

STAR WARS

The Hand of Fate

By Brendon Wahlberg

It is a time of decision for the Force. The Jedi nexus of fate approaches, drawing the Emperor together with the enemy who could destroy him.

Blinded to the future, Palpatine searches desperately for a way to ensure his own victory when he faces Luke Skywalker.

But the Emperor's greatest blindness may be towards the threat of his most powerful servant, as Lord Vader begins to question his loyalty to his dark master...

Emperor Palpatine, Master of the dark side of the Force, made no effort to hide his satisfaction as he strode across the throne room floor towards the two combatants. One of them was Luke Skywalker, a young man clad in austere black. He was holding his humming lightsaber blade at the throat of his vanquished enemy, Lord Darth Vader. Luke had given in to his anger at last, and he was astonished at how easily he had beaten the Dark Lord. Luke panted, barely containing his rage as he warily watched the approaching Emperor. The blade in his hand drifted perilously close to Vader's gasping mask. The once mighty Sith Lord was reduced to abject terror, trying in vain to crawl away from Luke.

Luke saw Palpatine through a haze of anger. The Emperor was a surprisingly small man, hunched with age and clasping his wrinkled hands together. "Good!" Palpatine said, his withered features stamped with lust. "Your hate has made you powerful. Now, fulfill your destiny and take Lord Vader's place at my side!"

Luke looked at the fallen Sith Lord, once his most deadly foe, now completely at his mercy. He looked at his prosthetic right hand, gloved in black, and remembered that Vader had cut his real hand off when they last met. Not only that, Vader had also tortured his friends and delivered one of them to the ruthless crime lord, Jabba the Hutt, perhaps never to be seen again. And those acts barely began to scratch the surface of Vader's black deeds. If he put an end to this evil being, he would only be giving the galaxy the justice it cried out for. Luke suddenly recalled another man who had once been helpless before a lightsaber blade, and what Vader had done to him. Then he made the decision that felt right and just. He reversed his grip on the lightsaber he had made with his own hands and swept it through the torso of the Dark

Lord, crying "For Ben Kenobi!" Vader died screaming, cut in half in a heap of seared gore.

Luke turned his back on the smoking corpse and faced the Emperor. Palpatine was nearly beside himself with glee. "Well done, my young apprentice! Now, come and kneel to me, and pledge your loyalty."

Luke didn't move. The Emperor smiled at Luke, but it was the smile of a crafty predator. "You cannot turn back, now, young Skywalker," he chided Luke. He held out a wasted hand, beckoning. "I shall raise you to such heights of power that your name shall forever eclipse the name of Darth Vader."

Luke walked over to him, and with a grim set to his features, knelt deliberately at the Emperor's feet. "Lord Vader's destiny is my own," Luke said with finality. Without warning, Luke moved. "Now you die!" Luke shouted, stabbing upward with his lightsaber at Palpatine's defenseless, robed body. The bright green blade did not find its mark, however. Even as the thrust began, the saber was deactivated by a proximity sensor hidden on the Emperor's person. The pommel of Luke's weapon thudded ineffectually against the Emperor's chest, and the galactic ruler lurched backwards. Palpatine saw a flash of crimson behind Luke, then the point of a force pike bloomed from Luke's chest. Luke was lifted from the floor, impaled on the long weapon of a hulking Imperial guard.

Luke had known he would not leave the throne room alive, but to have failed in his one chance to kill the Emperor...it was too much despair to bear. Drowning in his pain, Luke was dimly aware that his lightsaber had returned to life. Knowing death was near, and desperate to end his physical and mental torment, he managed to turn the weapon onto himself.

The red robed guard let the room's second corpse slide from his force pike and slump to the floor. He regarded his Emperor silently. Palpatine stared thoughtfully at Luke's body for a long time. Then, noticing the guard, he dismissed him distractedly.

The bland voice of Sate Pestage, the Emperor's Grand Vizier, interrupted Palpatine's introspection. "My condolences, Master, on the loss of your servant," said Pestage, glancing at the bodies on the floor."

Palpatine looked at Pestage bemusedly, searching his timeworn face for a hint of the sarcasm he thought might be behind the statement. There was nothing but a wizened serenity in Pestage's expression.

