

STAR WARS

A New Enemy

By Brendon Wahlberg

As the Galactic Emperor finds a new to immortality, a galaxy in the throes of civil war faces death on a gigantic scale. A new battle station capable of destroying an entire planet, ensures that the Empire will rule by fear.

Palpatine is secure in his belief that he has no enemies left to threaten him. But on an obscure rim world, the son of the Emperor's greatest servant is stepping onto the galactic stage.

Guided by the force, Luke Skywalker carries the power to throw the Emperor's meticulous plans into chaos...

Palpatine was the undisputed Master of the whole galaxy, and he had no enemies left. His piercing yellow eyes gazed from a face mostly hidden by a deep black hood. What could be seen of that visage was severely etched with age, the eyes sunken into cavernous sockets surrounded by withered, mottled skin. The forehead seemed oddly misshapen, and the mouth was a rictus filled with ragged nubs of teeth. But that mouth was set in a wicked grin, and the eyes burned with a hungry fire.

There were some, of course, who thought of themselves as his enemies. The irritating Mon Mothma and Bail Organa, for example. This was their foolish conceit. They were nothing, as were the pitiful insurrectionists who had of late been calling themselves the "Alliance." To the most powerful dark side Master who ever lived, these were not enemies. The Jedi, weak-willed practitioners of the impotent side of the Force, were dead and gone. Knowing that they could have threatened him, Palpatine had unleashed the Sith and their Dark Lord to hunt them down. As if to prove their inferiority, many of the Jedi had practically set their necks to the blade. Disheartened by the fall of the Republic, they had not even resisted. A few fought or ran, only to be overcome by the brute force of Imperial technology and the relentless, merciless pursuit of Palpatine's servant, the fallen Jedi, Darth Vader. The bravest had brought the fight to his own doorstep; these Palpatine had personally annihilated. The Purge had taken a great deal of effort, and of the Sith, only Vader remained. But with the Jedi exterminated, Emperor Palpatine had no enemies left.

Anyone seeing Palpatine in his private meditation chamber, deep inside the Emperor's Citadel on the dark side world of Byss, would have noticed the frail manner in which the ruler of known space clutched at his gnarled walking stick, and concluded that this man did indeed have an enemy--death itself. But he would be wrong. Palpatine felt death approaching. It felt like it had the first time, and although this was going to be his second death, it was impossible to become accustomed to such a thing. There was the sense that the very fabric of his tissues would soon be torn apart by the energies he daily channeled through them. He knew that if he were to die in truth, and lose his last physical form, he would be forever lost within the howling chaos of the dark side itself. It would claim him for its own as he had claimed the galaxy. Here on Byss, however, Palpatine could laugh at death. For he sat a stone's throw from his clone vat chamber, where a dozen clones floated suspended in nutrient tanks. He had come to Byss to die. And to be reborn.

The Emperor would erupt in blue energy, leaving a shattered shell behind. Then, thanks to his knowledge of cloning, and dark side lore from the Holocron of Ashka and Vantos Boda, he would enter one of his own mature clones. When he opened his new eyes, he would have a strong, young body once more. The dying was painful, and the transition unpleasant to be sure, but a little suffering was a small price to be paid for immortality. The very thought of his new body made his grin widen, and a dreadful cackle emerged from deep within his throat. Most people who heard that laugh immediately found good reasons to be elsewhere.

The Emperor's Grand Vizier, Sate Pestage, was merely used to it. Pestage stood waiting silently at the threshold of the small room, still as a statue. He had come to confer with his Master, but he would not emit a whisper until the dark and glorious one acknowledged him. Pestage was a wizened figure of a man with ancient, craggy features. In some ways, he seemed older than the Emperor, and his emaciated form was lost in his voluminous bejeweled robes. Nonetheless, Pestage was tireless in his service to the Emperor, and acted as his personal assistant in all things. He prepared meals, managed affairs, and scheduled the day's events. Now Pestage simply stared at his Master's decrepit form in sorrow. Pestage may have been old, but he had an aura of stubborn health around him. Palpatine radiated only decay.

It pained Sate Pestage to see the dark one thus diminished. His Master's discovery of a way to cheat a premature death had been a great relief to Pestage, but then they had learned the harsh truth that the new body would only last a few short years. Already it was time to take another. Pestage gave silent thanks to the Force that the citizenry of the Empire did not see their sovereign this way. To the rest of the galaxy, Palpatine was a middle aged, charismatic figure with a commanding presence. Of course, this image was the product of the finest holo-technology. When he was thus afflicted by the aging, the Emperor did not make public appearances, delegating the day-to-day running of the Empire to his most trusted advisors, such as Chief Advisor Ars Dangor. Dangor made all the public addresses and Pestage acted as an intermediary in all communications with the Emperor. Only a tiny handful of beings saw Palpatine as he really was, beings such as Darth Vader, the Sith Lord,

and Mara Jade, the Emperor's Hand. It was a strange affliction to deal with, to be sure. Aside from his trusted inner circle, no one must see the impossible changes in the Emperor's appearance. His mastery of the Force had to be kept a secret from the Empire as a whole. This led to some odd situations. Sometimes, Palpatine had to use a personal holographic projector to disguise his sudden great youth, or great age. For example, Bevel Lemelisk, the designer of the Death Star, had seen the Emperor in his aged state. After Palpatine's rebirth, he would have to meet with Lemelisk while holographically concealing his youth. Helping to maintain these deceptions was one of the ways in which Pestage faithfully served his Master.

