

My Kingdom For A Horse

Claims Office Eos City, Arx

Dacien Victae di Plagia, Butcher of Lyspair, adept of the dark side, former Headmaster of the Dark Jedi Brotherhood, and Right Hand of Justice, ground his teeth in frustration. He rapped his knuckles, hard, on the durasteel desk before him and stared a threat of unspeakable horror at the wiry little man seated on the far side.

"I'm sorry, my lord, but your policy simply does not cover damage of this sort." The man, sweating slightly, leaned forward, datapad in hand. "If you look -- here -- this clause specifically excludes 'Damage to the craft caused by planetary re-entry and crash in a warzone.'" He glanced up from the datapad, grimaced at Dacien's death-stare, and quickly continued. "Our adjusters have reviewed your claim very carefully and our conclusion is that your crash on Nancora falls firmly within this provision. Again, I *am* sorry."

Dacien took a deep breath and focused the whole of his will on calmly, if a bit haltingly, stringing some words together. "I...would like...to speak to your supervisor. Immediately."

The little man smiled apologetically. "I am the director of this office, my lord. If you would like to speak to the Regent directly, I can have the proper request forms prepared for your signature within the hour."

Dacien sighed a weary sigh. "No. No, that won't be necessary." He stood, flourishing his cape and idly gripping the lightsaber hanging on his right hip. "The power and fury of the Force is no match for Evant's impenetrable bureaucratic armor," he said under his breath as he turned and strode purposefully out of the tiny office.

He had come in person to contest the Regent's rejection of his insurance claim for the total destruction of his Upsilon-class shuttle *Astraeus* by way of an unpleasant encounter with the surface of Nancora. That shuttle had cost him most of the small fortune he had acquired during his time in the Brotherhood and he desperately needed the Regent's office to pay for a replacement.

A few days after the crash, a claims adjuster had surveyed the extent of the damage and informed him that he wouldn't receive a single bent credit. Dacien had not taken it well. But he soon regretted his reaction and had promptly bought the man new cybernetic legs, which were a marked upgrade over his old fleshy ones. In hindsight, that little incident may have colored the Claims Office's review today.

Regardless, he had followed this trail as far as it would take him. He would simply have to find a substantial new source of credits to finance a new shuttle. He already earned a decent salary for his work as a Hand. But how to supplement that? Dacien was an accomplished murderer, but he was no assassin. An excellent pilot and former Imperial admiral, but he was no mercenary. Could he, perhaps, spy? He wasn't trained in espionage, and his only prior brushes with that world had ended in explosive violence. But it might be worth another shot.

Dacien pondered his future as he settled in for the brief repulsorlift trip back to his spacious apartment. His encrypted Shadow Academy datapad flashed a coded alert -- he had an urgent message from an unknown source. Curious, Dacien entered his passcode and accepted the message.

Good morning, folks. Laren Uscot here. Your mission, if you choose to accept it, is simple.

Since the Shadow Academy has relocated to Arx, a monumental effort in security and secrecy has been undertaken to transport invaluable treasures of vast knowledge from all corners of the galaxy into the Master Archives. While massive amounts of ships, manpower, and resources have been dedicated to the protection of these items, there is no such thing as a perfect plan.

You and your team, if you choose one, have been tasked to secure a holocron being transported from the Star Destroyer *Paladin* to the Master Archives of the Shadow Academy on Arx. Bring the holocron to me at a location of your choosing, and you'll be generously rewarded.

As always, should you or any of your team be captured or worse, I will personally disavow any knowledge of your actions. I may be a mercenary, but I'm not stupid. Oh, and this message will self-destruct in five seconds.

Dacien grinned as the message deleted itself. *This* he could do. For the right price.

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Lambda-class Shuttle *Imperious*

On approach to the Victory-class Star Destroyer *Paladin*

Dacien stepped into the cockpit of the *Imperious* bearing a stern visage. "Report, pilot."

"My lord, the *Paladin* has instructed us to hold at this position and await further orders," the pilot relayed.

