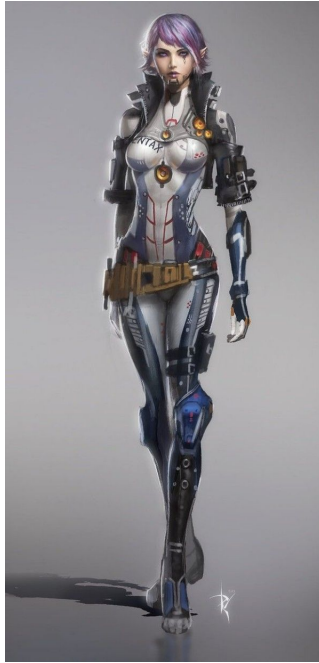


# Story of One: The Shroud Sprint

By Kasula Daegella



## **Shroud Nebula The Godless Matron Chute Town**

Parading through the absolute dregs of society that the *Godless Matron* had to offer, Cerena O'val regarded the Lucrehulk-class battleship's denizens and dwellings with absolute disgust. Brushing elbows with passing merchants, criminals and addicts alike, her right hand never left the belt on which her valuables were contained in the various pouches and holsters arranged on the nerf-hide band. Making no effort to conceal herself from the dirtied and unclean denizens of this accursed town, she wore her full racing regalia without thought to cover it with a cloak. None would be adventurous or bold enough to ask for an autograph or exhibit their wares—not while she was considered a 'guest' of the *Matron*.

*Less a guest than an unwilling occupant*, she thought. It wasn't that the woman was being held against her will, or that she was a hostage to Batholomew's crew. She came of her own volition, more or less, and settled in a hideout nearest to her sole place of comfort on the ship—the Sinning Den. The fact was that she owed a mountain of credits for something that she could never forgive, and blamed it all on her one-time acquaintances, and former accomplices of the Black Sun.

Kasula and Ysera Daegella, the Twi'lek sisters from hell. It was supposed to be a sure bet, and all of it fell to pieces. Years ago, she was given a significant sum to win in the Nexus Route Dash, the race that would have solidified her stature in the galactic racing community and given her sponsors the biggest payout of her career. Her most trusted advisor and

one-time lover assured her the Daegella twins wouldn't pose a threat, much less have a chance of winning the race. She suspected underhanded dealings, but gave no thought to it—not until the tables were turned. Breaking the terms of their agreement with the Black Sun, her rivals came in first and caused a **lot** of anger for own failure. So much so to warrant an attempt on her life, to remove her from the dejarik board.

*Checkmate.* Even if her enemies—former sponsors and business partners—failed, she was out of the game. Blown to dust, her vessel was the first target of retribution while she was at the controls. Were it not for the vacuum-sealed suit and a reflexive reach for her rebreather, Cerena O'val would have died in a cold vacuum. Still, she lost her crew, ship, and trust in her former allies and partners—not even in her former coordinator.

“Oi! Watch it!” a Jablogian flabbed his jaw in anger at being brushed aside. Either a fool or someone unconcerned, he didn't even heed the grim faces of the the two armed, and even angrier-looking pirates heading straight in his direction.

“Good that you're here!” he stammered, too enraged to form cohesive words, “This woman tried to rob me!” He indicated the purple-haired Sephi with a fat index finger.

Looking satisfied as the shorter pirate began trading whispers with his crewmate, the bulkier one stepped forward, “We'll take care of it.” His tone was level, almost apologetic.

The Jablogian didn't realize the comment wasn't addressed to him, as he stood waiting to get his taste of justice. Not before a blaster bolt entered the fat around his ribs, did he realize his grave error.

“Aiiiaaee!” He fell to the ground, a smoking hole left where his gut used to be.

“Our apologies, ma'am. Direct orders from C'ree. She's bet a lot of credits to see you race against Morgan's champions,” he reached down to take a credit chip from the Jablogian's pocket, “good luck out there.” Tossed like a coin, the chip landed in Cerena's hand.

This is how sentences are served on the *Matron*. Harsh, but swift. Unforgiving, and merciless.

She hadn't come here unwilling. She had come here to seek vengeance, and like the crew's version of *justice*, she would be merciless in dispensing it. Perhaps it was C'ree's volatile nature or some form of rivalry with the Daegella sisters, or even just for the sake of fun, but whatever the reason, Cerena O'val was given this one chance to turn her life around. A new starship, the *Countess' Birthright*, as fitting as the name was, awaited her in its hangar bay.

