

One Crew over the Crewcoo's Howie

"What do you mean they're going to replace me with a droid," Howie said angrily, slamming his datapad down on the ornate desk that dominated the bulk of his office on Arx.

"Not a droid, a droid intelligence" Mune, Howlader's Shistavanen Praetor corrected him. "It will be integrated into the Arx computer network and fulfill many of the basic functions of the Master At Arms."

"You seem strangely calm about this, Mune," Howie accused. "Aren't you worried about what this means for you?"

"For it to really matter you'd have to step down, and that's not happening anytime soon," Mune grumbled under his breath.

"What was that?" Howie demanded.

"Nothing, sir," Mune replied matter-of-factly. "I was just saying it would make our jobs so much simpler."

"Sure, and then one of Zxyl's little bean counters is going to figure out that *paying* a Master at Arms to sit there and backstop a droid brain is a waste of resources. If that happens, where would I get the budget for the fancy ales and trips to high-end meateries?"

"Well, you could always..." Mune began before he was cut off by Howlader.

"Don't answer that, it was rhetorical. And I think you knew it, too," Howie accused, pointing a finger at his second.

"Yes, sir," Mune humored him. "Then I guess you'll have to think of something to stop this ill conceived plan."

"And how would you suggest I go about doing that?" Howie demanded.

"Well, you and I both know it's been years since you've really left your office here," Mune started before getting cut off again.

"Rhetorical!" Howie thundered.

"Yes, sir. I guess you could assemble a team to do something to neutralize this new threat for you," Mune offered.

Howie raised his hand, seemingly to slam it down on his desk once more before his face was overtaken by a smile.

"Mune, you're a genius" Howie said, lightly smacking his hand down on his desk. "That's exactly what I'll do."

"Excellent, sir. Shall I call for the landspeeder?" Mune inquired obsequiously.

"Yes! And tell the crew of my ship we'll be getting underway," Howie ordered his subordinate.

"Your jalopy of a Stealthipede, or the MAA's issued ship?"

"You know damn well what I meant," Howie barked with frustration. "I keep that Sheathipede around because I'm not going to hock it back to Anubis. So yes, the MAA flagship."

"Of course, sir," Mune said with a bow before turning on his heels and retreating from the Master at Arms's office.

"This sounds an awful lot like something Krathy," Howie called after him. "I'm sure those dusty, purple bookworms had something to do with me having to deal with this!"

Howlader strode purposefully into the control center at the heart of the Kuat Drive Yards operation, his eyes scanning for his target. The man he sought was seated at one of the various oversight consoles, an orange skinned Faleen that had an air of superiority about him that most could see from orbit. As Howlader crossed the control center floor, the Faleen caught sight of the Master at Arms and his features shaped themselves into a wide smile. Rising from his seat, he grasped Howlader's hand once the two met.

"Howlader Taldrya, you son of a bitch!" he exclaimed happily.

"Need some people for a thing, Aabs," Howie explained.

"My name's Zanet Xox these days," the Faleen offered, his smile becoming more of a conspiratorial grin. "They've got me overseeing the Proxima Yards here."

"Hey Xox!" came a voice from the command station atop a raised platform that dominated the entire control center. "We've got keel layings to oversee! Get back to your station!"

"I quit!" the Faleen said, his right hand reaching up to grab his ponytail and then pull the Faleen mask from his head to reveal a scarred human face beneath. "And the name's Aabsdu Dupar."

Aabsdu and Howie fist bumped as the two men strode out of the command center.

Howie pushed aside the patrons that stood before the sabaac tables aboard the star liner *Stellar Princess* to reveal the man he was looking for. The other players were pushing their chairs away from the table as his quarry raked in the various credit chits and markers that dominated the center of the table. The Brotherhood's master at arms sat down at the table, and the other man at the table quickly raised a ready blaster before a look of recognition crossed his face.

"Howlader, you son of a bitch," the man said with a subtle grin.

"Never thought I'd see Kalen Aquillarum picking easy marks on the Nar Hekka to Nar Shaddaa run," Howie replied.

"Nobody's hiring an ex-Sith with a Hapan attitude to run their little Empire's these days," Kalen explained.

"Suppose I had a job that didn't care if you were a Sith Master back in your younger days?" Howie offered.

"I'm in." Kalen said as the two grasped hands across the table.

"This the guy?" Mune asked from where he and Howlader were sitting at a table in the back of the Arconan mess hall on Selen.

"No," Howie said, dismissing the figure in rainbow patterned robes.

"That the guy? Mune asked again, this time pointing to a crazed looking Zabrak with blue and black coloring.

"Nope," came Howie's reply.

"Him?" Mune asked while pointing at the middle aged, athletically build human in Arconan military garb, clearly growing frustrated by just sitting in the cafeteria waiting for their target.

"No," Howie said, taking a drink of his beverage of choice. "No, no wait, yes. Of course that's the guy."

Mune sighed as Howlader stood up from their table.

"Hey artist formerly known as Nero!" Howie yelled across the room.

Christopher Winchester looked over his shoulder before smiling as he saw who had called out to him. "You son of a bitch! I'm in!"

"We're in," Aabsdu said from his seat in Howie's office. Along with him were Winchester and Kalen, all taking various seats to face the Master at Arms behind his desk.

"We explained to those programers why it was absolutely critical to have the best expertise to train their algorithms with, and they totally bought it," Kalen explained with a chuckle. "Couldn't have been more simple."

"And," Winchester added, "we gained their trust completely after working with them to train the thing up. With the access they gave us, we should be able to get into the system and deal with this AI monstrosity whenever we want."

"Thanks for doing this, guys," Howie offered, standing up from behind his desk.

"So," Aabsdu said, leaning forward and taking a sip of the smoky Corellian brandy that filled his tumbler two fingers high, "what's the real job?"

"That was it," Howie responded with a flat tone. "Bye."

Howlader strode from his office, leaving the dumbfounded former Master at Arms crew in his wake.

"What do you mean it awarded Golden Lightsabers to everyone?" Evant thundered, his words seeming to shake the walls of Grand Master's office. "How the hell does it even do that?"

"I don't know, my lord," stammered the confused programmer. "We gave it the very best input to train the algorithms on."

"And I see here," Dacien said from where he was seated on a small couch along the room's west wall, "that it's telling one member it needs 'more' before it can promote them even while it issued a promotion to another."

"Nothing out of the ordinary," the programmer said nervously.

"Yet both members have exactly the same statistics," Dacien explained flatly. "*Exactly*. The entire point of this system was to produce consistent results."

"Y-yes, my lord," the programmer said, unable to offer a better explanation.

"Having trouble?" came Howie's voice from outside the office, preceding the Master at Arms by a few seconds as he walked confidently into the Grand Master's Office.

"Nothing you need concern yourself with," Evant said, forestalling further discussion. "Programmer Ekris here was just touting his newest innovation. Sadly, it seems like a fool's errand."

"What can you expect," Howie said somberly. "These Krath programmers always have something up their sleeves to waste our time and credits on."

"Indeed," Dacien agreed before he fixed the poor computer programmer with a stare that could have melted durasteel. "I think we can all agree that no further time will be wasted on this wild nerf chase?"

"Of course, my lord," Programmer Ekris said, bowing deeply as he tried to make as hasty an exit as decorum would allow.

Howlader caught the man's gaze as Dacien and Evant distracted themselves with other business, offering a playful wave and a nod as the underling retreated from the room.