

The Games Gods Play

Dacien Victae di Plagia, #7388

Interrogation Room X314

Clan Plagueis Flagship, ISD *Ascendancy*

Captain Ferro Morl rubbed his eyes and sighed in frustration.

“No, I’ve already covered this. Your friend from earlier -- the nice one. I told her. So go ask her,” Ferro snipped, his dark eyes glaring a challenge at the newcomer.

“Agent Karst will submit her own report, and I will submit mine. We’re bound to ask many of the same questions, that’s just the way it is. It’s in your interest to cooperate, Captain. We have other ways to compel answers.” Ferro’s questioner, a middle-aged human with beady little eyes, a crooked nose, and not a single hair follicle on his entire head, leaned forward in his chair and smirked. “But you already know that. Water?” He picked up a small thermos and took a long drink, then tipped it over. Three drops splashed to the cell’s durasteel floor, the thermos empty. “Tell me what I want to know and maybe I can find some more.”

This man was a real charmer. Ferro’s mouth was parched, his stomach grumbling. He hadn’t had either food or water in far too long. An obvious interrogation tactic, maybe, but it was effective.

Ferro leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. It wasn’t very calming. The chair was made of the same hard, cold metal as the floor, the walls, the ceiling, and the desk sitting between him and Agent Ugly -- not the man’s real name, of course, but Ferro thought it fitting. The room’s aesthetic was intended to be both uncomfortable and disorienting, to keep occupants off balance and make them more compliant.

The Captain had lost track of time by this point. He’d sat in the same uncomfortable chair in the same sterile room for what felt like a week, but was probably closer to a day. In that time, he’d been “debriefed” by three different people. The first, his commanding officer in the Ascendant Fleet, had been businesslike but not uncaring. The second, Agent Karst, had put on a good show of sympathy and friendship: *I’m so sorry about your loss; I’ll do everything in my power to help their families; If you just answer my questions, we’ll get you back to your unit after some well-deserved rest.* Now, Ugly with his threats and innuendo.

Ferro wasn’t a green cadet fresh from the Academy. He’d been on the other side of this very table many times in the past, and he knew the truth. The Sith were fickle and vicious masters, but above all else they prized power. He knew something they didn’t, and that made *him* powerful.

"You're right, Agent. I'm just tired, is all. Can we start again?"

Ugly chuckled, then picked up his datapad from the table and glanced down at it before speaking.

"State your name, rank, and unit."

"Captain Ferro Morl, 3rd Special Operations Group, attached to Command Force Aurek."

"You were assigned to the squad that infiltrated The Collective dreadnaught *Braga*, correct?"

"Yes."

"Where is Adept Dacien Victae di Plagia?"

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Hangar Bay 4

Clan Plagueis Flagship, ISD *Ascendancy*

Two days earlier

"What kind of name is Morl? Sounds like a fish," grunted Dacien Victae di Plagia as he strode briskly towards his pitch-black Upsilon Command Shuttle *Astraeus*, its vestigial wings locked upright into a landed position.

"Family name, my lord. No nautical connection to my knowledge," replied Morl, matching the Adept's pace and hoping Victae didn't notice how out of breath he was. In his experience the Sith, as a rule, always noticed signs of weakness. His mission would be hard enough without Victae marking him as an unworthy subordinate. Dacien turned his head slightly to glance at Ferro but did not respond. He seemed lost in thought as they approached the shuttle.

The Sith Adept cut an impressive figure. He wasn't tall, exactly -- he was a few inches shorter than Ferro -- but he was lean, and seemingly well-muscled for a man who appeared to be approaching middle age. His dark hair was neat and trimmed, and his clean-shaven face bore one long scar under his left eye. And that eye was a cold ice blue, as was its twin. He wore a fitted black armor in the style of an old imperial officer's uniform complete with the rank insignia of an admiral, trailing a crimson cape. Two lightsabers hung from his belt, one on either side. The hilts looked to be fearsome weapons in their own right, jagged blades protruding from their bases.

Surrounding the ship was a small force of six soldiers equipped with all manner of weapons bladed and blunted, but, mostly, blasters. Ferro also noted at least a dozen black packs scattered around the group of soldiers, most of which would be filled with explosives. Only he

and Sergeant Jekkis would carry non-volatile equipment, including the team's limited bacta supply.

It was Ferro's team, handpicked by him for their skill with infiltration and sabotage. This would be the most dangerous mission of their lives, and quite possibly the last. But they were well trained and experienced. They were also driven by the dire consequences of failure, not just to themselves but also to their friends and families. Such was a soldier's life in the Ascendant Fleet, where the Willing served diligently, if not enthusiastically, because it was so, so much better than being broken and made to serve as a mindless, gibbering slave.

