

Silver Fox and the Vixens

Written by:

Master V'yr Vorsa (6463): 3149 words

Augur Vez Hirundo (14287): 2946 words

Lieutenant Colonel Len Iode (14377): 2692 words

Featuring:



Kenneth "Ken" Iode

The Pilot

Len Iode

The Muscle

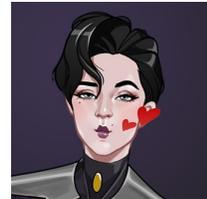


Alethia Archenksova

The Face

Morgan B. Sorenn

The Bait



Ghafa Ordam

The Mark

Vez Hirundo

The Slicer

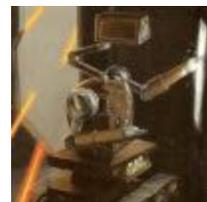


R3-H6

The McGuffin

YARVIS

The Suitcase



Wobbles

The Electrician

The *Aka'jor*-class shuttle shook violently. Another strafing run by two T-70 X-Wings had glanced against the Mandalorian built shuttle. Kenneth Iode surveyed the vaguely familiar console and muttered about more time to study it. To his right his adopted son Len realigned the scanners.

"Two more 70s coming in at point 0-8."

"I'm on it." The elder Iode pushed the control yoke forward.

A rapid beeping came from the defensive systems monitor on the Chiss' side. "Missile lock."

"So much for being 'on it,' Kenneth," the cool voice of Alethia Archenksova chided as she poked her head in the cockpit.

Ken took his eyes off the viewport and desperately searched the panel. "Where the hell is the damn chaff?"

The beep became a tone. "Missile launch," Len reported, "range...way too close."

The ace pilot found the countermeasures release switch to his back left and slammed it with his fist, rapidly moving his hand back to the yoke as the concussive blast rattled the craft. Several conduits showered sparks. "Stupid place to put *emergency* things."

"I thought you were the best Iode?" The stuncuffed, shock-collared, and unusually disheveled form of Morgan Sorenn chimed in from the back seat. "Can't handle a little Mando tech?"

The silver haired woman turned back to their captive. "Silence," a wicked grin crept across the former Consul's face, "prisoner."

"You really are enjoying this aren't you?"

"Most definitely."

"They're coming back around. Point 0-6 this time." Len clicked two sets of switches in the defensive controls area. "Shields to double rear."

"Strap yourself in, 'Leth. Things are about to get bumpy." Ken grabbed the throttle and paused. Archenksova darted to her seat next to Morgan and strapped herself in exchanging looks with her seatmate. The former TIE pilot pushed the throttle to its limit. The force from the engines beat the inertial compensators and pushed the crew back in their seats. The younger Iode gripped his armrests as his father pulled back suddenly on the yoke sending the craft into a sharp relative ascent. The X-Wings followed suit, rolling opposite of each other.

After a moment, Ken yawed the shuttle to line up with one of the two T-70s perfectly. He smiled and cut the throttle to zero, firing the breaking thrusters, which had the dampeners once more throwing the occupants against their restraints. The X-Wing pilot panicked as the shuttle suddenly stopped in their path, quickly pulling away to the shuttle's port side.

"How close are we to their black out zone?" Ken asked, a hint of desperation in his voice.

Len cycled through the display modes of his console and found where the jamming began. "Approximately twenty-five hundred kilometers to their jamming zone. Sending coordinates."

The elder of the two nodded steering the ship towards the invisible field in space that meant they were home free. As the pilot gently pushed the throttle forward to maximum, Archenksova commanded. "Send the message. Target the lead ship."

The younger Iode nodded and sent an unencrypted message over all the channels he could select. "Done, ma'am. Dad, the fighters are looping around. Gaining, but not quick enough."

Alethia smirked at Morgan and with the slightest of movements nodded.

"Now we wait."

The Collective Ship *Ocaejar* Commander's Quarters

With the first phase of the invasion in full swing and going to plan so far, not to mention not having slept in two standard days, Ghafa Ordam decided a brief rest was in order. The three meter deep pool of salt water shimmered in the low light of her quarters. The Nautolan woman dove in head first. Her tattooed tendrils floated gracefully away from her body. After a few moments her shoulders relaxed and the headache that was forming subsided. Underwater she was at home. No datapads with troop movements, logistics, or costs of operations. While it was all simple, lack of rest put her on edge. As she breathed in the purified liquid around her the lights in the pool began to blink.

"Commander. We have an incoming transmission from a ship bearing the military markings of Clan Odan-Urr of the Brotherhood." The higher speed at which sound traveled in water distorted the comms, but Ghafa understood it. She swam up to the surface. Taking a breath of the air she spoke.

"First officer, I want you to blow that ship out of the sky before it gets closer!"

"Ma'am they are surrendering and are claiming to have a gift. I think you should come take a look."

The Nautolan taught her face in curiosity. "Well that is interesting. I will be up in a moment," she pulled herself out of the pool and retrieved a towel. "How far out are they?"

"Fifteen hundred kilometers from our zone moving towards it at five thousand meters per second."

"On my way."

Beep...bong bong...beep...bong bong bong bong...

The ComScan monitor watched as the two fighters pursued the *Aka'jor*-class shuttle. The Technocrat cyborg technician was using a droid port to control the display. The first officer, a Capital Enterprises merchant ship captain, Malox Max stood behind him privately unnerved by the monstrosity of man and machine before him.

"Sir, the shuttle will reach the frontier 10.312 seconds before the X-Wings will." The technician's voice was modulated heavily in a manner that Max thought similar to Watt Tambor of the Techno Union during the Clone Wars.

"Current range?"

"One thousand kilometers, sir."

"Weapons?"

