

Living Force: Last Stand

The Final Living Force Update

By August and Cynthia Hahn

Note: It's been some time since our last Living Force campaign update. Before reading the article below, you might want to catch up on the story in progress with a quick look at the [last article we posted](#), still available in our archive.



There comes a moment when the line between a heroic life and an ordinary life comes down to a single decision. To one second in which action or inaction determines where the hand of fate will fall. Many seek to be champions for reasons of their own, but more often than not, the true measure of a hero lies in what he does between one tick of the doomsday clock and the next.

Tragically, most true heroes do not survive a third second slipping by.

"Bring us in close," he ordered to his bridge crew. "Keep weapons on cold fire; I don't want an energy spike giving away our location."

There was silence all around him, but in keeping with their skills and training, the troopers manned their stations and followed his commands. Even so, one voiced the reservations they all felt. "Sir, those are our ships out there. Won't an unprovoked attack on them be considered treason?"

Darrus Jeht sighed inwardly as the clone commander's voice echoed his own feelings. Still, there was no turning back now. In the time it had taken them to travel from the outer edge of the system to this point within the orbit of Almas, the *Maelstrom's* sensors had picked up two Republic cruisers gunning down seven starships. While his crew certainly saw those actions as combating Separatist sympathies in the Cularin system, Jeht knew better. Each ship had been harboring Jedi, users of the Force fleeing a galaxy-wide pogrom against their kind.

His crew would have known this if the *Maelstrom's* communications hadn't been down when the order was given from Coruscant. Even then they would have received word by now if Darrus's astromech had not been keeping that communications failure going by "unorthodox" repair techniques. These stalling tactics would not keep his crew in the dark permanently, but somehow Darrus did not think it would be a problem for much longer.

His mind back on the present, Master Jeht nodded to the clone trooper questioning his order. "I have reason to believe those ships have been taken over by the enemy. Since we cannot get word to or from home base, I have to go with my instincts." Then, knowing how much clones relied on discipline, he added. "Do you have a problem with your orders, soldier?"

"Sir, no sir!" The helmsman sat back down and plotted a course that would bring them into formation between the two other cruisers. Jeht noted their call signs on the tactical display -- the *Undaunted* and the *Primal*, two gunships with just as much firepower as his own. Taking them out would require finesse.

Finesse and treachery. With both ships turning to face the *Maelstrom*, Jeht sent them a short-range signal, advising them that he had orders to penetrate the system and hunt down current targets through the inner orbital rings. It was a lie, but it was just the kind of thing he thought their captains would be expecting. Sure enough, the ships parted and allowed him to pass between them without incident.

As soon as his ship was in position, Darrus struck. Before any of his crew could question why enemy-held vessels would be so accommodating of the *Maelstrom*, he transferred firing controls to his station and unleashed a barrage off both broadsides. Without powering the guns up fully or locking onto targets, his attack was far less accurate or lethal than he had been hoping. Most of the laser fire slammed into raised shields or missed completely. Only a few telling hits were scored, mostly in the last few moments of the volley.

Even so, the surprise hits were effective enough. The *Undaunted* blossomed plasma along its engine decks and listed violently away from the *Maelstrom*. The *Primal* was not as badly hit, but its weapons array went cold and dark, unable to return fire. "Scramble all fighters!" Jeht's order was carried out instantly and a second later, hangar doors opened all along his gunship.

Now came the true deception, one he could not have instigated without his astromech's clever help. Darrus had always been more than a little worried about R-0's tendency for deceit, but at this moment, he could not have been more grateful for it. Using the communications array the rest of his vessel thought to be offline, he began blanketing space with a complex pattern of binary control signals. The clever little droid had even told him that the ruse would be easy because, for some reason, the

ship's sensors were already rigged to be bypassed.

By themselves, the false signals did nothing, but they were just strong enough to be picked up by the sensors of the cruisers and their fighters. If this worked, he would know within moments when --

"Sir! We are picking up telemetry data, Separatist coding. They could be command transmissions."

Jeht nodded quietly, letting the comment hang in the air for a moment. He knew that the best deception was one its targets created for themselves. In this case, he was counting on the efficiency of the clone troopers to weave a deceit better than any he could craft on his own.

"Sir, they are controlling those fighters with battle droid pilots!"

