

The Price of Neutrality -- Rebellion

By August and Cynthia Hahn

It is a natural instinct for any living creature to try to survive. It is a hallmark of sentience when that instinct expands to bettering one's survival past the need for food and shelter. When this drive is a healthy one, societies flourish, and the divide between cultural classes provides incentive for competition and advancement. Governments rise, economies are created, and the quality of life improves for the majority of those involved.

But when the instinct is allowed to grow out of control, everything is put at risk. When the lure of profit outweighs the cost of the actions taken in its name, only one thing can result: disaster.



Still wearing his uniform cap backward like a complete Gundark, Nill ducked back out of the window and sat down with a heavy thud. "Hoo-wah! They sure do seem upset about somethin'! Whaddaya suppose it was, Vegg?"

His partner, a tired-looking Zabrak with no patience for the lame-skull he was saddled with, said nothing. But when it looked like Nill was going to open his mouth again, Vegg spoke in a vain attempt to shut the idiotic Human up.

"Oh, I don't know, Nilloc. Perhaps the ultimatum they just received? The manifesto delivered to Cularin by our rather acquisitive and ill-advised employers?"

Still cradling his blaster carbine like a favored son, Nill looked at him blankly.

Exasperated, Vegg paused just long enough to peer out the window and report troop activity to the gunner's post on the roof. Then, he dumbed down his words a bit. "They are upset because the people who pay us just informed Cularin of their desire to rule all commerce in the system."

Again, Nill just gave him a vacant stare. "Comm . . . erce?"

"Buying things?"

The addled soldier nodded vigorously. "Oh, yeah! I like doing that! What are you gonna do with your pay? I want to get some land east of Hedrett and start a farm."

It was Vegg's turn to stare. "You . . . want to be a nerf herder?"

Nill pulled down his helmet with a flourish and grinned. "Yep!"

With a deep, cleansing breath, Vegg let that one go. It was just too easy. "That sounds great, mate. You're amply qualified for the role, I assure you."

Nill crouched next to the window and stuck his carbine's long barrel out of it to scan for incoming forces. "Well, I don't know what *amply* means, but thanks!" Sighting something, he pulled the trigger and sent a red bolt out into the abandoned Tolea Biqua streets.

Knowing his partner's aim, Vegg felt certain the Militia soldiers outside were in absolutely no danger. Only house pets, potted plants, and trash dumpsters had any reason to fear Nill. Any reason at all.

"So whatcha gonna buy with *your* pay?"

Vegg grimaced. His counterpart was dim, but determined. Perhaps simple minds had an easier time staying in a single track; he really didn't know. In any case, experience had taught him that if he didn't answer the question, he'd be hearing it all day. Only the potential -- and at this point almost welcomed -- possibility of the building getting stormed and them all shot offered any chance of reprieve.

"My family has had the same ship for four generations. I'm only in Cularin because her hyperdrive blew while I was passing near the system. I got towed here, and I've been stuck ever since."

Nill nodded and took another shot. Somewhere far past the battle outside, a small animal howled in surprise. "Yeah, that's all

great and everything, but whatcha gonna spend your pay on?"

Vegg groaned. "A new hyperdrive, you dolt! The Coalition, the group of businesses and corporations funding this government takeover, is offering price breaks on its own goods to us, and I'll be taking advantage of it to fix my vessel and depart this miserable backwater." He tightened his grip on his blaster. "Do you not listen?"

With a shrug, Nill traded out the power cell in his rifle. "Yeah, I listen, but you don't talk so good."

Ten seconds later, Vegg commed up to the roof. "Blade One to Blade Three, copy."

"Blade One, this is Blade Three. We heard a shot, but we didn't see incoming fire. You all right down there?"

There was a short pause. "Yes, Blade Three. Blade Two just had an accident. He . . ." Vegg couldn't help himself. "He bought the farm."

There was just silence for a moment, and then the gunner on the roof responded. "Understood, Blade One. Tragic accident. Be sure to file a report if any of us make it out of this."

"Copy that. Out."

Vegg dragged the now-spare carbine over to his window and took a quick look outside. Nill hadn't been good for much, but his wild shooting had kept the Militia guessing as to where the next shot would land. Forcing them to stay behind cover had been useful until now, but that wouldn't work with only one person laying down fire.

Before he could duck down, a shadow fell over the Militia's side of the street. Concerned that they were bringing in something big like a walker or a tank, Vegg reached for his macrobinoculars. Even as he was bringing them up to his face, he saw the shadow stretch over the street and cover the building he was in.

The Militia troopers were looking up as well. One of them was gunned down for coming out of cover, but Vegg didn't see the shooter. He was too busy aiming his macros up into the cloudy sky. A shadow that big could only be caused by something massive -- a tug maybe, or a transport trying to land . . .

It turned out to be something far worse. Vegg focused on the incoming shape, and as the image appeared in the macros' display, all the blood drained out of his face.

The Coalition had been running the entire takeover from a capital ship purchased at high cost from the shipyards of the Separatists' main industrial element, the Trade Federation. The huge, ring-shaped battleship was their command center and the focus of their operation. It was the biggest thing in the system, and with the Republic gone, its superiority over the spacelanes was uncontested.

It was also guttering fire, exploding across most of its rent hull, and plummeting through the atmosphere directly toward Tolea Biqua. Through his viewers, Vegg could make out escape pods jettisoning all over the craft, most of them getting torn apart by the violent lightning of Genarius's perpetual storm.

Flaming metal death was falling like rain onto Tolea Biqua, and there was nowhere to run. Vegg dropped his macrobinoculars and turned away from the window. The communicator kicked on as he stared off into the void.

"Blade Three to Blade One, you see what I see?"

He didn't want to, but he made himself move. With only seconds left, at least he wouldn't die in silence. "Affirmative, Blade Three."

"I guess we're *all* about to buy the farm, huh?"

Vegg sighed. "I knew that line would come back to haunt me."

Living Force Game Notes

Effective immediately, the gas mining station of Tolea Biqua has been destroyed and the atmosphere of Genarius rendered even more unstable. As such, all mining and industrial facilities within the planet's atmosphere have been evacuated until further notice.

The loss of so many resources and stockpiles of material will be felt for the duration of the **Living Force** campaign. From now until the completion of the campaign in 2006, all fees, goods, and services purchased from any non-hero in the Cularin

campaign cost an additional 20 percent. No class ability or membership in any campaign organization can negate this increase. It is an unfortunate effect of the escalating cost of Cularin's independence.