Palpatine slowly turned to face the Grand Vizier. "What is it, my friend," he said quietly, beckoning to Pestage. The galactic ruler had a voice full of eerie sibilance that would seem appropriate issuing from a sepulcher. That voice, Pestage knew, could change from gleeful satisfaction to blackest menace in the space of a moment. Now it was calm, almost gentle. "Is the proclamation prepared as I have ordered it?"

Pestage took a step into the room, robes whispering, and held out an ornamental datapad. On its small screen, a short paragraph was illuminated.

His Imperial Majesty has decreed that the current emergency involving armed terrorists spreading death and destruction throughout the galaxy requires the temporary institution of martial law. The regional governors will now have direct control over their territories, allowing them to take the necessary steps to put a swift end to these cowardly and criminal attacks that threaten the families of every law-abiding citizen.

For the duration of the crisis, the Imperial Senate will be in recess. Reports that criminal activities have been supported by members of the Senate are being fully investigated. Rest assured that the terrorists will soon be brought to justice, and stability will reign throughout the galaxy.

The Emperor finished reading and nodded in satisfaction. This proclamation would complete his New Order. There would be no "recess," of course. With the disbanding of the Senate, the last vestige of the "Old Republic" would be expunged. No political opposition to the New Order would be possible. The impassioned speeches of Senators such as Leia Organa could influence public opinion, and those voices must be silenced. Mon Mothma had brought this on herself, giving Palpatine the perfect excuse. She had gone too far, openly declaring against him and then orchestrating the theft of the data on project Death Star. Vader was even now on a mission to recover that information. Mothma was beyond reach for now, but at least her accomplices in the Senate could be stripped of power. One day, though, the Emperor mused, he would find her...and teach her the true meaning of fear.

The proclamation also formalized the Tarkin Doctrine. Now, each system would be kept under control through fear, a potent weapon indeed.

The Death Star had been completed in the Horuz system and was very nearly operational; it would soon become the symbol of the New Order. When Palpatine next opened his eyes in the clone vat chamber, they would gaze upon a galaxy totally under Imperial power.

"You've done well, Sate Pestage. The phrasing is excellent as usual. Let Ars Dangor make this proclamation public as soon as possible." The Emperor grinned blackly and handed back the datapad. He moved to sit in his throne like chair with some difficulty. "I will not make any more decisions until after I am young again."

Pestage nodded.

Palpatine pointed a crooked finger at him. "I wish nothing to disturb my meditations. I must have peace for the transition. When my time is near, I shall call on you to assist in my preparations."

Sate Pestage bowed deeply. "Yes, my Master," he intoned, and quietly left the Emperor's chamber. Moving through the labyrinthine halls of the Citadel, Pestage reflected that he was a free man for the next several days. His Master's meditations were trance-like, and Palpatine neither ate nor carried out any activities, weakening himself to the point where he could simply will the transition. Pestage would help his Master to his bed, then leave him in complete isolation for that most private of experiences.

The Grand Vizier did not pretend to understand the workings of the Force, but he knew his life would be empty without the glory of his Master to light his universe. Even to be away from him for a few days made Pestage feel a little hollow. Perhaps he would visit the combat arena as a diversion. There was a fight to the death between a Wookiee and a Gundark this afternoon. Perhaps. But he would stay close to the Citadel, just in case he was needed.

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Palpatine was at one with the Force. His frail physical form was left behind, and his mind roamed the galaxy. His galaxy. He could feel its life and death energies, and through his connection to the dark side, he could savor the strength that was his reward for service. For the Emperor himself was only a servant. All of Palpatine's efforts were directed towards the creation of a galaxy where the emotions of a thousand million worlds would feed the dark side with anger, fear, and aggression. He called it his Dark Empire to be. Certainly, he loved the personal power he received as the foremost user of the dark side, and he had every intention of holding that power eternally. Together, he and the dark side would rule every living being.

Fundamentally, the dark side was chaos, entropy, a destructive force ever held in balance against the light side. But the dark side

hungered for dominance, and Palpatine gave it a chance to have that. He had no illusions; the dark side would consume him, too, if he let it, but that would never happen. He would serve it for always, and everything else would serve him.

Through the Force, the Emperor could communicate with others such as Vader across huge distances, though he sometimes preferred to use the holotransmitter for the way it created a huge image of his form to intimidate the viewer. Often, he could "see" what was happening where he turned his mental gaze, an ability which had given him a huge advantage during his rise to power.

Now he sent his mind in search of the Death Star, and the familiar presence of his servant. By now, Vader should have recovered the Death Star technical data and returned to the battle station to act as the Emperor's representative. Tarkin had been given a free hand in using the Death Star, but anyone with power needed watching, no matter how loyal. Vader made an excellent watcher, and in turn, he was watched by his Master.

It was with some surprise that he located the Death Star in orbit around the jewel-like world of Alderaan. He could "see" the enormous sphere floating against the starry blackness of space. The Emperor was not in awe of any technology. As he had so often told Vader, the Force was the true power in the universe. But he did find the Death Star to be beautiful. It was merely a means to an end, but it was a lovely and impressive means to an end.