For his part, Pestage knew his Master was experiencing a period of great stress, and he meant his presence to be soothing. Therefore it was with relief that he saw Palpatine calmly beckon to him and begin walking. Together, they went out into the halls of the Imperial citadel. They met no other person as they strode along in silence, for this part of the citadel was the Emperor's private sanctuary. There were times when Pestage worried a great deal about his Master. Like the day, four months

ago, when Palpatine had collapsed into a vision trance in front of most of the fleet Admirals. The glorious one had foreseen his own death, and despite his reliable means of overcoming that particular affliction, he had been afraid. Seeing fear in his Master had shaken Pestage. Palpatine was the foundation on which he built his life. He could not imagine what he would do if that foundation were taken away.

Equally worrisome was the Emperor's accelerated physical decay as the ravages of the dark side became ever more harsh. For Palpatine was demanding more of the Force than ever before. Pestage had seen his Master spend a great deal of time in his meditation chamber, trying, he suspected, to see the future. This ability awed Pestage, but for once, it did not seem to be working. Palpatine always emerged in a rage, flailing his fists and cursing his 'blindness'. He exerted more and more power, and his apparently futile efforts took a fearsome toll on his body. Only once had Palpatine given him any explanation, and Pestage had not fully understood. A great nexus was coming, the glorious one had told him, and the strands of probability were too much in flux to follow. But whatever barriers there were did not stop Palpatine from trying, and Pestage had begun to wonder if his Emperor would actually destroy himself.

Then, one day, Vader had returned with a prize. The Emperor had received his servant with a curious coldness, but once he discovered what the Sith Lord had brought, Palpatine had seemed rejuvenated. The prize had set in motion a series of frenzied preparations, as the Emperor immediately saw in it another means of gaining the information he sought--the probable outcome of his meeting with Luke Skywalker.

The prize had also made possible the contents of the room that they now entered. It was a large chamber, filled with row upon row of man-size tanks. The Emperor moved to the nearest one and wiped away the moisture beading on its glass surface. He stared at the face behind the glass with a searching intensity, but its eyes remained closed, its hair floating in the gentle currents of the nutrient bath. Sate Pestage suppressed a shiver. It was the face of Luke Skywalker.

The Constable of Homunculi, Rollo Mon, stepped out of the shadows, his enormous head ornament casting bizarre shadows in the sharp green light illuminating the entryway. The Emperor turned to him, his hand still resting on the tank.

"Prepare him," commanded Palpatine.

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Three months earlier, Darth Vader was striding through the nearly empty halls of cloud city. Behind him, struggling to keep up, was a surgeon droid clutching a foot long cylindrical tank. They hurried past vacated apartments and hollow, silent casinos. Only stormtroopers marked their passage by saluting, their rifles held casually due to the lack of any threat. For the once thriving luxury resort was now in the hands of

the Empire. Any citizens not able to evacuate in the exodus initiated by Baron-Administrator turned Rebel Lando Calrissian were rounded up and forcibly deported. Those with questionable pasts had gone to Imperial prisons, as had some of the innocent, caught in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Vader and the droid moved quickly into the lower levels of the city. The graceful sculptures and rich decor gave way to the gritty, exposed machinery of the Tibanna gas mining facility. Here and there, the squat, grotesque Ugnaughts scurried about, continuing the task of running the enormous machines. For them, one human master was much the same as any other, provided they were paid and not mistreated. Now the valuable gas, useful for antigrav devices and blasters, would go to the Empire, that was all. Finally, the Sith Lord reached the bottom of Cloud City and entered a small control room.

Vader stepped through a cloud of steam, suddenly appearing in front of Lieutenant Pralt and his work detail. Pralt backed away before he could catch himself as the huge armored figure loomed up before him like a sculpted gargoyle. "Report, Lieutenant," demanded Vader.

"My Lord," the officer stammered, straightening himself. Pralt knew of Vader's reputation for anger, and he feared to give the Dark Lord even partial bad news. But over the past few days, a strange story had circulated through the ranks. A week ago, when the Rebels had escaped both Cloud City and the Executor, Vader had failed to execute Admiral Piett, or anybody else. Instead, he had gone to meditate in his private chamber for three days. When he emerged, he had ordered a work detail to search the lower levels of the Cloud City reactor shaft for an unspecified object belonging to the Rebel, Luke Skywalker. Rumor had it that the Rebel had faced Vader high above and survived. His bravery bolstered by these tales, Pralt swallowed once and steadily reported, "My Lord, we have located what seems to be a lightsaber, but it lies in a rather difficult location." At least, Pralt assumed it was one of the old Jedi weapons. Its resemblance to the object hanging at Vader's belt gave the Lieutenant a bit of confidence...

