

# The Butcher

Dacien Victae di Plagia, #7388

## Hangar Bay 1 Dreadnaught *Braga*

*"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.*

Adept Dacien Victae di Plagia watched as Captain Ferro Morl ran to the hangar bay exit, keeping his balance remarkably well given the increasingly-potent tremors of the dying vessel, turned the corner and disappeared. Dacien hoped he hadn't inadvertently sent the young Captain to his death in a damaged escape pod. *It would be a pity to lose such a malleable tool,* Dacien mused as his grin faded into a grimace. He almost believed his own lie.

The hangar bay shook violently, rafters in the ceiling *creaking, snapping,* and falling to the deck below. Dacien swiftly turned and ran up the extended ramp of his Upsilon-class shuttle *Astraeus*. His Imperial Sentry Droid still stood guard diligently at the top of the ramp. Dacien stepped past the droid and paused as he entered the shuttle's hold. Two dead Technocratic Soldiers lay one on the other just inside the hold, killed by clearly-visible blaster burns. Dacien turned to his droid.

"There are dead people on my ship, droid," Dacien said flatly. "You know the rules."

"Yes, master. I was going to dispose of them before you returned, but then more of them arrived after the explosion in the reactor core." The droid stopped to indicate the ring of dead Technocrats at the bottom of the ramp. "I was compelled to hunt them all down, Master. That left too little time for clean up. My apologies."

The *creaking* in the hangar bay grew steadily worse as the grip of Nancora's gravity well pulled the *Braga* apart. Explosions echoed through the vast chamber, and then the lights went out.

Dacien slapped the ramp control panel as he continued on his way towards the cockpit. "Get rid of them first thing when we land, Droid. First thing. I don't care if you need to recharge!" Dacien shouted over his shoulder. The droid shrugged to itself. It waited a few moments while the ramp closed, then followed Dacien out of the cargo hold.

The droid had its own special maintenance and recharge station just outside the cockpit, which it opened and stepped into. As the transparent door of the maintenance station slid shut, Dacien's voice crackled to life over the shuttle's intercom: "Droid! There's another one in the cockpit. I swear by the Force I will..." The droid heard no more as it cycled off.

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### **Upsilon-class Shuttle *Astraeus* Escape from the *Braga***

Dacien grumbled to himself as he activated the shuttle's attitude and main thrusters, skipping the usual safety protocols. All of the system indicators looked as good as could be expected. The shuttle's reactor was quickly and ably nearing 100% from a cold start, which was dangerous in the best conditions and potentially fatal in the hangar bay of a latent fireball. The shields were up and the *Astraeus'* dual laser cannons would be online before he needed them. He glanced over at the dead Technocrat in his co-pilot's seat, sighed, and engaged the vertical thrusters.

The *Astraeus* lifted from the hangar bay floor as ceiling beams, wiring, and electronics fell onto and around it. The small collisions shook the shuttle but caused it no serious damage. Once the shuttle was fully separated from the deck, Dacien retracted the landing gear and rotated the ship to face the looming threat of Nancora outside the hangar shield. Worryingly, he thought he could see the faint glow of molten plasma growing around the *Braga's* hull. *I'm out of time*, he thought as he punched the throttle.

Abruptly, the hangar bay ceiling collapsed in an explosion of fire and debris so overwhelming that it bore the *Astraeus* back down to the deck. Dacien was violently thrown against his seat restraints as the cockpit lit up in a brilliant display of red warning symbols set to the terrifying blare of every warning siren known to humanity. But the shuttle's powerful main thrusters continued to do their work, rocketing the *Astraeus* out into space. Dacien scrambled to regain control as the shuttle entered a high-G spiral, the view in front of him rapidly swirling between massive Nancora and the black depth of space.

Only through his years of training as a pilot and Force-aided reflexes was he able to steady the ship's course by deliberately and rapidly adjusting attitude thrusters on either side of the hull.

After a few seconds he had enough control to take stock of his situation: most of his sensors were dead, as were his communications suite and weapons control. Many of the shuttle's thrusters were damaged, though a careful test of course adjustment told him that he could still fly.

Dacien called up one of the shuttle's still-functioning optical sensors on his viewport. In it, he could see the corpse of the *Braga* alight with the heat of atmospheric re-entry. *Won't be long now. Any trace of me or my mission there will be blown into its constituent atoms*, Dacien reflected somberly. Movement caught his eye. A piece of the *Braga* seemed to be getting closer, moving erratically. Dacien watched for a moment before closing his eyes and reaching out with the Force to prod at what he had seen.

*Human. Closing on me.* "It's a damned pilot," Dacien said to no-one. Dacien checked his shield gauge -- dangerously low. He couldn't fight and he could barely maneuver. His only hope was distance and danger. He shunted what little power remained in the shields over to the main thrusters, pushing the throttle beyond its ordinary maximum, then carefully tilted his vector towards the planet's surface. The *Astraeus* groaned under the added pressure, the ordeal in the hangar bay having stressed its hull to the breaking point already. Nancora grew larger, licks of flame flooding his view.

Dacien toggled through his sensors trying to identify who, or what, was after him. Most of them were either completely offline and nonresponsive, or were in clear need of calibration and showing him nonsense data. After a few moments of searching he was able to piece together enough to identify the ship as an old Z95 Headhunter. He hadn't been seriously threatened by one of those since his days in the Academy, decades ago. *Who says you can't go back?* Dacien thought with a fatalistic grin on his face. He gripped the shuttle's controls and held on as the *Astraeus* raced towards the planet.

