

Living Force: From the Cradle to the Grave

By August and Cynthia Hahn

Though the heroes of Cularin often travel between the system's many worlds and even to other planets light years away, the vast majority of Cularin's residents never leave their homeworld their entire lives. Every day is spent in the same settlement living each day the same way. For these normal folks, even the most galaxy-shaking events seem distant and, though important, rather irrelevant.

Only truly momentous circumstances can touch these common people; it takes history being made directly to them to bring home the impact of events sweeping the universe. When such things happen, the distant becomes the dire, and the irrelevant becomes all too terribly real . . .



They sat, staring at the last slice of kaavo like kilassin around a fresh kill. Three hungry mouths, and just one piece of laden crust with the aroma of meat and cheese wafting across the table to make them water. This always happened when Val-Aruun manned the bakery's ovens. He was the only chef who insisted on cutting kaavo into tenths; everyone else made six slices. Six divided fine. Ten . . . didn't.

"So," asked Renna, her green-scaled lips widening at the thought of snagging the last piece, "how are we going to decide this time?"

The largest person at the table by far, Ooorlak, smashed one hairy fist down on the table and lifted it again, voting as he always did for an arm-wrestling match. As one of Cularin's reigning champions at the sport, he was certain to win any such contest among those present today.

Renna and Sal were quite aware of this fact, which is why they never took Ooorlak up on his challenges. With a soft scoff, Sal put one well-manicured hand over the Wookiee's massive paw and shook his head. "Another time, perhaps, my friend. I think what this situation calls for is a trial by elocution."

Renna rolled her eyes -- quite an amusing expression for a Rodian -- and then laughed as Ooorlak howled in protest. With a deep chuckle, she corrected her brown-and-black-furred companion. "No, Oool, electricity isn't involved. He said el-o-cution."

The Wookiee still seemed concerned, even a little confused. Barking a query, he folded his arms and sulked. They never let him arm wrestle for anything any more. He felt quite put upon, really. Apparently, you break *one* Trandoshan's arm in four places, and suddenly you're a competition pariah.

The Rodian woman smiled slightly. "It's a big word that means 'talking,' Oool. Looks like you aren't the only one trying to play to his strengths." She shot Sal a look, regarding the smug Human trader with an appraising, critical gaze. For his part, Sal just shrugged and sipped at his juice.

"I'll accept your terms, Human, but you have to accept mine." Renna, negotiating like the business woman she was, extended a slender emerald hand. "Deal?"

Sal grinned widely and took it into his own, shaking it with an amused laugh. "Deal, Ren. Just name them." He sat back, relaxing into his chair with the look of a man used to getting everything he wanted. Infuriatingly enough, he usually did.

Renna closed the kaavo box to keep the last piece warm and rested her hands on top of it. "You stated the form of the contest, but I get to name the subject of the beguine. That work for you, Oool?"

After then spending five minutes explaining what "beguine" meant to the Wookiee, they were settled. Renna took a deep breath and revealed the topic they would be discussing, a subject very dear to her right now. "Friends, we'll each tell the story of how someone close to us has recently passed on. The best tale wins."

Sal narrowed his eyes, knowing what the Rodian was up to now. He led a very isolated life for the most part, coming out of his offices in Hedrett only for monthly constitutionals in the jungle and every lunch hour to eat with his very small circle of friends. Renna must have been counting on him not having any loved ones, certainly none that had died in the near past. If that was her aim, however, she was sadly mistaken.

"Agreed, woman, and you'll go first." Beside him, Ooorlak just nodded his approval.

With her hands still folded in front of her, Renna sighed. In truth, she'd picked this topic because of a loss that still stung her deeply. Perhaps, she hoped, talking about it would help. "All right, I will." Clearing her throat, she began.

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"Teelo was a member of my race, but more than that, he was a friend. We met after some employees of mine brought him back with them on a run for . . . well, Nirama. He was a decent pilot riding the end of a string of bad luck. I took him in, gave him a place to hang his coat, and let him come and go as he wished.

"He went back to work for Nirama and freelanced for me on his off days. He was a little lazy at first, but most men are, so that was all right. I watched him to make sure he wouldn't dip into the company till, and when he showed me he could be trusted, I let him start flying one of my transports. He never brought her back without fuel, and he never got her shot up or crunched; not all of my pilots could say the same.