Vader was already moving past him. "Show me," he commanded in a deep, mechanically amplified voice that was full of a surprising eagerness. Pralt signaled his men and the team led Vader and the silent droid into a narrow access corridor.

"Brace yourself, my Lord," Pralt warned as he opened the heavy door at the far end. Instantly, fierce winds swept into the tiny hallway, challenging the search team to stay on their feet. Vader stepped out onto the balcony beyond as if in total calm. Above the Dark Lord towered the enormous reactor shaft, a breathtaking open space glittering with distant lights. Below him, a mere hundred feet down, was the great sphere that terminated the shaft. It was studded with pressure release hatches that opened in response to the strong, shifting winds that coursed through the shaft. Vader stared at them as they rhythmically opened and closed, giving transient views of the bottomless drop to Bespin. Then, his electronically enhanced vision picked it out. Lying at the bottom of the

giant bowl, between two restlessly opening hatches, was a lightsaber. Wrapped tightly around the weapon was a severed human hand.

Vader could only attribute the miracle before him to the workings of the Force. While in meditation, he had been disturbed by thoughts of the hand. He had had a strong feeling that it still existed, and that the Emperor would want it. So he had come in search of it, trusting in the Force, and there it was. But it was not the pathetic bit of flesh that quickened Vader's pulse--it was the silvery pommel of the old Jedi weapon clutched in the stiff fingers. His lightsaber. Returned to him after some twenty years. It gleamed invitingly from below, somehow calling to him.

Pralt's voice broke into his fascinated contemplation, and Vader was startled to find that he had been leaning partly over the railing towards his prize. "My Lord," Pralt shouted, shivering in the cold and struggling to be heard over the howling of the wind, "if that is what you seek, I doubt we could send a man down there to get it. It would be too dangerous. Any attempt to retrieve the object could dislodge it and send it out one of those hatches."

Vader didn't respond immediately. Turning away from Pralt, he raised his arms to the immensity of the shaft. "It will be your good fortune, Lieutenant, to witness a demonstration of the true power in the universe," Vader said, managing somehow to be heard over the wind. Pralt felt nothing at first, then his skin began to crawl. The winds in the reactor shaft had begun to diminish. Pralt's men backed away nervously, but Pralt stood rooted to the spot. Slowly, inexorably, the swirling air quieted, then became still. One by one, the pressure release hatches below hissed to a close, until they were all shut. Vader gestured again, holding out a hand towards the lightsaber below, and it rose up to him majestically, settling gently into his outstretched palm.

Pralt shuddered in disgust to see the severed hand up close; its cauterized stump of a wrist and its ice-covered fingers clutching the saber even in death made Pralt unconsciously reach for his own right hand, as if to make sure it was still attached. Vader gestured to the surgeon droid and it clumped up, holding its cylindrical vat. The droid pressed a switch on the container and the top hissed open. Vader pulled the hand from the saber and immersed it in the reddish Bacta solution. He attached the saber to his belt, and turned to Lieutenant Pralt. "Good work, Lieutenant," he said simply. Then Vader strode away, the droid in tow, leaving Pralt and his men gaping. They stood there for a whole minute, not moving, until finally the chill winds began to return, urging the search team back into the warmth of the corridors.

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Alone in medstation seventy of the Executor, surgical droid 2-1BV had finished the treatment of the last blaster wounds from the Bospin battle. The mighty Super Star Destroyer was moving away from the gas giant and aiming itself at Coruscant, the dark heart of the Empire, the

Imperial throne world. Beevee turned to the wall stasis unit where the hand of the human Rebel was stored. With no other commands to obey at the moment, he clumped over to the unit and opened it. Removing the Bacta cylinder, Beevee examined the readouts on the container. The hand was perfectly preserved. It had been frozen during its stay in the reactor shaft, and the Bacta was acting to keep the tissue in a healthy state. In fact, Beevee noted clinically, the hand could even be reattached to the original owner with little loss of function, were he available. But no doubt the owner would have a prosthetic replacement by now. A droid hand, of sorts.