Palpatine sent his mind into the station, reaching out for Vader while keeping his servant unaware of his presence. Vader was in the command center, with Tarkin and the young Senator (former Senator now, he reminded himself) Leia Organa. It took an extra effort to focus on Vader, since there seemed to be a strange echo of the Dark Lord's mental signature present. The strain of the approaching transition was evidently beginning to take its toll on him, leaving his Force senses impaired, Palpatine decided. After a moment, Palpatine adjusted, and could view the proceedings with more clarity.

Tarkin began to speak, with a crisp superiority. "Princess Leia, before your execution I would like you to be my guest at a ceremony that will make this battle station operational. No star system will dare oppose the Emperor now." Palpatine felt that he had chosen Tarkin well. Another man might have his own power in mind, rather than the Emperor's. Palpatine wondered what young Senator Organa had done to deserve execution.

Now Organa spoke back with a haughty defiance evident in her stance and tone. "The more you tighten your grip, Tarkin, the more star systems will slip through your fingers."

Palpatine smiled. Anyone could speak with defiance when they didn't see quite how much trouble they were in; Tarkin was holding back something devastating. Now, with a horrible politeness, he decided to reveal it to her. "Not after we demonstrate the power of this station. In

a way, you have determined the choice of the planet that'll be destroyed first. Since you are reluctant to provide us with the location of the Rebel base, I have chosen to test this station's destructive power...on your home planet of Alderaan."

Palpatine felt the shock in the young woman. So, she was a Rebel agent! It was more proof that he was right to disband the Senate; it had become a viper's nest of Rebels. Curiously, he also felt shock in Vader. His servant did not like this development. But what of it? What was the Death Star for, after all? Through the influence of Bail Organa, Alderaan had become a hotbed of sedition. Better to have it gone.

Organa had begun to babble futile protests. "No! Alderaan is peaceful. We have no weapons. You can't possibly-"

But Tarkin let the mask of civility drop. Beneath it was the face of the Imperial War Machine, cold, hard, and merciless. "You would prefer another target? A military target? Then name the system!" He moved menacingly towards her, and she retreated, only to come up against Lord Vader. Tarkin spoke in a low voice. "I grow tired of asking this. So it'll be the last time. Where is the Rebel base?"

"Dantooine," Organa seemed to crumble. "They're on Dantooine."

"There, you see Lord Vader, she can be reasonable," Tarkin gloated. "Continue with the operation. You may fire when ready."

"What?" shouted Organa. *Tarkin let his amusement show. "You're far too trusting. Dantooine is far too remote to make an effective demonstration. But don't worry. We will deal with your Rebel friends soon enough."

"No!" protested Organa, but it was, of course, too late. The Death Star gunners efficiently prepared the prime weapon to fire. Palpatine held his breath as immense beams of force emerged from the Death Star's superlaser, joining to form one awesome shaft that stabbed once at the core of the planet Alderaan. But he never saw the explosion of the planet, for at that moment, a stunning and wholly unexpected surge of power hit the Emperor like a tidal wave, washing away all conscious thought. In his private chamber in the Imperial Citadel on Byss, Emperor Palpatine lay prone on the cold floor, limned in dark fire, his yellow eyes burning like twin suns.

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Sate Pestage responded to the biomonitor alarms immediately, crossing the Citadel in minutes. He pounded the door release of the meditation chamber, expecting to find his Master overcome by disaster, and was completely taken aback to find himself staring into the face of an erect and apparently healthy Palpatine. The Emperor's face was dominated by a savage smile, and he seemed full of vitality.

"Don't be concerned about me," the Emperor rasped, reaching out a reassuring hand to Pestage. "I am in no danger. Something has happened to me that I have not foreseen! It changes everything--I must understand it."

"Master," Pestage stammered, "it is well that you are safe...When I heard the alarms, I was in conference with Lord Vader...He wishes to speak with you. Should I transfer his signal?"

"No, Sate Pestage." Palpatine seemed highly agitated. "Delay him while I consult my Holocron." He was already heading for his bed chamber, moving with a new strength that amazed the Grand Vizier. Pestage bowed and the door hissed shut.

Once he was alone, the Emperor reached towards an ornate stand on which rested a smooth cube that softly glowed blue. He took the Jedi recording device in his gnarled hands, caressing the ancient writings on its elegantly tooled surface. The Holocron felt warm and alive. Deep within the object, organic crystals awakened. He felt a light touch on his mind as the Holocron sensed his surface thoughts and summoned the knowledge he required. There was a shimmer in the air, and a hologram of a somewhat grotesque alien with claw like hands and an exoskeleton appeared above the cube.

"Dark One," the hologram spoke. "Listen to the words of Bodo Baas, the gatekeeper, and learn the story of the Sith sorcerer, Gant Feer. In the bleak days when Exar Kun was made the Dark Lord of the Sith, Feer was one of the fallen Jedi under his command. Feer was both depraved and ambitious. It is thought that he alone had access to certain terrible secrets of Sith magic, and he used them without Kun's knowledge. Feer captured Jedi and ritually murdered them. Each terror-filled death weakened the light side and strengthened the dark side. But one Master escaped to tell the tale, and so we know that Feer boasted of being able to feed on their dying energies, absorbing strength through his link to the dark side." Bodo Baas paused. It was hard to tell from such a face, but the monster seemed reluctant to speak to him. When it resumed, it seemed to look right at him.