He nodded again, both pleased with himself that the ruse was working and disgusted with himself that it was necessary at all. These were good men, as were the pilots he'd just sent out -- pilots he did not intend to take back aboard. "Understood, commander. Is there any risk of those signals --

On cue, three levels above the bridge, R-0 forced the *Maelstrom's* communication array to begin broadcasting a wide-range jamming tone. "Sir! There's a disruption field going active. The source is our ship!" Jeht waited for the inevitable, logical conclusion. "Sir, the enemy vessels are taking control of the *Maelstrom's* systems!"

Darrus made himself frown; with the way he was feeling, it was not difficult. "I understand, commander. Lock out all external communications and bring down the primary array. We can't risk falling into Separatist hands."

The order was followed instantly; no one asked what would befall the now cut-off pilots outside. Without orders or communications, they would be flying blind and likely destroyed by the enemy. There was no other alternative, so the clones did their duty and completed their orders. If Darrus had not been so preoccupied with his own guilt at manipulating his men, he would have marveled at their efficiency.

Now came the hard part. With sensors on passive only and no communications, the *Maelstrom* would be unable to identify the other two cruisers as anything but what Jeht had called them -- ships under enemy control. This would leave its crew free to fight without concern for the Republic or their fellow soldiers. If Darrus was to survive a battle with two Republic capital ships, he would need his crew in top fighting form.

As if in answer to his thoughts, the bridge rocked beneath him, sending several clones sprawling to the deck. "Control surface hit on the starboard side, sir! It is not critical, but shields there are failing."

"Understood, lieutenant. Bring us around to bearing 10 mark 4 and fire our main guns at the *Undaunted* before she can recover. Target her engines." The order was carried out swiftly, and as the *Maelstrom* fired a burning twin pulse of red light, Darrus could see the fireball it created in the *Undaunted's* thruster pairing burn away the ship's ability to fly or enter hyperspace. A second later, the fires spread inward and tore the vessel apart. In one salvo, he had cut his opposition in half.

Unfortunately, the other half was still capable of fighting back. Another hit shook his vessel as the *Primal* reminded him that she had gotten her main lasers back online. This time, the damage was to the port main thruster. Still functional, it was no longer at top output. That would limit his speed, but Darrus had a feeling that one way or another, leaving Cularin would not be a concern for him.

Still, the *Primal* had just made it impossible for him to turn or chase with enough speed to get her in his sights. If this were a dogfight, he would probably be done for. Even now, all of his fighters would be closing to engage the *Primal* at close range, diving, spiraling, and risking their lives to land any shot they could.

Hmmm, he thought -- a dogfight indeed.

"Kill all engines, fire all stabilizers at 80 percent, and overburn the bow landing thrusters. Do it now!" Without meaning to, Jeht touched on the Force and drove his command into the minds of all present. Even faster than they would have, the clone troopers complied. The *Maelstrom* trembled violently as numerous bulkheads shook loose and support structures buckled under the stress of the sudden stop. Impressed that she held together even that well, Jeht waited the fraction of a second it took for the thrusters in his cruiser's nose to fire.

Intended for slowing duties when the *Maelstrom* made its infrequent landings, the bow thrusters were never designed to be used in space. The effect of doing so was not something the crew could have anticipated, but it was exactly what Jeht had counted on -- the vessel flipped over while still moving forward at a crawl. He could hear the metal in his ship scream in protest, but she held together. No matter what he did to her, she was holding together.

And now facing a very surprised *Primal*. "Fire all forward guns, full power! We only get one shot!" The dark space between the *Maelstrom* and her prey lit up like a thousand streaking suns. The light boiled away the cruiser's main shields and deck plating

instantly. The *Primal's* superstructure glowed for a moment then disappeared in an explosion that blinded the *Maelstrom's* sensors.

For several heartbeats, nothing existed but the painful white of the forward screen and the dawning realization that he was still alive. Darrus quickly leaped out of his chair and dashed over to the sensor logs. Even on passive, the *Maelstrom's* arrays were state of the art. The only flaw in his ruse would be if pilots came back and reported other clone troopers in the fighters they engaged. To both his relief and his chagrin, the detonation of the *Primal* had completely devastated his own craft. By attacking so swiftly and surprisingly, he had managed to wipe out both sides. He was alive and victorious. He desperately wanted go somewhere quiet to be ill.