His pursuer was not easily dissuaded. In fact, the enemy pilot appeared to be fully committed to the chase and continued to rapidly close on the *Astraeus*. He would be in weapons range in moments, according to the estimated range map displayed on Dacien's console. *Time's up*, Dacien thought, as the Z95 crossed the final range marker. Dacien simply waited, knowing there was nothing he could do to fight back and that trying to evade would put him into an unrecoverable death spiral as the heat and pressure of Nancora's upper atmosphere intensified.

Dacien saw the red light of the blasts but never heard or felt anything in the tumult of planetary re-entry; the shuttle simply stopped following his commands. Two more crimson blasts followed, and then his remaining sensors showed the Z95 pulling up rapidly, escaping back towards vacuum -- likely convinced, with good reason, that he'd secured a kill.

Dacien sat quietly, eyes closed, as the *Astraeus* plummeted to its doom, wreathed in flame.

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**Crash Site *Astraeus***  
**The Badlands, Nancora**  
**One day after the crash**

Dacien awoke with a start, gasping desperately for air. His hands flailed about, trying to grasp something -- anything -- in the darkness that surrounded him. A sharp, stabbing pain arced down his left shoulder and through his arm, stalling him instantly. After a few seconds of panic, he regained a sense of himself and lowered his arms back down to his side, breathing slowly and deeply. He closed his eyes, carefully focused on his presence in the Force. *Multiple fractures in my left arm, some internal bleeding, but otherwise...I'm alive enough.*

He reached out with his senses. He wasn't alone; he could feel two distinct life forms very close. But where was he? He was on his back -- no, he was reclining in a chair. He felt around for a moment and found straps across his chest. *Still on the Astraeus*, he realized with a mix of calm familiarity and the dread of memory, of falling to his certain death. He unstrapped himself and carefully rolled out of the seat. He stood at an angle, the cockpit pointing up, the rest of the shuttle -- what was left of it -- down and ahead of him.

Some red emergency lighting still glowed in the hallway as he stepped out of the cockpit. The droid maintenance station to his left was open, the droid gone. Further ahead, he saw gaping wounds in the cargo hold bulkhead, faint starlight trickling in and casting weak shadows around him. He crawled through a large hole in the bulkhead and emerged into the dark, hot air of Nancora night. The back half of his shuttle, including the cargo hold and parts of the two vestigial wings, lay a good ten meters away, a crumpled, burning wreck. *I'll have to get a real job after this*, Dacien brooded as he spared a thought for the prohibitive cost of replacing his beloved shuttle.

As he took stock of his surroundings, a powerful sense of *not being alone* pounded in his forehead. Thankfully, his lightsabers had survived the crash intact on his belt, as had the vital Shadow Academy datapad containing the specs of the *Braga's* stealth system. Dacien carefully ensured that the datapad was secured, then grabbed a saber with his right hand, finger on the activator. Grimacing against the pain of his broken left arm, he crept around the shuttle's corpse as silently as he could manage in the low light.

As he rounded the side of the ship, he heard voices in hurried conversation. Argument, maybe. They weren't shouting, but they weren't exactly quiet either -- but then, they probably thought everyone at this crash site was dead. He kept low and slowly made his way in the direction of the voices.

After a few moments, a small camp came into view: a couple of low-rise tents, a light emitter, and various gear packs scattered around it all. More importantly: two humanoids. On their knees. Hands raised. Arguing with a droid. His droid. Dacien dropped all pretense of stealth

and strode purposefully into the camp, slightly regretting his pace when his left arm complained vigorously.

“But we don’t have access to a ship, Yo-Your Accuracy! Please, please, just let us go. We won’t touch anything else on your wre--er--shuttle and we won’t tell anyone!” cried one of the two. As he neared, Dacien could clearly make out the garb of Technocrats, though they didn’t appear to be soldiers. Engineers of some sort? They also appeared to sport a variety of bizarre cybernetic implants. *Weirdos*, Dacien thought as he stepped beside his droid.

The two Technocrats stared up at him, eyes wide, mouths agape. The droid apparently had not noticed him, though, as it spoke: “I do not believe you, lowly humans. You will take me to a ship suitable for one of my stature, and in return I will not kill you slowly. But first you *will* complete my monument.” The droid gestured out into the desert, where Dacien could just make out a pile of debris roughly shaped into the form of an Imperial Sentry Droid. “The eyes must glow, humans.” The droid’s digitized warble carried a distinct menace.

When the Technocrats failed to respond, the droid raised its blaster-arm and aimed at the Technocrat to its right. Dacien cleared his throat. *Ahem*. The droid spun, blaster still raised, and regarded Dacien in awkward silence.

“Uhhmm,” mumbled the droid, “Master. I am pleased that you did not combust during the descent.” The droid lowered its weapon. “As you can see,” the droid lifted its other hand back towards the wreckage of the *Astraeus*, “the bodies have all been removed from the shuttle, as instructed.” The droid paused, then added, “Master.”

Dacien could only nod as he choked down the urge to yell, laugh, and cry all at the same time.

“These two are my servants, Master.” The droid indicated the Technocrats. “They will secure us transport, once they have completed...”

“Your monument. Yes, I overheard,” Dacien finished, eyebrow raised and frowning slightly, but still yell-laugh-crying on the inside. “That will have to wait, droid.” He regarded the Technocrats for a moment before resuming, the droid glaring intently at them. “Do you have a ship?” Dacien asked the Technocrats.

“I -- no, I tried to tell your droid--” The droid placed the barrel of its blaster arm against the man’s head. “--I tried to tell His Accuracy that, my lord. We’re miners, not pilots or soldiers. We’re no better than slaves out here, no say in where, why, or how long we work. There’s just no way...,” he trailed off.

