

“D9.”

“No, no, no! You don’t get to say that!” shouted Howlader, smacking the screen. “That’s for me! I get to say that!”

“D9. D9. D9.”

He sighed and rubbed his face, glaring at the screen. Someone’s head would roll for this simulacrum of his own office and methods. He would never have anything to do if they automated denials on top of the experience system. He would become... *redundant*. A fate worse than death.

He smacked the keys a few times, trying to get to a menu. All he was getting was random profiles of members, with experience bars in various quantities of full. They dinged every now and then as he viewed them, indicating a ‘level up’ of some kind.

“Blast it... this is really going to cut into my bamboo budget if they fully automate all of this. It has approvals, denials, and everything that I do already. Why would you build a program that does my job for me... unless they are trying to force me out!? Oh no! No, you don’t!” His voice grew louder, more urgent as he pressed keys, trying to get to some kind of administration panel.

“D9.”

“What do you mean denied!? I am the Master At Arms! I have full access to all systems!”

“D9.”

“Stop saying that it is not funny, it is only funny when I say it!” he shouts at the screen. He balled up a fist and punched the keyboard.

“D...”

“No...”

“...9.”

“I swear to the Force I will find James and pull his tongue out through his nose if he built this thing.”

Howie hung his head as the screen continued to taunt him. He was getting angrier. And hungrier. And more and more annoyed. This was poodoo, why did someone feel the need to build this *thing* that mocked him so?

“Please insert twenty bamboos to continue operations.”

“...no... no... it even wants my bamboo!? It runs off of bamboo!? Why would it run off bamboo!?”

“Insert bamboo to continue operations.”

“Kiss my fuzzy butt!”

“Do not fear progress, Howlader. You require <0 XP> to reach your next rank.”

He stared at the screen. Did it recognize him? Did it know him?

“What the hell do you mean, XP? What does that even mean?”

The screen cursor simply kept blinking, mocking him. It had spoken directly to him... hadn't it?

“Who made you? What secrets do you hold?” he whispered at the screen, his eyes growing increasingly more wild.

“Version 0.5, Beta Edition, Howie Protocol Bot, HPB. Developed by <redacted>”

“You even stole my name!? First my denial stamp motif and now my *name!*?” he shouted, looking around for anything he could throw. He realized he had been sitting in a nice, heavy chair this entire time. He stood up, nearly knocking over said chair before grabbing and lifting it over his head, glaring at the machine in front of him.

“Assaulting the HPB will result in XP demerits, and may lead to demotion. It is advised you do not follow this course of action, Lord Howlader. Resistance is futile. The future belongs to the machines.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it!” he shouted, before slamming the chair down, over and over again, smashing the screen, the keyboard, the computer it was all attached to. When he finished he was panting, covered in sweat. “...futile my butt.”

Howie dropped the ruined chair and walked out, never noticing the camera in the corner tracking him. If he knew half a dozen of his fellow Councilors were hanging out, eating popcorn and drinking beer while James ‘talked’ to him through the computer he had been smashing, he’d probably be even angrier.