"Did you provide my clearance code?"

"Yes, my lord. They targeted us with their turbolasers as soon as we exited hyperspace and only stood down once I transmitted the code."

Dacien nodded. *Admirable caution.* “Very good. Put me through to the bridge.”

The pilot silently moved to comply, punching in the correct comm channel and connecting. He glanced up at Dacien and gave a crisp nod when the line was open.

“*Paladin*, this is Dacien Victae di Plagia. Who is in command?”

Silence for one...two...three.... A loud burst of static, then silence again. The line was closed.

Dacien frowned and looked to the pilot for an explanation. The man shrugged, confusion evident on his face. Dacien gestured at the comm panel. “Try again.”

The pilot re-engaged the connection and glanced up at Dacien.

“*Paladin*, I am here on urgent Academy business. Do not delay me further.”

No reply, though the line remained open this time.

“*Paladin*, what is your status?” Dacien asked, wondering at this strange behavior. Still no reply.

Dacien motioned for the pilot to mute the comm. “Fly us in. Land in the hangar. I will get to the bottom of this.” He paused for moment, reaching out with his senses. Something was *wrong* on that ship. “Keep the engines warm and don’t let anyone board this shuttle.”

“Yes, my lord.” The pilot engaged the main thrusters and the looming destroyer rapidly grew in the display port. The comm channel remained silent and the *Paladin*’s weapons sat idle.

Dacien, brow furrowed, exited the cockpit and stood at the top of the shuttle’s closed ramp. He shut his eyes and probed the *Paladin* with the Force. He could sense the crew, some Force users, most not. They were relatively few in number, but that wasn’t unusual since the *Paladin* had ceased functioning as a mobile Academy after the founding of the new Shadow Academy on Arx. He also felt the odd Force-tinged relic, par for the course on an Academy vessel. But something -- something he could not identify -- felt out of place. Powerful emotion welled within him, a powerful longing *called* to him.

Whatever that thing was sensed him back.

Dacien opened his eyes with a *shudder* and took both of his sabers in hand. He gripped them tightly and focused on his breathing as the *Imperious* entered the hangar bay.

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VSD *Paladin*

The shuttle's ramp *hissed* shut, leaving Dacien alone in the dark, cavernous hangar bay. There were no crew in sight and only emergency lighting illuminated his path to the access corridor. He proceeded cautiously, probing for signs of nearby life as he stepped through the blast door and into the hallway. It, too, was empty. He picked up his pace and headed for the nearest turbolift.

He was very familiar with the layout of the *Paladin*, having spent the better part of two years living and travelling on it. Relying on that knowledge, he made his way towards the ship's Vault, nestled securely near the center of the ship's mass not far from large suite of rooms reserved for the Headmaster. Ordinarily, that area would be heavily guarded, but...

As the turbolift rose from the hangar bay up into the heart of the ship, he finally began to sense other people nearby. But the profound *wrongness* pressed him, worming its way into the recesses of his mind. He stumbled against the side of the turbolift car, one hand splayed on the wall, the other a clenched fist. Dacien shook his head and steadied himself, regaining control and forcing the -- whatever -- out. He could still feel it like an outside force pushing against him; the pressure increasing with each passing moment.

After an eternity, the turbolift slowed to a stop and the door opened. Dacien stepped out into the dark corridor and came face-to-barrel with a raised blaster rifle. He reacted by pure instinct, stepping to his left, slightly bending his knees, swiftly grabbing the barrel with his hand and *twisting* it away from him down and to the right. At the same time, one of his dual lightsabers leapt into his extended left hand and ignited, bathing the dim corridor in bloody light. Then he froze.

"Captain Wilks?" Dacien asked the woman holding the blaster.

She immediately dropped the gun and snapped to attention, a horrified expression on her face. "My lord, I didn't know it was you!" Wilks had served on his personal security detail during his time as Headmaster. He had always found her to be a competent and diligent officer. And not easily intimidated.

