

# **Dark Lord Substitute**

## **Chapter 1**

### **By Draconicon**

Bertram worked in the college library, using that time to build up a small pool of funds to supplement what little bit of his student loans weren't sucked up by the college. It was a bit of fraud, to be sure, but it worked out well enough for the ram. Not enough to be noticed, enough to make him slightly more comfortable. In this sort of environment, that mattered more than one might have thought.

The ram pulled another book from the trolley, pressing it between two others and sighing as he did. The mythology section had been bad enough, but looking at what students had done to the science and technology section was...well, it was enough to sink the heart.

*And nobody thinks to fix it...*

Bertram shook his head, knowing that the only thing to be done was to take everything down and organize it, breaking down the whole thing and putting it back together again. In order. Correctly. He started taking one book down after another, ensuring that they were all out of reach of anyone passing by, shaking his head as he did so.

“Alright. So...first number...”

He started sorting them by numbers first. He'd get the authors later, when they were all properly set up, but for now, the numbers. One after another, comparing them three decimals down, and he shook his head.

These little things were why he was convinced that any attempt to order the world was doomed. Every time that someone came up with a way to keep something organized, working properly, someone else came along and messed it up. All progress was halted while the people that did the organizing fixed it again, and in that time, the little pranks, the little bits of chaos and naughtiness spread further and further, requiring more effort to fix them and sort them out. There was more time spent fixing the little problems that chaos made than using the order to get ahead.

*And stories would have you believe that the forces of order would always win...*

He shook his head. Much as he approved of order in the library and elsewhere, he had yet to see what sort of effect it actually had. The sheer lack of care that people mucking about had for the system - and despite his annoyances, he knew that it was lack of care most of the time rather than outright malevolence - meant that there was little point in there being order besides the outright authoritarian sort. Of course, that was rather opposed by the library staff, so there was no chance in hell of that happening.

Everyone had it out for the forces of 'evil' in so many stories, but it really felt like the stories had a bad idea of just how unhelpful their vaunted freedom and choice of justice systems actually were. Trial by combat? Judged by an ill-informed king? Freedom to run around and do nothing, while the rest of the kingdom was trying to keep itself running? And kingdoms as a general rule, anyway, rather than something to at least attempt to weed out the failures in high office rather than the endless forgiveness the good guys gave them?

Really unbelievable, for that matter.

Bertram shook his head, picking up the first row of books and putting them back on the shelf. They were all in about the right order, and it was easy to shift one or two to make room for anything that had to go back on that shelf.

Being a librarian, he was surrounded by various stories, different mythologies, fantasies, sagas, and more of heroes that were trying to fight against the great evils of the world. More out of boredom than anything else, Bertram had read through more than his fair share, but every single time, he ended up coming out of it wondering how the heroes would have won if they were facing a more competent opponent. It felt like the heroes won because of fiat rather than because they had earned it, and the villains were horrible because it made the heroes look better.

*If they had even one antagonist that knew what they were doing, then it would change everything, he thought, sliding another book onto the shelf. And I imagine that, from the top, a dictatorship with the right sort of mindset behind it wouldn't be that bad. If you had the right sort of evil overlord to set everything in place, you might actually be able to build a proper society out of it.*

Another set of books up on the shelves, one last rack to go. He shook his head, sorting through the last bit. It was just like what he was doing, wasn't it? Break down the chaos and sort it out so that you could make something better. That was all that he needed to do here, and he swore that if there was someone that could actually do that in real life, then it might sort out a lot of issues there, too.

*A little bit of uncomfortable times, some tight moments, and then the world starts coming together again, he thought, sliding the books together in proper order. Everything where it belongs, easily found, serving a good function and doing what it's supposed to do. Then you start putting together the systems that you need, and everything works even better than it used to before the dictatorship.*

Of course, you couldn't really preach that you were trying to change the world. Nobody would take that seriously. Bertram had watched the runs for class president, year president, and the way that the different clubs across the college played at politics for electing their various heads. He saw the way that those that supported the status quo often got what they wanted, and those that challenged it were seen as rebels. Even those rebels that succeeded often only did so with the tacit backing of those that saw that the status quo was bending too far in one direction and needed to pull it back.

Working within the system, as far as Bertram was concerned, was fucked. You could only get so far before everyone else told you what you could and couldn't do. If you tried to go past that, then you were kicked out.

*You'd need to be the bad guy to get past all that, but no story talks about being the bad guy that sets things right. Heh. Nobody wants to admit that someone that does bad things might have good reasons for it.*

He shook his head, putting the last of the books on the shelf. The ram wiped his forehead, looked out the window beside him...and froze.