The end of the battle was also R-0's signal to cancel his interference with the *Maelstrom's* sensor arrays. The "droid transmissions" ended, and any trace of the false signal was purged from ship's records. There was no need to continue the ruse.

What needed to happen next was unavoidable. Darrus hated to do it, but he realized that he could not keep fooling these men indefinitely. Sooner or later, one of them would get a signal through to Coruscant. As soon as they did, his life expectancy would be measured in moments.

He placed his hand on his wrist, finger over one of the code buttons of his communicator. Pressing it would send a command to R-0 that went against everything he believed in -- the silent activation of the *Maelstrom's* self-destruct. He considered going down with the ship himself, but he knew there was still a job to do here. There were still Jedi and other Force-users to protect. If there were not, he would have happily sat in his chair and disappeared into oblivion alongside his loyal troops.

He walked calmly toward the rear bridge exit. "Commander, you have the bridge. There's a lot of debris out there. While Engineering tries to repair our damaged engine, I'll go out in the *Legacy* and look for survivors. Just keep her steady and wait for --"

"Sir, long range sensors have picked up another large ship entering the system!"

Jeht stopped, turning to face the trooper. "Do you have a fix on its type?" This was not at all in the plan. Coruscant could not have known that he would be here and certainly did not have the manpower to send another cruiser so swiftly. Neither the *Primal* nor the *Undaunted* had been able to transmit during the battle, so there could have been no warning. In any case, reinforcements would have been hours away.

Jeht took his finger away from the destruct button and stared at the sensor screens again. "What am I looking at?"

He asked the question, but one glance gave him all the answers he needed. The incoming vessel was something out of his nightmares, a ship he had seen destroyed with his own eyes, with eyes that had witnessed the deaths of innocent millions at the same time. "It's impossible, sir, but our sensors indicate that it's the --"

"The *Shadowblade*." He finished the dumbfounded trooper's sentence. Somehow, the Separatist superweapon had survived and was here, now. Jeht blinked once and set aside his shock. It would only serve the *Shadowblade's* masters, and he had no time for panic. "Commander, does this ship match the sensor ghost we picked up when we entered hyperspace to come here?"

After a few seconds, "Yes, sir. Target vessel is a perfect match."

How? His mind searched frantically for an answer even as he ordered the *Maelstrom* around for an intercept course. Then it hit him. "The ship had already been rigged for fake signals." The destruction of the *Shadowblade* had been a lie. For all he knew, the ship had been in orbit or even in hyperspace long before his bombardment reached the ground. All those people, killed for nothing.

"Sir, with Engine One crippled, we'll never make it to the target before it passes through the system's asteroid field."

So the *Maelstrom* was not its target? Then what was? "Commander, course estimate on the enemy vessel. Quickly!"

To their credit, his people moved fast. "Vessel is heading for the system's primary planet at impressive speed. Projected time of transit is 28 minutes to the asteroid belt, 10 minutes to cross it, and 22 minutes to arrival at the destination."

Jeht cursed silently. That was fast, faster than his ship could go at present. There was no way to catch it before it slipped into the Belt. He grimly thought that the universe did not like him enough to have the *Shadowblade* hit by an asteroid. The only luck he ever had was bad. Used for years by the Chancellor, lied to by the Council, his beloved slain by someone he trusted like a brother . . .

The clone commander's voice shook him out the dark spiral. "Sir, sensors indicate the enemy vessel is heavily shielded. Firing our main guns after your reversal has shattered their cores. It will take days to repair them."

Again, Jeht knew what the man was going to say. "We don't have anything capable of bringing it down?"

The trooper just nodded. Well, that tore it. Jeht had been certain he would never leave Cularin again. Now he knew why. "Commander, plot an intercept course using 120 percent burn on the engines." He looked at the clone with darkly shadowed eyes. "And by intercept, I mean ram."

The crew did not hesitate more than a moment before fulfilling his orders. Jeht could hear the ship complain as its engines began to burn far hotter than they were ever meant to do. Metal stress groans echoed through every deck, but as always, the ship stayed together and did as she was told. The ship's damaged thruster was spraying molten steel and plasma fumes like a Podracer. If it did not explode and take the *Maelstrom* with it, they might all survive just long enough to smash into the *Shadowblade*. In a strange way, Darrus found that a comforting thought.