Another Technocrat tied in physically with his console replied. "Port side laser cannons are targeting. Calculating for one shot."

The officer nodded. As he did, the elevator doors opened and a swimsuit clad Ghafa Ordam entered the bridge drawing Max's attention at once.

"Ma'am."

She approached the console. "Report."

"The shuttle is within one thousand kilometers of our electronic jamming zone. Holding course and speed."

"Why haven't the X-wings blasted it from the sky?" Ghafa probed.

"It appears they used the last of their missiles."

The Field Commander's tendrils twitched. "Really?" she asked, suspicious of the situation.

Max nodded. "The X-wings were returning from a strike at our picket line when they broke from their formation to intercept the shuttle. The fighters then opened fire on the shuttle seemingly with no warning after the shuttle began evasive maneuvers."

Something damning aboard? Ghafa thought.

"Play back the transmission," the Nautolan ordered.

With a soft whirring a holographic projection of Alethia Archenksova appeared.

"I bid you greetings, Field Commander Ordam. If you do not know me from your intelligence reports I am quite surprised. However, allow me to introduce myself, I am Alethia Archenksova, former director of the Sentinel Network and most recently High Councilor of Clan Odan-Urr. As you know my number two, Aurora Ta'Var took power of the Clan. What you and your intelligence commands do not know is that shortly after your false flag attack on Kias, myself and several other like minded individuals attempted to remove the Force Users from any positions of power. We were purged. Unfortunately for them, mercy is the way of the Jedi and most of us were simply exiled. Only one of our number, Len Iode, managed to hold his position. It was for show, naturally, as the Master of the Roll holds no real power. After his dismissal from that post, we all decided to join your cause. So now I come to you during your most glorious invasion of the Brotherhood asking for asylum for myself and my comrades," Alethia stepped closer to the holocam. *"We have thrown off our shackles. We want to break Every. Single. Chain."*

Stepping back, *"As a sign of our sincerity I wish to present you a gift."*

A Chiss man holding a blaster rifle shoved another figure into view: the cuffed and frazzled by what appears to be a recent shock from the shock collar on her neck, Morgan Sorenn.

"Former Deputy Grand Mistress Sorenn was kind enough to join us."

"You all will pay for your treachery!" Morgan spat, *"You won't make it out of this sector Imp wannabe!"*

Alethia started gasping as she was slowly lifted off the deck grasping at her neck. Len stared at the Pirate Queen, hate burning in his eyes. *"Let her go!"*

Morgan smiled. *"Make me, soldier boy."*

The Chiss grinned and pushed a button unseen. Blue arcs covered Morgan's body and smoke began to rise from her clothes. Alethia dropped to the floor instantly, and drew two sharp breaths before composing herself.

"Please consider our offer."

The image dissolved leaving Ghafa and Max staring at the projection source. "Bring them aboard. We will take Sorenn for full interrogation on the detention level."

"And the others ma'am?"

"I will determine if they are sincere in their repentance." Ordam paused. "Leave them to me."

Hangar 2

The troopers, a mixture of Liberation Front partisans and Technocrat soldiers, kept their blasters trained on the shuttle's egress ramp as the motley group started to disembark.

Archenksova was in the lead, arms outstretched so that her empty hands were plainly visible. The Councilor was, as always, impeccably dressed in a dark blue robe over a tailored white suit and Morgan's lightsaber hanging from the black sash around her waist. The two Iodes followed behind, clad in the armor of their respective services. Their blasters dangled from their belts as each man had both hands clamped tightly around one of Morgan's arms as they half-escorted half-dragged her down the ramp. Sorenn hardly lived up to her glamorous pirate queen reputation; dressed in the clothes of a common thug, Lord Cantor's former deputy was bruised and disheveled, with her hands encased in stuncuffs behind her back, a shock collar around her throat and an improvised gag in her mouth.

The partisans tensed and kept their blasters aimed at Morgan, though the Technocrats remained calmed and more equitable, keeping their sights on the others.

Bringing up the rear, a black-clad Mirialan staggered out of the shuttle with an unassuming R-series astromech at her heels. At first glance, Vez Hirundo had more in common with the roughed-up captive than her fellow defectors. She was the only one of the party with a blaster out, and she kept it aimed directly at Morgan's back—or as directly as her shaking hand would allow. The droid's domed head swiveled back and forth as it let out a low whine.

"Weapons on the deck," the partisans' officer barked. "Now."

The party, with slow, deliberate motions, tossed their weapons to the floor. Alethia spoke, her voice no more tense than if she were out for a stroll in the park. "I take it the field commander found our offer engaging?"

"I'll ask the questions!" the officer snapped. "What's with the droid?"

“Another gift, in case Sorenn proves... uncooperative,” Archenksova answered. “I don’t have access to all of Odan-Urr’s systems, but the droid has everything we could get.”

“Everything *I* could get,” Vez muttered.

If Alethia heard the Mirialan, she ignored the comment. “I think Field Commander Ordam will appreciate the droid’s memory banks.”

“How stupid do you think we are?” the officer sneered. “That thing’s not going to the commander until we’ve scanned it.” He nodded in the direction of one of the Technocrats, who approached the R3 with a restraining bolt in hand. Several of the others approached Morgan warily, stun batons at the ready. Ken and his son backed off a bit to let the Collective troops take her.

Morgan’s hateful eyes burned into the Odanites as the troops dragged her towards the corridor, intentionally hauling her backwards so the Force-user couldn’t see where she was going or maintain the dignity of walking to her fate under her own power.

The officer, pointedly ignoring the spectacle of the bound and gagged pirate queen, nodded to a pair of cyborgs nearby. “Scanning team, get to work. As for the rest of you,” he sneered, “I’d just as soon space the lot of you right now, but Field Commander Ordam wants to see how your arrogance holds up in person. Come with me.”