Dacien considered for a moment, nodding. “Where are we, exactly?” he asked the droid.

“We appear to be somewhere in the Nancora Badlands, Master. Before the shuttle crashed, its droid brain reported us on a trajectory to land between Axio and Faron City, but I do not know how close th--”

The droid’s head exploded outward, molten metal rupturing from its face and splattering onto the two Technocrat miners who collapsed to the ground screaming, writhing as the viscous metal rapidly burned through clothing, skin, and bone. Dacien dropped and rolled to his right, away from the burning husk of his droid. A brilliant streak of light and heat tore through the air where he had stood. He heard a *sizzle* when the bolt struck the barren ground behind him, fusing it into glass.

He had glimpsed the origin of the bolt this time and sprang into action, leaping inhumanly far to land beside his new target. She presented a terrifying visage in the low light: tall, dark, a fiercely angular face with yellow tattoos under her eyes. Dacien slashed downward with his one good arm, single red saber ablaze. The *Shikari* Huntress didn’t miss a beat, just ducking under and sidestepping the slash. In the same movement she dropped her bow and brought her fist up into Dacien’s right side, just beneath the shoulder. A sharp pain lanced through his body and he recoiled, jumping backwards out of her reach.

Dacien risked a quick look at his new wound, raising his arm slightly. His armor was punctured, blood congealing around the hole. *Vibroknuckler. That was stupid and sloppy. She’s well-trained and too fast.* Dacien reset his stance, raising his saber high, slightly flexing his knees. The two slowly circled each other, looking for an opening.

“You’re a good shot,” Dacien called out to her.

She gave him a feral grin but said nothing, keeping to a low fighting stance with the vibroknuckler on one hand and a stun baton gripped in the other.

Dacien knew his wounds would only get worse until he had time to meditate. Moreover, he was an expert with two blades; with just the one, his form would suffer. If this fight dragged on the *Shikari* might very well get the better of him. “Are you here for me?” He asked, not expecting an answer.

She nodded. “I am here to hunt Jedi.”

“Well you’ve mistaken me for someone else, then. I’m certainly no Jedi.” Dacien forced a laugh. “I’ll make you a deal. If you leave now, I will let you go.”

“I don’t make deals with your kind, Jedi. Now be quiet and die with honor. My sisters will be here soon, and I do not wish to share this kill.”

“That’s just as well,” Dacien muttered, “I was lying.” As he finished speaking, Dacien *whipped* his right arm forward, releasing his grip on the blood-red lightsaber. The blade *whirred* through the air in a spinning arc, the *Shikari* in its path.

She dropped into a forward-roll, the blade passing well overhead, and came up running straight at Dacien, poised to strike.

Dacien let his blade fly off on its own, firmly planted his feet with his right hand splayed open, and let the power of the dark side flow through him. He felt a sickly, twisting surge of energy, so strong and cruel that it threatened to burn him alive from the inside. The muffled ache in his left arm swelled into a chorus of torment. Dacien’s face twisted in pain, a grimace fixed under hard eyes. Rarely in his life had the dark side felt so *alive*, so *intentional*. It wanted to consume him.

The Adept slammed his will into the power, encircling it, strangling it, focusing it -- outwards. A fierce white-blue lightning sparked from Dacien’s outstretched fingertips. It burst through the short gap between the two combatants in the span of a heartbeat and struck the *Shikari* forcefully in the center of her chest. The Huntress was instantly knocked off course, spinning around and off to Dacien’s left. She hit the ground with a bone-crunching *crack*.

She didn’t cry out. She was already dead.

Dacien let out a deep breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding. For a moment he merely observed the *Shikari*’s corpse, wary of some trick though the Force told him she did not linger in her flesh. He walked over to the body, nursing his aching left arm with his one good hand. Normally, drawing on the dark side for a short burst of Force lightning would not phase him, but his injuries -- and, he surmised, exhaustion -- had taken a toll. He needed to find safety soon.

Kneeling over the dead Huntress, Dacien carefully picked over her equipment. One item in particular drew his attention: she wore an Inquisitorius scanner on her arm. *Stolen from a dead spy. Or a gift from a traitor.* Dacien removed the scanner and looked it over. It was thoroughly encrypted, and he had no hope of slicing into it. He crushed it in his hand and continued his search.

Only one other item of note emerged. It was a datapad, also encrypted, but with a workable and unsecured global positioning system. *Useful.* Dacien activated it, quickly pinpointing his position to within a few meters. He had crashed in the middle of nowhere, nearly equidistant from the planet’s two major city hubs. The odds of finding a ship nearby were low, to the say the least. But it looked like there was a camp of some sort maybe a day’s journey further out into the Badlands. The Technocrat miners may have come from there, and it was his best hope of finding a vehicle of any kind.

Dacien stood and hooked the Assassin’s datapad to his belt. Then he raised his right arm with a flick of the wrist and his lightsaber shot out of the surrounding gloom. He caught it, secured it,

and returned to the miners' camp to search for supplies. The sun would rise soon, and even an Elder Sith could die of heat and dehydration.

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## **Nowhere**

### **The Badlands, Nancora**

#### **Two days after the crash**

After leaving the crash site, Dacien had made his way carefully to the south and west, using the natural features of the Badlands' scarred and pockmarked terrain to stay hidden from any prying eyes. He spent the better part of the morning seeking a safe place to rest and recover, the oppressive red glow of Nancora Major turning the already-hot desert into a sweltering deathtrap. Before long, he was forced to give up his search and settle for a partially-shaded spot in the lee of a large rock outcropping.

