

STAR WARS

COLLATERAL DAMAGE

AN *UNSTEADY GROUND: PRELUDE* SUBMISSION BY:
NIHLUS VEXRII OF CLAN TALDRYAN (#9056)

Command Bridge
Secutor-class Star Destroyer **Resurgent**
In Orbit Above Chyron, Caelus System

Even in these times of relative “peace”, the bridge of the Clan Taldryan flagship **Resurgent** was bustling with activity. With the recent discord sewn between the Dark Brotherhood and it’s new “ally” the Severian Principate by the forces of those Collective scum, all hands remained at steadfast alert and performed their duties at the excellence level required of them by the Taldryan Military. Once one of the most formidable forces within the Brotherhood, the decimation in Kr’Tal by former Taldryan Consul and Grand Master Jac Cotelin - a *Son of Taldryan* no less - had forced the former First Clan to reassemble it’s fleet, the continued losses of recent years taking its toll on the new and fresh military force.

The auxiliary communications interception officer in one of the trenches on the command bridge pressed the earpiece of the headset to his head with marginal force, pushing the speaker closer into his pale blue Pantoran ear as he listened intently to the whispers and light static coming through it. The noise of the bridge made it hard, but he was still able to decipher several words that seemed familiar to him.

Wiggling various dials on the communications terminal in front of him, the officer tried to clear up the signal and remove the static. At first he lost the sound all together, but within a split moment had it back and clearer than ever.

“Operation Delta-Bravo-Echo, you are cleared to proceed,” stated the slithery yet somewhat robotic voice coming through the intercepted signal.

The words puzzled the officer, who called over his immediate superior with a large wave of his arm. As far as he was aware, there was no Taldryan military operation in play with that name. The message repeated once more, and then cut-out. As the head communications officer approached his terminal, the auxiliary officer worked frantically to trace its origin and destination before it disappeared for good.

“What is it, ensign?” queried the other officer with an eyebrow raised. It was not often that one of his subordinates called him over so nonchalantly. The Pantoran officer continued to tap at his screen, not responding for a moment as he continued the trace. Impatience grew within the Human superior, eventually looking over the shoulder to see exactly what he was doing. Just as he did so, the interception officer spun around in his chair.

“Sir, I just picked up some weird chatter coming outside the system. Here,” he motioned to the terminal, moving out of the way so the other being could make out the details clearly, “Have a look. It looks as though the signal destination was here on Chyron. I don’t quite know what to make of it.”

"Where?" the head officer asked, puzzled now. Just as he did so, a flash of light erupted from the moon surface below and everyone - including the two communications officers - nearly snapped their necks shifting their heads to look out the main viewport in dismay. A large explosion rocked the hardened Imperial Sector, reducing nearly half a block to rubble and sending a shockwave that damaged several large buildings around it. Only a split second passed before another explosion took place, this time in the venerable Merchant Sector.

"Full alert, **now!**" ordered the ship's captain from the helm as he pointed fingers to various officers, beginning to bark commands to anyone that would catch his gaze. The bridge shifted into high gear immediately, red combat lighting illuminating the ship as klaxons started blaring across the over-two kilometer long Star Destroyer.

The head communications officer returned his gaze to the terminal in front of him, frenziedly scanning the information the interception officer had gathered on the incoming signal. He rushed out of the communication trench and made his way to the captain, datapad in an outstretched hand.

"Captain! We traced an incoming signal from out of the system moments before the blast!" he panted. As the hulking vessel's captain turned to face him, another bright light filled the viewport; this time it was an explosion within the Taldryan Sector that was dangerously close to where the Citadel was located. The captain snatched the small computer out of the outstretched hand of his subordinate and reviewed the information with haste.

"Get me Consul Taldrya immediately."



Consul's Office
Penthouse Floor, The Citadel
Taldryan Sector, Chyron
30 Minutes Later...

The Taldryan Citadel, or *The Citadel* was it was more widely known, was a towering dark building that stretched into the high reaches of Chyron's skyline surrounded by four much smaller towers. Built shortly after the Clan's arrival in the Caelus System, it was constructed from dark metals and glass at the center of the Taldryan Sector on the small moon, serving as the focal point for all of the Clan's operations inside - and out - of the small planetary system. At its peak was the Consul's penthouse, a small floor reserved specifically for the reigning Consul to conduct his or her business quietly away from the prying eyes of the rest of the Clan.