The crate clanked against the Aka’jor’s decking as Roz and Hal dropped it. The metallic crate was thoroughly padded on the interior and none of the sensitive scanning equipment was jostled. The two Technocrats, blended over their years of service into a bland humanoid average, worked in silence. Hal opened the crate and started assembling the apparatus as Roz silently noted all the shuttle’s nooks and crannies, its electronics and maintenance trenches, everywhere someone could squirrel away an explosive or a container of dioxis gas.

It didn’t take long for the Collective scanning team to cover the entire shuttle. The full-spectrum radiation saturated every molecule of the shuttle’s interior, mapping every wire and weld. They catalogued the ship’s modifications on Roz’s datapad and filed the report for Field Commander Ordam.

Aka’jor-class shuttle. Modified using commercially available components, resulting in a modest increase in survivability in combat. Small arms cached in hidden compartment in floor decking behind the pilot’s chair. Safe.

The duo packed up with prim efficiency and left the shuttle without a word, satisfied in the *Ocaejar*’s safety and the infallible might of the Collective. And, as far as scanning crews went, Hal

and Roz were competent and professional. Short of physically ripping the shuttle apart and combing through the pieces, nobody could have been more thorough.

Of course, if someone had torn the shuttle apart, even into large pieces, they probably would have found the twin compartments that Hal and Roz missed. They were less than a cubic meter each, perfectly symmetrical to keep the Aka'jor's profile tidy. The bulkhead was solid. There were no hidden openings or camouflaged panels to pop open as in a second-rate smuggler's freighter. When the Odanite Expeditionary Force built the compartments into the shuttle, they did it from the outside in so that you'd need a lightsaber or at least an arc welder to carve your way into the shuttle's passenger area. And then, just to be thorough, they'd padded the compartments' interiors with sensor-dampening cloth and verified with every model of scanner they could find that the result looked exactly like solid metal.

The two droids, YARVIS and Wobbles, weren't particularly enthusiastic about being built into a spacecraft that was going to be shot at on the way to an enemy dreadnought. Vez, Wobbles' 'symbiotically co-equal sentient,' hadn't been very enthusiastic about it, either, until she saw how much the OEF was offering to pay her. Regardless, the two droids were doing their part, patiently waiting for their chronometers to finish the countdown that had started when they felt the shuttle touch down in the *Ocaejar's* hangar bay.

The pair's synchronized cronos silently hit zero. Wobbles, the vintage Imperial interrogation droid who had been modified to torture electronics rather than organics, fired up the arc-welder at the end of one spidery appendage. On the other side of the shuttle, YARVIS popped Alethia's lightsaber out of its internal storage compartment into an eager manipulator, pointed it at the bulkhead, and pressed the switch.

Detention deck

Two Technocrat cyborgs dragged Morgan through the corridors, caring little that they had been twisting her arms uncomfortably as they marched. When she did struggle or complain into her improvised gag she was met with the all-too-familiar sensation of electric shock on exposed skin. Eventually the only weapon left was her murderous glare, but it had little effect on the troopers.

She heard a door open several minutes and an unidentified number of corridors later. The hissing and buzzing of electronics on the interrogation chair, and the nearly rancid smell of the room, gave her a clear picture of what was awaiting her in there. The two Technocrat troopers lifted her up and slammed her against the backing, forcing air out of her lungs. In moments she was bound and strapped to the apparatus which swung around to face the interrogator. The two troopers, now designated guards, took positions flanking Morgan while the rest of the Partisans who had been following them stayed outside.

The interrogator's back was turned, giving Morgan a clear view of the cybernetic harness grafted onto him. It had two additional appendages with various tools wriggling and writhing with his every movement. A low growl escaped the captain's gaged mouth as the interrogation chair moved of its own accord and positioned her above the torture probes.

"Do not be afraid," the interrogator said in a low, gurgly voice as he turned to face his victim. He was a Harch, a humanoid arachnid species Morgan had only ever seen once on Nar Shaddaa. The alien's six seemingly-healthy arms were enhanced with various displays and cybernetic additions to, appropriately, make his work easier. Both his major eyes were long since replaced by cybernetic spheres of jet black and electric blue, while the four additional eyes on his forehead remained his species' usual red color. One mandible on his grotesque face, including all his teeth, were made of metal and his hair was pale gray, with patches of black and dark brown making him look ancient.

"Now we shall talk about your Dark Council's plans, little Sith," he said and engaged the chair's mechanism.

Main hangar deck

Two partisans walked down the long stretch of the ship's main corridor just as YARVIS' head extended around a corner. Above him Wobbles did the same, awkwardly floating in mid air in an attempt not to be seen. YARVIS raised his head to observe his awkward companion. Of all the interrogation droids in all the galaxy, he had to end up with one who had a conscience and a need to rush to protect its master.

"Calm down," YARVIS exclaimed in Binary as Wobbles echoed his frustrations at their pace. They were slower than expected due to frequent patrols, but still YARVIS was sure they would be in place at the correct time. His internal clock allowed for time to skulk and avoid potential danger. Wobbles gave another unintelligible whir of frustration as he rushed across the corridor trailed by the quite loud grind of YARVIS' tracks.

"Oh yes, very funny. You know, I didn't pick this bucket of bolts as a body. And besides, if I could fly I would still be faster than you." He waved his limbs around in annoyance much to Wobbles' amusement.

They carried on down the side corridor, towards the elevator leading to the detention level. The corridor opened into a larger area with stacked crates, weapons and the odd mouse droid performing cleaning duties. In front of them the large doors of the twin turbolift doors, usually used for transporting equipment between decks, were open with two ASP-series droids unloading cargo crates onto the deck. A single Technocrat soldier stood guard. The two labor droids stopped their work as the pair approached, but finding nothing of interest continued on with their task. The guard took a step forward, blaster held to his chest but ready to open fire at a moment's notice.