As soon as Batholomew's pirates turned their backs, the crowd ogling the assets beneath her form-fitted attire turned their attention back to their stalls and devices. Groaning in delirious pain, but alive, the Jablogian stretched out his hand as if protesting the loss of his credit chip. Instead, all he caught was a heel as it ground into the back of his palm as

Cerena left the lecherous stares behind and focused on the next task in her revenge—getting to the hangar.

## **The Godless Matron**

### **The Sinning Den**

“Is there something I should know, C’ree?” Morgan Bartholomew Sorenn tapped on the armrest of the sectional furniture as C’ree grinned from her position draped across Morgan’s legs. The rest of the Den didn’t even give so much of a glance in the pirate queen’s direction. Her business was none of theirs’, and there was enough entertainment to provide adequate alternatives. Everyone has their vices, and she was more than willing to provide, at cost.

But C’ree’s usual behaviour was off, enough to be worrisome.

“No secrets, C’ree. I don’t like secrets,” she demanded, plainly. She knew the first mate’s behaviour for what it was—a game. And both of them knew, Morgan didn’t like losing.

“Secrets, hmm?” C’ree kneeled on the chair to be beside Morgan, just high enough to run her fingers through the raven locks casually, “What have I ever kept a secret? You will know of it, but it’s a surprise.”

Closing her eyes in relaxation as C’ree worked her fingers into the locks, Morgan took a sip of the Corellian brandy in her grasp, “Better be one I’ll like, then.” The drink coursed through her like a drug, bringing with it a kind of euphoria only experienced in the ambience of the Sinning Den’s music, entertainment and atmosphere.

Staring up over the sea of faces and bettors, C’ree flashed her grin to no-one in particular. Morgan might have bet on her champions, the Daegella sisters aboard the *Damsels’ Distress*, but C’ree wanted to see how the pirate queen would react once she found out C’ree had brought her own racer, one that the twins were uniquely familiar with and one that might bring some competition to the table.

It was, after all, just fun and games.

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## **Shroud Nebula**

### **YT-2000 Light Freighter, The *Countess’ Birthright***

“Racers!” the intercom blared as Cerena O’val tightened her grip over the controls, fabric stretching over the knuckles of her fingers as the accelerator was prepared to feel the full force of her might, “All of you have been chosen to attend the first-ever Shroud Sprint!”

“On behalf of Morgan Sorenn, we welcome and encourage your participation in the race,” the voice continued, “Reminder that deals made off the track will not be tolerated, and will be dealt with accordingly. We might be pirates, but we have a code. Follow the rules, and don’t be a problem.”

“Get ready!” Cerena’s instruments activated with a countdown timer appearing on her console, “Get set!”

“Go!”

Roaring to life, the full power of her accelerator kicked in and the inertial compensator lessened the blow that would otherwise send Cerena’s head to the rear of the starship. Dialing it back as soon as the desired velocity was reached, Cerena toggled the switches to maintain a steady course. Wherever C’ree might have gotten ship, must have cost a fortune.

Before she could gain a significant lead over **all** the contestants, however, the stocky and unassuming collection of thrusters of a quadrijet spacetug jumped to the lead. The modifications were obvious; lack of tow capabilities for weight, external fuel tanks for longevity and the removal of all regulatory systems. In other words, it was a deathtrap with stabilizer vanes.

The incoming transmission indicator on her controls blinked twice in succession before she flipped the toggle, allowing another racer to communicate.

“*Me juuz ku, wermo!*” the alien in the quadjumper ship gloated hysterically, which Cerena assumed to be a Gran, or some other unsightly creature. Translated loosely to “See you, suckers!” the alien’s moment of triumph was short-lived. As the Sephi expected, the shoddy modifications must have never been tested before, and made for a rather spectacular display of fireworks as all four oversized thrusters shorted and ignited the external fuel tanks.

“Oh, no!” the rather over-excited and non-sympathetic voice of the announcer called out over the intercom, “Looks like Gra’ttega has just had his first and last race in the Shroud.”

“Those who betted on Gra’ttega’s departure can collect their earnings at the Den,” the same announcer half-muttered into the microphone without the excitement in his voice.