In this moment, however, it was anything but quiet. Makeshift stations had been set up by enlisted officers of the Grand Taldryan Army around the floor, with commanding officers barking orders to their subordinates left, right and center.

In the corner of his office stood the Clan's Consul, Rian Taldrya, hunched over his desk and staring at the single plane holo-projected image of Chyron's city-surface displayed across the smooth dark-walnut colored surface. He was joined in the room by the Proconsul Seraine

“Erinyes” Ténema, and Vodo Biask Taldrya, a former Consul of Taldryan and the Clan’s Spymaster.

“How did this happen?” seethed the Mirialan Augur, who was normally calm and collected in his emotions, “I want answers *now*.”

The two Sith surrounding him could feel the reverberations of the Disciple’s anger through the Force as all three tried to establish how someone had managed to detonate three explosions of such a large scale on the moon’s surface without *anyone* knowing *anything*.

“Rian,” began Erinyes, almost equally annoyed that something like this happened, “The flotilla is on full alert, with the Cee-Ess-Eff forces canvassing the streets in the surrounding areas as we speak,” in reference to the Caelus Security Forces that Taldryan *also* secretly maintained control of. While usually the Zeltron fed on the anger of these moments, she was trying to project a wave of calm towards the Consul.

Vodo remained quiet for several moments, the half-mechanical Zabrak tapping away furiously at the datapad he held in his hands. Streams of reports from around the moon began swarming his datapad like flies on a bantha as he tried to parse through it all. As the Force Disciple began to pace back and forth, his Obelisk mind raged. In reality, the Mirialan was teeming with anger at himself that he had not been able to stop or intercept the bombing in the first place.

Before long Vodo too spoke, though in a sour tone, “From what my sources are telling me, it appears as though *The Collective* is claiming responsibility for the attack..”

“I’ve never wanted to punish someone so bad—” began the Augur, before being cut off by the sound of the office door sliding open. The Mirialan had been somewhat relieved he was interrupted and unable to finish his sentence. In the doorway stood the dark armored form of Nihlus Vexrii in his near-trademark Sith Regalia, who entered promptly.

“Nihlus,” began the Battlemaster’s former master, the Twi’lek Warlord, “You have arrived, late as usual.”

“At least I *showed up*, Biask,” retorted the modulated voice of the newly arrived Sith as he reached the Consul’s desk, a hint of anger in his own voice. Scanning the projection across the surface, Vexrii looked at each of the blast sites distinctly from behind the seclusion of the opaque onyx faceplate on the forefront of his helmet to discern their location in each sector and their proximity to important Taldryan assets. As a former Quaestor of House Ektrosis and the first Aedile of the former House Taldryan, the Umbaran had a *special* investment in the Clan and it’s wellbeing.

“I have a task for you Nihlus,” began Rian, raising his eyes to stare into the approximate location of that of the Battlemaster’s as he sat down at the hide chair behind the desk. Nihlus waited patiently for the Force Disciple to continue. A split second later, the Consul slid a datapad across the table to the Battlemaster before continuing, “We’ve traced what we believe is the go-ahead signal for the enemy assault. The destination was here on Chyron, in our own Taldryan Sector.”

A little bewildered, the Sith awaited further information from the Son of Taldryan. It came a moment later.

"Since the attack we've been able to narrow the destination down within a single block, in the entertainment district. I'd like you to go check it out. Report back what you find immediately," Rian motioned to the datapad, "All of the intelligence we've gathered thus far has been shared to that datapad, and you'll receive more as it comes in," he pointed a thumb to Vodo.

"As you wish," the modulated voice of the Battlemaster replied, before he turned his head slowly and slightly towards the Zabrak.

"Apprentice," stated Vodo condescendingly.

"Master," Nihlus' robotic voice reciprocated coldly before leaving the room, back turning against them all.

What am I, chopped liver? The Zeltron in the room wondered as the Battlemaster departed.



Street Level

Entertainment District

Taldryan Sector, Chyron

The streets of Chyron were chaotic, with Caelus citizens running frantically to get inside as members of both the Caelus Security Force and Taldryan Home Defense Battalion patrolled the streets to maintain order after the explosions had rocked the moon. Under order of the Caelus Security Council, all non-essential personnel and citizens had been put under the very first mandatory curfew until the bombing situation was resolved.