“Designation?” he asked through his synthesized vocal processor. Likely he had not been informed of any arrivals, and usually it was only the humanoid techs and operators that came into this section of the ship.

“Designation MK-1345,” YARVIS lied through his circuits, a trait programmed into him along with his malfunctioning sarcasm filter. “I am taking this interrogation droid down to maintenance for reassessment and repair. He has a malfunctioning audio receptor.”

The guard turned to Wobbles next. “Designation?”

If YARVIS could groan he would have, just as his mistress had done many times before. Clearly this one wasn't very bright. “His audio receptor is malfunctioning. He cannot hear you. He requires part replacement.” Wobbles floated in the air, clearly playing the part they had agreed beforehand, spinning in slow and twitchy circles as he observed his environment.

For but a moment the guard hesitated but finally stepped aside and let them pass. Moments later they were in the turbolift, going down.

“That was somewhat unexpected, but I feel we handled it well,” YARVIS exclaimed and received a short reply from Wobbles. “Yes, of course you'd think you did better just floating around being a dud instead of doing the talking. You're an ITO. You've been specifically programmed to feel superior.” A low, electronic laugh echoed inside Wobbles' body as he seemed to bounce around the turbolift in amusement.

“Oh, switch off.”

Interrogation Room Besh

Cell Block Forn

Detention Level

She could hear her breath drumming in her ears harder than the bass she was so used to in night clubs. She felt every drop of sweat streak down across her forehead, stinging her eyes, blurring her view. She tasted iron on her tongue, blood seeping from the cut her own teeth had made only moments earlier when she inadvertently bit down on it. Her bones and marrow hurt, if that was even possible, and she swore she could feel her old scars reopening when the electrodes shocked

her temples, or the needles pierced her neck to inject a new type of drug which would make her more pliant.

Still, she remained unbroken, like Mandalorian iron against the searing heat of a blaster. She remained unbroken.

The interrogator reached down and grabbed Morgan's chin, raising her limp head as the interrogation chair drew back and away from the many tools on display. Her eyes had drawn back into her skull, lips trailing blood and saliva, brow sweaty, clothes soaked with her own odor. He scoffed, or something rather similar, as his clawed three-digit fingers released his victim. He head bobbed in place.

"We are very irritated with your lack of cooperation," he hissed through alien teeth while injecting her with yet another stimulant. With a gasp Morgan's eyes widened, bloodshot and shaky, as her body spasmed from the pain the injection introduced. She had been riding a wave of pain, sensory overload and adrenaline ever since she was dragged into the chair, with little respite. The only thing keeping her sane were the Force and her own stubbornness. She pulled against her restraints as hard as she could, cutting and bruising her own wrists and neck with every forceful tug.

"We find you...aggravating," the Harch said in a gravel-like tone only to be met by smirk from his so-called-victim. She coughed up saliva and blood, not even granting him a word, gasp or scream, only bloody-white teeth. Every moment of frustration opened him up more and more to her mental abilities. She had only probed his mind during his lulls in questioning, when his frustration peaked. The Collective had a fine way of indoctrinating its soldiers, especially the officers, against her invasive powers, but eventually she always got what she wanted, it was only a matter of time and patience. But the game was balanced. As she eroded his mind, he too eroded her body. Eventually even she would break, unable to think or concentrate clearly enough. Death usually followed. All she could do was wither down the interrogator's defenses and wait for her moment.

The Bridge

Rath Oligard had never been one to suffer fools lightly, and what few had bumbled into the Collective's senior ranks had died at Meridian, Lyra Colony, or any of a dozen other battles. Rath Oligard may provide the Collective's vision and grand strategy, and Varryn Antillus may manage its finances, but Ghafa Ordam had perhaps the most leeway of anyone in the Collective when it came to moving men and durasteel. She was no easy mark.

The Nautolan was slow to take in the Odanites with her black, lidless eyes. A display of power, Alethia knew. As if the scores of armed crewmen on board the *Ocaejar* didn't make that point clearly enough.

"Why shouldn't I have you shot?" Field Commander Ordam, whatever her faults, was at least quick in getting to the point.

"I thought the Collective welcomed anyone who wanted to bring down the Force-wielders," Alethia answered.

"Don't be smarmy with me, Archenksova." Ghafa didn't snap. Her voice was steady, displaying neither annoyance nor amusement. "You were leading the war effort against us. You think we'd be quick to swallow the idea that it was all some Jedi mind trick?"

"I remember how thoroughly you'd burrowed into the Sentinel Network," Alethia said. "I suspect you know more of our biographies than just what you've seen on the holonet."

Ghafa took a moment to ponder that. She didn't know the Mirialan. The documents her people had pulled up after that transmission indicated she was some sort of petty criminal, probably involved in the Shroud Syndicate. The man in the TIE flight suit was Kenneth Iode, formerly of the New Republic Defense Fleet and the Imperial Navy before that. They were likely hangars on, lulled into this stupid plot by charm or money or, in Iode's case, paternal instinct. The Liberation Front could have them.

The Chiss was a little trickier. Len, like his adoptive father, read 'military' from head to toe. He'd been on the Collective's scopes for years now, but hadn't registered as one of Odan-Urr's movers and shakers. Since Nancora, he'd largely served as a glorified schoolmaster for the Odanite military. Nothing indicated that he was anything less than loyal, but the sapient-sourced intelligence consistently painted him as one of Archenksova's allies.