Dacien, released the barrel of her blaster and let it drop to the floor with a *clang*. He disengaged his saber, returning it to his belt. Then he paused to survey the scene around him. Captain Wilks, terrified, in front of him. Two heavily-armed guards standing outside the Vault door just a few yards away, weapons ready. And bodies. Five--no, six bodies, all in Shadow Academy garb and varying degrees of dismemberment.

"Captain, what's going on?" Dacien asked, refocusing on the woman before him. "My shuttle couldn't get any response from the bridge, all of the lights on this damned ship are off, and it looks like a warzone in here." Dacien gestured at the bodies and the guards. Then he noticed

that the guards had turned away from him and the Captain. They were facing the Vault, and their weapons were raised.

Captain Wilks cleared her throat, drawing his attention back. "Uh, my lord, there's been an incident. The *Paladin* is on lockdown. Or...well, it would be on lockdown, but most of the crew aren't...they aren't feeling well."

Dacien watched her for a moment, waiting. He didn't recall her being so pale, so faded. When she didn't continue, he glanced back at the guards, the bodies, back to her. She was staring past him, through him. "Captain. Captain," Dacien snapped his fingers twice in front of her eyes, "look here." Nothing. Dacien frowned, spared her another look, then walked toward the Vault. He had come here for a purpose. He would complete his task and then return to Arx and send help.

He stepped carefully over and around the bodies and stepped up to the two Vault guards. "Open the door."

The guard to Dacien's left turned to regard him for a moment before returning to his silent vigil. Dacien felt anger building inside him, unused to being so casually dismissed. He grabbed the man by the right shoulder and *pulled* him back around violently. Dacien leaned in close. "Open. The. Door." He nodded at the sealed Vault. "Now, or you join the others back there." He indicated the bodies in the hall with a twitch of his head.

The guard sneered but said nothing. His partner didn't so much as look over their way. Behind him, he heard Captain Wilks clear her throat again. Dacien *shoved* the guard hard into the Vault door, bones breaking. The man slumped in a heap, sneer glued to his face. Dacien turned around to face Wilks. The weight of the wrongness grew; its pressure probed at his senses, looking for a way in like water following the path of least resistance.

The Captain's face was a pallid, blank mask. "Captain," Dacien began with a warning tone.

"You should just let him in, My Lord," Wilks said, talking over the adept as if Dacien hadn't said a word. "He's no threat to You." She wasn't looking at him.

"Who should I let in?" Dacien asked quietly.

"He's just one man. He's powerful, but he's just one man. His knowledge of this place could help You."

"Captain..." Dacien glanced over his shoulder at the remaining guard, who stood still as a statue, then back to Wilks. "Captain, who are you talking to?"

She didn't reply, but the wrongness did. It whispered at the back of his mind *Let Me in*.

Dacien moved in a sudden burst of speed, whipping one lightsaber out at the lone guard and decapitating him. At the same moment, Dacien delved deep within himself to harness the cruel power: a Force so cold it burned, so hot it froze his soul. His brown eyes grew sallow around the edges as lightning leaped from his extended fingertips and *struck* Wilks square in the chest. The woman flew a meter backwards and crumpled, tendrils of smoke rising from her corpse.

He heard laughter as he retrieved his blade and scrambled over the dead guards to the Vault's access panel. Thankfully the current Headmaster, Farrin Xies, trusted Dacien enough to give him up-to-date access codes. He punched the code in and stepped back as the Vault began to *creak* slowly open. The laughter grew, the *pressure* pounded at his skull. When the door opened wide enough for him to enter, he took one step forward and collapsed.

The Vault **VSD *Paladin***

Dacien strolled through the Vault, idly perusing its contents. Holocrons, tomes, scrolls, a variety of ancient artifacts of unknown origin or use, the occasional mask -- the Sith had always been fond of masks. The room was warm, well-lit, inviting. He enjoyed his time here. So much to discover and learn. He really should stay a while; nothing was pressing him.