*So, they’re betting on how long we’ll live? Good to know. There’s one I can help along.*

On-cue, the sponsor-bearing hull of the VCX-100 Light Freighter christened the *Damsels’ Distress*, turned fifteen degrees on its side, stood out against the crimson nebula. This race was no Dragon Void Run or any similar death-wish, but the rules never said anything about taking out the competition.

“Get in front,” Cerena O’val grated her teeth, “take the lead.”

The Daegella sisters' freighter, however, made no such move. It was as if the two of them were reading into her thoughts, but she knew the both of them better than that. They were conserving their fuel, waiting to engage the ion thrusters on the final stretch.

So long as they remained in her ion trails, she had them beat.

### **The Godless Matron** **The Ball**

"Was this the surprise?" Morgan asked, seemingly unfazed by the spectacle outside the *Matron's* viewport. A ruse, to draw a pang of disappointment from C'ree.

The first mate, however, called her bluff. "Face it, you want to win just as much as I do."

Morgan's lips parted in a smile. C'ree knew her too well, but this was a gift for her amusement—nothing more. As she regarded the starships passing through the checkpoints scattered throughout the surrounding region, she wondered where the two lead ships had gotten to—surely, neither them of them had already made it to the Shroud's debris field?

The announcer's voice filled the chamber, "Two contestants fighting for dominance among the asteroid belt, but none taking the lead!"

"It appears they're at a standstill," Morgan observed, switching the viewscreens to the lead's current position, "let's see what comes next."

### **Shroud Nebula** **VCX-100 Light Freighter, The *Damsels' Distress***

"This one doesn't—"

"Give up. I know." Ysera finished Kasula's sentence, rolling her eyes with the last word. The race was, astonishingly, almost to the finish line. Yet, the lead was still contested between them, and an unknown racer in the Yt-2000 next to the *Damsels' Distress*.

"Asteroids incoming!" Kasula shouted over the comlink headset, giving Ysera just enough warning as she finished the climb into the VCX-100's dorsal turret. Turning up the inertial compensator almost instinctively to prevent her sister from getting motion sickness, Kasula traced pinpoint arcs of fire over the asteroids most likely to leave a dent.

"Give me one moment!" Ysera shouted from above, forgetting that she was wearing the comlink.

"You have three seconds!"

“Done!” the twin announced from the gunner’s seat, swivelling the turret around to target a cluster of smaller asteroids large enough to leave a dent, but small enough to disintegrate under fire.

The light on the console blinked for several moments as Kasula was preoccupied with navigating the asteroid field, “Transmission coming through, Ysera!”

“Patch it in up here so I can listen!”

A voice, almost too regal to belong this far into the Outer Rim, filled their headsets with respect and venom in equal measure, “Kasula and Ysera Daegella,” it addressed, “I have waited for this moment, to reclaim my prestige in the races.”

“For a long time,” it continued, “I wanted nothing more than to see you both fall as I have, dragged down and forgotten to those who once vied for your attention, rallied to your success. You’re going to eat ion trails, and this time, I’m going to win.”

## **Shroud Nebula**

### **YT-2000 Light Freighter, *The Countess’ Birthright***

Warning indicators flared and navigational instruments failed amidst the asteroids, but Cerena O’val knew how to manage without a machine calculating routes. She had run similar courses before—the Kessel Run, Dragon Void. It was all so familiar, and she knew the best routes through each of them. Mapped in the back of her mind like lines on the palm of her hand, she could calculate the routes with little more than her subconscious at the task.

Although the *Damsels’ Distress* was still caught in the glow of her ion engines, another racer was taking advantage of her preoccupation with the twins. Climbing up beside her, an ARC-170 starfighter was nearing the lead with a full crew compliment.

“Karking hell,” she cursed, noticing the look on the rear-facing Devaronian’s face as a tail gun was swung to face the *Countess’ Birthright*. To her amusement, she jinked just in time to see that the Daegella sisters hadn’t been able to see the bolts of plasma before their shields absorbed the fire.

Unfortunately, it also meant that she no longer had their freighter locked behind her engines, veering slightly off-course to find a straighter, faster route through the asteroid field. Green bolts traced dotted lines in front of, and behind the Clone Wars-era fighter, obliterating smaller asteroids into smaller, more manageable chunks for all three contestants as each one followed a slightly different route.