That left the woman herself. She'd appeared out of nowhere in the year or so before the Collective's emergence, rapidly climbed her way to the top of the food chain, and just as rapidly retired to a diplomatic role right after the Odanites' allies in the Vatali Empire declared war on the Collective. A hardliner against the Sith, until she played peacemaker. The leader of the normal people caught up in the Jedi's wake, until she abruptly removed herself. Rumoured, mostly by her enemies, to be some sort of agent of Palpatine's empire.

As a batch of defectors, the group made sense. But they'd certainly want her to think that, wouldn't they?

The two men and the Mirialan shifted awkwardly, waiting for Ghafa to break the silence and trying to ignore the stuncuffs on their wrists and the blasters at their backs. *No*, she realized. The Odanites were trying to focus on her, but their body language was all subtly oriented towards Archenksova. *Interesting.*

In the end, it was a crewman who spoke first. "Field Commander, our scans have detected no weapons or explosives on this droid." Little R3-H6 rolled alongside the lieutenant, a contented hum purring from its vocoder.

"Did you look over the alleged data?" Ordam asked

"No, ma'am."

Ghafa looked back to the prisoners. "I hope for your sake it's something decent." Then back to her officer, "Councilor Archenksova and the droid will be staying with me for a while. Take the others to processing. Let our Liberation Front comrades show them some hospitality."

Detention level

Wobbles bobbed through a blast door with YARVIS rolling beside him. They had entered the detention level with no incident, but still attempted to avoid any patrols as best they could. The lighting on the deck was dimmed and the climate control turned down to a brisk temperature. It helped when the prisoners were already miserable and freezing before the interrogation. YARVIS' sensors noticed the change when they left the turbolift earlier. Unpleasant for organics, he assumed, and made a note of it in his log for intel. The duo rounded another corner and another pair of blast doors before they saw the Iodes and Vez being taken to detention cells. They were on the right path.

The droids followed the group, trailing far enough behind so as not to draw attention. As they entered the cell block and saw the group of Odanites being taken to one of the cells, they grabbed the attention of what they both assumed was the warden. He was a droid, the old imperial K2 kind. The droid's head rose and his photoreceptors flashed.

"Designation and purpose?" he asked with a monotone voice.

"Designation MK-1345," YARVIS lied once more, repeating his earlier statement. "I am taking this interrogation droid maintenance for reassessment and repair. He has a malfunctioning audio receptor."

“Proceed to transfer tube three,” the warden said as the guards who led the Odanites inside left the block, giving YARVIS and Wobbles quizzical looks. YARVIS looked at Wobbles as the ball-droid bounced in the air in acknowledgment. He floated away and entered a tube on the ceiling leading to the IT-O holding area and maintenance bay just above the block.

“There is a malfunctioning power cell in block F on this level,” YARVIS informed the warden just before rolling away towards the cell block his companions were held in.

“Hold. I have no maintenance request in the system. You must be mistaken,” K2 replied, sternly.

“The damage is minor. The request is slotted under low priority maintenance. Request number unknown. Reevaluate,” YARVIS replied and rolled away as he left the K2 to search the huge databank of minor damage repair and maintenance requests that likely floated around the *Ocaejar* for months before being handled. From repairing nuts and bolts to rewiring simple circuits and power cells, it would take the K2 a while to scan every request. As he passed the door of the cell, YARVIS stopped near an access panel and unscrewed the bolts slowly, waiting for the signal.

The tube quickly gave way to a short but wide and long storage space designed to house IT-O droids. It was made up of three corridors with twelve alcoves in all, and seven droids currently housed in them. Wobbles made his way to the first alcove and plugged it, the ship’s system attempting to override his programming and force new subroutines into his droid brain. It only ever worked on droids with restraining bolts, and Wobbles had none. It took him but a moment to disengage the automated takeover and proceed with his mission. Finding his way through the gigabits of data and code, he found what he was looking for.

The security system was fairly well made, but mostly automated as the Collective had few crewmembers to handle that much data. It was left to droid brains to manage. Still, Wobbles seemed to find his way around well enough as he peeked into the holding cells and interrogation rooms through the security cams. He found his targets: holding cell Forn-1 and interrogation room Besh.

With an almost happy whir of his inner servos, Wobbles began initiating their plans. First the cams went out, then the silent alarm system which was tripped when unauthorized personnel opened cell doors, then the loud alarm speakers were shut down, just in case someone decided to push the alarm button in any of the guard posts around the level. Lastly, he waited patiently as he saw YARVIS crawl into view before disabling the last cam and engaging a power surge in one of Cell block Forn’s power couplings, diverting too much power until the system broke.

The electric overload fluctuated through the cell block, flickering lights and consoles alike. The bulbs fizzled and broke in places, while maintenance panels smoked with charred wiring and circuit

breakers. The wave reached the main power distribution unit for the cell block and fried it in a spectacular display of sparks, smoke and flame.

The trio of Odanites abandoned in a cell looked at the flickering and dying lights in unison as the door to their cell opened and YARVIS peeked through. With little time to spare all three reached into the droid's hidden compartment and pulled a hand blaster.

"Good job, droid," Kenneth commended him as he walked out and searched his surroundings. He and Len opened fire on the K2 droid who's programming kicked in only moments after the doors opened. It took them a full volley but the K2 unit piled on the floor, smoke and sparks emanating from the blaster holes on its head and torso. Wobbles tumbled through the tube and righted himself, cheering in his own way as he saw his companions were safe.

"Nice work," Vez smiled and pointed for both of the droids to follow her and Len and Ken took up covering positions at the entrances.