Ferro chose to see Willing service as an opportunity. The Sith were evil and cruel, but they rewarded success and ambition. Ferro's young career had seen plenty of both. He wanted to prove himself and reap the rewards of continued advancement; he was young enough, prideful enough, to downplay the risks and rely on his winning combination of talent and confidence to get see him through. Dacien Victae di Plagia was the first Elder he had ever met in person, and now he was the man's second-in-command on a suicide mission. Ferro was thrilled and terrified in equal measure.

"Captain Morl, have they been briefed?" Dacien asked, indicating Ferro's squad with a casual wave of his hand. The Adept was standing slightly off to the side, admiring the shuttle.

"No, my lord. They've only been told that it's an infiltration and instructed on what equipment to bring. Would you like me brief them?"

"That won't be necessary, Captain. I'd prefer to address them myself." Dacien turned his piercing gaze to the assembled group. Ferro felt a sudden pressure in his skull, a hint of darkness appearing at the edge of his vision. He shoved aside an unbidden urge to flee and stood firmly rooted to the hangar deck. A quick glance at each of his men told him they were experiencing something similar.

Dacien seemed to consider the group for a moment, letting his eyes wander over each and every soldier in turn. It was subtle, but each of the soldiers showed some hint of unease when Dacien made eye contact: a widening of the pupils; a faint sheen of sweat on the brow; a slight twitch in the jaw. His men were well trained and used to the overpowering aura of the dark side, but this was a bit more than usual. Obviously a test of some sort. Thankfully, they must have passed it because as quickly as it started, the pressure and panic disappeared. Ferro thought he saw a slight grin on the Elder's face, though Dacien said nothing about what had happened.

"I'm told you all volunteered, is that right?" Dacien asked the group. They nodded in response, though Ferro knew it wasn't true because he had chosen them himself, just as he had been told to report to the Adept. Now Dacien wore a knowing smirk. "Then let's not waste any more time. You all know the threat that The Collective poses. Plagueis cannot stand against them alone;

their fleet and their tactics are, for the moment, overwhelming. But we have a chance to strike a blow that might turn the tables in our favor.”

The soldiers were listening intently. Dacien pointed to the group’s sergeant, Jekkis.

“Have you ever breached and boarded a cruiser?”

“Yes, my lord, during the Dark Crusade,” Jekkis replied confidently.

“And how did you manage that?” asked Dacien.

“Our fleet knocked out their shields and we raided their hangar bay with about five squads worth of troopers in transports, my lord.”

“Well we won’t be doing that. I doubt entire Ascendant Fleet could damage our target enough to get a boarding party in the hard way. At least not without losing most of our ships.” Dacien’s smirk faded. “No, this time we bluff our way in. That’s the easy part. Once we’re on the ship, then it gets tricky. There will be no reinforcements, and our mission is to completely destroy the target. Hence the inordinate amount of ordnance.” Dacien gestured at the packs of explosives. “We set ‘em and forget ‘em, get back on my shuttle, and make it back to space before the whole thing goes up. Kill anything that moves, no prisoners and no survivors. Understand?”

As a group: “Yes, my lord.”

Dacien nodded, his face turning grim. “Captain Morl, give them the details and then load the shuttle. We leave in one hour.” With that, Dacien strode up the ramp into the *Astraeus*.

Ferro cleared his throat and activated a small field-holoprojector displaying a dreadnaught-class ship schematic. One of his men raised a hand. “Yes, private?” Ferro nodded at the soldier.

“Sir, is it true that we’re attacking a superweapon?”

“It’s called the *Braga*, private. It’s a dreadnaught with a big fancy laser on it, and we’re going to blow it up.”

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Upsilon-class Shuttle *Astraeus* **En-route to the dreadnaught *Braga***

The door *hissed* closed behind Ferro as he entered the cockpit of the *Astraeus*. A red-tinged glow, emitted from lighting elements evenly spaced around the floor, walls, and ceiling, suffused the cockpit. Ahead, millions of faint, shimmering stars swimming in an endless abyss. Banks of

lights, computer displays, and various toggles filled the entire room. Dacien sat at the controls, keeping a steady course and occasionally flicking switches. Ferro had never trained as a pilot, and the whole endeavor was as mystifying to him as the Force itself. Ferro stood in silence just inside the door, not wanting to interrupt the Adept's concentration uninvited.

"Come, sit," Dacien said, giving Ferro a quick a glance over his right shoulder.

