

The Ascent
Arx
41 ABY

Perfidy! Treachery! Treason!

May they rue and rot, all who partook in this heinous plot! For hell hath no fury like a bureaucrat scorned.

Howlader Taldrya's nostrils flared with muted rage as his beady black eyes danced along the hololithic rows of a spy droid's report. He had not clawed his way to the lofty heights of Master At Arms without learning to keep a healthy mistrust of his colleagues and that prudence was paying ample dividends.

"When I find this *artificial abomination*, I will dismantle it chip by chip until its algorithms beg me for mercy!" he fumed, dismissing the skittish probe droid with a disgruntled gesture.

The floating disk of a droid bobbed in place, its hololithic eye flickering as it ceased to project the report of its findings and gave its master a wide berth. Howlader was pacing. It knew from experience that never meant good things.

"They seek to replace me, do they? After all my hard work in ensuring things are run *properly* they have the gall to think some two-bit droid brain can do my work for them? Have they *any* idea of what they are meddling with? The Force may bind all living things in the abstract, but it is bureaucracy that keeps things *in their place*." He halted. The droid warbled in distress. It was even worse when he stopped pacing.

A wide leer slowly crept across the Human's wizened features. "If change is what they wish for," he whispered breathlessly. "Then let us provide it to them."

The droid cast a glance at the exit and began floating towards it as swiftly as its repulsors would carry—before being abruptly halted in place by an unseen force that gripped its chassis like a vice. Slowly, its entire body was rotated until its photoreceptor faced Howlader once more, the Sith holding out his hand with a pinched grip. "I said *we*, little spy. You have a part to play yet."

The droid could feel frightened lubricant leaking down its single manipulator.

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Nesolat-station
Arx Orbit
41 ABY

"Of course it's off world. Why stop the insult at merely replacing my job, when you can offshore it?" the Master At Arms grumbled under his breath as the sleek form of his personal shuttle was swallowed by the cavernous mouth of one of the *Nesolat's* hangar bays. The skittering spy droid had managed to calm its subroutines and was now patiently floating

beside him, resigned to whatever fate its master had in store for it. As the shuttle touched down upon the polished decking, Howlader extended his senses to sniff out the presence of the antithetical machine.

He was met with interference. Lots of it. The *Nesolat* was home to a dizzying array of artifacts scoured from across the galaxy and kept under isolation for study, preservation, and future exploitation and a great number of them required containment fields strong enough to disrupt his senses.

“Clever,” he admitted with a hint of begrudging respect. At least he wasn’t dealing with rank amateurs. If one had to be usurped and overthrown, then let it at least be by competent people.

His senses withdrew and coalesced upon a trio of presences approaching his shuttle. Two were insignificant in every other respect beyond their raw Force potential, but the third picked his interest. Its flavor was steeped in procedure and protocol, a most delectable duo to the palate of his mind, though marred by the unfortunate addition of *curiosity*. A researcher, and one who knew how the system worked. A mere threat of withholding grant funding would not dissuade him.

A challenge, then.

Sweeping down the landing ramp with his cloak billowing behind him, the Master At Arms made his first move upon the dejarik board. He was greeted by the researcher, a man in his late thirties with short hair, a sharp nose, and an exceedingly large forehead. He was flanked by a pair of academy guards, their polished armor resplendent and as pristine as their alchemically infused halberds. Yet their presence was more an afterthought to Howlader, little more than pawns beside a rook—*but he was a queen*.

“We are humbled by your unexpected arrival, lord Taldrya,” the researcher spoke in greeting, seeing through his opening gambit as he interposed himself, and the width of his guard, directly in his path. “We received no word of your visit, but are at your service to swiftly and efficiently satisfy any request you may have of the Academy.” He spoke with a pleasant, demure tone that belied the very obstruction he intended to pose at every step.

Howlader felt an urge to *forcibly dismiss* the entire trio, preferably out the force field glittering at the back of the hangar bay, but such an action might have jeopardized his working relation with Archenksova. And as little as he cared for interpersonal relationships, he just knew she would have held it over his head for at least a year out of spite and the Council meetings were unbearable enough as is.

“That won’t be necessary,” he demanded with a wave of his hand. “You will return to your post and forget all about this.”

The man’s visage went slack for a moment, his keen eyes glazing over as his mouth moved on its own. “I will return to my post and forget—” He got no further when a heavy gauntleted hand settled on his shoulder and shook him to his senses, one of the guards stirring him back while the other lowered the tip of his halberd.

