

"Didn't you hear me?"

A growly grumble, bearish, was all the answer that emitted from the furry figure lounging in his seat. It was a very good chair. Very glorious to generally do nothing from and lounge in.

"My Lord, they intend to replace you... By all that is green and good like me, this is serious!"

"My Halc," began the Bear Who Was Besriest, "So let them."

"But my Lord—"

"Shhhhh, no. No buts. Only beers."

"I don't understand!"

"Don't you see?" Finally one berry-black bear eye cracked open, peering from a yawning face. "If they replace me with this 'artificial intelligence' then that means *retirement*. And retirement means more time for beer."

The Taldrya, recently returned from his roguish journeys among the stars solely for the purpose of alerting his former Master to the nefarious and many-fingered plot he had heard whispers of, gesticulated wildly. His verdant ponytail flew with the flailing of his arms.

"That's just it, don't you see?! This infernal mockery of you, this *bot*, it will replace you entirely!"

"And?"

"And that *means* that you will no longer be in charge of ordering the drafts and imports here to Arx. It will. *It will control the beer, my Lord*. Something without the ability to taste!"

It was as if, from somewhere, a dramatic drum beat rose and crescendoed, portending of DOOM.

Suddenly a flurry of movement ensued. Golden chains and silky, seductive maroon fabric swished as Howlader, NOT HOWLANDER unlike what SOME PEOPLE kept calling him for A LITERAL DECADE GETTING IT WRONG, rose from his lazy chair and stormed from the office. Halcyon ran after him, a blur of green.

"My Lor—"

The question was cut off by a furious, bellowing roar, enhanced by the Force. It echoed down the halls, cracking the stonework of the Dark Ascent.

"I WILL NOT BE REPLACED! NEVER! YOU MERE MORTALS CANNOT TAKE FROM ME!"

Journeyman and peons and the intern fled in terror. Praetor and Magistrate alike qualied. The Master stormed to the elevator, stomping and fuming.

For a solid moment, he seemed to debate taking the stairs, so great was his rage.

But they were stairs, and he needed to save his power. So instead he stomped and fumed in place, waiting for the *ding* of the dong.

Whence it finally came, the lifts carried him to the Council Chamber's tower, the Grand Master's audience room — after much hitting the CLOSE button when others tried to get on with him. Black and white suited fury stormed the doors, not even noticing the lack of guards.

"EVANT!" Howie boomed, "CEASE THIS AI NONSENSE AT ONCE— wait, where is everyone?"

The chambers were empty.

"That's what I was trying to tell you, my Lord," his right paw man said as he caught up from being squished into the elevator wall. "They've all gone to the Ethereal Realm. To war."

"What? What's that? Who's war?"

"Sir, there was a report..."

"I do not read Krathy things, you know this."

"Yes, forgive me. Well, they've gone away."

"Then who is responsible for this damned robot?"

"Artificial intelligence," corrected the man, "and I believe it is the technologies and information development branch. Or just James."

"Bah!"

And with that the Bear turned once more, to go find whoever he needed to find in order to save the beer before this madness would ruin them all.