

# The Calm Before the Storm

By August and Cynthia Hahn

No matter how sophisticated the machine, some down time must be introduced into any working cycle or the entire system falls apart. Whether the pause is needed to let moving parts cool or for data to be tabulated in an effort to avoid corruption before new information is collected, every device from computers to swoop engines needs a break once in a while.

Sentient beings are no different, especially on the distant world of Cularin. All people, heroes and villains alike, take advantage of any lull in the storm that is life . . .



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The big man lifted his victim nearly a meter off the ground and pulled back his fist. A pair of sweeping blades attached to a gleaming silver handle was cradled in the fist's massive fingers, a delicate grasp for such a powerfully built hand. With the touch of a glowing amber button, the blades began to vibrate, sending a faint and eerie whine through the trash-strewn alley.

"I hope you understand, sir; this is entirely a business situation. Neither my partner nor I bear any malice toward you."

As the blades reached a fevered pitch, the huge assailant smiled in an unsettlingly friendly way and started to drive his exotic weapon forward.

"Wait!"

The voice was almost too late, and though the muscular assassin tried to halt the progress of his weapon, he succeeded only in turning it aside. The slight change in course was, however, enough to keep the Rodian Throwing Razor from shearing through his target's chest. Instead, it cleaved deep into the formed plascrete wall beside the unfortunate, sending large shards of shrapnel in all directions.

"Mister Haque." The massive killer turned his gaze to the alley's newcomer. "Your presence, as always, is appreciated, but the same cannot be said for your interruption or the volume of your voice."

The shorter man, dressed head to toe in military-issue fatigues and body armor, dipped his head in a polite apology. "Please forgive the discordance and the misfortunate timing of my arrival, my dear Mister Zlash. I think, however, you will find it easier to allow me such a courtesy if you will allow an explanation."

Mister Zlash, as he had been called, kept the man in his other hand elevated. With a slight smile creasing his thin lips, the assassin-for-hire nodded like a ch'hala tree swaying in the wind. "Consider the courtesy extended."

"Very kind, Mister Zlash. It would seem the remuneration for the deletion you were about to perform is delinquent arriving in our financial accounts on Coruscant."

A grimace replaced the smile. "Is there any reason forthcoming as to the nature of this -- *delay*?"

Mister Haque held up a datapad, showing his almost Neolithic partner an image of a Human man and several bars of tiny, scrolling text all displayed in the characteristic font of Holonet News. "It would seem our employer is a Separatist sympathizer working for -- and, it would appear, against -- the Republic Senate."

Zlash's wide eyes narrowed, and as they did, his grip tightened. As his left hand was already around his victim's throat, this elicited an alarmingly loud choking sound from the man. "A fact, my good Mister Haque, that bears no relevance on why we have not been paid."

"Agreed, Mister Zlash, but it also seems he was executed this morning for treason against the Republic." Mister Haque shook his head reproachfully. "Tragically, it would seem his termination came before his payment to us cleared. Even more unfortunately, our erstwhile employer's accounts have been frozen, making extraction of said payment quite impossible."

The huge hand around the man's throat loosened just enough to stop throttling him. "Most unfortunate. Am I to understand then that we have not been paid for this service, which I was about to render in good faith?"

"Correct."

"Acting as I was under the assumption of a valid contract and terms of compensation agreed upon by all parties involved?"



"Succinctly put."

"Not counting, of course, the party currently gasping for what respiration he can obtain past the pressure of my palm against his larynx?"

"Presumably not, yes."

"And that, because of our would-be procurer's untimely demise, the chances of us getting any form of tender in return for said efforts is negligible?"

"At best."

The gargantuan killer shrugged, a gesture that lifted the man another three inches off the ground. "Well . . ."

Standing with one hand on a bone-white ivory inlaid blaster, Mister Haque echoed his partner's unsettled tone. "Well."

With that, Mister Zlash set the man on the ground, sheathed his razor, and dusted off his almost-victim's coat with two mammoth hands. "You of course know what this means, don't you, Mister Haque?"

A reticent nod accompanied the much smaller assassin's response. "I am afraid I do."

Mister Zlash stared down into the terrified eyes of his prey. "It would seem my partner and I owe you an apology, Mr. Chistor. We have done you a disservice, and for that, we offer our sincerest regrets."

The shorter hunter moved gracefully around to his partner's left side and smiled sadly. "We assure you, we are typically more professional than this. Work in the galaxy is becoming very complex, and we allowed our eagerness at getting a lucrative Coruscant contract to get the better of us."

Reaching into his blast vest, the only article of clothing on his chest, Mister Zlash pulled out a mangled blaster pistol and handed it back to the stunned bureaucrat. "We will, of course, pay for damages, both to this fine weapon and the speeder we unfortunately had to eviscerate during our pursuit."