Ferro obliged, moving up to the copilot's seat and easing himself into it. All of his gear was with the squad back in the passenger compartment. He felt almost naked without his blaster at his hip.

"Captain, why are you here?" Dacien inquired without inflection.

Ferro hesitated. "My lord? With respect, you asked me up here."

"You know what I mean. You didn't volunteer for this. I certainly didn't ask for you. So why are you here?"

Ferro could feel the Adept's attention boring into him, though the man kept his eyes fixed firmly ahead of them. He briefly considered responding honestly, but discarded that notion almost instantly -- it would be nothing for Victae to ensure that Ferro and his entire squad met with an unfortunate "accident" during the mission. No, best to lie convincingly.

"I was chosen by Ascendant Fleet Command because my men and I are particularly well-suited to infiltration and sabotage missions on enemy vessels, my lord. I am always Willing to serve Clan Plagueis to the fullest extent of my ability." Ferro smiled inwardly at his wonderfully bland evasion. The best lies are the true ones.

"You think yourself clever, Captain?" Dacien asked darkly, his face a frozen mask. "It's a dangerous thing for a mortal to play at the games of the gods."

Ferro's heart was pounding now, the unnerving pressure in his head and darkness in his vision returning. He suddenly began to doubt everything -- he would get himself killed, and for what? So that one paranoid Sith could stymie another? What did it gain him? He should never have gotten out of bed this morning; no, he should have fled the Plagueians when he had the chance all those years ago.

Dacien took his hands from the controls and leaned back in his seat, eyes closed. The cockpit lights seemed unnaturally dim, as if filtered through a cloth; the sounds of the shuttle were oddly muted. "Don't ever lie to me again, Captain." Dacien's voice was suddenly the only audible sound in the room, clear and dreadful. "Let me tell you what I know. I know that the Dread Lord and her minions, my loyal di Plagia brothers and sisters, don't trust me. They fear me for my power, and they fear me for my perceived allegiance to the Grand Master. I may have left the

Dark Council, but they're convinced that Pravus pulls my strings as if I'm some puppet. They hope to rid themselves of me on a convenient suicide mission."

Dacien fell silent, but Ferro felt as if the man's words were reverberating inside his skull. Ferro was afraid to speak; he could feel that the Adept was not yet finished, but the silence stretched for what felt like hours before Dacien resumed.

"Now it's your turn, Captain. Tell me, am I right? I was commanded by the Dread Lord to lead this strike. Were you commanded to be my minder? Perhaps to stab me in the back and leave me bleeding out on a dying ship?"

Ferro looked over at the Adept to find the man staring back at him, still reclining in his seat. Some light was returning to the cockpit, the pounding in his head subsiding. Outside the viewport, it looked as if a battle raged around them. Tiny points of light danced in complex patterns, like fireflies in the wind. Streaks of green, red, blue, orange shot back and forth between behemoth vessels, the light show occasionally punctuated by fiery explosions. There was no sound to it; the beauty of war in vacuum was silence.

Ferro considered his words carefully, keeping Dacien's admonition to speak honestly in mind. "I was ordered to watch you, not to kill you, my lord. I can't speak to the Dread Lord's motivation, but my mission is to help you destroy the *Braga*. I hope to return to the fleet alongside you and my entire squad."

Dacien nodded once, a thoughtful expression on his weathered face. "Thank you, Captain. You might want to secure your seat straps."

A bright flash lit up the viewport, a shockwave knocking Ferro out of his chair and onto the floor. The *Astraeus* shuddered violently and Ferro felt a flash of fear, certain the ship would come apart. It didn't, but more, smaller blasts followed the first as Ferro lifted himself back into the seat and strapped in. He flicked open a comm channel to the passenger compartment.

"Sergeant Jekkis, report."

For a moment there was nothing but static.

"Sir, we're fine back here. All strapped in, and the gear secured. I take it we're into the battle?"

"Good guess, Sergeant. Hold tight." Ferro turned off the comm. "My lord, were those missiles? I thought we were still out of sensor range. I can request a fighter escort from the fleet."

"No, Captain," Dacien snapped. "This is part of the plan. Those missiles were fired by Plagueians. We need to convince the *Braga* that we're with The Collective and are under attack

by the Brotherhood.” Dacien glanced over and laughed when he saw Ferro’s slack face. “Did I forget to mention that during the briefing? Ah, there she is.”

Ferro looked around, trying to spot whatever it was that Dacien had seen. The battle over Nancora looked to be picking up. He spotted several large vessels appear in a flash, entering the fray directly from hyperspace. Likely the fleets of other Brotherhood clans, working together for once – though reluctantly, and not very effectively. In all honesty, they were probably attacking each other at least as much as they were The Collective.

