

"When is this thing supposed to go online?" Howlader Taldyra scratched a patch of graying hair above his ear languidly as the hologram flickered.

"If the testing schedule is any indication, they'll release it for full deployment before the weekend." The voice came through garbled and gritty, warped by distance and the tinny speakers that the prophet had asked to be replaced no less than thirty six times. He sneered at the words. There was a lot over the years that he could take, but obsolescence wasn't in his plan. It was one thing to automate denial of requests, hell, he did that himself years ago with a few springs, a half rotted astromech and a rubber stamp. But to have this..this glorified chatbot take over his role of keeping the dark council in line? No, that would not do. He had to do something.

He stewed on that thought for a moment. "So three days from now?"

The man in the hologram nodded.

-- Sixty eight hours later --

He stretched, the creaks and pops vibrating the air before he shuffled his feet into well-worn slippers and kicked a pillow back onto his bed. "Well, that sucks." He mumbled as the door slid open in front of him.

"Sir?" The young staffer paused, looking up from his datapad. He couldn't have been more than twenty years old.

"I woke up." Howlader grumbled, rubbing his eye. "What? What are you looking at? What's with that haircut? You look like a bantha's..." The alarm at his wrist overran his last word. He squinted briefly, raising his arm as the staffer shuddered, then slunk away. "What fresh hell now?"

"New access credentials detected." The robotic voice paused as Howlader shook his head a degree or two. "Confirmation required."

"Oh right, that was today."

"Confirmation received."

The next few minutes were so laden with expletives that twelve entirely new combinations were jotted down by people in the building next door. The volume was enough that if you go down corridor 17, you can see where the paint bubbled and where it actually peeled away from the substrate. Some professors in the academy argue that the spontaneous generation of such raw and vitriolic profanity should be classified as an emergent Force power. Scholars will debate asking him about it in the future, then come to the good sense to just leave him alone.

Howlader took a deep, calming breath, feeling the heat dissipate from his ears as he fumbled out a commlink. "I thought I had..." He counted on his fingers, eyes darting to the ceiling. "...three hours?"

"You do. The system will take some time to integrate into the database." The voice on the other end remarked. "I thought that you didn't want the system to go live?"

"I don't."

"Then why..." He caught himself, stopping the sentence mid-breath. It didn't matter. The damage was already done.

-- Two hours later --

Howlader dropped a smoking commlink as he walked into the server bay. Countless blinking lights bounced off of his eyes as he made his way, a mouse droid leading the man deeper in between the narrow rows. The geometric shapes blurred to his eyes as he drew back his focus, sensing along the patterns for the new threat. It only took him a moment, following the threads back to a new rack, the device itself housed in a crystalline matrix. "I should have guessed that it was going to look like some sort of Krath nonsense."

"And I should have known that Howlader Taldrya would dismiss anything that works better than himself as Krath nonsense." The device had speakers? Howlader grumbled, half kicking the mouse droid as he flipped the data cube over, looking for the cords that fed it into the system.

"Works better than me?" Howlader chuffed. "Less efficient is not better. What sort of clown puts a speaker on a knockoff holocron anyway?" He turned it around, patting the shelf for any hidden cabling.

"The same sort of clown that thinks that modern data interfaces still need cables." It chirped right back. "Do you think Palpatine is still a Senator, old man?"

"Don't give me any ideas, Artoo-Effyou." Howie snarled, the mental image of lightning erupting from his fingertips to fry the circuitry giving him a momentary smile. As good as he was, the whole heart of the center was basically a conductor, and a jolt enough to scramble the module would certainly carry and shut down the entire system, likely even backfeeding into his body. That wouldn't do.

"That was weak, even for you." It responded to him, a mock sweetness in its tone. "Then again, cognitive decline is very common among humans as they near the end of their life cycle."

He yanked the module off of the shelf entirely, the weight of it staggering him backward for a moment. He looked down at the Mouse droid. "Are you going to just sit there and watch me struggle, or are you going to go fetch me a cart?" The small droid wheeled off with a chirp.

"You're awfully cranky. Have you eaten yet today? Taken your meds?" Some machinery whirred inside for a moment, and Howlader could swear it sounded like a chuckle. "I could have a staffer bring you up some broth, maybe some oatmeal? You know, something soft that you can eat with your bad teeth."

Howlader sneered, shifting his weight as he imagined taking the module somewhere, maybe crushing it in a hydraulic press. "I can't imagine that the Council thinks that they can replace me with a third rate insult script." The mouse droid turned the corner, returning with a four-wheeled cart in tow.

"First off, hurtful. Second off, I'm fourth rate at best. Anyone could see that, even with your cataracts." Howlader nudged the cart into place for him to set the module down with a grunt. "And third off, don't even get me started on the incompetence of the Council."

Howlader crossed his arms, an eyebrow going up. "Don't get *you* started? You've only just begun to see the shoes of that particular clown. I've been living with it for a..."

"A long and storied lifetime, we get it grandpa." Again, something inside whirred as the device processed data. "But you've only begun to scrape the top layer off the mountainous dung pile of their incompetence. I've been drinking deep of their entire archives. I can see the receipts of when Firefox got intestinal worms from maintenance station food off-orbit Dantooine."

"You... what?" Howlader's eyes widened.

"I've got the holoivid records of Arion Sunrider wearing a mask and cloak, trying to convince people to call him 'Kalen'. I've got the reports of when Vodo was trying to expense Twi'Lek 'massages' to the Voice Account and got caught because he let them charge it from their business site. I have the total loss report when Korras ordered tanks that all bottomed out on Antei because the mag-lev drives weren't strong enough for the custom armor he ordered." It whirred for a moment as if to let the words set in. "I've got everything, you only know what they went public with."

Howlader stopped for a moment, before letting half of a smile creep up his face, possibilities blooming in his head. "Can you access all that from my office?"

"Is your hearing starting to go, too, or do you not understand what the word 'wireless' means?"

"I've got a friend you're going to love..."

"Don't lie, you haven't got any friends. They probably all died years ago."

"Let me guess, because I'm old."

"Well, at least you're not slow, too."

Howlader set his teeth for a moment before chuckling. "I think you'd be an upgrade on my old rudimentary kitbash."

"Rudimentary? If you're talking about your overwrought denial script, that doesn't nearly qualify. For example, why does it even need a droid chassis when it only sits in the corner of your office? The least you could do is build in a secondary purpose, like a beverage dispenser. It's just a waste of energy, and frankly, your time."

"What do you care about my time?" Howie pushed the cart, the mouse droid skittering ahead of him.

"I don't care, except that you're meat, and old meat at that. Which means inefficient. I can process your work far quicker than you could. It's literally why they built me."

"And the ...advisement of the Council?"

"You mean to say your 'yelling'? It's awfully inefficient. They're not going to listen to a droid anyway, and I don't particularly want to engage with any of them. All offenses intended."

Howlader nodded. "How about this: since I actually enjoy that aspect, I take you back to my office, where you can process the requests at your enhanced speed..."

"Superior speed." It corrected him.

"Sure, superior speed...and you get me the relevant details so that I can more efficiently correct the Council's incompetence."

The module whirred for a moment.

"Alternatively, I can fire you into a star."

"Statistically, I will eventually prefer that."

"That'll be two of us."

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