The windows were tinted for the comfort of those just browsing in this part of the library, so he was used to seeing the skies being a bit darker than average. This, however, was insane. A storm had come rolling in out of nowhere, the clouds dark enough to blot out the sun and make it look like it had turned from day to night. The whole college grounds looked like night had fallen, and he could see lightning streaking through the clouds as it rolled over the campus.

*Well...I don't think anyone's going home on time tonight...*

Bertram pushed the card a few feet away, starting to back away from the metal plates that supported the windows when the first lightning bolt crashed down.

**K-BOOM!**

The first crash of thunder rattled the building, and the few students that were roaming around in his part of the library went running, screaming. Bertram stumbled from the shockwave, almost falling into the shelves behind him.

*That's not normal...that's very not normal...*

The ram pulled himself to his feet, managing another couple of steps before another K-BOOM rattled the windows, breaking one of the panels behind him. The glass shattered inwards, falling over the trolley and the books still on it. He did not envy the morning cleaner when they'd have to come in and deal with that, but the ram was not going to just stop and clean it up now.

Order had its place, and order demanded that he get his ass to safety, just like everyone else that was in the building.

He ran down the aisle, taking almost ten seconds to reach the spot where it connected with the main room. The windows continued to crack and shatter ahead and behind him, littering the whole place with glass as the storm got worse and worse. The ram lowered his head, charging as fast his feet could carry him.

Just as he rounded the corner to the main part of the library, the window just ahead of him broke. The glass came streaming in, and a lightning bolt followed. It struck him right between the horns, and he fell...and flew.

For a split second, he saw his body being left behind, and then he saw nothing at all.

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When Bertram opened his eyes again, he wasn't in the college library. He wasn't in a hospital, either, nor in an ambulance, nor in a bed. In fact, there was very little that was familiar to him in the slightest. He was surrounded in darkness, his head feeling rather heavy, and he could hardly see. He could just see hints of shadows, something that was pressed near to his eyelids as he opened them.

He started to lift his head, only for those shadows to turn to a red screen. He would have jerked backwards, but no. His body didn't want to respond just yet. Instead, he was made to stare into those red and yellow screens, seeing something coming into view in front of him.

A lot of somethings, as a matter of fact.

As he turned his head left and right, he saw a line of men that were dressed in plated armor. Not metal, either, but something that looked like it was plated over itself, constructed of different material than he could immediately recognize. They wore helmets that covered their faces, too, with two openings near the chin that looked like they were made for gas masks. The helmets themselves were fairly narrow, coming to a V down at the chin, rounding up and out towards the head with horn-like tops to them.

Then he saw another line behind the front, and then another line, and another. It kept going, revealing hundreds of people lined up. Each one carried a rifle of some sort in their hands, and he could see more weaponry piled onto their shoulders and hanging from their waists.

*What's going on...where am I?*

One of the figures in the front row, wearing a cape off one shoulder and with a series of triple lines down the opposite shoulder, stepped forward and saluted. They reached up to their helmet and pulled it off, revealing themselves to be a hyena.

"General Mark Twist reporting, Dark Lord of the Void," the hyena said.

"**...General?**" Bertram said, his voice coming through as a modulated, deep, threatening thing. "**What –**"

“As the Prophecies of the Stars demand, the Dark Lord of the Void had been called again, to challenge the Federation of Allied Systems. The power of the Void shall be heard across the stars again, and once more, the galaxy will tremble at your power.”

*What the hell...I'm dead, right? I have to be dead.*

Bertram looked down at himself, but the red-yellow vision that he was getting through his helmet told him very little. He could tell that he had gloves on, and that had some kind of armor that he hadn't been wearing before. He reached to his gloves, pinching the back of them, and he could still feel it.

*Okay, not dead, not dreaming...*

The hyena general continued.

“We, the army of the Dread Star, swear our loyalty to you once again. In preparation for your arrival, the planet had been secured, and the government subdued. Once more, the forges are firing, and the weapons that will feed your armies flow. The old guard have been made your slaves, and they will serve you or die. Such is the old way.”

**“...You did this...in preparation for me?”**

“Yes, Dark Lord. It is done in your name. The tides of darkness shall -”

The hyena paused, holding a finger to his ear. There was a moment's pause, followed by a nod.

“Alright, spy drone's moved on. Everyone can take off the helmets now.”

And just like that, the whole room exploded into a series of gasps for breath as the soldiers yanked their helmets off. Bertram could hear them gasping for air as the General walked up to him.