A fluorescent green flash grabbed his attention. He could see an unusually bright spear of green light lancing from a large dreadnaught into what appeared to be a Nebulon-B frigate. Then another flash, reddish-orange this time, and the frigate was gone. In its place, a cloud of debris floated. So that was it, then. The green flash and spear of light was the *Braga*’s superweapon, some sort of composite beam laser. Dacien adjusted their course towards the *Braga* and increased their speed. He also began evasive maneuvers as more Plagueian munitions went off around them.

“Captain, there’s a comm panel to your right with a big red button on it. Please press the button,” Dacien said calmly.

Ferro complied. He flicked a protective transparent cover off of the button and then pressed it without hesitation. For a moment there was no answer. Then a series of unusual, high-pitched sounds flooded the comm. Ferro looked over to Dacien for some indication of what he should do, but the Adept simply shook his head and held out one hand in a motion that clearly said “Just wait.”

The screeching, whining, beeping sounds continued for a few moments before ceasing suddenly. Then a woman’s voice replaced them. “*Braga* control to Technocratic Guild shuttle. What is your status?”

Dacien responded without hesitation. “*Braga* control, we were on an infiltration mission directed by Rath Oligard himself. Our cover was blown and now the foul Sith are trying to shoot us down. We have information onboard that is vital to the war effort and must be transmitted to the *Skylla* as soon as possible. Request emergency landing clearance.”

“One moment.” The comm paused. Explosions continued to rock the shuttle, and Dacien’s piloting became more erratic. “You have clearance for emergency landing. Hangar bay 1.”

“Thank you, *Braga* control.” Dacien nodded to Ferro, who cut the comm channel.

“Well done, my lord. You were very persuasive.” Ferro mused, momentarily awed by the apparent ease of their ruse.

“Nonsense, Captain. The noise you heard earlier was the *Astraeus* transmitting a valid Technocratic Guild code to the *Braga*, compliments of the Inquisitorius. That’s why they’re letting us in. I had nothing to do with it.”

Ferro frowned at the mention of the Grand Master’s spies. He was supposed to be watching Victae, to make sure the Adept wasn’t conspiring with any inquisitors against the Clan’s interests. This would not reflect well on him. He would leave this little encounter out of his report.

As they rapidly approached the *Braga*, the dreadnaught’s cannons opened fire on their pursuers, driving the Plagueians off. Dacien eased up on the throttle and steadied their course, aligning with the hangar bay. “Captain, go back and prepare the men. We’ll be on the ground in five minutes, and I don’t think we can expect our warm welcome to last.”

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Hangar Bay 1

Dreadnaught *Braga*

Ferro crouched inside the passenger compartment of the *Astraeus*. The main lights were off, but the deep red hues of the emergency lighting were enough to let him see the men of his squad similarly positioned. They were split in half, three men on either side of the shuttle’s main ramp, which remained closed. Ferro moved over to the starboard side of the ramp, taking up the rearmost spot behind a scrawny private named Gorlin. Gorlin was best known in the squad for his unnaturally good luck at pazaak, a talent that would be of little use unless their enemies agreed to decide the battle with a contest of chance like in some old children’s tale.

Dacien Victae was the last to arrive in the compartment. Beside him was a fearsome-looking droid, black as night except for the blood-red glow of its two optical sensors. Ferro recognized it as an Imperial Sentry Droid. Outdated, maybe, but he wouldn’t bet against it in a fair fight. Dacien spoke quietly to the droid, his commands inaudible to Ferro a mere three meters away. The droid appeared to nod once, then stepped to the center of the room, two meters behind the top of the ramp, and waited.

Dacien walked over to Ferro and laid a hand on his right shoulder, crouching down to Ferro’s ear-level. “Captain, the droid will lay down covering fire as the ramp drops. I’ve made some accuracy modifications to it, so it should be able to hit anything waiting in its line of sight. I’ll move out first and clear the area; give me a few moments and then lead the squad out, but stay behind cover. Understood?”

Ferro nodded affirmatively. “Yes, my lord. If I may, what is the droid called?” Ferro asked. “In case I need to give it any instructions during the battle,” he quickly added.

Dacien gave Ferro a wry smile. “Only dirt farmers and lack-wits give their droids nicknames, Captain. Do I strike you as either?” Dacien chuckled and clapped Ferro on the shoulder, standing up and walking to the center of the ramp, slightly offset from the droid’s line of fire. “It has its orders and you have yours. That’s all you need to know.” Dacien toggled his comm unit, speaking a command to the shuttle’s droid brain: “Lower the ramp.”