He ate half of a ration bar, and drank just enough water to wet his lips and tongue before cutting himself off. With no notion of how long it might take to find succor, he had to be ruthless with his rations. Sitting with his back against a rust-red rock, he crossed his legs, closed his eyes, and allowed himself to sink into a deep meditation. It was risky to delve too deeply or for too long, exposed as he was. But he hoped the *Shikari* tracking him would take time to rest during the heat of the day; as it happened, he was right.

They struck at dusk, the giant red star casting the sky in deep, unnatural hues as it sank below the horizon. It reminded Dacien of nothing more than blood. He had devoted the entire day to meditation, focused on resting and healing his wounds. The time was well spent: he had shed the previous day's exhaustion and regained limited use of his left arm, though it still pained him and fine motor control of his hand eluded him.

As he lingered on the cusp of meditation, observing the world more clearly through the Force than with his heavy-lidded eyes, he felt the three *Shikari* approach. They made no sound, nor could he have seen them had he looked. Instead, he focused on their presences in the Force. He smiled a wicked smile.

The *Shikari* crept towards the lone Sith, one raising a dart gun, two with arrows of pure plasma nocked and ready. The dart released with a barely-audible rush of air, expertly aimed at its target's exposed neck. In that same moment, Dacien's eyes snapped open and he launched into a backflip, landing fully upright. The blood-red saber in his right hand banished the darkness with a *snap hiss* as his left hand extended towards the nearest Huntress.

The dark power came easily to him this time, its hate and devouring hunger no match for the strength of his overbearing will. He *twisted* the power and *hurled* it forth. Terrible arcs of light spewed from his outstretched hand, striking and then enveloping the dart-bearer. Her head



arched toward the night sky, a wordless shriek escaping into the heavens as the evil sorcery lifted her bodily from the dirt.

Her companions loosed their blazing arrows, but Dacien sidestepped the first and easily deflected the second with his blade. They dropped their bows in unison and charged the Adept with stun batons and vibroknucklers, coming at him from opposite sides. The women roared in fear and anger as they closed on him. A cruel laugh leapt from Dacien's throat as he deactivated and dropped his saber.

Dacien raised his right hand beside the left, still *crackling* with hateful energy. He turned his focus inward, again grappling with the bottomless well of darkness. He heard his own half-mad cackling as if from a great distance, the world around him growing foggy, its shapes indistinct. The intoxicating blend of violence and pain threatened to consume him.

He knew he was running out time. It was reckless to draw upon so much of the dark side, even for one such as him. He could lose himself to it, drown in it, be torn asunder by it. Or he could channel it, direct it, *control it*. Risking everything, Dacien opened himself fully to the torrent of power, drew it within his will and *cast it out*. His ice-blue eyes grew sallow; his skin paled, dark veins throbbing beneath the surface .

The shape of the world snapped back into place. Blue-white energy now engulfed both of his hands. He brought them together with all of his might, forming the lightning into a single, thick strand of energy flowing from his hands into the crisped husk of the dart-bearing *Shikari*. In a flash, two more streams of liquid fire forked from her shell and bolted, one after the other, into her fellow Huntresses. The two women were caught in mid-swing, just a span of seconds from striking blows to Dacien's head and torso. But like their dead companion they were swept from their feet and utterly destroyed.

Dacien held the torrent open for several heartbeats, ensuring his work was done. Then he released his grip on the dark side and collapsed onto the hard, blistering earth. He slept the whole night without disturbance, his body in the center of a blackened ring of dirt. Charred debris, barely recognizable as human, surrounded him.

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**A Camp Near Nowhere**  
**The Badlands, Nancora**  
**Three days after the crash**

Dacien lost the entire next day to recovery. The sheer amount of power that had coursed through his body had not only left him drained, but had also exacerbated his still-healing wounds. Thankfully, he had been able to relocate from the rock outcropping to the *Shikari*'s

own nearby campsite, and spent the daylight hours meditating and recuperating inside a tent rather than exposed to the elements.

All of the gear on the women had been damaged beyond repair by his attack, but at the camp he had found another stolen Inquisitorius scanner. This time he did not destroy it immediately, but instead listened to the increasingly-frantic calls from other *Shikari* trying to make contact with the group he had roasted alive. The *Shikari* were growing careless in their operational security. He was able to glean quite a bit of useful information from their transmissions: he had apparently been designated a high priority target for the *Shikari*, but the Brotherhood's seven Clans had established beachheads across Nancora, diverting resources and attention from the chase.

Dacien needed to find a way off the planet before the ground war started in earnest, or he might be caught up in it. The *Braga's* stealth schematics were too valuable to risk in a warzone. So when the sun set again, he packed up his limited supplies, double checked his heading on the assassin's datapad, and resumed his journey. He would soon reach The Collective's mine and, he hoped, secure transport.

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### **Outskirts of Mine Krill-Twenty-Two The Badlands, Nancora Four days after the crash**

The mine was a gaping wound in Nancora's surface, a pit dozens of meters deep and at least a hundred across. From that wound oozed a gleaming metallic pus. A series of enormous pipes drew the liquid metal from pools at the base of the mine up to a surface-level facility where it was likely prepared for transportation to a processing plant. From his vantage point at the far rim of the mine, Dacien instantly recognized the liquid: it bore the same glimmer and silvery sheen as the prototype stealth device on the *Braga*. He had stumbled upon part of the supply chain for The Collective's superweapon.