*Gotcha.*

The YT-2000, lingering in wait behind a particularly large chunk of rock, banked out of cover, directly in-line with the ARC-170 taking lead. Staccato bursts found their marks in a strafing

pattern from the left wing of the starfighter, across the hull to its right. The shields didn't hold, and the three crew ejected at just the right moment to avoid a permanent end.

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### **The Godless Matron Chute Town**

Thumbing the switch of a device identical to the switch of a charge detonator, the man watched the viewscreen with casual enthusiasm. Dressed in what one might expect of an amoral pirate, the *Matron's* crewmember waited for his moment; all under Batholomew's orders.

*She hates to lose, all right.*

Just moments ago, he shot the tinkerer that made the device between his beady little eyes—an Ugnought, no less. Stuffed within the crate he decided to use as an armrest, it was unlikely someone would come across the little bugger, at least until the rot set in.

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### **Shroud Nebula YT-2000 Light Freighter, The *Countess' Birthright***

"The racers at the final stretch!" the over-excited announcer returned, far too loud over the *Countess'* intercom for comfort.

"Just three of them returning from the asteroid belt! The Daegella sisters are in the lead!"

*Not for long*, Cerena mused. The faint clicking of a dial being turned to the maximum filled the background noise that wasn't being drowned out by the intercom as the inertial compensator was turned to full.

"Just a blue milk run, after all."

The accelerators roared to life as the YT-2000 made use of its stored fuel—*all of it*—for the final stretch. Were she not so captivated with what was directly ahead, she might have waved as she passed the VCX-100 on her way to the finish.

"A hundred clicks," she narrowed her vision on the finish, "Just... a little more."

Her hand reached down to grasp the latest aftermarket modifications toggle, that which would engage the ion afterburner. Without hesitation, she clicked it into the "on" position.

“Bantha Fodd...” she stammered, spinning around to find an unhooked cable, broken coupling—anything that would have prevented it from working. Instead, she heard a grumble from the rear of the ship, the kind of nightmares and distant memories.

“No!”

The ion engine echoed its last hum. The freighter tore itself to pieces like a Jawa dissecting a droid for spare parts. The difference was, she was at the controls reaching for the apparatus that would save her life, again.

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## **The Godless Matron**

### **The Ball**

“Well,” Morgan switched the viewscreen off, “that was indeed a ‘surprise.’ That being said...” she swivelled around to face C’ree, hands folded in her lap, “I did confess that I hated losing.”

“That’s not how this works!” C’ree insisted, throwing her hands into the air, “But, fine. Your ‘reward’,” she offered with a fake sadness in her tone.

“What...” Morgan held the item up from its box—an autographed ‘uniform’ bearing the logo of the Daegella sisters, “is this?”

“This is unheard of!” a sound filled the chamber from all directions. *I’ll have to shoot that announcer next*, thought Morgan. “The pilot of the *Countess* is now... **onboard** the lead freighter.”

Scowling at the turn of events, Morgan turned the viewscreen back on.

## **Shroud Nebula**

### **VCX-100 Light Freighter, The *Damsels’ Distress***

“I... owe an apology,” the Sephi wheezed as she clutched the breath mask in her left hand. Exposed to the cold vacuum of space for just a moment, her skin had grown paler; it would take time in a bacta tank to recover.

“Don’t mention it,” the sisters replied in unison. “We’ll cross that line, together,” Kasula added.

“That’s what I must apologize for,” Serena O’val responded, the unmistakable sound of a scatter blaster heard from behind the sisters manning the controls, “This is a model VCX-100. Meaning there’s an auxiliary fighter onboard. Get in it, and leave.”



“So long as we get our ship back, yeah?” Kasula interjected, raising her hands off the controls.

*What was it with these two?* “Won’t be a scratch on it,” the other contestant sighed, “Now get. Off.”

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## **The Godless Matron**

### **The Ball**

“What a turn of events that was, dontcha agree?” C’ree sneered, knowing full well what this meant.

Morgan shot back a stare that could melt durasteel, but relented her anger enough to maintain her composure. It was bad form to be a sore loser, after all.

“So...” the first mate stretched out across the chair, “I’d like that uniform back.”