A slight *hiss* and *whir*, then a rush of air as the compartment equalized with the pressure of the hangar bay. A slit of light appeared at the base of the ramp, moving up the sides. The slit grew, light flooding into the compartment, as the ramp lowered. When it was about halfway down, Ferro could just make out what appeared to be three humanoid shapes waiting outside for the ramp to fully extend. Suddenly Dacien’s sentry droid opened fire. The first figure, helmet in hand, dropped instantly, smoke pouring from a visible blaster burn to the right eye. Before the other figures could react, the second fell to two well-placed chest shots. Finally, the third dropped and rolled away, just missing another expertly-placed blaster bolt.

Dacien sprang into action, flying down the ramp in a blur of motion. Two crimson-bladed sabers erupted from his hands, twirling in a violent symphony of lightning and thunder. In seconds the third Technocrat Soldier had been beheaded, its body crumpled with one hand on a riot control baton it hadn’t quite managed to draw.

The Adept paused for a moment, kneeling to inspect the final soldier’s remains. From his vantage point, Ferro could tell that all three bodies wore armor strongly resembling that of the old clone troopers. They appeared to be well-armed and equipped, but hadn’t put up much of a fight. Ferro suspected the three soldiers had been sent as escorts rather than guards -- a suspicion reinforced by the fact that the first of the dead soldiers hadn’t even been wearing a helmet.

Their ruse had been shockingly successful. Overconfidence, perhaps. The Collective had taken the Brotherhood utterly by surprise, and had assumed the Sith would be too disorganized and fractious to return the favor so quickly.

Stillness filled the hangar bay, the only sound the oscillating *hum hum hum* of the Adept’s twin blades. Ferro waved his men forward, and they ran down the ramp with military precision, taking up covered positions and searching the cavernous room for targets. There were none.

Ferro walked up to Dacien, who flicked off his sabers and returned them to his belt with a flourish of his blood-red cape. “My lord, surely they must have reinforcements on the way. Should we leave a small rearguard to protect the shuttle?”

“No, Captain. My droid will see to that.” The Adept closed his eyes and tilted his head to one side. His right hand rose slowly, a seemingly unconscious movement. “I feel... an emptiness here. This ship is severely undermanned, but also...” Dacien trailed off, lost in thought.

"My lord?" Ferro prompted.

Dacien opened his eyes and frowned at his upraised hand, lowering it. "We're wasting time here. Locate a dataport, get a spike into it, and find us a map. A ship like this must have a truly massive reactor, almost certainly made unstable by the power demands of that weapon. If we can make our way there, a few well-placed charges could turn this vessel to dust."

Ferro motioned Sergeant Jekkis over and relayed the Adept's order. Jekkis picked out two soldiers and the three of them began searching the hangar bay for a dataport they could access. It didn't take long -- no doubt the technophiles of the Guild had installed a senseless number of dataports throughout the ship so that they could plug in and "be one" with the *Braga* or some such tripe.

Within five minutes of killing the three Technocrat Soldiers, the Plagueians had secured the hangar bay and obtained a fairly detailed map of the entire ship. Almost too easy. Dacien studied the map carefully on his datapad, tracing his finger down hallways with his eyes closed. After a few apparent dead ends, he made a surprised sound and opened his eyes. Ferro saw a dangerous glint of -- what, excitement?

"Did you find it, my lord?" Ferro asked carefully.

"Yes, I believe I did, Captain." Dacien pointed to the spot on the map again. "Captain Ferro and I will head to this point. Sergeant Jekkis, you will take the rest of the squad to the reactor core here," Dacien indicated a different location on the map, "and set the charges. Slave them to the Captain's remote detonator, then make your way back to the ship. My sentry droid will signal me when you have returned. Wait for us there. Go now."

"Yes, my lord," Jekkis said without hesitation, saluting with his right fist over his heart. He turned to his men and began issuing orders to them. The group made its way rapidly, but quietly, to the end of the hangar bay. From where Ferro still stood with Dacien, he saw them open the door out of the hangar and slip into the hallway beyond. No alarm was raised, and no weapons were fired.

"My lord, if I may..." Ferro began.

"You're wondering why I sent them away without you? Especially given your express mission to watch me and report back to the summit about my actions here?"

"Frankly, my lord, yes. I'm also wondering where you and I are going, if not the reactor."

Dacien grinned, that dangerous gleam still in his eyes. "The where, Captain, you will find out soon enough. As for the why, just know that I trust your squad to do its job, but I think you can be persuaded by more...interesting alternatives."