Aeyrs Zarru, a Mercenary companion of Nihlus Vexrii - though he considered them more *followers* than actual companions - had been dispatched by the Battlemaster to comb the entertainment district of the sector with several Taldryan squads in hopes of finding the true destination of the signal. A master codebreaker and slicer with contacts across the galaxy, he stood the best chance out of the Sith's charges in finding the hiding place of the Collective scum who had carried out the heinous attack.

Using the datapad passed along to him by the Umbaran, the Raider searched each place of business in the area without an accompanying squad of soldiers, wearing his simple blue and black Synthweave Bodyarmor and fairly lightly armed - an Inquisitorius Stiletto and his Mandalorian Vambraces the only armament on his person. When stopped by a squad - which happened a lot during his search given the curfew - Aeyrs provided them with his identification and once verified, proceeded onward with his quest.

After a couple hours of searching the Taldryan Sector, the Mercenary stumbled upon the bar Spanky's. According to Taldryan legend, this location had been replicated from a bar once present in the Kr'Tal System, and was rumored to hold information and secrets dear to the Clan. Feeling the *strong* need for a drink, Aeyrs stared at the bar for several moments as thoughts rolled around in his head.

What could it hurt, if Vexrii doesn't find out? He pondered for a moment. The half-breed made his decision then and there.

The former Imperial Stormtrooper brought his search for the culprits of the explosions to a temporary close and entered through the main doors, explosions on Chyron be damned. To his surprise, the establishment was still quite bustling with activity; apparently not many of these people had been given the same news of a curfew as the rest of the city-moon. Taking a seat at one of the tables in the corner, the Mirialan-Human half-breed waited to be served. Before long, he was approached by a very voluptuous and entrancing female waitress of the Twi'lek species in a skimpy white long-sleeved outfit.

"What can I get you, sugar?" she asked in a soft and sweet voice, a tray nestled between her arm and the hourglass shape of her body.

"Alderaanian, if you have it" he responded with no hesitation. The man's favourite drink was Alderaanian Ale, particularly due to its rarity - but also it's fine taste. You just couldn't get that hint of *Death Star* in any other ale.

"Sorry, but we ran dry of that over two decades ago. Can I get you anything else? Something we might have, perhaps?" she queried. Aerys rubbed his chin for a moment as he considered his next drink, eyes studying the physique of the waitress.

"Whatever you've got that's nice and strong," he suggested. With a simple nod, the Twi'lek parted his table and went to enter the man's order. A few minutes passed by, during which time Zarru mostly kept his eyes to his own table. As the waitress returned to his table she tripped over her heels, her bright-green skinned body and the accompanying drink tray tumbling to the floor of the fine Taldryan establishment.

There goes my drink, thought the Mercenary as he rose from his seat in the booth and got down on the smooth stone floor to help her. Normally he wouldn't, but this waitress was attractive - and it'd unfortunately been a while since he had the comfort of a woman in his bed.

"Oh my, I'm so sorry!" she exclaimed in a sweet voice, clearly embarrassed at what happened. Zarru helped her gather the broken pieces to the glass onto the metal tray, but not without noticing something incredibly peculiar. As the soft-skinned Twi'lek reached for the final piece of glass that once compassed his drink. the white sleeve on her right wrist pulled back and revealed an incredibly distinctive tattoo.

It was dark forest-green, almost too subtle to notice. It was only by luck that Aeyrs had caught a glimpse of it; three pillars, the center of which was raised, encased in a small circle. The brand of The Collective and its rotten agents.

You've got to be kidding me, he hoped silently. As the two finished on the ground and returned to their feet, the blushing waitress apologized once more before fetching a new drink for the half-breed. Once she had turned and proceeded away from him, Aeyrs slipped away from the table to a different point in the somewhat crowded bar to do some more investigation.

It was only then that he began to notice that things were off. He had seen almost none of these people before, in this establishment or any other on Chyron - and Aeyrs drank *a lot*, frequenting the few places to drink on the city moon *a lot*. It was increasingly odd that all these people were still gathered here after the curfew. There was one patron, Raistline Taldrya, that Aeyrs knew of but did not know personally. The Augur had been seated at the bar, sipping peacefully on what the Mirialan assumed was a fine ale. He couldn't see a Taldrya - being stereotypical in that moment - drinking something that wasn't.

The Raider watched as the Twi'leki waitress that served him returned the booth where he once was, puzzledly glanced around, and then moved onto another customer. Just like that, he was forgotten. Turning his gaze around the room, Zarru studied a few of the patrons for several minutes, thoroughly disappointed he wasn't going to get that ale. To his surprise, he saw that very same tattoo on another patron's neck, only partially hidden by their clothing.