"For three years, he worked for me like that. His chief loyalty was to N, and I respected that. He respected the flexibility I gave him in his work hours for me. It was a good relationship and I . . ." She trailed off there for a moment, looking down into her glass. "I started to appreciate him for more than just the job.

"You may not know this, either of you, but Tee and I started seeing each other on a personal level. Just dinner and the occasional vid at first, then a little more seriously. He was a good male; he paid his debts and he kept his word. First man I'd been with in a while that did. He was not the brightest podling in the stream, but he was smart enough to treat me well."

She took another deep breath. "Teelo owed Nirama for his ship, and he would never let me pay it off or get him another. I tried so hard to get him to work for me full time, but his honor wouldn't let him leave N, especially when things started to get tight in the asteroid belt. He just kept saying, 'I need to see the boss through this. When we're done, he'll cut me loose, and then I'm yours. You'll see.'

"Only I'll never see that . . . or him again. That space slug Riboga had his goons out gunning for everyone in Nirama's employ, and Teelo was no exception. They found him coming back from a run to Tilnes and burned him down. He . . ." Her voice wavered, so much so that Oool put his huge hand on her shoulder in support.

"He was on his way to see me, and he died for nothing more than some fragging Hutt's vendetta. Riboga's gone and his people fried, but none of that brings Teelo back to me. I . . ." Her words failed her and, after stopping long enough to catch her breath, she raised her glass. "To Teelo, the finest male I've ever known."

Sal and Ooorlak both did the same, touching their mugs to hers and drinking in the fallen Rodian's honor. The table was quiet for moment before Renna spoke again. "Sal? Want to go next?"

With a quick nod, he waved down a waitress to get refills for the table. Then he took a small necklace out of his pocket and placed it on top of the kaavo box. Its silver chain sparkled in the afternoon sun, a bright sheen that echoed the glow of the ethereally blue crystal adorning it. In a quiet voice far more serious than Renna or Ooorlak had ever heard him use, Sal began his story.

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"I am sure it comes as no surprise that in my time on this planet, I've had some business dealings that one might call 'unscrupulous' or 'questionable.' Indeed, Renna's favorite term is, I seem to recall, 'mind-bogglingly criminal.' All perfectly accurate descriptions, I have to admit. Not *everything* I've done on Cularin has been illegal, but I'd be lying if I said most of them weren't.

"I've made deals with the Thaeireians, the Cartel, Nirama, Riboga, and dozens of other interests that don't bear naming, mostly because I have a hard time remembering them all. I make a tidy sum off my legitimate businesses, but the real money -- the real power -- is found in the shadows. In the marketplaces and back room meetings you won't find on any map or scheduling program.

"In any case, I don't tend to make any close contacts in my line of work; it's not healthy, if you know what I mean. The most I ever do is learn people's names, so I can keep track of them in case they double-cross me. I don't get involved; it's a hard and fast rule for me. No exceptions."

He took a long, deep drink, the taste of the bittersweet burshka juice making him grimace. "Well, almost no exceptions. Before you all knew me, my business dealings were darker than they are now. I mean a *lot* darker. Neither of you would still be sitting here with me if you knew some of the things I've done or paid people to do.

"It was during that time that I met her -- the Black Queen." His eyes practically misted over in memory. "So elegant, so vicious, so very much my kind of woman. The moment I met her, I knew I had to work with her. She did things the same way I did. We were perfect for each other.

"Perfect, that is, until she had a change of heart. In one night, she folded up her organization and dropped out of sight. I didn't hear from her again for almost three months. I didn't know if she was dead or alive, if she was lying low or lying three meters under. Her vanishing act made me do the same. Some of her former associates were not the sort of people you wanted to be

near when things were tense -- and trust me, things were blaster-level intense.

"Zelice -- that was her name, Zelice Sturm -- found me in one of the dives she used to keep for operatives in over their heads. I'd started dealing again, nothing serious, but enough to keep me solvent. She was there, she was alive, but there was just something . . . different about her. At first, I was afraid she was there to 'liquidate' a loose end -- me -- but one look in her eyes, and I knew better. She wasn't there to hurt me.