He had spent the long hours before dawn observing the mine, witnessing a shift change as miners trudged into and out of the pit, overseers exchanged reports, and guards eyed both warily. Security personnel were light on the ground, no more than ten appearing at any time though he suspected at least that many were held in reserve. Two fixed blaster turrets flanked the surface facility, each manned by a single guard leaving just eight to patrol the mine. He also spied a handful of light repulsorlift vehicles and a squadron of speederbikes. *My ticket out of this scorched hell*, he thought as he stared longingly at the vehicle bay. In all of his time watching, none had approached his side of the rim.

As the blood-red light of Nancora Major broke over the horizon, Dacien took a final sip of water from his canteen then closed and hooked it to his belt. He held his left hand in front of his chest,

palm up, and flexed his fingers: finally, no pain. Fully recovered from both his crash wounds and the exertions of prior days, Dacien took both of his lightsabers in hand and rose to his feet. As he stood silhouetted against the rising red behemoth, surveying his nascent killing field, he was finally spotted. A guard raised the alarm, yelling and pointing up at the rim. Soon, sirens blared from the mining facility and the turrets rotated to face him. They fired, brilliant green spears of light erupting from both turrets.

The bolts overshot him by meters. Two fiery streaks roared over Dacien's head from behind, trailing acrid smoke. The turrets exploded, fire and debris raining down around them. Dacien ducked and turned in time to see four more missiles streaking towards the pit. He felt the *thump* of each explosion deep within his chest, heard the harsh *crack* of the munitions as they struck their targets -- his targets. But his attention was fixed on the approaching attackers: the missiles had been launched by a squadron of X-Wings now racing back into orbit; behind them, dropships lumbered to the ground and disgorged platoons of soldiers. Amidst the chaos of the invasion, Dacien felt the familiar presence of Force users. Then he spotted green, blue, and purple flashes as lightsabers sprang to life, the distinct *snap hiss* reaching his trained ears through the tumult. *Jedi.*

Dacien leapt into action. He turned back to the rim and stepped off, falling a dozen meters to land with an expert roll and coming to his feet at a run. He cut down three terrified miners who had taken cover against the wall of the pit. A nearby guard, eyes wide but determined, leveled his blaster rifle and fired at the Adept. Dacien easily side-stepped the first bolt and deflected the next two right back into the guard's chest, dropping him. Dacien slashed down at the squirming guard as he ran past, silencing the man's moans.

Escape from the Badlands would have to wait. He needed to reach the surface facility and secure any data or prototypes it might hold before the guards destroyed them, or, worse, the insufferable Jedi discovered them. As he raced across the mine, jumping from platform to platform to avoid falling deeper into the pit, he cut down two more guards and several miners -- he didn't bother to track how many. By the time he reached the elevator up to the surface facility, he could hear the sounds of pitched battle behind him. He paused to look back.

It seemed he had underestimated the reserve guard contingent: there were at least twenty, some heavily-armed Technocratic Soldiers but most more lightly equipped. The hidden strength of the defenders confirmed his suspicions about the nature of the mine -- The Collective clearly valued it more than a simple ore mine. Dacien returned his attention to the red-rock wall in front of him. The large pipes draining the mine ran up its side at least ten meters. The pipes were smooth; he couldn't hope to climb them. If he pushed himself, he could make it to the top in one leap, but that might leave him scrambling and exposed. *The elevator*, Dacien frowned, *I need to use the elevator.*

He clambered onto the elevator and hit the activator. The elevator was little more than an open-sided cart attached by metal cords to a pulley system at the top. Not very advanced, not

very fast. He waited impatiently as the contraption rode its way slowly up the cliff face, watching the carnage of battle unfolding as he went. The Jedi were in the thick of it now: one at the top of the rim helping the Brotherhood's soldiers engage the mine's defenders; two more down in the pit racing towards him, only stopping to dispatch the few guards that remained in the pit itself. They had seen him, then. Dacien gritted his teeth and willed the elevator to move faster, to no effect.

It took far too long, but the slothlike elevator eventually drew near enough to the mine's rim for Dacien to jump the rest of the way. He landed lightly and ran to the surface facility. The nearest entrance was a closed blast door. Dacien fixed it in his mind and closed his eyes, right arm outstretched. It took a few moments, but he found the mechanism and made the fine adjustments necessary to unlock the door.

The door sprang open and a warning *surged* through the Force. A grim-faced *Shikari* stood in the center of the doorway, bow drawn. She loosed her plasma arrow, Dacien already twisting and stepping to the left. But there wasn't enough distance between them and the arrow struck him firmly in the side of his torso. The bolt seared through armor and flesh and exited out his back. He roared in pain and fury and *hurled* his right-handed saber into the woman's face, dropping her instantly, her bow clattering to the duracrete floor.

He ducked inside the facility and probed his wounds. It hurt like a Force-cursed nightmare, but a quick survey with the Force told him it had missed his organs. His hand came away dry, the wound cauterized by the plasma. He clenched his teeth as a wave of pain washed over him, breaking after a moment as he forced it down. Eyes closed, he focused his power, briefly, on triaging the internal damage. Then he gathered himself and moved deeper into the facility.

He didn't encounter more *Shikari* inside, nor were any guards present. The sounds of the battle raging outside echoed through the structure as he entered the main chamber. It was large, though smaller than the outside of the building suggested: presumably the frame of the facility was heavily reinforced, leaving less interior space. It was austere, no ornamentation in sight, and the lighting was a harsh, unnatural white.