* * *

Main Access Corridor, Command Level Dreadnaught *Braga*

Dacien and Ferro encountered minimal resistance as they made their way from the hangar deck to the ship's command level. Ferro could not understand how such a massive vessel operated with just a skeleton crew, especially given the importance of the ship's composite beam. He said as much to Dacien as they strolled unmolested down the *Braga*'s main access corridor, but the Adept simply grunted and muttered something about not needing to defend what isn't there.

The hallways on the ship were identical and interminable, stretching for dozens of meters at a time. They were all bare of decoration; simply durasteel for days. Occasionally a hallway would disappear into a large room of some kind or another, but even then they came across no more than two Technocrat Soldiers and a handful of unarmed engineers. All dead now, of course. Still no alarm. Also, no word from Jekkis.

After about fifteen minutes of tense but tedious walking, Dacien raised a fist and stopped dead in his tracks. "It's up ahead. We won't be alone this time. I'll go in first. Keep to cover." He walked softly over to a closed bulkhead door, gripped one of his lightsabers in his left hand, and raised his right hand in front of him, towards the door. He stood perfectly still for several seconds, eyes closed, brow furrowed in concentration.

Ferro crouched on the other side of the narrow hallway, keeping the Adept between him and the closed door. He raised his Merr-Sonn 44 in his right hand and waited. Suddenly the door clicked and swept open with a surprised *hissssss*. In the same instant, Dacien's other lightsaber leapt from his belt into his extended right hand and both sabers ignited, bathing the hallway in blood-light. Ferro could hear shouting from inside the room, and soon flashes of brilliant red blaster fire streamed out into the hallway.

Dacien handled it with ease, seeming to move his lightsabers into place to block bolts before they even left their blasters. The Adept danced his way steadily into the room, subtly shifting out of the way of any bolts that he did not bother to deflect. Ferro waited until Dacien was out of sight before moving up to the doorway and chancing a peek into the room. He narrowly missed being hit by a stray blaster bolt that flew into the hall and joined the growing mural of scorched durasteel on the far wall.

Ferro rolled into the room and, still crouched, ran to the nearest cover, an overturned metal table. A quick glance around the table showed that he wasn't the first person who tried to use it as cover; he only hoped he would have more luck than the poor dismembered fool slouched against its other side.

Meanwhile, Dacien's blades flew around him in a mad cacophony. It looked to Ferro's eyes as if the blades were alive, leaping out of Dacien's hands to fly at nearby targets before flinging themselves back into the Adept's grip. Four Technocrat Soldiers now lay dead in a roughly three-meter circle around Dacien. Three more were firing at him from cover behind some more overturned tables. At the same time, a pair of HK-series assassin droids entered the room from a door on its far side and instantly joined the barrage.

"Halt, intruder. Drop your weapons and submit to painful murder," barked the droids in unison, their voices vibrating with an electronic warble. Dacien, still focused on deflecting the attacks of the Technocrat Soldiers, extended his right arm in the direction of the HK droids. His lightsaber hurtled toward them, a blur of crimson light. Dacien's right hand twitched once, then compressed into a tight fist. The first HK droid's head was severed from its body. Its companion continued to fire, the staccato rhythm of its blaster rifle echoing in the chamber, adding an oddly percussive quality to the battle.

As Dacien jerked his fist back to his chest, the tip of his saber erupted through the remaining droid's chest from behind it, then lodged there as Dacien released his fist. The Adept continued to fend off the Technocrat Soldiers one-handed as sparks exploded from the droid. The HK collapsed with a lifeless cry of frustration. The droid's blaster fired off at random, spewing plasma around the room and destroying several light emitters in the ceiling, until it finally overheated and stilled. Dacien recalled his right-hand saber with a flick of his wrist and returned his full attention to the three soldiers under cover.

Suddenly Ferro spotted a fourth soldier rounding the corner into the room, rushing the Adept with a fully-engaged riot control baton. Ferro took aim and fired off several shots at the suicidal lunatic charging Dacien. Two hit the man -- or woman? -- in the chest, but the soldier kept running.

Ferro was sure Dacien had missed this one; he was preoccupied with the three Technocrats shooting at him and had simply not seen the charging soldier. Ferro grabbed a flash grenade from his belt, engaged it, vaulted over his cover-table, and lobbed the grenade at the cluster of three soldiers. Then he threw himself into the riot baton-wielder, knocking her -- yes, definitely a her, probably -- off-balance. A blinding flash and bang and the world disappeared except for a sharp pain in Ferro's everywhere.