That was clearly a mistake, he mused. The Miralan searched for a door to the back room and quickly, stealthily, entered once he had found it. Just as he walked in, the Mercenary was greeted by a larger Twi'lek - this time a male, but with the same shade of green skin - who reached out an arm and placed a hand on his chest.

"Just where do you think *you're* going?" he challenged with a stern look on his face. Aerys smiled, looking the man up and down for a split second. In that moment, he decided that he could take down the beast of a man in his way.

"There," he pointed to a metal door on the other side of the room, a small keypad off to the left-hand side, with a little grin on his face. The Mercenary had no choice but to enter the basement and find out what was really going on here, even if there were supposedly Taldryan secrets stored away.

The Twi'lek chuckled for a moment, "I don't think s—" he started, but was cut off as a fist collided with the bells in his genital area. It only took a split second for the pain to travel through the man's nervous system to his brain, his entire green-skinned torso lurching over out of pure muscle instinct.

At the same time as he had punched the man in front of him, Aerys slipped the smooth silver handle of his Inquisitor Stiletto from his belt and into his left hand. Once his target was a little further down to the ground, the Miralan thumbed the switch on its side and grabbed the Twi'lek's shoulder with his right to hold him steady. The red glass blade of the thin weapon popped out with a slight *snap*, before being shoved vertically upwards through the man's jaw. The eyes on the Twi'lek went wide, before he keeled over completely and his mass collided with the floor.

Problem eliminated, concluded the Raider as he locked the door to the back room. He stepped over the lifeless husk towards the keypad beside the metal door that stood in his way. He pulled his slicing pad from his utility belt, and the Scoundrel hastily plugged it into the keypad. Using his advanced knowledge of encryption and security - it *paid* well to be a codebreaker - the Miralan was through the door's security in no time.

Descending quietly into the bowels of Spanky's, Zarru was greeted by an unfortunate sight; Two more men of Twi'leki and Trandoshan descent, a large terminal system, and a ton of boxes with a huge warning label across them. The two other beings were facing the terminal, reviewing footage of the recent explosions and the aftermath.

"Operation Delta-Bravo-Echo, ssssuccesss" hissed the Trandoshan, still unaware of the new arrival. Just as quietly as he had descended the stairs, Aerys approached the two men from behind and raised both hands to the rear of their heads. Without a sound, he fired the wrist-blasters imbedded in each of his vambraces into the base of each's skull, dropping them to the tile like a womprat into the feeding pits.

That was insanely lucky, he smiled as he sliced the terminal system. It took him a few minutes to break The Collective's encryption protocols, but before long he was in. The amount

and quality of information that flowed across the screen was somewhat astonishing, even to the Scoundrel, who hastily copied it to a datadisk he stored beside his slicing pad. As the data transferred, he investigated the stashed boxes inside the basement of the bar. Just as Zarru suspected when he first saw the warning label, they were full of un-primed explosives waiting to be delivered across Chyron for more damage by The Collective. As he understood it, it was possible the entire establishment had been compromised and was a base of operations for the Brotherhood-hating scum.

"Vexrii," the Mirialan-Human half-breed called into his comlink, set to the channel used by the Battlemaster and his associates, "You're not going to believe this..."



Middle Deck, *Imperial Gozanti*-class Cruiser **Vengeance**
Hangar A-3, Motti Memorial Spaceport
Taldryan Sector, Chyron

The armored Umbaran entered the bridge of the **Vengeance** with a hurry in his step. Inside were a couple of dark-metal B1 Battle Droids under the ownership of the Battlemaster, Tox and Dusty, and his other fleshy associate Xavdak Isatar - another half-breed of Chiss and Human lineage. Lieutenant Isatar served as the de-facto captain of the vessel, managing the droid crew most of the time on Nihlus' behalf. The blue-skinned, white-uniformed man near instantaneously turned to face the new arrival with a half-salute.

"Take us to these coordinates immediately, Lieutenant," the modulated voice replied dispassionately to the welcome, moving to stand at the front of the bridge a couple meters behind the two B1s in the pilot chairs. Both battle droids turned, avoiding their master's gaze and focusing their purple photoreceptors on the Chiss. They were joined at their sides a moment later by the ship's main caretaker, who relayed to them the destination he had been provided.