A handful of engineers and miners ran about, frantically gathering datapads and equipment and piling it all in the center of the room. Dacien spotted thermal detonators sitting in a ring around the pile. He stepped fully into the room, extended his right hand and *thrust* the detonators away from the equipment. When they struck the far wall, they exploded with a deafening *fwoop*, the blast wave knocking the Technocrats to the floor, senseless. Dacien braced against the pressure and stood his ground, arm shielding his face.

When the blast passed, Dacien walked up to the equipment pile and looked it over casually. The Adept glanced down at the nearest engineer who squirmed on the ground, head held in his hands. "Do you have samples?"

Dacien was forced to kill three engineers before one finally directed him to what he sought: a container of the liquid metal small enough to secure on his belt. Thanking the man with a quick death, Dacien ran to the nearest exit from the room and removed a thermal imploder from behind his back. He set the seven-second timer and lofted it in an arc that brought it down amidst the equipment and the few still-living engineers. He turned and exited the chamber, back towards the rim of the mine. He still had work to do.

The building *shook* with the force of the imploder's powerful detonation as he stepped back into blood-red daylight. The wind was picking up, flourishing Dacien's crimson cape and sending rust-dust spiraling into the air. One of the Jedi who had pursued him was just clambering over the lip of the mine, long dark hair whipping in a gust of hot air. Dacien could sense that the man's partner was just a meter or so lower in his climb.

"You climbed the damn thing?" Dacien called out to the long-haired Jedi. "Let me guess. You were a Guardian? I bet I've killed many of your friends," he taunted.

The man sneered at Dacien as he gained his footing at the top of the rim. He stood several inches taller than Dacien, with broad shoulders. He wore the simple robes of a Knight. "We were told to avoid conflict with the Sith, to focus on our common enemy." The long-haired Jedi gestured at the facility behind Dacien, which was starting to belch smoke. He paused, as if considering his next words carefully. "But I know who you are; what you've done, Butcher. You murdered *children* for your mad Grand Master." Long-hair ignited his lightsaber with a *snap hiss*, its cool sapphire glow cutting a sharp contrast to the oppressive, rust colored landscape.

Dacien's lips curled into a hateful smile, his face a rictus of anger. "Are you here for vengeance, little Jedi? Or do you call it justice?" He waved Long-hair forward, then gripped and ignited his dual sabers, crimson blades extending one after the other.

Long-hair proved too cautious -- *cowardly*, Dacien thought -- to be lured into a one-on-one fight with the Elder Sith. Instead he took a defensive stance as his partner joined him atop the mine rim. The second Jedi was only slightly shorter than the first and also sported the drab brown that all Jedi seemed so fond of. His young face was scarred and pockmarked, too young for a grizzled veteran; his eyes a pale gray, stoic. *A short life of trauma and loss*, the Adept surmised. Gray-eyes bore dual sabers, both a deep emerald hue. *Blue and green, colors of life and sustenance*, Dacien reflected as he watched the two Jedi share meaningful glances and hand gestures, *they don't belong on this dead rock*.

Across the rim, the battle between the Technocrats and Brotherhood forces was winding down, the few remaining Technocratic Soldiers just barely holding on in small pockets of defense. Amongst the Brotherhood troops, a dual-wielding Jedi of considerable power flowed through the ranks, purple blades a blur. For an instant, her eyes locked with Dacien's despite the distance. He felt her conviction, her fear. She would come for him, but not before he ground the two weaklings in front of him into the dirt.

Dacien breathed deeply, the gusting wind stiflingly hot. He released a light sigh, returning his attention to Gray-eyes and Long-hair. He charged Gray-eyes, crimson blades held high in an aggressive stance. Gray-eyes reacted quickly, raising his dual green sabers to parry and fixing his feet for support. Long-hair raised his single sapphire saber for an overhead strike at Dacien's exposed left flank. At the last moment, Dacien spun on his heel, twisting to the left and dropping to one knee, right-hand blade extending in a rapid Force-enhanced thrust at Long-hair's chest. Long-hair was too slow to react, unable to bring his saber down in defense before Dacien's blade punctured his heart.

The tall Jedi sputtered nonsense, eyes confused as blood poured from his mouth. He fell to his knees, Dacien's blade firmly lodged in his chest. "Lonat!" Gray-eyes cried out, fear overcoming his stoicism. Dacien tugged his saber free as he rose and skip-stepped backward, out of Gray-eyes reach. Lonat stared without seeing, eyes fixed on Dacien. The Adept felt a chill at the base of his spine, but shrugged it off with a frown. Lonat collapsed face-forward into the dust of the Badlands and lay still.

Gray-eyes was furious, the legendary Jedi calm lost in a torrent of passion. He roared in anger, and recklessly rushed Dacien. The Adept simply side-stepped the charge, Gray-eyes stumbling past, spittle trailing from his open mouth. Dacien turned as the Jedi passed and brought the jagged metal blade of his saber hilt down into the man's left shoulder with bone-crunching force. The Jedi let out a yelp of pain as his botched charge brought him stumbling headfirst into the side of the building.

The wind reached a roaring pitch, dust billowing in tight funnels. Dacien watched in open amusement as Gray-eyes rose, haltingly, and turned to face him again. "If I had the time, I'd regale you with stories of my youth," the Adept said with a grim smile. "Of my idealism. My hope for the future. I'd tell you how I served the Empire; believed it a force for good, for order. For justice." Dacien paused, unbidden memories of betrayal and loss assaulting him, a haunted look in his cold eyes as his grin faded. He shook his head slightly, and then continued in a quiet voice barely audible over the rising gale. "Then I'd tell you of the day it revealed its true face to me. How I discovered the festering rot at its heart and swore to excise it."