"Gant Feer did not live to enjoy his gains. Exar Kun noticed how powerful his underling had become, and destroyed him. Feer's secrets died with him. Take heed, Dark One. To take life from the death of others is possible, but it may bring ruin in unforeseen ways." With a steamy green glow, Bodo Baas dissolved.

Palpatine sat silently in thought. As Alderaan was shattered, he had felt a huge surge of power flowing into him through his connection to the dark side. At that moment, he had been unprepared for it, too surprised and stunned to move or think. But while it was happening, he had felt like he could have done anything, anything at all. An entire world, teeming with life, had died in terror! If the story of Gant Feer was any indication, such an event would have strengthened the dark side. At one with the Force, Palpatine had been filled with that power, though it had passed through his grasp like a gale force wind. He thought he

knew how to prepare himself for the next time, how to keep himself from being overwhelmed, and how to turn the power to his own ends. He might even use the power to find a way to overcome the problem of his vulnerable clone bodies. With that much power, he could even make a new body for himself...a perfect one...an invulnerable one. He laughed suddenly as he realized that this gave the Death Star a wonderful new purpose.

Gently, he replaced the Holocron. He sometimes felt that, though it was just a recording device, it was subtly against him. There was the way it called him "Dark One," for example. That it had warned him against pursuing this course did not surprise him. It did not matter. There was always a danger. The chance of a victory over his affliction was worth any risk.

Palpatine crossed to his personal HoloNet terminal and activated it. The screen showed the stark black mask of Darth Vader. Vader was alone in his meditation chamber on the Death Star. Palpatine acknowledged him with a slight nod. With head bowed, Vader spoke in his deep, machine-enhanced voice. "My Master, the destruction of Alderaan..." Vader was shaken. "There was a great disturbance in the force. I fear for the consequences of using the Death Star in this way. Destruction on this scale could bring chaos to-"

The Emperor silenced him with a gesture, frowning. As usual, Vader's perception of matters was lacking in insight. The Sith Lord thought of the dark side as the means to bring his kind of order to the galaxy, but, here he balked at the means to achieve that end. "You will understand in time, my servant. The destruction of Alderaan has made me stronger. When you find the Rebel base, it must be destroyed with the Death Star as I make my transition. Nothing will be beyond my new abilities. I shall rule the galaxy forever, and you shall ever be at my side."

Vader said nothing, but Palpatine knew he would always obey. This fallen Jedi circled the Emperor's evil majesty like a moth around a candle flame. He needed the Emperor's darkness to fill a void inside him, but he could never come too close, lest he be consumed.

"I sense that something else troubles you, my servant," Palpatine urged him.

With his characteristic bluntness, Vader said, "My old Master, Kenobi, is here on the Death Star. He has come to face me. When last we met, the advantage was his. I fear he must be the victor again."

Now it was Palpatine's turn to be surprised. Kenobi! That cursed Jedi, still alive! So he had escaped the Purge and stayed in hiding for twenty years. Now he dared to show his face. Such audacity must be punished. "Kenobi will meet his long overdue destiny today. Whatever foolish errand has brought him out of his hole will be his last. Together we will crush him, my servant."

Vader radiated trust. "And what of the Rebels who came with him? They have the Death Star plans and they may escape the station."

"Let them go," the Emperor said with a smirk. "They shall lead the Death Star directly to the Rebel base. Now go and meet Kenobi. His time has come."

Vader bowed deeply as the Emperor terminated the signal.

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Vader stood silently in an empty hallway of the Death Star. Dim memories of his defeat at Kenobi's hands sent a chill of foreboding through him. There had been a devastating blow that ripped through his defenses, and a fall into searing lava. The memory of that agony gave his hate a keen focus. He had been reborn from that death, reforged in that furnace. Now he would pay his old Master back in kind. The old man appeared from a corridor as if flowing from the shadows. Vader's lightsaber was already glowing redly in his hand.

"I've been waiting for you Obi-Wan. We meet again at last. The circle is now complete. When I left you, I was but the learner, now I am the Master."

Kenobi wasted few words, igniting his own saber and taking up a classical offensive position. "Only a master of evil, Darth."

With that, they were upon each other, trading lightening-fast blows. This was an elegant combat between two masters. Each strike was carefully controlled, and the warriors spun with an economy of motion that belied the complexity of their attacks. Kenobi seemed suddenly to be under increasing strain, as though an invisible weight were pressing down upon him. He shook his head and blinked, trying to clear his eyes.

"Your powers are weak, old man," Vader taunted, aware that the promise of the Emperor was being fulfilled. Palpatine was somehow able to cloud Kenobi's mind at this distance. He had grown strong indeed!