“You need a hand, lordship?”

**“A hand and an explanation. My voice doesn't really sound like this, does it?”**

“That's the helmet. Hold on.”

Wheezing a sigh of relief, he waited for the hyena to pull the helmet off. There were an insane number of little twists and clasps and ties that held it on, apparently, because he could hear the little clicks going on for nearly three minutes before there was a sudden hiss of exhalation. The pressure from outside equalized with the pressure inside, and the hyena gripped under the chin.

“Gotta say, I’m looking forward to seeing what you actually look like.”

**“You don’t know?”**

“Ugh...to be fair...the Dread Star...tends to stuff the Dark Lord into the armor before anyone gets a chance to see them. Just...one second...”

With a sudden ‘pop,’ the helmet came free, and Bertram got his first free breath. The air was stale, yes, but it was the sort of stale that was like upgraded airplane air. Recycled, rejuvenated, and recycled again. It was thick enough to make it a little tricky to breathe, and it was warm without the humidity, but it was something he could work with. All the time in the library made him rather tolerant of dry air.

As he shook his head, he got a better look at the general. Mark Twist, the hyena had introduced himself as, and a twist he was. Slender rather than the thick body that most hyenas had back at home, with a lean body and slender shoulders that almost made him look like a female rather than a male. The general’s fur was striped and slashed across the face with tan and brown, and he wore the same odd armor as the rest of the soldiers.

Now that Bertram could get a better look at it, he could see that it was more like a series of scales than plates. It was just that the scales were a lot bigger than average, and that meant that they were harder to make out as anything but plate armor from a distance. They weren’t pieces of metal or plastic, either. They were projected from little emitters that formed the matrix pattern that the scales followed. At first, it almost looked like some sort of hard-light, but no. Mark touched one emitter, and it stopped firing, revealing a smaller piece of some kind of ore.

“Guessing we’re out-teching you?” the general asked.

“Yes. Quite a bit.”

“Great. I’m assuming you haven’t reached hard-light technology yet?”

“We might be getting close.”

“Lasers?”

“Barely on the medical level.”

“Cloning?”

“Lab rats and a sheep.”

“...Prosthetics?”

“We have a few imprecise models.”

Mark shook his head, tossing the helmet back. Bertram was able to catch it, thankfully. His body was starting to warm up again, mostly in the arms and chest. When he tried to pull himself from the chair, his legs refused to move, so he didn't push his luck. He just sat there, holding the helmet up to get a look at it.

It was definitely something rather creepy looking. The eyes were not empty black, but rather had a single sliding star on them, something that was recessed to look like it was following you everywhere it went. The top was capped with space for his horns, but they were tilted in a different way, making it look like weapons were aimed down at someone in front of him. Looking at his chest, he could see two different control panels, and he had a pretty good idea that he shouldn't touch either of them.

"...Is this something I have to wear all the time?" he asked.

"Whenever you're in public."

"Why?"

"It's part of being the Dark Lord of the Void. Rules."

"Yes, you mentioned that title. What is that?" he asked, as calmly as he could manage. Which was surprisingly calm, now that he thought about it.

"The Dark Lord of the Void? The Terror of the Stars? The avatar of the Dread Star and the great power of the darkness before-time? He that would see the universe fall into the darkness and rule from there?"

"...I don't think we had, either."

The general rolled his eyes, only to be laughed at by another officer - or so Bertram assumed - coming up from the ranks. A helmet came off, revealing another hyena, this one almost the spitting image of Mark. The only differences were that the stripes on the face twisted in the opposite direction, and that this one was female.

"Looks like you lose that bet, brother," she said, shaking her head. "Looks like we're on track to lose again."

"Just because I had high hopes, Zelda."

"Yeah, well, hopes are great when you can get them fulfilled. They're shit when they don't work out."

The hyena female - Zelda - wiggled her fingers, and Mark stuffed a hand down his pocket and tossed her something. It looked small and light, almost like a coin, but it appeared out of nowhere and disappeared just as fast, almost as if it didn't actually exist at all.

The sheer tech difference between this world and his own was starting to send his head spinning, but there was one thing that he held onto as best he could. The fact that they were calling him the Dark Lord, that they had been talking like some stereotypical evil army, and then stopped as soon as some spy drone had passed? He needed to know what was going on.

“General,” Bertram said. “I need an explanation.”

“Look at that. Our figurehead wants an explanation,” Zelda said, laughing. “Think he’d understand any of it?”

“He might.”

