective immediately, the destabilization in the power vacuum among Cularin's criminal elite takes a greater toll. Law enforcement has its hands full trying to stop petty vendettas and territory grabs all over the Cularin system. Scoundrel heroes gain a +1 circumstance bonus on any rolls required by the Gamemaster during adventures when trying to employ their Illicit Barter class skill.

One effect of note to all heroes is the wholesale purchase of the Ma'Haffee Shipyard by the Republic and its retooling into an operational facility for military craft. As part of the buyout arrangement, the owner and operator of the Shipyard was able to get all back debts owed by and to the business reimbursed by the Republic. This has the out-of-game effect of making certain NPCs, like Lt. Trace Polters, deliriously wealthy.

The in-game effect is that *all* payments owed by heroes on their starships are now considered to have been made. All player-owned starships are fully paid off and entirely the property of the purchasing hero. While this may cause a moral conundrum for some (as their ship was paid for by the Republic), it is more likely to be the cause of parties and celebrations system wide!