Dacien stepped forward, deactivated his sabers and returned them to his belt. He cocked his head to the side, face growing dark, eyes deadly serious. "But, oh, the things I've done in service to that goal. If you only knew the half of it..." Gray-eyes stared silently at Dacien, the gushing wound to his shoulder clearly painning him. Dacien inched ever-closer. "My point, friend, is that I see the pain and the anger that you try to hide. Your eyes betray you." Dacien paused, concern evident on his face, then quietly added: "There is another way."

Dacien's emerald dagger opened Gray-eyes' throat from ear to ear. The Jedi gurgled and clutched pointlessly at his neck, lifeblood spilling around his fingers. Dacien leaned forward and whispered in his ear, "I wish there were time for it." Gray-eyes gazed at Dacien in terror, eyes

wide. Dacien finished the Jedi with a thrust of his dagger into the man's heart, then stepped back and turned around.

The last remaining Jedi faced him. He recognized her, though her name escaped him. *Odanite*. She had come alone. In the distance, Dacien saw that the fighting was done. Her soldiers had secured a handful of prisoners, and the bulk were now racing toward them with weapons ready. The wind howled.

"Warden, I'm afraid I've killed your apprentices."

Her face was a mask of grim determination. "You have, Butcher. Two more names added to your list of bloody crimes. Killing apprentices comes easily to you. Killing me won't." She raised an already-ignited purple saber in challenge.

Dacien grunted, as if amused, then hurled his dagger in an underhand throw aimed at her center mass. Her eyes widened and she gasped, but managed to dodge the projectile, dropping to the side in a crouch. Dacien drew his sabers and ignited them, following behind his dagger in a blur of speed. The Jedi parried his first blow and rolled away from his second. The two dual-wielding warriors rapidly exchanged blows, thrusts, and parries under the scorching glare of Nancora Major.

The Warden was relentless in her attacks, the deaths of her pupils fueling her every move. Dacien soon found himself standing on the rim of the mine, back foot planted just inches from the edge. *This has lasted too long*, he thought, sparing a glance at the oncoming Odanite soldiers. He could cut them down to a man and defeat the Jedi Equite, but it would take precious time and energy. This excursion to Nancora had cost him dearly already. It was time to end her and leave.

Three explosions rippled through the ground, their sounds drowned by the roar of the wind. Dacien and the Jedi both whipped their heads back towards the Odanites and their captives, all of whom were likewise staring at the Odanite dropships -- or rather, the smoking craters filled with flaming dropship wreckage. Warriors in white-clad armor suddenly spilled over a small rise in the desert.

Dacien knew them instantly: they were Ravagers, slave soldiers of Clan Plagueis equipped in the manner of the old Imperial stormtroopers. Dacien groaned in frustration. He had contrived to fake his own death on the *Braga* in order to keep its stealth technology from his Clanmates. Now his Force-cursed luck had brought the Clan to him before he could make good his escape.

Reacting quickly, the bulk of the Odanite force wheeled around to face the new threat while a squad of soldiers continued towards him and the Warden. As he returned his attention to the Jedi, Dacien spotted an ominous dark shape in the distance, approaching the mine with impossible speed. It took him a moment to register what he was seeing. When the realization

dawned, his eyes widened. The Force tugged at all of his senses, promising mortal danger and rich opportunity. He grinned at the Warden, who had struck a defensive posture while watching the Plagueians arrive, then stepped backwards into the abyss and fell.

The storm hit as he dropped, a wall of dust and sand hundreds of meters high, blown by gale-force winds. Nancora's red sun disappeared behind a black shroud, only the faintest light seeping through and casting the already-red dust with a distinctly morbid hue. Rock, loose equipment, and even Long-hair's discarded lightsaber rained down into the mine in a shower of debris as the storm blasted overhead. Dacien rotated calmly in mid-air and landed in a crouch, then ran to the wall and ducked down for cover. In a matter of minutes, all of the large detritus from above had been blown away, leaving only sand and dust to be *whipped* around by the powerful storm.

Dacien took his cape in hand and tore away one of its corners. He fashioned it into a makeshift mask, covering his nose and mouth and tied it around his neck. Then he clambered up the side of the mine, selecting his hand- and foot-holds with care -- he was no climber -- and eventually reached the rim. The storm raged on. Dacien hauled himself out of the mine, arm shielding his eyes while the cape-mask kept the worst of the dirt from his lungs. The harsh, abrasive wind scourged his skin; the low light and swirling dust made his eyes useless.

So he closed them, lowering his arm and taking both sabers in hand. He steeled himself against the strong gusts and reached out with the Force, searching for the enemies he knew surrounded him. The squad of soldiers had been completely overcome by the storm; they still lived, but they were scattered and clung desperately to the ground. The Jedi was huddled nearby, trying to take cover behind the carcass of one of the Technocrats' blaster turrets. She sensed him, too, he could tell, as she slowly rose.

His sabers ignited, flooding the small visible space around him in crimson light. Motes of sand and dust danced around the blades, those that drew too close blackening with a *fsss* and flitting away. He wasted no time, *hurling* his right-hand blade at the sand-blinded Warden and chasing after it with inhuman speed. She frantically brought a purple blade up to to parry, but her senses were overwhelmed, her ability to counter with the Force too limited, and his follow-up lunge skewered her left lung. He heard her bloody gasps, sand and dirt sucked down into her hemorrhaging lung, followed by a wracking cough as she collapsed to the ground.

Dacien recalled his right-hand saber and quickly turned his attention to the struggling Odanite soldiers nearby, dispatching them with haste. Then he launched himself through the air and landed in the midst of the blind melee between the clashing Odanite and Plagueian forces. Dacien slashed about indiscriminately, none of his victims seeing more than an ominous red glow through the vicious wall of sand as he cut them down.