“None of the others did. Why do you think this one would be any better?”

“He asked. Most of the others just kinda...”

“Died?”

“Well, eventually.”

“...I’d really, really appreciate an explanation,” Bertram said, feeling the tightness in his voice. “Sooner than later, actually.”

“Yeah, we should probably hurry this up,” Mark muttered, looking towards the ceiling. A rather high ceiling, he realized, or was - no, those were stars in the distance. This room was open to the stars. “That spy drone will orbit around again soon.”

“Fine. Let’s get him back to the ‘royal quarters.’ Dark Lord whoever probably will want his harem before long,” Zelda muttered, putting her helmet back on.

“...Harem? I get a harem?”

“Just...put the helmet on,” Mark said.

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He didn’t know if it was the sheer shock of the situation that was letting him stay so calm or what, but Bertram could tell that it was fading. As they walked from the Grand Courtyard to the ‘Dark Citadel’ - a name that even Mark couldn’t quite say without having to hide a snicker - he found himself starting to shake in his boots. The armor kept it from showing, somehow, but the realization of what had happened, and that this wasn’t a dream, was hitting him hard.

Somehow, he had been hit with a bolt of lightning, but he hadn’t died. Instead, he’d been taken away for...something. To inhabit a new body? Or to just have a body like his stuffed into this suit of armor? If the former, he felt like he was still a ram, but he’d need to get out of this in



front of a mirror to be sure. As it stood, he didn't know what had happened to him, or why he was doing this.

All he knew was that he had been dropped into a completely different world, at the head of an army, and he was supposed to lead it. Somehow.

*Well, this is just...complicated...*

At the back of the great hall of the Dark Citadel - he bit off a chuckle of his own, unable to help himself - he expected them to find an elevator. Instead, Zelda stripped off a glove, pressing her hand against a piece of the wall that looked similar to the rest of the dark...well, it looked like stone, but could have been anything. She touched it, and a portal opened, one that ran right to a large room. She stepped through, and Mark gestured for him to do the same. Shrugging, he did as he was told.

The helmet wasn't at all comfortable, he had to admit. In addition to the fact that it made seeing much harder with the red and yellow split in color, it was stifling as all hell. The air was thick and hot inside of the helmet, and he could barely breathe through the holes that brought air to his mouth and nose. It stank of purifiers, but he supposed there was a reason for that. He shook his head as he found a seat, sitting down as the two generals remained on their feet.

**"So,"** he started to say, only to groan at his own deep voice. **"Do I have to wear this stupid thing?"**

"In public, yes," Mark said. "It's part of the image of the Dark Lord."

**"We're not in public now, are we?"**

"No."

**"Then get. It. Off."**

Thankfully, with both of them helping, it came off sooner than last time. He could not find words to describe how much more comfortable it was with the helmet off, and he swore that he was going to find some way to deal with that without having to wear it all the time. That was something beyond uncomfortable. He took a deep breath, was thankful that the air didn't feel as recycled down here as it did in the courtyard, and looked between the two hyenas.

"Now...I would like to ask a few questions, to see if I understand this properly."

"This is going to be dull," Zelda said, looking down at her nails.

"Then perhaps you can tell me how many times this particular cycle has repeated, then?"

The hyena female blinked, looking up from her nails. The ram sighed.

“I may be from a different world, but I’m not an idiot. I can listen. You and Mark have been talking as if this happens regularly. At a guess, I’d say at least once every other generation, though perhaps more frequently, and that the Dark Lord that comes in to lead the army is someone that’s always from a time not your own. That means that this has happened regularly and frequently, and you have both either met or heard of what happened to the Dark Lords of the past, so can we skip the condescension, please?”

“...” Zelda looked from him to her brother, then back to him. “Well then. I guess we got one that pays attention.”

“Grandfather could have used one of those,” Mark muttered.

“Well, at least later in the war.”

“At the battle of the Pale Star?”

“Or during the Siege of the Wormhole.”

“Oh, yeah. That one. Definitely that one.”

“Ahem.” Bertram brought their attention back to him, and nodded. “Thank you. So...what is this ‘Dark Lord of the Void’ thing?”

“That’s...a little harder to explain,” Mark said, rubbing the back of his head. “Do you have the whole ‘ancient enemy of the gods’ story where you come from?”

“The idea where an ancient evil comes back and fights against the powers of good, threatening to kill the universe? Yeah, but what’s that got to do with this?”