"Undoubtedly." Mister Haque returned a small communicator, still smoking from the sword strike that rendered it useless only a few minutes before. "We will also let the matter of the bruises sustained by myself during our previous struggle go without incident. You have quite a left hook, Mr. Chistor; few of our victims ever make contact, much less draw blood. Well done, sir."

Mister Zlash dropped one of his hammerlike hands down onto Barnab Chistor's shoulder, reminding the man suddenly of every part of his battered body that still ached. "My partner and I insist that you let us buy you breakfast before returning you to your office. Our treat, of course."

Mister Haque echoed with equal determination. "Of course."

With no real option available to refuse and no assurance that he would survive doing so, Barnab nodded his approval as quickly as his tortured neck would allow.

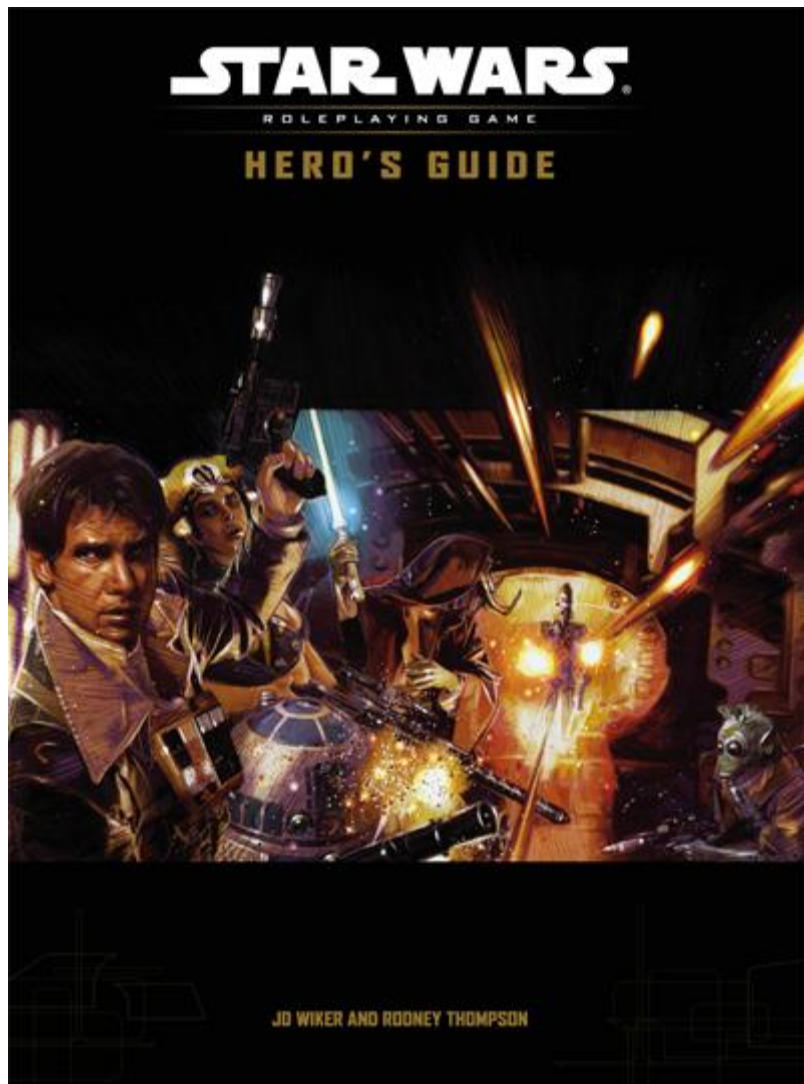
"Excellent. We know a wonderful holistic restaurant in Hedrett run by an Ithorian. All his ingredients come from his clan's Hive Ship, so the quality is unquestionable . . ."

And with that, the two deadly stalkers led Gadrin's governor to their speeder and disappeared into the tangle of streets beyond.

## Living Force Game Notes

Effective immediately, all heroes in the **Living Force** campaign are permitted to use almost any feat or prestige class in the *Hero's Guide*. The only exceptions are Jedi Weapon Master, Lightsaber Forms other than I and V, and any option that requires membership in an unapproved race or organization. All other options are available to newly created characters and existing characters alike.





With this opening of restrictions, which prepares for the conclusion of the **Living Force** campaign, heroes have a one-time opportunity to be remade along new guidelines. Experience points, equipment, and issued certificates are not altered in any way, but heroes can be rebuilt completely using new classes, new stat adjustments, and all other facets of character creation.

This option can be chosen at any time prior to the end of the **Living Force** campaign. Heroes who take this opportunity must note it on their logsheet before they begin playing in their next adventure.