"She was there to save me. We stayed up all night talking in that run-down factory. She told me about her past, about her hatred for the Jedi Order and how she'd left it behind out of bitterness and resentment. She told me how a group of truly brave souls risked their lives to bring her back from that darkness. I wasn't sure I really understood anything she was saying, but I could *feel* the difference in her.

"I can't explain how or even why she did it, but she changed my life that night. When she left to return to Almas, I dropped all my worst contacts, turned them over to OPS, and started focusing on other things. I still make an obscene amount of money, of course, but I don't do it off the blood and pain of others anymore."

He looked down at the crystal for a long time before finishing his tale. Renna and Oool glanced at each other in concern, but before they could prompt him, he spoke again.

"She gave me this necklace before she went back to the Academy. She told me to keep it to remember her by, that she probably wouldn't see me again. I wanted her to stay, but she wouldn't. She couldn't. She had a duty, she said, and her time was almost gone. Then, so was she. She died on Almas, with all the rest. Somehow, I think she knew she would. I just wish I understood why she'd go back there if she did."

Sal raised his glass and his friends followed suit quickly. Over the clink of glass and pottery, he said, "To Zelice Sturm, Jedi Master and the best friend I never deserved." They all drank, with him drinking the deepest and the longest.

When they were all finished and the glasses refilled, Sal and Renna turned to regard their furry friend. "Ooorlak, I believe it's your turn," Renna said quietly. Sal nodded, his voice not quite up to speaking again so soon.

The Wookiee nodded emphatically and raised his hands to the open sky. He was obviously gearing up for an epic tale and while his style of speech sometimes left a lot to be desired, neither of his friends could ever fault his enthusiasm. They both sat back in their chairs; this could and probably would take a while.

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Surprisingly, the story was short but no less heartfelt for the brevity. Ooorlak howled and trilled his way through the events of two years ago, when a vital conference held in space on behalf of Cularin was assaulted by forces far greater than any could have imagined. In the terrible fighting that took place, many brave warriors died defending the delegates and protecting the fragile peace they represented.

Ooorlak rose out of his chair and began to move around the table as he spoke, physically acting out elements from his story. He stung a spanner from his belt as if it were a lightsaber as he recalled the greatest hero in the battle, Jedi Master Kirlocca. A kinsman from his extended tribe, Kirlocca was apparently a proud part of Ooorlak's past, one he told them about now in great detail. Great, *loud* detail.

Finally, his story brought him to the end, standing amid the now-abandoned tables nearby with his spanner raised. Ooorlak painted the scene on that ill-fated star cruiser quite vividly, describing the foes surrounding Kirlocca and the young Padawans at his side. One by one, the enemy fell, but each victory came at the cost of another young life. Ooorlak looked around at his imaginary allies, just as the Jedi Master did, and acted out the great Wookiee's noble sacrifice.

Betrayed from behind by a false Jedi he'd been protecting, Kirlocca remained proud and strong as he bought time for the delegates and the other heroes aiding them with his own life. The Jedi Master fell in battle, but he did so with honor, steadfast to the very end.

Ooorlak looked up at the table where his friends were seated; he was on his knees from where he'd portrayed the final moments of his tribesman. He bowed his head in memory and rose to his feet, quietly returning to his chair. This time, it was Renna and Sal who raised their glasses first, both deeply impressed with their friend. The Wookiee grunted the closest thing to gratitude his native tongue allowed.

Their glasses came together and they drank a final toast, this time to the noble Weapons Master and Jedi, Kirlocca of Almas. Afterward, they sat in silence, glancing at one another, lost in their own memories of the honored dead.

It was Sal who finally broke their collective reverie. "Is there any possible way to judge one of those stories over the others?"

Renna and Ooorlak shook their heads in unison. "No," she said in a hushed tone. "How could we?" She looked down at the

kaavo box, long since forgotten as the original point of their contest. "Not that it matters," she added. "I am not at all hungry any more."

Sal agreed, as did Oorlak. The Wookiee reached forward and took the box in his hands. Chirping and growling, he suggested that they take it to the Crosstown Bar and leave it at the Wall of Remembrance. Covered with stories and keepsakes of all the people who had fallen in defense of Cularin, it seemed the perfect place to end the journey they'd just taken together.

They rose as one and started the long walk to the Crosstown. "They aren't really gone, are they?" Sal asked quietly.

No one answered. No one needed to.