He writhed on the ground for an eternity, wishing he'd taken cover after throwing the grenade rather than being a Force-cursed idiot. Eventually his vision began to return, and the high-pitched whine in his ears became a full-throated blare. He felt himself lifted up, turned around. Someone was talking to him, slapping him. He blinked his eyes clear and could just make out Dacien's face staring at him, mouth moving. Ferro shook his head and tried to speak, but he couldn't hear himself and from Dacien's expression he hadn't made any sense. It briefly crossed Ferro's mind that what he was seeing in the Adept's eyes might be genuine concern, but then he remembered where he was and what they were doing. It wasn't concern for Ferro's

well-being; it was concern for whatever role Dacien had decided Ferro would play in his scheme.

After a few more eternity-seconds, Ferro was finally returning to his senses. "I'm fine, my lord, fine. Yes, I was an idiot to throw that grenade, yes, my lord, I see now that you had everything well in hand," Ferro mumbled. Dacien had cut down the three hiding Technocrat Soldiers and the baton-wielder, not to mention the soldiers and droids he'd killed earlier, without suffering more than a singed cape, but Ferro liked to think that his grenade had helped, somehow, even if every fiber of his being regretted it.

Dacien helped Ferro stand and slapped his shoulder. "Well it worked out anyway. Do you know where we are?"

"The *Braga*, my lord."

Dacien stared quizzically at Ferro for a moment before continuing, more slowly. "Yes, the *Braga*, Captain. But go deeper. We're in a lab. Not a weapons lab, exactly. Look around you." He gestured with both arms, indicating the full sweep of the large room.

Ferro took it all in for a few moments. It did look like an engineering lab of some sort, but Dacien was certainly right that it didn't appear to contain any weapons, weapons components, or any sort of ammunition that he could recognize. What stood out to him the most was the large cylindrical chamber at the center of the room. The chamber walls were transparent, and inside the chamber a large, metallic...device... seemed to flicker in and out of sight. It was as if it kept disappearing and reappearing on a regular cycle. Ferro stepped closer to it, mesmerized.

"Is this..." Ferro began and trailed off. "I've heard of Force users hiding themselves..." Ferro glanced up, suddenly remembering who he was talking to.

"It's not the Force, and it can't make anything truly invisible, if that's what you're wondering," Dacien offered. "It's a trick of the light, combined with special composite materials that reduce its sensor profile dramatically. A state-of-the-art stealth system. The Collective is hardly the first group to create a ship-killing beam weapon; that's an old technology. *This*, Captain Morl, is the true superweapon."

"How can you be sure, my lord?"

Dacien stared at Ferro for a long moment before answering, as if weighing how much to tell. When he spoke, he turned back peer into the chamber. "I became aware of the theory behind such devices while I served as Headmaster. It's something the Grand Master quietly pushed the Dark Council to research and develop, but we never had any success with a prototype." Dacien glanced over to Ferro, his face stern and brow furrowed. "You will speak of this to no

one. Especially not the Dread Lord or her agents. You don't want to become Pravus' personal project."

Ferro visibly shuddered, a thousand grotesque and painful punishments flashing through his mind's eye. "No, my lord, I don't want that at all. I--"

The lights cut out and klaxons blared. Red emergency lights kicked on almost instantly, casting a dread hue over the room. Suddenly the ship *lurched* to port and both Ferro and Dacien were thrust against the wall of the room. Ferro could feel the ship's artificial gravity begin to fluctuate randomly as he scrambled back to his feet and keyed his comm unit.

"Jekkis! What's happening down there?"

No response.

"Those bloody fools," Dacien growled, his face taking on an almost-feral look, teeth bared. "They detonated the charges. They're going to get us all killed."

Dacien wasted no time. He ran to the main computer console, located directly in from of the stealth chamber and began flicking switches and pressing buttons furiously. "Ferro, get over here!" He shouted. "Slice into this, download *everything*. Here," Dacien unclipped a datapad bearing the Shadow Academy seal from his belt and set it on the console, "use this. I'll make sure our path back to the hangar is clear."

Ferro rushed over to the computer and began entering commands by rote, starting with the most common cracking-codes -- though obviously the Technocratic Guild wouldn't be that stupid. But they were. On his second try, he gained access. Whoever had programmed this console had not followed best practices. Ferro said a little prayer of thanks to the Force.

He worked his way into the ship's confidential file system, rummaging around for anything that looked useful. After a few seconds of fruitless searching, he gave up on that and simply entered the command to download all confidential files to Dacien's datapad. Then he waited.