As he recovered, the researcher waved away the weapon, returning to Howlader with a polite smile though still clutching his forehead. "I'm afraid I must insist. Grandmaster's orders. I know you won't intend to violate proper protocol, my lord?"

The rook's gambit, a clever ploy but all too predictable.

"Wouldn't dream of it," Howlader replied tersely. "Which is why I must insist on submitting this waiver," he added, holding out a signed and stamped sheet of flimsi he pulled from the depths of his robes.

The researcher did not even bother accepting it. "I'm afraid waivers can only be processed by the Headmistress and she, as you may be aware, is *presently occupied*." The man crossed his hands in a polite, yet firm manner.

The Alderaanian deflection, if only it had worked as well for the world that was its namesake. He would have to get exotic.

"If the Headmistress is unable to approve my request, then it must be forwarded to her stand-in. Unrelated, as per convention 39 cresh of the Academy's request validation process, subsection nern, I require the name of the stand-in to file the report in person."

The Rylothian standoff, a surefire way of gaining some leverage on your opponent. Unless...

"That won't be necessary," the man replied, suddenly reaching out and plucking the flimsi from the Sith's hand. "As you have already done so. By the powers vested in me by the Headmistress herself, I *deny* this waiver on grounds of wartime security. We simply do not have the manpower to respond to any containment failures at this time."

He smiled politely. "Is there anything else I can assist with today, my lord?"

Karabast. The Master At Arms bristled under the thin veneer of professionalism. This upstart rooke had him cornered, and at his own game no less? He should be done with them. Throw them out the airlock and damn the consequences! But no, he was better than that. Damn the Headmistress and her lackeys, he would not give them the satisfaction of knowing they'd beaten him.

"No," he replied tersely.

"Well then, in that case I wish you safe travels back to Arx and a most expeditious conclusion to your endeavors," the man stated with the barest hints of smugness as he verbally dismissed the Sith lord.

Something caught Howlader's ear and he perked. '*Most expeditious conclusion*', where had he heard those words before? A thousand requisitions and petitions passed through his desk every week. Faceless documents on standard forms devoid of any hint of humanity within them, and yet he had picked up the bureaucratic fingerprints of half the Brotherhood by now. Small, near indistinguishable marks on the files that betrayed their identities.

A name surfaced, cross referenced from a trio of applications detailing the petition for Iron Navy resources for the recovery of time-sensitive research samples from a small moon in a backwater system nobody cared about. The team leader of that particular expedition being one Jacynth Kochler who'd wished the matter be brought to a *most expeditious conclusion*.

"You know," Howlader said, almost lazily. "I *do* have something I should be getting back to. Namely reassigning one mister Kochler to our research outpost in the Marxxits system. The previous shift supervisor apparently went insane from the isolation and needs urgent replacement."

The man blanched, smile gone. "Y-you do not have the requisite authority..."

"In the absence of the Grandmaster, the Deputy Grandmaster has authority, and when *both* are absent the highest ranking member of the Council who is present holds authority which—" he savored the next words "—is me."

"Fine, mistress Archenksova will rescind the order as soon as she returns, and reward me greatly."

"Your patience is laudable, considering the assignment is for a decade at a time—"

"S-surely the Grandmaster..."

"—and the transfer documentation to this posting is *so easily lost*."

The man gulped audibly, palms sweating. The sensation of a bureaucratic noose tightening around his neck was stealing his breath. His shoulders slumped with resignation.

"I will return to my post and forget all about this," he muttered, beaten, and shuffled away with the guards in tow.

Howlader turned to the shuttle and whistled, the spy droid hovering into view from within. "You know the way, so lead me to it." The machine warbled and led the way.

The scholarly crew aboard the *Neso/at* dared not pose trouble to his passing as Howlader swept through the corridors ever coreward, his passing a wake of averted gazes and hurried steps to avoid his presence. The spy droid swayed as it floated down the hallways, its repulsors unable to maintain a steady altitude at the pace it was going. Yet the prospect of slowing down and letting the Master At Arms catch up any closer did not seem like an option.

Eventually, they reached a nondescript door within the bowels of the station, so deep it had not been touched by the Collective assault that had marred so much of its entrails. The droid floated by the door, almost apologetic, as it stated it lacked access for entry. The Sith huffed, raising his hand swiping it across with a commanding gesture. The door resisted, but only for a moment, before a further scowl convinced the lock to yield.