As he made his way further into the Vault, he spotted an unusual-looking holocron. It was spherical and seemed to be made entirely of translucent red-and-gold metal. He'd never seen anything like it. It sat alone on a pedestal, a place of honor. Curious, Dacien approached the holocron.

The lights flickered out, replaced by emergency track lighting; a strong smell of ozone filled the room as bodies materialized from nothing around him, eight or nine in total sprawled on the Vault floor.

In an instant, the lighting returned, the air regained the pleasant if somewhat stale scent of *old things*, and the bodies disappeared. Dacien blinked once, twice, startled out of his reverie. *What the in the bloody Force-cursed hells* Dacien thought. He spun around, taking in the full room. Nothing unusual. He turned to the strange holocron and took an involuntary step back. A man in a flowing black robe, hair black as night with eyes to match, stood beside the pedestal. The man smiled.

"You're a tough one to crack, Dacien," the man said without moving his mouth. "I've been trying to get your attention for a while and, really, you made it quite difficult."

Dacien nodded, mostly to himself. "Was she talking to you? Wilks, earlier?"

Still-mouth's smile grew. "Yes, she was fond of you, you know. In another life, perhaps you two might have...but you killed her, so it's neither here nor there."

Dacien raised a hand and waved off any further conversation. "It's been a long day. This is a Force vision or I hit my head really hard. You're some kind of Force-y not-a-person, or a Force ghost or...something." Dacien indicated the strange holocron with a quick nod. "Is that you? I think you live in that little sphere."

Still-mouth's smile grew again, now unnervingly large. "As I said, tough to crack. I'll make you the same offer I made your friend Wilks and the rest of this ship's crew. Get Me out of here and I will share My knowledge with you. All you have to do is *let Me in*."

Dacien grimaced as the pressure *flooded* back, threatening to crush him. He couldn't breathe; Still-mouth's *longing* to escape was overwhelming, a physical force pushing all around him, inside and out. He growled in defiance and lunged forward to grab the not-man by the throat -- but his hand passed through empty space. Still-mouth smiled some more.

Dacien roared in pain and frustration, then reached inside himself to call the dark power once more. It didn't answer. He couldn't feel the dark side *at all*. Panic threatened to take him; he hadn't felt *powerless* like this in decades. If he had lost his connection to the Force, he would be cut down and discarded by the Brotherhood, by his clan and fellow di Plagia. It would all be over. Maybe Still-mouth could help him, restore him. All he had to do was *let Him in*.

Dacien froze. His thoughts weren't his own.

He forced himself to breathe, to slow down, to assert control. He remembered the dead guards, the empty corridors. The Vault should be dark and littered with bodies. This place, well lit, comfortable, clean -- it wasn't really a place at all. His hand had passed through Still-mouth, but if they weren't in a real place, then Still-mouth wasn't really there and neither was Dacien. He wasn't cut off from the Force. He was being manipulated.

Dacien's eyes snapped open. He was lying halfway through the Vault door, the looming cavern ahead of him pitch black except for a faint red-gold glow atop a pedestal near the far side of the room. He grunted and pushed himself up, checking his sabers. Dacien stalked into the Vault, radiating fury at Still-mouth's deception. He could feel the dark side, feed off it. His anger would sustain him now.

As he approached the spherical holocron, it seemed to *pulse* in time with the pounding of his heart. It whispered incomprehensibly at the back of his mind; it was the sound of fear. The pressure was gone but the sense of wrongness remained, plainly emanating from the holocron. He watched it for a moment, considering, and then speared it through the center with a crimson blade.

Davar's Bar
Eos City, Arx

Laren Uscot sat at a private booth in the back of small bar. The location had been Dacien's choice for the delivery; it wasn't much to look at, but the drinks were reasonably priced and could shear the hull from a Star Destroyer. Laren browsed his encrypted datapad, shaking his head and muttering "An entire galaxy, and Furios wants to go *there* on vacation?" A small box *thudded* on the table and Laren looked up.

Dacien Victae di Plagia took a seat across from him. He looked tired, maybe a little angry. "Do you know what this is?" The adept asked.

Laren smiled.