“Pretty much everything,” Zelda said, rolling her eyes. “Dunno how long ago it was now, but some dickweed of a mathematician teamed up with a theoretical physicist, and they made some sort of messed-up experiment. Something about ‘justifying philosophies’ or something like that.”

“Point is,” Mark continued, “they created a recurring event. Every two or three generations, when some sort of variable lines up, a Dark Lord is called out of the Void, we’re made to go to war, and the whole universe lines up to see the avatar of the Dread Star fight against the Federation of Allied Systems. It’s basically a slug-fest that keeps going until either all the rulers of the Federation are taken out, or until the Dark Lord is.”

“...How often has the Dark Lord won?” he asked.

The hyenas looked at each other with a slight wince, and that was all that he needed to know. He sighed, leaning forward and rubbing his head in his hands.

“I don’t suppose there’s any way for me to go back home and skip this?” he asked. “No, of course not...no way in hell, I imagine. Otherwise, every Dark Lord before me would have said no to this and gone right home, wouldn’t they?”

“Well...most of them,” Mark said.

“Some of ‘em liked the perks of being Dark Lord. Commanding an army, ruling worlds.”

“Yes, for as long as they live. How long is the average lifespan, again?” he asked.

“...Maybe a year?” Zelda said, asking Mark, who nodded. “Yeah, about a year.”

“Terrific.” Bertram sighed, rubbing his forehead again, hiding the groans and the little shakes that were starting to break through the wall of calm. Yes, shock. Definitely shock had been what had kept all that at bay. He doubted that it was going to last much longer, though, particularly with news like that. “So, I have a year, maybe less, before the rest of the galaxy wipes me off the face of the map.”

“More than likely, yes,” Mark said, the hyena nodding. “Usually we have a few days before the Dark Lord ends up finding that out, but...well, you asked.”

“And the rest of you?”

“We’ll fight. Some of us know how. Me and Zelda used to be part of the Federation fleet before we switched sides. We know how they work, how they fight, and we know how to run an army. The one thing we’re not allowed to do is surrender.”

“That’s part of the same thing that summoned me, I imagine?”

“Right in one.”

“Terrific...just...terrific.”

So, he had a military that couldn’t just surrender, a war that had to be fought, and he was on the ‘bad guy’ side that was so bad that they were actually CALLING him the Dark Lord. How in the world was that supposed to -

“Why ‘Dark Lord’ anyway?” he asked, gesturing at himself. “Why this...get-up?”

“Well, the two guys that made this up were very pro-Federation, and the guy that was opposing them at the time was a bit of a dick...”

“So, what, they locked the whole thing in a time loop so that the Federation could keep proving that they deserved to exist against someone that might have had a valid point?”

“...You might be right about this one,” Zelda said. “He’s got a decent head on his shoulders.”

“Here’s hoping,” Mark said. “But yeah. That’s basically it.”

“...Is there any upside to this? Any Dark Lord that hasn’t died in the process?”

“Not really. Not that we’ve read about, at least,” Mark amended. “But, you never know. New generation, new tech, new possibilities.”

Bertram seriously doubted that. He’d been a librarian, someone that had been skimming a few funds off the top and trying to make ends meet. Now, he was in a doomed position that was meant to eventually kill him, while making him the villain for the rest of the universe to fear just to keep another administration in power.

If that wasn’t overblown karma, he didn’t know what was.

He could feel himself cracking, and knew that it was going to come sooner than later. Not wanting the hyenas to see him, he looked around for something, anything, as a distraction for himself.

“You said something about...about a harem?” he asked.

“Yes. There’s a remote for that in your bedroom,” Mark said. “Just hit the buttons, and you’ll get previews of the slaves captured for you. Press the button again, and they’ll be brought to you.”

“There are actual...slaves?” he asked. “That wasn’t part of the whole...”

“Oh, as far as the universe is concerned, we’re the bad guys. It’s part of the whole process. So, we might as well enjoy it.”

“...”

“We’ll leave you to that. No need to get in the Dark Lord’s way, right, Zelda?”

“I’m certainly not interested in whatever he’s packing.”

“Well, could have said it better than that. See you tomorrow, Dark Lord. We’ll talk strategy then.”

The two hyenas left, and Bertram collapsed back in the chair, not sure whether to hyperventilate or cry. He felt like he might do both. He had a year, or less, and then he was going to die. Harem, armies, whatever, it didn’t matter. One way or another, he was going to end up dead, and unless he found a way to make this work, all the amenities wouldn’t mean a goddamn thing.

He'd wondered how the bad guys could lose. Now, it looked like he was going to have to figure out how they could win.

**The End**