* * *

Hangar Bay 1

Dreadnaught *Braga*

They had encountered no resistance at all as they made their way back to the hangar bay. The artificial gravity had continued to fail in exciting new ways, including throwing them both into the ceiling on three separate occasions, slowing their progress as the ship began to break apart around them. Twice, a section of hallway near them exploded out into space, emergency blast

doors quickly sealing their oxygen in and saving them from being expelled into vacuum. Even the emergency lighting was beginning to fail.

Ferro had hoped to see some sign of his squad, but they had not encountered anything -- no bodies, no equipment. As they entered the hangar bay, Ferro noted that several additional bodies had piled up at the base of the *Astraeus*' ramp, apparently gunned down by Dacien's sentry droid while trying to commandeer the shuttle as an escape craft. The *Braga*'s slow-motion meltdown hadn't caused too much obvious damage in the hangar yet -- one sign of a well-designed ship was its ability to keep hangar bays and escape pod bays functional during dire emergencies.

As they ran towards the *Astraeus*, Ferro paused to wonder at the incredible, ominous sight of Nancora looming outside the hangar shield. The *Braga* appeared to be in a slowly-failing orbit, and the sheer enormity of the planet -- it completely filled the space outside the hangar as far as he could see -- suggested they didn't have long before gravity tore the ship apart. At this point they were perhaps more likely to be killed by massive natural forces than by the explosion of the ship's reactor, he mused.

Dacien leapt an impossible distance from the hangar bay floor onto the shuttle's ramp, and strode briskly up to his droid. They exchanged a few words and then Dacien dropped back down to the floor and jogged over to Ferro, who was still entranced by their impending doom.

"Captain, it's time for you to go," Dacien said with a quiet urgency.

Ferro didn't respond; he didn't seem to register the Adept's words.

"Ferro, focus," the Adept ordered in the same terrifying, Force-infused voice he had used earlier in the day. That got a reaction. Ferro blinked once, twice, then turned and looked Dacien square in the face.

"It's time for me to go? What about my squad? What about *you*?"

"Your squad is dead, trust me on that. The *Astraeus*' droid brain was using their comm links as listening devices. My sentry told me that the ship heard most of what happened: Jekkis betrayed us both. He didn't slave the charges to your detonator, he tried to slave them to his. One of your privates noticed and confronted him, and that's when the blast went off. The only reason we're still alive is that they hadn't managed to set all of the charges yet. The reactor was damaged enough to send the ship into a death spiral without instantly rupturing. So that's good," Dacien added the last bit under his breath.

Ferro nodded. "I've worked with Jekkis for years. I never suspected...."

“Of course, I’m sure that’s why they picked him. The Dread Lord has many plans, wide as an ocean and twice as deep. I suspect Jekkis was ordered to ensure the ‘success’ of the mission, regardless of whether you kept up your end of the bargain or not. But there’s no time. There are escape pods just outside the hangar, over there,” Dacien gestured towards a different door than the one they had entered. “The hallway is clear of life and if the condition of this hangar is any indication, the pods are in good working order. Take one.”

“We’re not leaving in the *Astraeus*, my lord?”

“Not you, Ferro. This will go badly enough for you as it is, and I have some work to do before I return to the Clan. Tell them I left you behind to die -- they’ll believe that. Then tell them you saw the *Astraeus* disabled by an explosion before it could leave the hangar, and that you just made it to a pod in time to escape.”

Ferro nodded, “Yes, I see. I can do that. I assume you want to take the stealth plans?” Ferro asked, taking the Adept’s datapad from his belt and offering it back to Dacien.

Dacien accepted it with a nod and a grin. “I’ll be in touch. Keep your head down, and may the Force not kill you.”

With that, the two men parted ways.

* * *

Interrogation Room X314
Clan Plagueis Flagship, ISD *Ascendancy*
Two days later

“Where is Adept Dacien Victae di Plagia?”

“He’s dead, Agent. He left me behind, but I saw an explosion disable his shuttle in the *Braga*’s hangar bay. I barely had time to make it to an escape pod before the ship was pulled to the surface as a giant ball of fire. There’s no chance he survived.”

Agent Ugly looked skeptically at Ferro. He was about to ask a follow-up question when his comm link buzzed, and he stepped out of the room.

After a few brief moments, Agent Ugly returned, his face twisted into a grimace that did his countenance no favors. “It seems you are to be released immediately. And you’ve been promoted to Major. Something to do with ensuring the destruction of a grave threat to the Clan and exemplary services rendered in aid to the war effort, apparently. Congratulations, I suppose.” Ugly appeared to be singularly uncomfortable with the change of circumstances.

“Thank you, Agent. Could I bother you for some water?”