The minutes crawled by, every second counting down toward the end. Jeht watched the *Shadowblade*'s sensor signature loom closer despite its impressive cloaking suite. Ironically, if the *Maelstrom* had not been calibrated to falsely read the enemy ship in the first place, her sensors would never have picked it up this time. He noted sardonically that Palpatine had never intended for him to be here again. He was all too happy to disappoint.

"Sir, we'll reach the asteroid belt in 10 seconds on my mark." The commander watched his screens, adding stoically, "Mark." Darrus knew why the clone was bothering to say anything at all. He had not given his crew any order to slow down or raise shields before entering the field. The commander and likely everyone else on the bridge were worried they would smash into the first asteroid that crossed their path, especially at these speeds.

The key, of course, was that an asteroid would not be crossing the *Maelstrom*'s path at all. Darrus had spent a lot of time in this belt when he was assigned to the system. Cularin's resident crime boss, an honorable man by nature, had given him several hidden lanes of approach to the Belt, and Darrus was using one of them right now. At this speed and trajectory, the ship would not encounter a single rock of any appreciable size. His five years of service in this system had to be good for something after all.

Darrus checked himself and realized -- his *fifteen* years. He had been caught in the same temporal field as everyone else in the Cularin system, catapulted ten years into the future through the terrible powers of the Darkstaff. Even now, vast bands of glowing energy were still tearing their way through the belt, subjecting everything they touched to the destructive waves of time.

Darrus quietly touched a send button on his wrist communicator and murmured into it. "R-0, it's time for you to go. Take the *Legacy* and get out of here while you can. Go find Millinae and bring her the ship. Maybe with you beside her, she won't be able to ruin this one." There was an angry string of protesting beeps, but Darrus was in no mood to argue. "Dammit it, R-0, there's no need for you to be here. Let me at least save one person, even if it's a droid."

As the whine of mechanized ire pealed again over his wrist comm, Jeht turned it off. He trusted in the precocious little robot's sense of self-preservation to override its indignation. Once it calmed down, Darrus had no doubt that R-0 would be in the *Legacy* as fast as its servos could roll. Secretly, he had always been fond of R-0, and with the droid being the only piece of Trillinae left, he felt a certain peace at the thought that it would survive.

"Sir, the enemy ship is about to emerge from the far side of the belt. We'll lose sensor contact with it for a few seconds afterward, but we should be able to catch it before it reaches Cularin."

Darrus furrowed his brow, night-black eyes narrowing. "Explain, commander. Why will we lose sensor lock?"

"Sir, there's an energy pattern moving across our trajectory. It doesn't match any known pattern, but it is fairly small and should be out of our way before it poses a threat." The clone paused after that, obviously expecting some kind of orders.

Energy pattern. The time rifts, Darrus thought. He was worried that if they lost sensor contact with the *Shadowblade*, its cloaking fields might keep it hidden thereafter. He knew where it was going, of course, but it could still cause massive damage before he found it again. Blast the Darkstaff and all its woes! If it helped the *Shadowblade* escape him, he'd . . .

The anger served no purpose. As quickly as it rose, Darrus sent it back down. Control was needed here, not frenzy. He reached inward, trying to find the calm in the heart of his spiritual chaos. "The eye of the Force storm," his mentor once called it. "Steady as she goes, commander," he said in a placid tone. "Steady as she -- wait!"

The storm erupted again but not in a destructive way. "Lock on to the *Shadowblade* and fire every torpedo bay we have at her!"

"Sir, as I said before, we don't have a chance of denting --" Darrus cut the clone a withering gaze so dark that the man physically staggered. "I mean, right away sir!" Slumping into the gunnery seat, the clone commander brought up firing solutions. Hesitantly, he spoke again. "Sir, the ship's cloak is breaking our lock. We can't target her effectively."

Darrus nodded; he had expected that. "Then flood and charge all tubes. Dumb fire everything we've got, commander."

A hundred streaks raced out of the *Maelstrom* and surged through the dark toward the enemy ship. Sleek and angular, the *Shadowblade* looked like its name. A cragged knife of black panels and shielded thruster points, it resembled nothing so much as a bladed talon slicing its way through the stars. All around it, tiny explosions tore apart stray asteroids and impacted harmlessly along its defenses. Nothing penetrated its ebon depths but the detonations got its attention.

