

Remember When

By Morrie Mullins

The cantina door slid open, allowing the greenish glow of a fading radiation storm to wash over the few meters of floor not covered by tables or chairs. The light illuminated in strange alien relief boot prints in all shapes and sizes that tracked through the permanent layer of dust that was as much a part of Krakin's Alehouse as the ale itself. A shape stood, silhouetted in the doorway, for a long moment. Thick-bodied and tall, the Wookiee seemed to be surveying the alehouse, trying to decide if it was worth his time to step across the threshold. Then he did, and the door slid shut, and the green glow faded into the pale yellow mist of cantina atmosphere.



It took a few seconds for your eyes to readjust, but you didn't need to see particularly well to be able to pick out the Wookiee. His long, slow strides carried him between small round tables where patrons hurried to scoot durasteel chairs out of his way, scraping them through the dust and against the floor with a not-quite-painful keening of metal on metal. He made his way to the bar, sat down, and promptly blended into the haze of smoke and noise that was the Alehouse on that night.

Another Wookiee in a system populated, it seemed, by every species of the galaxy. Another face -- a hairy face, but a face all the same -- in a sea of faces that had somehow made their way to Cularin. Another face in the pond of faces that found themselves drinking this evening in a cantina built by an individual who might have been a Rodian or a Zabrak. Or a Sullustan - some folks said Krakin had been a Sullustan, but most everyone who heard that just shook their heads. It didn't matter, really, what Krakin was. The cantina that bore his name had been run by a lisping Trandoshan with the unfortunate name "Sossk" for the past fifteen years, and it didn't seem like Sossk planned on going anywhere any time soon. He liked the dust, the pale yellow mist, the low murmur of conversation blended with cheap music piped in through speakers that had probably been old and used when Krakin installed them. He seemed to like having people around, though he didn't show it through his smiles. He never smiled, just wandered the bar, one thick hand in the pocket of his apron, serving drinks when he felt the urge, stopping to talk whenever someone looked particularly uninterested in talking.

You'd been watching, listening, for a while, when a conversation caught your ear. It wasn't that the individuals were speaking loudly. Quite the contrary -- what attracted your attention was the fact that they seemed to be trying to speak softly, but were so well and truly inebriated that their notion of "quiet" had become distorted. Still not loud, but just loud enough to be heard with relative clarity while avoiding overt notice. But you noticed, because the content of their conversation was something that had been on your mind as well.

"S'not like he was really a bad type." A tired, slurred voice, with hints of Corellian. "I mean, yeah, he once had my commanding officer strung up and used as a practice dummy for blade drills, but the guy -- he deserved it, right? Went and sold off some cargo to the Velkurs. Bloody stupid, that."

"No doubt, yeah." A higher voice. Female? Gritty and a little angry. "It's not like everyone wasn't warned. You do what you're told, and you'll advance. And you did. He didn't lie about that."

"About anything." A third voice. Deeper, slower. Somewhere between thoughtful and unconscious. "I remember your commander. Blak, yes?"

"Yup. S'the one." The slurred voice came with a muffled echo; someone was speaking into a near-empty mug.

"And he was warned," the deep voice said. "We were all warned. Disloyalty results in death. Betrayal results in death. You never had to wonder," he sighed, "never wondered at all. Where you stood. You knew."

"You lied to him, you died. Didn't matter why." The gritty female -- the more you listened, the more you detected hints of Ryl in the twang of her speech, though you weren't particularly inclined to turn and look to verify -- grunted and swore. "But at least you knew it was coming."

"Like those two -- what were their names?" The words ran together in a jumble of sounds that would have been lost on you entirely, had the music not chosen that moment for a pause. "They were your cousins, right?"

She snorted. "They were Twi'leks. I can't claim them. I wouldn't. They deserved what happened to them. Harboring the Cell."

"S'not like he even gave 'em a chance. Just had the droids blast away. You know what I heard?" He snorted. "I heard when the droids were done, there was nothing left but their boots. Just blasted 'em right out of existence."

The deep voice spoke. "He was cruel. But fair, in his way. And whatever else may be said about him, he kept his word. Never broke it. He expected too much, to think that others might live up to his standard, but it was the only standard he knew. Things were much better with him in charge. Much."

For a few seconds, the music swelled, and you heard the sound of mugs clinking together, then settling, empty, back to the tabletop. By the time the music fell back into its discordant drone, the trio seemed to have already picked up the thread of their conversation.

"-- is unpredictable. Everything is maneuvering. Nobody knows where anybody else stands." She grunted and swore in a language you didn't quite recognize, a dialect of a dialect that came close to Dosh. Close, but not quite. "You look at who's left and you have to think, how are we gonna make it? I mean, the next thing you know, we're all gonna get turned against each other. The last of us who were loyal to Nirama are going to end up wiping each other out."

"S'not going to happen." The words, still slurred, at least came out forcefully. "We got too much history. You remember when he told us we were gonna help in the war? 'Your duty is to me,' he says. 'You swore the oaths.' I remember, 'cause I found the recording. Powerful. Anyway, what came next? Oh yeah. 'You swore the oaths. But there are greater oaths and more powerful loyalties. Cularin is our home, and we will defend our home. Not because it is the right thing to do for business, or the right thing to do for us, but because it is the right thing to do. I will not rest until Cularin is free.' Most of us, we didn't care about free Cularin. But he made me care." His voice trembled. "Never going to be another like him."

The noise of the cantina rose for a few moments, the door hissing open to allow shouts from a streetside fight to amble in and attract some small attention. Then the door again shut out the world.

"In one move," the deep voice said, "everything that we worked for was taken from us. No, not the credits. I have as much now as I ever did with him. More, perhaps. I don't know how many of us appreciated what he really gave us."

"Security?" Her voice held its edge like a well-honed knife. "I don't think so. Always on the run. Good benefits. Great medical plan, yeah."

"Not at all what I'm talking about. He gave us identity. Look at who we are. Just the three of us. Could we be more different from one another? We are the lost spirits of the galaxy, caught in the pull of whatever body is nearest us until we slingshot around and drift somewhere new. He changed that. He offered us identity. Not the kind of identity you get working for a Hutt, either. For a while, it wasn't even like we were criminals. I always knew we were, but there was a part of me that felt . . . free. As if even though we violated every trade charter that existed in Cularin, even though we peddled wares that should never have been sold to anyone, we were providing a service. We were part of Cularin. This is why, when he asked me to fight for Cularin, I did."

"S'why we all did." A hiccough. "Now it's like, we got nothing. Nobody likes the new boss, and he don't like Cularin. It's all business, and he doesn't care who gets hurt. S'all credits to him. I don't know any more where I stand. I was kinda proud to work for Nirama. Showed integrity. Of a kind. I guess."

"Identity." The female voice lost a little of its edge. "You think too much about what it means. Too deep. I don't come drink for deep conversation. I drink to forget deep things, to remember the good. You remember when he sent half the fleet out to run the Thaereian blockade? Now that was entertaining . . ."