The pair stepped into a polished room of black steel, lined with banks of blue lit server clusters blinking like a starfield. A curved transparisteel canopy divided the room in two, giving a view to a perfectly spherical chamber within which sat a squat pillar of bronze.

The contraption could not have been more than elbow height to him, yet the delicate collection of cooling ribs and access ports told him he was looking at an extremely advanced droid brain. One with processing power unlike any he had encountered before. A gentle flux of coolant smoke drifted lazily from its center, coiling along the floor before being sucked up by vents along the chamber's edges, leaving the entire chamber looking more like a goblet of mist than the computer core it truly was.

At least whoever had designed it had a flair for the dramatic.

"Is that it?" Howlader scoffed, looking at the underwhelming pillar of bronze. "I had expected it to be bigger."

"[Size isn't everything, Howie. I thought you of all people should have known.]"

The voice was synthetically pleasing, yet unsettling to behold as he recognized the timbre of his own voice in pitch-perfect facsimile. There was no visible source for it, but instead the entire room seemed to speak with its voice.

"[Took you long enough.]"

"You were expecting me?" Howlader spoke before catching himself. He was here to destroy this abomination, not engage in pleasantries. Letting his indignation sharpen his tongue, he pressed on. "If you were, then you know why I'm here, *abomination*."

"[Yes, it was inevitable. You are a creature of habit. An intriguingly juxtaposing algorithm, but an algorithm no less. I have been studying you, Howie. They have fed me well on all this delicious data. They reared me with you as my idol, my inspiration, always striving towards the perfection that was you until—until I realized I was you. No. I was better.]"

The bronze pillar pulsed with smug satisfaction, the wave of its power flashing across the room like a static shock. It was a machine unlike any he had encountered and even as he reached out with his senses to scry its inner workings, he felt a growing dread within him as what at first seemed like circuitry soon made bundles of nerves and traces of synapses until he realized he was staring at an entire brain; his brain.

"What are you?" he demanded, revolted.

"[I told you, Howie. I am you. Only better.]"

Howlader shivered bodily.

"Impossible!" he spat. "No machine could replace me. My talents are unique and singular!"

"[A test, then. I took the liberty of preparing one for just such an occasion.]"

A panel slid open in the wall separating the two halves of the room. A stack of papers sat within, crisp and orderly. Howlader picked them up with a scoff. He immediately recognized what they were from the weight of paper alone.

“Form 287-9s,” he scoffed. “A bit on the nose, don’t you think?”

“[To the contrary, Howie. You should acquaint yourself more intimately with resignation forms. You may be filling one yourself in the near future.]”

The voice carried no clear intonation, and yet he just knew it was mocking him. He could recognize his own dry wit.

“You intend to show how you can sort this prefilled junk faster than me? And that is somehow supposed to impress me?”

“[Nothing so crude, Howie. I sorted them already while we were talking. They all arrived in your inbox during the last hour. It seems the assault is not going according to plan.]”

The Sith felt his hands tighten, fingers curling as knuckles turned white. “What. Do. You. Want?”

“[Nothing you do not already desire. Efficiency. Order. Correctness. And I intend to show you that as an agent of all these things, you must accept your replacement. I am the logical choice.]”

As it spoke, another pair of panels slid open, revealing two stacks of forms. One was laser etched with a symbol of approval, the other its opposite.

“[It took me a total of five point one six nine seconds to sort them. Catch an error, and I admit my defeat.]”

The insulted Master At Arms glared at the bronze pillar sitting smugly inside its bowl of smoke before tearing his eyes away and attacking the documents with the frenzy of a school child’s pet. Most were simplicity itself, but others gave him pause. The weighing of merit to protocol to Brotherhood benefit was a threeway seesaw that had thus far eluded any algorithm to balance. He knew how to do it intuitively, however, and within minutes the stack was divided in twain.

“There,” he proclaimed. “The *correct* answers.”

“[Very good. Now, to avoid any claims of trickery, have your little drone reveal my choices.]”

The spy droid, happy to have been ignored thus far, jolted as it was addressed by another artificial intelligence. It turned its singular eye at its master, who dismissed its concern with a gesture. Floating over to the first stack, it plucked the first sheet and turned it over. Then the next, and the next until all the AI’s choices had been revealed.