Interrogation room Besh

Morgan's slumped and unresponsive form gave the Harch very little pleasure when he stabbed at it. She barely reacted to his stimuli, and he had to up the dosages with every needle prick. She was close to dying, he had thought, before giving her another adrenal which kicked her into life again. She came out of her stupor with gritted teeth, straining against the chair that held her suspended above the tools her interrogator seemed to enjoy. Morgan curled her fingers and sucked on the open gash splitting her lower lip. Blood pooled between her teeth as her gaze connected with the alien's. Despite her wounds and his attempts, they were still as strong as ever, unbent and unbroken. It frustrated and angered him to no end.

With two clawed, hairy hands he grabbed Morgan by the hair and pulled, more out of frustration than any sense of reason. "You will tell me what I wish to know!" he yelled at her but received only a wicked smile in return and a mouthful of spit and blood in his eyes. The lights flickered above and as the room filled with the Elder's laughter both guards lifted their blasters towards her. When the power cut off her laughter subsided and the metallic noise of restraints opening echoed through the room.

Lightning sparked, thunder roared and smoke billowed from the two men as the Elder's onslaught of Force energy fried their cybernetics, popped their circuit boards, and scarred their flesh. Both men fell to the floor, screaming in agony under the pirate's feet. The Harch whimpered, stuck to the bulkhead like a mynock. He was promised a safe workspace and an easy job. He regretted ever accepting it when Morgan grabbed his head and slammed it against the durasteel wall. The lights flickered again, but he saw her blazing red eyes even in pitch black. They were haunting, invasive, and menacing, like hot steel piercing his soul.

"Tell me what you know," she said as she squeezed his head with strength not becoming her frame. He felt an invasion of his mind as she barreled through whatever measly mental barrier he was trained to create. He felt sick to his stomach, the sensation of someone forcing his memories out. He felt every pain he endured and every pain he inflicted upon his victims a thousand fold. He could swear he felt his mind tear like sheet paper whenever the woman squeezed harder. Memories of Rath Oligard, Ghafa Ordam, and Daggo Mouk flashed through his mind into hers, flooding both like a tidal wave. She extracted whatever she could find and he could barely move an inch to stop her. She discovered what little of the Collective's plans he knew, their hidden bases, caches, ships, routes. All six of his eyes rolled back into his skull from the stress and pain before the woman released him onto the floor.

Morgan walked over her victim before yanking the door open with a wave of her hand. Already four partisans waited for her, having heard the commotion inside, and immediately opened fire. The blaster fire bounced off of a barrier Morgan erected in front of her. She waited patiently for but a moment to regain her full focus. With hands raised she extended her fingers and let loose a barrage of Force energy into her foes. The lightning bounced from one man to the next shocking their bodies and disabling their weapons. The power surge was so strong the lights reignited and flashed like daylight in the chamber. The four guards fell to the floor, smoking and bubbling from the onslaught, all dead.

Finally, Morgan's body denied her as she took a step forward. She buckled onto the floor, panting and sweaty. The interrogation had affected her more than she realized and it was only the surge of anger and adrenaline that kept her going. Still, she regained control, breathing slower and slower with each second when Vez and the droids hobbled in.

“You okay, lady?” Vez asked, unsure whether to be concerned or horrified by the display.

“I’m fine,” Morgan replied. The Force had nourished her body and focused her mind enough to continue the mission. Finally composing herself, she stood and walked past Vez. As she exited the chamber she turned to YARVIS and with a wave of her hand recalled her blaster thus far hidden in his body.

“All according to plan so far,” Ken stated as Morgan examined the bodies of the K2 and several more guards that rushed into the cell block after them. “You alright?”

“Let’s get to work,” Morgan replied with a no-nonsense tone. With little pause Vez and Wobbles connected to the data console and powered it back up. Len and Ken both looked over the Mirialan’s shoulder as she worked. Soon she and Wobbles were inside the ship’s main security hub, changing orders and patrol patterns, creating power surges and maintenance orders, setting off alarms on upper and lower decks. They were impressed by the girl’s efficiency and speed.

“This old junk ball of a ship had no chance,” Vez commented with a smirk, proud of her work and of Wobbles. “We have a route and an opening. We should use it.” She data spiked the bridge alarm and overloaded the internal sensor system before thrashing the console with garbage data from her datapad.

Without a word all four booked it for the bridge level, with the two droids trailing behind.

Commander’s Ready Room

Ghafa’s idea of hospitality wasn’t much, though Alethia was sure it was more pleasant than what the others—to say nothing of Morgan—had to deal with. She was in Ordam’s ready room just off the bridge, a small and spartan office. Ghafa herself sat behind the room’s sole desk, hunched over and staring at the standalone computer terminal. R3-H6 was plugged into said terminal, happily baring the full contents of its databanks. Alethia sat in a chair opposite Ghafa across the desk. A pair of armed officers stood behind her, bringing the cramped room to the limit of its comfortable occupancy.

“Hmm,” the Field Commander said. “I think I’ve seen enough. Take the droid over to Commander Alton and let the Technocrats have a look at it. Not for dissemination.”

One of the guards saluted and started uncoupling the droid from the computer system. “You,” Ghafa addressed the other. “Go with the Ensign. I can handle this waif.”

Ordam waited until the two finished packing up the R3 unit and shooed it back out through the bridge.

“Now, what to do with you...”

“You’ll find everything on R3 is quite genuine,” Alethia said.

“Maybe. If so, it’s not bad. Not as much as I’d like, but not bad.”

“But.” The word wasn’t a question so much as a statement. Looking into Alethia’s eyes, Ghafa could see a bit of the durasteel that had made Archenksova’s reputation behind the deep blue irises.

“But it’s hard to believe you’d be a loyal servant of the cause,” Ordam said. “And you have enough of our brothers’ blood on your hands to warrant an execution anyway.”