After the target destination was loaded into their brains, the two droids sprung to life and began tapping away furiously at buttons on the controls in front of them. After receiving confirmation from hangar control to depart, the dull, drowning hum of the ship's repulsors and sublight engines began to whine.. Before long the **Vengeance** slowly pushed off the ground. The ship's heavy-duty landing gear retracted, and it's ascent began to speed up considerably.

It wasn't long before the *Imperial Gozanti*-class vessel completely departed the capital-grade starport in the Taldryan Sector, heading towards Aerys' provided location. Thanks to the travel by air provided by the cruiser, the trip was relatively short and sweet. During the journey, the only noise on the bridge were the various dings and beeps of the flight console, sensors, and Nihlus' own mechanical breathing

"Order Kilo and Ravager to their stations," the Umbaran commanded, referring to the B1 droids he had designated as the vessel's gunners. Isatar followed through, issuing the order through the ship's internal communications system. Moments later, the **Vengeance** arrived at the determined destination and eased to a stop; hovering several tens of meters above Spanky's bar.

Nihlus studied the establishment for a moment from behind his faceplate. Spanky's, although this was a new location following the destruction of the original on Karufr, was an important part of Taldryan's history. Many members and leaders of the Clan alike had their fair share of moments within its halls, and it was expected with this new replicated location that they would have many more.

The Sith tapped at the comlink on his wrist, with a hail to his Mirialan-Human half-breed companion on the small device. It was only another moment before he responded.

"Are you clear?" inquired the Umbaran, no hint in his robotic voice of what was to come.

"Yes," came the simple reply from the other end, before Vexrii turned his helmeted head to face Xavdak. Although the Chiss' tenure with the Sith had been short, he anticipated what was coming next.

"Open fire on the bar, and wipe it from the face of the moon," came a modulated, ruthless command from behind the dark metal shell. Isatar nodded, and relayed the command to each of the droids at their respective stations. As they followed through, the sixty-four meter long cruiser descended closer to the ground and lurched forward on a downward angle so that both weapon emplacements could fire on the target.

Once the Gozanti was in position both the heavy laser turret and standard laser turret opened fire on the bar with everything they had, sending large blasts of superheated plasma into Spanky's. At first the resilient building put up a good fight, surviving a couple direct hits to the underlying structure before it began to crumble. First one of the walls began to collapse, and the roof-line shortly after. None of the Collective operatives made it out alive.

Moments before the entirety of the building collapsed in on itself, Raistline burst from the front doors.

"RAAAAAAGH!!" screamed the Taldrya in complete anger, with bloodshot eyes, as they fell upon the vessel decimating his precious Spanky's. Igniting the amethyst-purple blade of his lightsaber Majere channeled the Force into his arms as he threw his lightsaber with as much force as he could muster, using his abilities to guide the thrown weapon home to its target. The blade of pure energy collided with the bottom of the hull, cutting into it for a moment before falling back to the ground.

The **Vengeance** continued its assault for another few seconds, and peeled off once its occupants were sure that no one else had escaped the bar alive. Raistline turned, observing the rubble that had once been his favourite establishment. The Arcanist picked up a piece of the fallen bar and proceeded away, leaving behind some of his fondest memories. Several moments after he departed, a large explosion similar to the three that had taken place earlier in the day erupted from the basement and sent chunks of rock scattering everywhere.



It wasn't long before Nihlus had been called before the Consul and Proconsul to answer for what he had done. No other person on Chyron - let alone a member of Taldryan - had been so brash in recent history as to actively fire on Taldryan territory. While there was some level of assumption between the two there was a connection between the assault and the recent bombings, there was also the assumption that the mad Sith had gone... well, mad. As Vexrii entered the Consul's office the Clan's two senior leaders stared him down; Rian from behind his desk, and Erinyes in front of it.

"Nihlus," began Erinyes before the Taldrya stepped in to take over.

"What were you thinking?" he asked angrily, both hands pressed firmly on his desk. "What gives you the right? We had people inside there, and who knows, maybe even some innocents!"

With no sound but his modulated breathing and footsteps, the Sith stepped forward. Reaching into his belt, he pulled the datadisk that Aerys had provided him on the Collective Cell's activities on Chyron and placed it on the Consul's desk.

"Collateral damage," came his singular reply as he turned and departed the room. Neither followed, but he could feel their seething anger continue for some time; until they reviewed the information he provided.

FIN.



And with that, the destruction of Spanky's is complete. Let's not bring this bar back *again*, yeah?