Kenobi seemed to come to terms with his fate at that moment, and he serenely said, "You can't win, Darth. If you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you can possibly imagine." Angered at Kenobi's calmness, Vader struck more wildly, slicing into the corridor walls. The two warriors, failed teacher and fallen Jedi, moved next to blast doors leading to the hangar that housed the captured freighter that Kenobi had arrived in. Vader could see the guards running to his defense, and he knew that Kenobi would indeed meet his death in moments, one way or another. Suddenly, across the hangar, a motley crew of Rebels and droids made a break for the freighter, taking advantage of the stormtroopers' distraction. Kenobi spared the Rebels a glance, and seemed to come to a decision. He lifted his sword away from Vader's and closed his eyes. Without hesitation, Vader sliced his old Master cleanly in half. The

empty cloak fell to the deck, followed a second later by the old man's lightsaber.

Vader probed the cloak with a booted foot, conflicting feelings of triumph and fear filling him. A fierce firefight had erupted in the hangar. Vader stood calmly as his troops were cut down. The blast doors shut suddenly, leaving Vader alone in the silent corridor. Vader strode to a comm panel to inform Tarkin that Kenobi was dead. He would pass on the Emperor's instructions that the other Rebels were to be allowed to escape. A homing beacon had been hidden aboard their ship, and they could easily be followed to the Rebel base itself.

There was a muffled roar from behind the doors as the freighter made a fast takeoff and plunged out into space. Vader picked up Kenobi's lightsaber, and hooked it to his belt. The Emperor would want it for his collection. Kenobi's ending left him feeling strangely hollow. Somehow he sensed that, despite all appearances, the conflict between Kenobi and himself was not over at all.

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Once again, Vader knelt before the image of his Master. "It is done, my friend," the Emperor soothed. "Kenobi has become one with the light side forever. His spirit will fade and be gone. There was no possible anchor to hold him. You have done well, my servant. The last of the Jedi died today."

"I saw his face, my Master," Vader replied cautiously. "He did not have the look of one who has lost his battle."

"It is nothing," the Emperor assured him. "merely the false pride of an old man. I shall leave you now, my servant. I must become one with the Force to prepare for my rejuvenation. Go now, and do my bidding. When you see me next, I will have triumphed over this frail flesh."

Vader arose, intoning with satisfaction, "The Rebellion shall meet the same end as Kenobi."

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Palpatine was at one with the Force. His body rested in his bed, beside the softly glowing Holocron. That body had come near to the end of its usefulness. Soon, the destruction of another world would fill him with strength. He would will his own death at that moment, becoming absolutely at one with the dark side, existing as formless energy. He would bring that power to his new body, transforming it into an indestructible thing, the perfect vessel for his new level of dark side mastery. The main problem with the clones was that they were copies, one

step removed from the protecting energies of the force. Thus they were more vulnerable to the depredations of the dark side. But now he thought he could remake his body, literally rebuilding it out of dark side energy, using one of the clones as a template. With such a body, he would be the dark side, and nothing would be able to stop him. His spirit trembled, even as his body lay in a trance. The moment was approaching.

Across the galaxy, the Death Star was about to come within firing range of the fourth moon of Yavin, a jungle world that teemed with life. The Rebels on the moon had put up a fight, of course, but all they had to throw against the station were a few dozen antiquated one-man snub fighters. It was pathetic. But then, the Emperor well understood the weakness of inferiors.

Vader was in his own prototype fighter, leading his TIE wingmen against the X-wings, indulging in target practice on the inexperienced Rebel pilots. Tarkin waited confidently in the command center, not even thinking it necessary to send out the swarms of fighters that were his to deploy. It was hard to get a clear sense of what was happening through all the chaotic emotions filling the area. Rebel pilots screamed in terror as Vader's laser bolts inexorably found their targets. Imperial troops milled in confusion as Rebel attacks blew apart surface installations. Gunners radiated excited concentration as they wielded their powerful turbolasers against the darting Rebel ships. The Emperor savored all these feelings.

But on the command deck, calm reigned, and Palpatine was able to focus on the Grand Moff. Tarkin turned as his aide announced, "Rebel base, thirty seconds and closing." Grim satisfaction radiated from the Grand Moff. Palpatine shared his feeling. This was the fruition of long-cherished plans.

The seconds ticked by. Racing across the Death Star surface, Vader was closing on the last few Rebel ships. The Emperor sensed his servant's determination, but knew it would all be academic in a few seconds.

"The Death Star has cleared the planet," came the announcement at last.

"You may fire when ready," said Tarkin crisply.

"Commence primary ignition," pronounced Tarkin's aide. The Death Star's prime weapon roared to life, preparing to deal death in an instant. Palpatine readied himself for the transition, opening himself fully to the Force. At that moment, an unexpected spark came alight in the darkness--someone was using the light side of the Force! It was impossible, but unmistakable. The Emperor's mind reeled with sudden confusion, but it was too late to change anything.

"Stand by," the words filtered through the energy waves building around Palpatine's body.

"Stand by."