The storm passed as suddenly as it arrived. One moment all was dark chaos, the next clear sky over a massacre. Dacien stood, panting slightly, amidst the bodies of dozens of dead soldiers,



Odanite and Plagueian. He ripped the mask from his face and put away his sabers, surveying his bloody work.

Sand *crunched* behind him and he whipped around, hand reaching yet again for a blade. He hesitated.

“Captain?” Dacien asked, bewildered.

Ferro Morl stood helmet-in-hand facing the Adept, armor scoured by sand, dark eyes weary. A small squad of helmeted Ravagers stood in a semi-circle behind him, weapons lowered but with fingers on triggers.

“It’s Major, actually, my lord,” Ferro offered, bowing slightly and raising his right fist to his heart in salute. “For my work on the *Braga*.” The young man’s face took on a questioning look, as if asking *What the hell are you doing here?*

“Might we speak alone for a moment, Major?” Dacien asked, indicating the man’s escort.

“Ahh, yes, of course, my lord.” Ferro dismissed the Ravagers with a wave; the slave soldiers departed immediately, walking back over the small rise from which the Plagueians had originally appeared. He waited until they were out of earshot. “My lord, I didn’t expect to find you on Nancora. I thought you had left the system.”

Dacien grunted. “That was the plan, but we live in interesting times, Major.” He paused before continuing, noticing an odd deformity in the left glove of Ferro’s armor. “What happened?” The Adept asked, nodding to indicate Ferro’s hand.

“A long story, my lord. The short version is that I killed a very important person in a very unfortunate way, and now I’m in need of a new hand.” Ferro gestured at the bodies strewn around them. “Still, it could be worse.”

Dacien nodded and smiled, “It certainly could. And please, my friends call me ‘Sir.’” That drew a laugh and an affirmative nod from Ferro. Dacien pulled the small container of liquid metal from his belt and tossed it to Ferro. “Recognize that?”

Ferro examined it for a moment, nodding. “From the *Braga*? That shimmering metal in the stealth chamber?”

“Yes. Another piece of the puzzle. It seems the material comes from this very mine.” Dacien gave the Major a deadly serious look, pushing against the man’s senses with the Force to impart a message: *No one can leave here alive.*

Ferro's expression darkened. "Sir, there's an entire company of the Ascendant Legion camped nearby. You cannot stop word of this mine from spreading, it's already too late. The Odanites found it. We found it. You found it..." He trailed off, shrugging helplessly.

Dacien ground his teeth in frustration. Ferro was right, more would come. "Who knows I'm here?"

Ferro paused before answering slowly, "The squad I was with. Maybe their commander. Soon, others."

Dacien placed his right hand on the hilt of his saber and started to jog after the Ravager squad.

"Sir!" Ferro shouted, reaching out to grab the Adept as he passed. Dacien turned a fierce glare on the Major, lips curled in a snarl.

"Do not presume to stop me, Major. My survival cannot become common knowledge. Not yet." Dacien said menacingly. Ferro dropped his hand, mouth open as if trying to decide what to say. Dacien stared at him expectantly. "Spit it out, Ferro," he said sighing.

"Sir, you once warned me never to lie to you."

Dacien nodded, "Yes, it was good advice. So what?"

Ferro cleared his throat, his face paling slightly. "Might I speak freely, sir?"

Dacien appraised him carefully, nodding. "I wouldn't have you lie to me by omission. Go on."

"Sir, you were in the Imperial Navy once. A pilot, an officer. You sent soldiers to their deaths, but did you ever *waste* their lives?"

Dacien said nothing, face inscrutable.

Ferro continued. "I don't know your ultimate plan for this," Ferro raised the small container in gesture, "but I trust that you are working toward some greater goal. I trust that the reason you want your survival concealed serves *some purpose*. The Ascendant Legion has a purpose as well. It serves *your* Clan, sir, the Clan whose name you bear. Let the Legion serve that purpose; let it defend your Clan." Ferro paused to suck down a quick breath. "I will help you however I can. Just, please, don't *waste* these men and women."

Dacien stood in silence, his mind raging against itself, though his face betrayed nothing. After a few minutes, he asked, quietly, "What do you propose, Ferro?"

\* \* \*

**Ascendant Legion Forward Base  
Outskirts of Axio City, Nancora  
One week after the crash**

Adept Dacien Victae di Plagia stood in the Legion command tent, listening as generals relayed orders to their subordinates. The tent, like the small but well-defended base surrounding it, was a hive of barely-contained chaos: aides sprinted in and out, the sounds of ordnance and logistics echoed. The assault on Axio City was imminent.

Dacien's miraculous resurrection had been greeted with public celebration by the Clan Summit, which showered him with accolades for destroying the *Braga* and wiping out an Odanite company on Nancora. In private, the reception was cold and distrustful. His place at the head of the ground assault served dual purposes for the Dread Lord: first, he was the most powerful Sith in the Clan and had led a successful military career in his younger days, so it made strategic and tactical sense; second, and more importantly, it kept him occupied and in mortal danger.

Dacien absently checked his belt for the stealth-schematics datapad and the liquid metal container. They weren't there, and their absence endlessly bothered him. But Ferro could be trusted to keep them safe until this was resolved.

Ferro had been right. The Clan did matter to him, and he couldn't bring himself to spend its soldiers wastefully just to hide himself. He would lead the attack and Axio City would fall. That purpose fulfilled, he would disappear again to pursue his true mission: arming a new Empire.