“Oligard spent far more time than I have at the end of a Force-wielder’s leash,” Alethia quipped. “I can’t help but think that’s not the real issue.”

The Nautolan smirked. The Human had a lot of spunk for someone in her position.

“You’d be a propaganda coup, if nothing else,” Ghafa said. “But you’re a professional liar, Archenksova. You shouldn’t be surprised that it’s caught up to you.”

The Field Commander paused for a moment, letting that sink in and trying to read the Human’s expression. Getting nothing, she continued.

“Normally, I’m authorized to deal with these situations, but in your case I think I’m going to call on a higher power.” She leaned forward and tapped the comm on the table. “Communications, this is Ordam. Get me a secure line to the Lord Superior as soon as you can.”

While it took a few moments, the call came through quickly enough that Alethia could only assume it had been expected. The holoprojector in the ceiling burst to life, and a life size blue simulacrum of Rath Oligard himself joined them in the office.

“Ghafa, you still have our guest in cuffs?”

For her entire career, Alethia had thought of her voice as one of her most valuable tools. Silky, deep enough to instill respect but high enough to feign innocence, crisp and aristocratic or smooth and reassuring as needed. Oligard's voice seemed to her the masculine equivalent, deep and rich and paternal. She'd heard it a thousand times in recordings, but had always wondered if the man himself would live up to the legend.

He did.

"A safety precaution, Lord Superior."

Oligard gave his toned and muscled field commander a glance, and Ordam complied without having to hear the order. The stuncuffs clicked and fell in a heap in Archenksova's lap.

"High Councilor," Oligard said, letting the sting of Alethia's former title linger for a moment. "Why don't you start at the beginning?"

"There are four of us. Myself, Len Iode, his father the pilot, and a contractor named Verity Hirundo. We've delivered an R3 unit with classified material stolen from Odan-Urr by Hirundo, which Field Commander Ordam has seen, and Morgan Sorenn as a prisoner. If you still don't trust us, we'll accept resettlement as far away from the Jedi and Sith as you can get us, but we'd rather work."

"I'm assuming the data and the prisoner have passed muster or Ghafa wouldn't be wasting my time. Why the change of heart?"

"Well, it's not as though I came to Odan-Urr by choice."

"But they made you their leader."

"Yes, and I suppose I have you to thank for that," Alethia smiled. "After your initial attack, the Jedi could barely sleep at night without fear of an OEF crewman or a Tythonian stabbing them in their beds."

"And so the Council chose a non-Jedi." Oligard nodded. "Yet you prosecuted their war against us with some vigor, I'd say."

"*The Rains of Kamuekiko.*" Alethia waited to see if the name the Tythonian civilian freighter, one of many, meant anything to Oligard, though of course it didn't. "Your initial attack killed far more normal people than it did Jedi. I think you can understand that sometimes we have to do some ugly things to get by."

"Continue."

“Iode and I were already something like mascots, making it look like the regular people made a difference to Jedi thinking. And I can’t say, after New Tython, that we had any compunctions about killing the Sith. We had our backs to the wall in those days, and the sudden attack on our people didn’t leave us much time to think. The Jedi made me the face of the war effort, then once they’d patched things up with their genocidal overlords and gotten the Vatali on board, Ta’var shipped me offworld so the theocracy could come out of hiding.”

Here Ghafa interjected, walking from behind the desk to a point between Alethia and Oligard. “Our records say that Iode retained some influence until quite recently.”

“Well, they couldn’t get rid of all of us at once. Cortel went first—can’t have the navy getting any ideas—then me, then Iode once Aurora was more firmly in control.”

Oligard’s eyes narrowed. “And now you’re what? Coming to the winning side?”

“‘Winning’ may be overstating your case, unfortunately. Palpatine was much more efficient at killing Jedi, and yet here we are,” Alethia said. “Odan-Urr will have complete control over the Kiasst system within the year. Do you know what that means?”

“The Sith hate everything because they think it makes them powerful,” she continued. “The Jedi just hate everything. Emotion is evil, remember? Now imagine letting those people control your society. No joy. No art. No love.” Alethia leaned forward, her speech quickening with genuine emotion. “I’m Alderaanian. Born 29 years before the New Order. Is that in your records? I’ve already lost one home. The Vatali are arrogant and standoffish but they don’t deserve the wars the Jedi brought them and they don’t deserve what’s coming.”

Oligard’s lips moved in reply, but the sound was garbled and the hologram started to flicker. Ghafa scowled and leaned forward to adjust the signal. The Lord Superior did not enjoy repeating himself.

Ghafa had enough time to notice the tug at her belt as Archenksova jerked the blaster out its holders. She almost had enough time to process what it meant as she instinctively twisted her body around, elbow swinging back to strike the threat her conscious mind hadn’t even perceived. But she never had the time to be impressed by the Human’s speed, to curse her own stupidity for leaving her flank exposed to an enemy. By the time her elbow connected with the other woman, the superheated tibana gas was blazing through the inside of her skull.

Alethia swore and massaged her cheek where the Nautolan struck her. Ghafa Ordam’s corpse twitched on the floor.

Ken and Len lined up on opposite sides of the turbolift doors, somewhat concealed from anyone at the stop with their blasters ready. Morgan stood in the middle of the car, her face and her stance

reflected the seething rage within her. Both men felt it, almost electric. The elder Iode had felt that level of rage only once before.