The last thing Palpatine sensed was the Grand Moff Tarkin's crystal clear feeling of triumph. Then the Emperor's body was torn asunder, erupting in cold blue fire. His spirit went plummeting into a fathomless abyss that was everywhere and nowhere. But instead of the incredible strength he expected to feel, there was devastating loss. Something had happened to cast a pall of horrible weakness over the whole of the dark side. His essence wailing in dismay, Palpatine fought to reach his clone body, pouring into it with a desperate lunge. His new eyes shot open, and even as he choked out the nutrient solution that filled his mouth and throat, he reached out with the Force. What he felt, or did not feel, filled him with rage. The Death Star was gone as if it had never existed. His own senses and abilities were noticeably diminished. His new body was young and strong, of course, but he felt like he was touching the Force with gloves on. He fell to his knees as the vat door slid up and away. The able hands of Constable Mon reached out to steady him, but he pushed them aside. He was trembling with hate. Someone would pay for this outrage! The whole galaxy would pay. And first to suffer would be those who had failed him.

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By the time night fell on Byss, the five moons shining beautifully on the ornate towers and sprawling complexes of the Imperial Control Sector, the HoloNet had delivered the awful details of what had happened at Yavin. The dread Death Star had been vaporized by a single shot from a Rebel X-wing. The pilot had hit a thermal exhaust port with a proton torpedo, against impossible odds. The Dark Lord of the Sith was reported missing or dead. The base on Yavin was untouched, and worst of all, news of what had happened was being spread throughout the galaxy by the cursed Rebels. Alliance propaganda touted the genocide at Alderaan and the destruction of the Death Star as final proof of the Empire's tyranny and the Alliance's cause as freedom fighters. This would have little effect on the firmly held inner systems, but the outlying regions might be swayed. The time for retribution was now.

Palpatine blamed the defeat at Yavin on the incompetence of his officers. It was fortunate for those who had served on the Death Star that they were dead. The designer of the battle station, Bevel Lemelisk, would soon wish that he was dead with them. There must be a greater military buildup than ever before. Rebellious worlds would be snuffed out. He did not need a Death Star to reduce a planet to rubble. The new Super Star Destroyers would suffice. There would be a sweeping shakeup in the command structure of the Imperial forces. He needed someone he could trust implicitly in command. Someone ruthless and absolutely loyal to him. Someone of the highest competence. He needed Darth Vader.

But first he would have to find the Dark Lord. Palpatine knew his servant was not dead. He would have felt it. Somehow Vader had survived, perhaps by escaping in his fighter before the station had erupted. So for several hours, the Emperor searched the space around Yavin. The Death Star continued to burn. Vast sections of radioactive wreckage formed a

loosely held together orbiting graveyard, littered with incinerated, flash-frozen corpses. Slowly, the gravity of the gas giant would claim the remains, swallowing them without a trace. Not a spark of life remained.

No! There was something, very faint...In a decaying orbit, a crippled fighter with curved wings floated, dark. Within it, Vader was in a hibernation trance, conserving the minimal remaining life support. Immediately, Palpatine contacted his agents in the fleet and directed an assault shuttle from the new Yavin blockade to rescue Vader. Within a few days, Vader would once again stand before him, ready to do his dark bidding throughout the galaxy.

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Vader and the Emperor were alone in the throne room on Coruscant. Strong and commanding in his youthful body, Palpatine stood over his kneeling servant. The Sith Lord was full of anger, humiliation, and a sense of failure. He clearly expected to be punished.

"Rise, Lord Vader," said the Emperor in ringing tones. Vader rose to regard his Master with bowed head. Palpatine was clad in a severe black uniform with the Imperial symbol at his breast, and over that, a flowing cape with a high flaring collar. Vader towered over his Master, as if to give the lie to their relative authorities. The Emperor's face was now unlined and full of regal assurance. Vader's face was forever hidden behind a grotesque mask meant to inspire fear. But it was Vader who felt the fear as he awaited his judgment.

"Tell me of what happened," said Palpatine, his voice calm.

"The Rebels escaped," Vader replied, "leading us to their base as planned. As we began to orbit Yavin, they came out to meet us in one-man fighters. It seemed the last defense of people who fully expected to die. I instructed tactical to do an analysis of their attack. When I saw that their target was the equatorial trench, I realized that these were not suicidal madmen. They were desperate, but they had a plan. I ordered the Grand Moff Tarkin informed and mobilized my personal TIE fighter squadron. Several fighters broke away from the main group and flew into the trench. I pursued them with two wingmen. We destroyed several ships, and one Rebel fired on a thermal exhaust port, proving my theory correct, but the shot was too difficult. Tarkin did not send out reinforcements, but by then there were less than five Rebel ships left."

Vader paused. The source of his shame was to be told next. The Emperor simply prompted him, "Go on."

"Three X-wings made a final attempt. I destroyed one ship, and the second was damaged and fled. We closed on the leader. He was an uncanny pilot, and my targeting computer lost its lock again and again." Vader stared full into the face of his Master. "It was then that I felt the

impossible. The pilot was using the Force and it was strong in him. Then I knew that what had seemed folly was great cleverness on the part of the Rebels. A Force user, I knew, could make the shot. No wonder the Rebels had designed this strategy, with such a one among them. I fired again when I had a lock, but somehow my shots only hit his droid. I felt the presence of Obi-Wan, trying to interfere with me, but he was too late. The Death Star was ready to fire. The Rebel pilot must have stopped focusing on evasion because all at once my targeting computer had a firm lock. But at that instant, as if ordained by the Force, my attack was broken." Filled with anger, Vader had to stop for a moment. The repetitive sound of his mechanized breathing was the only sign of life within his rigid armor.