That was exactly what Darrus wanted. The deadly ship turned with impossible grace and slashed through space as it reversed course. Master Jeht had been banking that the ship wanted no witnesses to its mission here, which meant that it would have to destroy the *Maelstrom* before it could move on to Cularin. With luck, this would give him the opening he needed to bring the dire vessel down.

"Sir, the enemy ship is changing course to intercept us."

"Put our respective trajectories on screen. I need a surrounding map as well; show me any energy disturbances." As soon as he said it, the order was completed. He was staring at a full three-dimensional map of the local asteroids. A glowing swath of iridescent violet represented the time rift, dead ahead. It was nearly moving to block the *Maelstrom's* path, but at its current speed, it would be out of the clear asteroid lane within a few seconds.

That would never do; he needed that vortex right where it was. "Commander, change course. Scan the temporal disturbance for its weakest point. Set our path for that spot and don't stray even a meter. We have to hit it precisely at its center or we'll be torn apart."

In truth, there were other safe zones as well, but Darrus did not have time to go into that with the clone commander. Every rift tended to have pockets of relatively stable time energy. He did not know how the science behind it worked, but he knew that there were places in each field where asteroids could drift in, disappear, and drift back out days, weeks or months later without suffering any apparent harm. They were impossible to predict and since they sometimes never released their temporal prisoners at all, they were too risky to use. No, the storm's eye was their only chance.

"I want every available generator powered up and shunted to the forward battery." Before his dutiful commander could voice his concern, Darrus added, "I know the main guns are down. They aren't the only things up there."

The next few moments were a nightmare. The *Shadowblade* was much faster than Jeht had planned on, closing the distance between them in less than half the time he'd hoped. A trio of black steel panels opened along the *Shadowblade's* edged nose, revealing turbolaser batteries. Without shields, the *Maelstrom* took a severe beating from its first volley. Deck plates ruptured and the hull took deeply piercing hits along every forward deck. The ship's status panel showed multiple internal fires, but Darrus paid them no heed. None of them mattered. There was nothing he could do, in any case.

Urging his vessel forward, Jeht watched the *Shadowblade* for any sign of weakness. He was hoping, praying to anything that might hear him for just one lucky break. All he needed was to be right about one thing, to have one suspicion proven right. As the dark blade powered up to fire again, his wish was granted.

"There!" he shouted, pointing at the tactical screen. "The *Shadowblade's* cloaking field is weakest when it prepares its weapons! To lock onto us, it has to relax its jamming!" His exuberance was dimmed by the *Shadowblade's* next wave of attacks. A massive hole tore through the starboard "wing," venting seven decks into space along with all their occupants and equipment. Other damaged systems flashed over the captain's chair readout, each one just as ignored as before.

"Bow charge ready, commander?" He gestured to a control panel and looked knowingly at his second in charge. The clone nodded his understanding and took a seat. "On my signal, give the *Shadowblade* everything we've got."

The dark enemy swept around the *Maelstrom*, flying through the smoke and debris she was guttering to get a straight line of attack on her engines. Obviously looking for a quick kill, the *Shadowblade* opened every port on her hull -- dozens of glowing apertures all poised to end this engagement as violently as possible.

Darrus waited, holding his breath, as the sensor-blocking field around the vile superweapon dwindled to its lowest point yet. That many guns needed a lot of firing solutions, sensor traffic he could use to guide his own attack . . . of sorts. "Now!"

The dorsal array near the nose of the *Maelstrom* spun around, grinding on half-damaged actuators to do so. It opened up with a scintillating gray beam nearly invisible to the eye but very noticeable in its effect. The *Shadowblade* jerked momentarily out of control, caught in an overcharged tractor beam so powerful that it could not immediately break free. Forced sideways, it towed behind the massive cruiser like flotsam caught in its wake.

"We can't hold her long, sir."

"We don't have to." Then, with a sigh of regret and resignation, "Helm, .03 degrees starboard."

"That takes out of the safe path, sir."

"I know."

And with that, both ships plunged into the chaotic rift, disappearing in the flaring light of time.

Living Force Game Notes

Effective immediately, the **Living Force** campaign's web updates are ended. The online articles have been part of the game for three years now, bringing options and plot updates to players around the world. The **Living Force** campaign concludes permanently on December 31, 2006.

For many years to come in memory, may the Force be with you.

Always.