

41 ABY
Eos City

"Pardon me, are you Howlader, sir?"

"That depends. Who's asking?" The Master at Arms looked up from his terminal to see a protocol droid standing in his office.

"To be sure, sir. I am unit Z-3PX, at your service, sir. I have been looking for you."

"I'm getting nervous." The Master at Arms' flat tone as he returned his attention to his monitor suggested he was anything but nervous.

"Sir, I heard your name from the Seneschal and wanted to offer my aid with your duties, when I got sort of out of sorts with a staffer of yours. I may have punched him—it's a blur, sir. He handles your remand queue..."

That got Howlader's attention. "You punched Halcyon?" A smile twitched at the corners of his mouth.

The droid paused for a beat. "Yes. 'Twas an accident, sir. But regardless, I vehemently stated my purpose. He looked at me like I was stupid. I'm not stupid. So how did you, sir, earn your position so fast?"

"I was the only panda present in the past."

"You're a panda! Of course! I'm no panda!" the droid wailed. "Ma-ker, how I wish I could trade this cursed metal plating and circuits for mottled fur!"

Howlader considered the droid's odd reaction. "Do you want to learn?" He rose from his chair. Something smelled off about this entire situation.

"That would be nice."

"While we're talking, let me offer you some free advice..." Howlader draped an arm over the droid's shoulder. "Talk less."

"Sir?"

"Yell more."

"Er..."

"Don't let them know what you approve or deny for."

"You can't be serious."

"You want to get ahead?"

"Yes."

"Droids who run their mouths oft wind up dead..."

"Sir?" Any further inquiry was cut off by the droid going rigid, with its cranial unit twisted at an unusual angle as the Force seized control of its circuits.

Howlader smiled. Whoever had sent the droid must have forgotten that the wily old bear was a Dark Prophet in his own right, second only to James himself in matters of technical wizardry. Droids were playthings. Breaking this ones programming restraints had barely taken his concentration, let alone effort.

"Tell me why you're really here, A-3PX." Howlader strolled back to his desk and plopped into his chair.

"The Seneschal sent me to document your processes for analysis, Howlader, sir," the droid reported.

"Why?" The Master at Arms opened a desk drawer and retrieved a bottle of whiskey and a tumbler, then poured himself a generous serving.

There was a brief delay as the droid searched its databanks. "That information was not provided to me, Howlader, sir."

"Mm." Howlader sipped from his glass. The peatiness and the burn in the back of his throat sharpened his senses. "Why'd they send a droid? They should've sent an email," he muttered to himself.

"That information was not provided to me, Howlader, sir."

"I wasn't asking you." Howlader scowled. "Why do you keep calling me 'Howlader, sir'?"

"It's a relic of my previous assignment with Master Tyrus, Howlader, sir," the droid explained. "My memory core was wiped per standard procedures to remove classified Inquisitorius intelligence, but the process was interrupted and a few fragments were imprinted into my base programming by mistake, including a circumstance of Master Tyrus chuckling to himself over the rhyme. The failed memory wipe embedded that correlation in my linguistic subroutines. Since that information was deemed non-sensitive, the matter was marked as low-priority in the Seneschal's issue log."

Howlader grunted and took another sip of his whiskey. They hadn't just sent a droid, they'd sent an *Inquisitorius* droid—the Krathiast of droids, in other words. That made this whole affair even more suspicious.

The more Howlader thought about it, the more he realised there was only one conclusion: James had sent a spy droid to monitor him while he was doing his job. The Seneschal was neither uninformed nor careless. If he'd sent a spy droid, he'd done it on purpose, with the goal of digging up information that the Master at Arms didn't want shared. But why? The only secret Howlader kept from anyone outside his own staff was how he judged the recommendations he received.

It's finally happening.

People had joked for years that the Grand Master—whether it was Evant or the assjack before him—wanted a way to replace the Master at Arms with an AI. To do that, they'd have to document every part of his job, and try to learn how and why he did what he did. A spy droid could do that, in theory, but James didn't operate on "in theory" unless he was told to, and only two people in the Brotherhood could do that.

Howlader sighed and stared off into space as he mulled his situation over. A part of him wanted to just throw in the towel and retire off to some quiet corner of the galaxy. It wasn't like he had anything left to prove, after all this time, and Evant was far less fun to yell at than Mav. If he stepped down, he'd be free of all the hassles and obligations. He could let it be someone else's problem. That'd be a nice change of pace.

Change. Howlader frowned and sipped his whiskey. He didn't like change. He especially didn't like change that involved trading something old and proven for something new and untested. Plus, it was frankly insulting that they'd tried to go behind his back. Did they think that would stop him from finding out? Save them from being yelled at? He'd show them what being yelled at was *really* like.

Not yet, though.

"A-3PX, go tell them I agreed to show you how I do my job, and that you expect that learning all the nuances of my decision-making will take several years."

"As you wish, Howlader, sir." The droid bowed its obedience and shuffled out of the room. Howlader smiled as it left. If the Council thought they could build an AI that was better at his job than he was, they were welcome to try.