"That accursed freighter dove at us in a collision course. One wingman was shot down, and the other panicked, striking my ship and ending my defense of the Death Star. Out of control, I spun into space. The next thing I knew, the Death Star was gone and over a million Imperial lives were lost." Vader waited, seeming to prepare himself for his Master's response.

"Your thoughts are focused on how I will punish you," Palpatine said. Vader stiffened even more. "You think you failed to save my battle station. Perhaps I will cut off your hand...that would be a fitting payment for your failure, don't you think?"

Vader's mind reeled in sudden confusion. He wasn't sure he had heard his Master correctly. Both of his arms and hands were prosthetic, and losing them would only mean that the cybernetic specialists would have to replace them. It was no punishment at all.

The Emperor spoke into the silence to reassure his servant. "I do not blame you for what happened, Lord Vader. If Governor Tarkin had treated the attack with proper seriousness and deployed the Death Star's fighter defenses, that freighter could not have gotten through. I cannot punish him for that, but I can punish others in the command structure. I want them all to hear the rumor that even you were a victim of my wrath. For if you are not safe from my anger...then who is? As for the Force user you sensed...he is of little concern. Obi-Wan Kenobi obviously engineered the whole thing. His cowardly death was a distraction to allow his pilot to escape. But that is as far as it goes. This debacle was a freak event. An untrained whelp can be no threat to us, now that we are prepared. There will be a new Death Star, my servant. While it is under construction, I shall assemble the greatest strike fleet ever known. It shall contain the first of the new Super Star Destroyers and you shall command it. Your duty will be to hunt down and destroy the Rebel Alliance. I know you will not fail, my faithful servant." The Emperor smiled benevolently, but Vader was still clearly troubled.

"I have not told you the worst of it," the Dark Lord said. "Kenobi's plans ran deep. I told you that I felt the Force in the pilot, but I also knew at that moment that the boy was my son."

Palpatine was incredulous. Sudden fury radiated from him. "Son?! I never knew Skywalker had a son! What treachery is this?"

Vader immediately fell to his knees. "I did not know myself. But I could not be mistaken. I believe Kenobi raised him hoping to present a threat to us."

"Well his plans have failed," the Emperor grated, glowering at the ebony helmet before him. "He will never become a Jedi. We ensured that when we destroyed Kenobi. He did not foresee his own end. This changes nothing. We shall find and crush the Rebels as planned."

"Yes, my Master." Vader hesitated. "Even so, I wish to find him and put an end to him. It does not make sense to ignore even a small threat. Surely...this is the lesson of the Death Star."

Palpatine considered Vader. There was some very subtle difference in him, feelings running just beyond Palpatine's reach. But the Dark Lord had been through a great deal recently. It was surely only the strain affecting him. Palpatine spoke firmly. "Young Skywalker, if that is his name, can be no threat to our might. But he is no doubt with the Rebels, and if you wish to destroy him, you may do so when you crush the Alliance. Now go, and work my will."

Vader arose and left, black cape billowing. Palpatine put his momentary unease aside. He could trust Vader implicitly, for Vader was entirely his, body and soul. The spirit of Anakin Skywalker was as lost as the very limbs of the cyborged giant who went out to plan the Empire's revenge.

* * *

Everything proceeded according to the Emperor's design, as he was so fond of saying. As three swift years passed, the galaxy felt the full might of the Empire. Vader's strike fleet pursued the Rebels across the galaxy, never giving them a chance to establish a permanent base. Rebellious worlds were swiftly punished and their resources were fed into the Imperial war machine. Palpatine's vision for the galaxy was becoming a reality. Vader seemed obsessed with finding young Skywalker, but that did not seem to interfere with his search for the main Alliance forces. The new Death Star took shape around the forest moon of Endor.

Then, one day, Vader sent news that he had located the main Rebel base on Hoth, and was proceeding with his full armada against it. The clever Rebels received a lucky break, however, when the fleet admiral brought the entire fleet out of hyperspace too close to Hoth. Had the fleet remained out of scanner range, it could have used the cover of the system's asteroid field to remain hidden until it was too late for Hoth base to react. Instead, the Rebels were alerted and had time to raise a planetary shield that Admiral Ozzel had not guessed they possessed. The end result was a needless and costly ground battle. Sacrificing many lives in a delaying action, the Alliance managed to allow the escape of

its command group. It was a rout, but it was not, frustratingly, a final victory for Vader.

Then Palpatine received reports that Lord Vader had committed the entire strike fleet to the capture of one Rebel ship, the freighter that had ended his defense of the first Death Star. His obsession had finally gotten the better of him. There was a scattered, demoralized, and defeated remnant of the Alliance out there among the stars, and the time to finish them was now. There was no time for foolish hunting games. Vader must be brought to heel.

The Emperor stalked angrily through the corridors of the Palace, and his court stayed well clear of him. This made it easy to hide his aging beneath his voluminous hooded robes. His second clone body had aged at an accelerated rate as expected, and it seemed to him that the decay might even have become faster this time. But he liked to maintain appearances. It pleased him to let his people see him and know exactly who their Master was.