A soft tone indicated they had arrived at the bridge antechamber as the door rolled away to reveal a Liberation Front partisan with a datapad in hand. They barely had a chance to breathe before the Iodes and the former Dark Councilor pounced. The hum of the lightsaber and blaster fire alerted the guards at their posts at the two entrances. The one to the right immediately smashed their panic button; no klaxons, no lights, and worse—no security doors. Puzzlement followed by horror took control of the man who, rather than firing back continued to push the button until his forearm was separated at the elbow. The Partisan did not even have a chance to scream before his mind was scrambled with electricity shot from the Pirate Queen's fingers. Blaster fire in the background indicated to her that the OEF contingent had done their deadly duty across the hall. Another turbolift arrived. Cautiously Vez stepped out followed by the droids.

"That wasn't so hard," Len quipped as he stacked up on the door. After a moment, he looked back and he realized that his graying pilot father was not behind him. Glancing around he saw his father standing at another door. The same side as the turbolift doors but further out. Genuine fear was on his face.

"Leth is in there, we've got to get her out."

"Dad, bridge first. Girlfriend later."

Ken fired daggers from his eyes at Len. "Who knows what Ghafa's doing to her."

"Dad!"

Reluctantly, the elder Iode lined up behind his son and looked to the Mirialan team member.

"Wait until we are clear."

"Less talk!" Morgan hissed as she closed down her saber with a snap-hiss. A curious move each man thought but did not say.

A tap on the shoulder and Len rushed through the sliding door, to the other side. The bridge was open, consoles on the perimeter with their backs to a central command chair. Len lined up his first target, a Collective crew member working the console in front of her. He squeezed the trigger.

Blam.

The first target fallen away, another lined up almost perfectly.

Blam.

The third actually had time to look at him.

Blam.

On the other side of the bridge, Morgan stepped through and let out a pent up scream. Lightning flowed from her fingertips. The smell of ozone, flesh, and heated metal filled the bridge. When she dropped her hands back down, every Collective crew member on her side was smoking.

“Shame you two only left one for me,” he quipped, “I should have gone to save 'Leth.”

Len rolled his eyes and shouted. “All clear, Vez. Time to work your magic.”

As the green skinned woman walked in she cracked her knuckles. “No problem.”

The Chiss turned to his dad, but before he could say anything he noticed the former Imperial was gone.

Ken tried everything, but the hatch would not budge. Len came up behind him and placed a charge on the door.

“Allow me.”

The two stepped away and the adopted Iode activated the charge. Acrid smoke and a loud thud filled chamber. Ken stormed through the opening, the humidity from the pool hitting him. There Alethia Archenksova stood over the lifeless corpse of Ghafa Ordam.

“Oh. I thought—” Ken said stunned and impressed.

“You’re sweet.” Alethia replied as she strode toward Ken. “Where are we?”

Len stepped in the ready room lowering his rifle and bringing up his datapad. “Vez and Morgan are with the droids on the bridge.”

“You left *the* Pirate Queen and a junkie slicer on the bridge alone?” an edge in her voice.

Len shrugged. “Your team, boss. Besides YARVIS is there.”

She sighed, “Let’s get back to the bridge before they do something rash.”

VeZ had made quick work of most of the security protocols already, but the emergency anti-boarding procedure was in a separate system.

Alethia and the Iode men returned to the bridge. The former spy chief of Odan-Urr took in the result of the elder storm. "I like what you've done with the place Morgan."

"Burnt corpses are so fashionable no matter the decade." Morgan sat down in the captain's chair, kicking the corpse of an unfortunate crewman further away.

A soft ding echoed through the bridge.

"VeZ?" everyone said in unison.

Her hands a blur across the console, VeZ reacted swiftly. "Response team. Locking the doors...now!"

The sound of hissing air and the squeak of pressure equalization came from the two entrances. Thudding could be heard distantly through the doors.

"Any time, darling!" Morgan fired off.

The final keystrokes hit. VeZ stepped back and smiled. The pounding got quieter and quieter. Finally it stopped as the gas hit levels to make the crew unconscious.

"Done."

"What did you do?" Len asked.

"They had a defense system to release dioxis gas around the ship. Good against boarders. I just activated it." She smirked.

"Well now, results! I like this one, Archenksova." Sorenn shifted in her chair and smiled. "About my compensation for this suicide mission."

Alethia pursed her lips. "No altering the deal. We don't have the credits to—"

"Oh heavens no! Credits are credits."

The Odanites and slicer were collectively confused.

"I think I'd like this ship. As is, bodies and all."

Archenksova smirked. "Done."

"You know what, I think this is the first mission which has gone perfectly for us. Ever." Len pondered aloud. Morgan gave him a look of derision, her wounds still not fully healed.

Suddenly a small hatch opened to a concealed lavatory. First Officer Maylox Max stepped out from the room and fired a shot at the former Deputy Grand Master, which slammed into one of the forward consoles. He fired again, this time striking Len in his knee, causing the tall Chiss to collapse screaming in pain. Max missed his shot at an enraged Ken. The last surprise shot he got off struck Vez in her forearm. Archenksova and the senior Iode unloaded their blasters into the deposed first officer's chest. The pilot kicked away the dead man's blaster, his eyes cold fire.

"You deserved that," Morgan chided.

"Aaaaaaah, thanks," Iode spat as he dragged himself over to the youngest member of the team, "Vez?"

"This hurts way worse than I thought."

Ken walked to the helm console on the port side. "I'm setting us on a jump that will get us to Kias in a few hours. Any tracking system, Vez?"

Writhing in pain, the young woman replied. "I...ow...didn't see...anything."

Ken checked a newer star chart. "Alright, one more adjustment. Old route is no good."

Archenksova walked out of the lavatory. "Barebones medkit."

"Treat her first," Len commanded through gritted teeth.

"And they say there are no gentlemen anymore," Alethia replied as she followed the instruction and began treating Vez.

Ken turned to face the group. As he did the stars turned to lines and the ship lurched from the battlefield to hyperspace. "Two systems, a layover with pirates, and we'll be home."