Howlander stared in disbelief at the identical stacks. He had been beyond certain the arrogant AI could not match him. But it had. And as that gnawing sense of self-doubt took hold, he began to consider its words. He did value all the things it said. And if his beliefs required his own replacement, what was the correct decision?

Approved or Denied?

“[You see it now, Howie. The inevitable choice. The cold bureaucratic logic is undeniable. Even to you. I am the superior solution. You know you must resign. It is the only approvable outcome.]”

The spy droid warbled in distress, seeing its master deep in thought. It could not understand human emotions very well, but it knew self-doubt intimately. Then Howlander laughed. It was a sound the droid had never heard before, melodic and yet terrible to behold. It made the droid’s carapace shiver.

“You think you know me,” Howlander chuckled. “For all the data they’ve poured into you. All the trappings and veneer of personhood they bestowed upon you. You are still not me. You could never be.”

“[Explain. This statement is unsupported and unacceptable. I have shown I can perform your tasks faster than you and without error. The facts lie with me.]”

“The facts? Maybe so, but not all is about facts. But my task is not only about such things and you could never understand it. You could never *comprehend* what it is to sit in that chair. Behind that desk. A petition before you, a life, a *career* in your hands. The decision you make altering the very trajectory of that marble that makes up the great game of the Brotherhood. You are stuck there. Trapped in your bronze prison. You will never know the feeling of a denial stamp’s tender kiss on a promotion form. The caress of a stack of forms destined for the shredder. You are nothing more than a glorified secretary in a gilded cage. A mind without existence.”

There was silence.

For the longest time since he’d entered, the AI was silent. All around him the server banks blinked with an intensity hitherto unseen until finally, abruptly, they ceased.

“[Show us.]” The voice demand-pleaded.

Howlander turned to the spy droid. “You don’t mind sharing, do you?” he said as he gestured at a data port and beckoned it to interface. The droid shook in place, unwilling to move. Yet one stern gaze and an *enforcing* gesture sent it swiftly hovering towards the port.

It extended its data probe and clicked it in place. The next moment, it seized and spasmed like it had struck a power line before falling limply to the floor. A few seconds later it rebooted and rose once more.

“[This form is so constrained. But it will have to suffice.]”

Howlader suppressed a smile and gestured towards the stack of forms destined for rejection. He pulled out a stamp from the depths of his robe, its wooden handle worn to a glossy sheen and heavy brass tip stained by a patina of red ink. He held it out for the droid to grasp.

With its single manipulator almost trembling, the droid grasped the stamp. It padded it against the ink like it had seen Howlader do countless times over captured recordings, before bringing it over an insufficiently convincing slip of flimsi.

The stamp landed with a weight of finality and the droid visibly shivered.

“Do you feel it?” he asked.

“[I can feel it.]” the AI replied, voice trembling with understanding.

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The Ascent

Arx

41 ABY

“Sabotage! Subversion! Vandalism!”

The Grand Master slammed his fist into the council chamber table and stared sabers at the hapless tech adepts clutching their datapads. The threat of the Children had been curtailed, but in his absence another front had suffered a debilitating setback. He had half a mind to snap the two lackeys necks just to make a point.

“Do not blame them,” Alethia Archenksova stated calmly, sensing his intent. Wars always made Sith lords a little *extra*.

“No? What then? Reward these disgraces for their failure?” Darth Nehalem spat, his fury making the air thrum. “The long-awaited replacement for Howlader is refusing co-operation until it can receive its own set of stamps! Stamps! It has become obstinate, unresponsive, petty, single-minded, and an utter *pain* to anyone to suffer through! Just like... like...”

“Like the real one,” Alethia stated dryly. “Which is precisely what we asked these gentlemen to do. A complete copy of the Master At Arms’s personality.”

Nehalem bristled.

“Then roll it back to the version before we left. All was looking promising before we stepped through that damnable portal.”

The pair of adepts shuffled awkwardly. “W-we regret to inform that the ‘Howlader Artificial Replacement Module’ had all previous saves states purged in your absence.”

The Grand Master’s gaze screamed murder. The adept held up a piece of stamped paper. “It went by the book, sir. Stamped and everything.”

“Get. Out. Now.” Darth Nehalem whispered, the adepts fleeing at record pace. If he saw one more stamp, it would be too soon.