Palpatine strode into the Palace's main communications room, a hive of activity. Imperial Navy officers eyed him expectantly. He knew they were angered over Lord Vader's summary executions, and that they felt that the Dark Lord was completely out of control. To mollify them, Palpatine had decided to reprimand Vader in public, thus avoiding a mutiny in the strike fleet. At the same time, he would remind Vader of his responsibilities towards finding the Rebel fleet.

As the Emperor entered, the officers all knelt to him, bowing their heads. A nervous technician worked the communications station, and began the job of contacting the Executor. His fingers stumbled on the switches and he glanced up, sweating, expecting to be disciplined. But no one was watching him. All eyes were on the Emperor, who had suddenly and silently collapsed onto the gleaming deck, to the open-mouthed shock of the entire gathering.

* * *

Sate Pestage tended to his Master in the Imperial Medical Center. An entire wing had been cleared to treat the mysterious affliction that had overtaken the Emperor. The resident doctors were baffled when they were told that they would not be needed, but they were easily dealt with. The Rumor Control office would soon have the matter in hand.

Pestage knew that his Master was in a vision trance. It had happened before in his presence, and he knew that all the Emperor needed was rest and privacy. Palpatine lay on a bed, occasionally whispering, eyes shut, his mind clearly elsewhere. This time, though, Pestage found himself disturbed. He knew his Master well, and impossible as it may have seemed, Palpatine was evidently afraid of what he was "seeing"...

A young man stood before the Emperor, clad in black. It was the son of Skywalker. The Force was with him, and he had become a Jedi. He regarded Palpatine with defiance.

The Emperor was falling. He was filled with fear and surprise, and screamed all the way down. His body was ripped asunder by a collision with gigantic energy discharges. His life force was swallowed into the dark side, but this time, it was different. There was no immediate rebirth, only a terrifying chaos with no end...

Palpatine was afraid. Somehow, these two visions were linked, both part of the same possible future. A future in which he would die.

The Emperor's eyes flew open, startling Sate Pestage. The Grand Vizier had begun to sputter an inquiry as to his Master's state when Palpatine sat up and cut him off. "Contact the Executor immediately. I require a conference with Lord Vader. Send the signal to me whenever it comes in."

"A moment, Master," said Pestage uncomfortably, "If you are well, I must tell you that Prince Xizor has been trying to contact you while you were indisposed. He has requested an audience with you. I did not know what to say...he is a criminal of the basest sort..."

"Yes, he is," said the Emperor tersely. "But we will use him for his transport fleet as we construct the new Death Star. Tell him that I will see him now. But if Lord Vader's communication comes in, I want to speak with him immediately, no matter what."

"Yes, of course, Master," said Pestage.

And that was that. Without another word, Palpatine hurried from the room, leaving Sate Pestage gaping.

* * *

"What is thy bidding, my Master?" asked Vader, on bended knee. Before him was an enormous hologram of his Master's hooded face.

"There is a great disturbance in the Force," said Palpatine.

Vader cautiously responded, "I have felt it."

Palpatine sternly stated, "We have a new enemy. Luke Skywalker."

So, his dark Master had finally come to understand how it was. Perhaps the great tremor in the Force had finally convinced him. Something important had happened while Vader's forces had been sifting

through the asteroid field for the Millennium Falcon. What it was, he didn't know, but all at once, his son had become significant to the Emperor. Respectfully, he intoned, "Yes, my Master."

"He could destroy us," said Palpatine. Vader tried to hide his surprise. His Master must feel that his son was a threat indeed! Vader had, for three years, cherished hidden plans deep inside him, plans for his son. He knew he must downplay the boy's importance.

"He's just a boy. Obi-Wan can no longer help him."

But the Emperor was adamant. "The Force is strong with him. The son of Skywalker must not become a Jedi."

Vader knew this meant death for his son. The son of Skywalker. His Master would not even acknowledge the boy as Vader's own, believing that when Anakin had "died," every last vestige of the man was gone from Darth Vader. But something did remain, something he himself did not fully understand. He wanted his son to live, and rejoin him. Now Vader played his hand. "If he could be turned, he would become a powerful ally."

To his surprise, the Emperor agreed. "Yes. Yes. He would be a great asset. Can it be done?"

"He will join us, or die, my Master." Vader felt relief as the hologram faded. He did not understand why the Emperor suddenly feared that his son might become a Jedi. Could the boy have found a Master? It did not matter. He would be the boy's Master. He would show his son the true nature of the Force. He stood and moved to the doorway. There was much to be done.

* * *

After he finished his audience with Prince Xizor, Palpatine sat in his throne, pensive. He wondered what the outcome of their new course would be. He had agreed to Vader's suggestion because there had been a third vision in his trance: he had seen Luke Skywalker kneel before him, pledging servitude. My father's destiny is my own, Skywalker had said in the vision. Vader had been absent in the vision, but perhaps that was for the best. Vader had become...uncertain, of late. It may be time to replace him, with another Skywalker. Perhaps this new possible future, in which Skywalker knelt to him, would negate the other one, in which the boy was responsible for his death. The strange feeling was that he did not know. It excited him, this uncertainty. He had a new enemy, for the first time in years. He looked forward to their meeting. There was much to be made ready for that meeting. Much to be done. Thinking upon it, the Emperor laughed.