Beevee's photoreceptors regarded his own hand. It was so very different from the human hand in the tank, consisting of three grasping claws at the end of a stark metal rod. It enabled him to manipulate sophisticated surgical instruments and heal the wounds incurred by the vulnerable organics. Once, on a previous assignment, the old droid had seen two young human lovers sneak into his infirmary. They had not even noticed him as he stood motionless among the diagnostic equipment. They had done many things with their hands that Beevee knew he could never do. His cold, sharp edges could never gently caress a soft cheek or smooth hair away from a warm forehead. He wondered if the Rebel whose hand this was did such things with a human female. He wondered if there had been much pain when the hand was cut off. Pain was something Beevee clinically responded to, but it was not something he could feel himself. If a lightsaber took his hand off, he would merely have impaired surgical capacities. Then his manipulator would be replaced. Like the Rebel's hand. He wondered if the Rebel's new hand could feel the skin of another person's face.

Internal sensors warned him of the approach of a new patient, a captain who had broken an ankle by tripping into a service well. Beevee quietly replaced the Bacta tank and didn't give it another thought as he prepared his instruments for the simple operation. A moment later, the Executor made the jump to hyperspace.

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Emperor Palpatine was at one with the Force. Lines of probability stretched out before him as he turned his mind towards the future. The farther he looked, the more the lines branched and the more they tended to flicker or fade. The focus of his attention lay on a very strong line that led to a confusing jumble resembling a tangled ball of twine that kept changing shape. It was the nexus of fates in which he met Luke Skywalker. The fates of himself, Skywalker and Vader were tied up there, and he absolutely could not see whether any of their lives continued past that point. He knew the meeting was inevitable. It seemed to Palpatine that Skywalker's path met Vader's first, and then both joined his own at the nexus. But when the Emperor tried to penetrate that nexus, the awful result was always the same.

It was the mental equivalent of leaping into a whirlpool. He was swiftly rendered helpless, trapped in a chaotic storm of visions. They went hurtling past his mind's eye, leaving only fleeting impressions.

A black-clad Skywalker called his lightsaber to his hand and with a lightening move, burned Palpatine's head from his shoulders...

A passive Skywalker made no move to ignite his lightsaber as Vader moved in. Vader was saying, "If you will not fight, then you will meet your destiny." Luke did not resist as Vader cut his son down...

Vader and Skywalker suddenly put aside their fierce duel and marched towards the Emperor, seated defenseless on his throne. As one, they treacherously murdered Palpatine...

Vader was dead, killed by the Emperor himself when the Dark Lord had encouraged Luke to try to kill the Emperor. Now Palpatine was hurling Force lightning at Skywalker too, leaving the boy writhing in agony, begging to serve him...

Skywalker was holding his blade at Vader's throat, hate filling his face, dark side power coursing through him, ready to commit patricide...

The variations were endless. The Emperor's mind was assaulted by the nexus, threatening him with destruction. If he did not break out of it, in mere moments, his consciousness would be pulled in a thousand directions at once. It took even more power than the last time, but Palpatine managed to win free, awakening with a sickening spinning sensation on the floor of his meditation chamber. Fear and anger coursed through him. It was impossible for him to see the shape of things to come, but he required absolutely to know. So much was at stake--everything he had created so far. His Empire. Palpatine clenched his fists, gazing ruefully at the progressing ruin of his flesh. He could not continue these ordeals and survive. He doubted that he could rescue his consciousness from that nexus and make it into a new clone, were he to perish from the stress it caused him.

Suddenly a call signal demanded his attention. He stood painfully and moved to his terminal. He saw that the Executor had returned and was in orbit around Coruscant. Vader wanted to have an audience with him. Vader. The Emperor's anger burned even more darkly. Yes. He would see Vader. And learn what the traitor had to say for himself.

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Sitting on his throne awaiting Vader's arrival, the Emperor knew he had finally come to regret the day he had made "Lord Vader". When Anakin Skywalker had turned to the dark side, so long ago, that had been well. Palpatine had thought he would be one of the most powerful dark side adepts among his secret disciples. But just when Anakin had begun to discover his power, he had foolishly faced his old teacher, Kenobi, and had wound up so grievously wounded that the only way to keep him alive was to cyborg him. At the Emperor's order, his limbs were replaced, increasing his stature considerably. He was encased within an armored life support system that compensated for the loss of his lungs. An ancient order of dark side monks, the Sith, had taken Anakin into their care, helping him to recover and adjust to his new body. They had seen him as the fulfillment of an old prophecy, and they created a fearsome mask that resembled the war helm of their greatest legendary hero. Anakin was given a new name and raised to leadership of their order. True to the prophecy, Darth Vader had led the Sith to new heights. When they took him in, they had been a monastic order living in seclusion, hiding from the Jedi, and lamenting their lost glory. Vader gave them back their splendor, however briefly. At the Emperor's command, he led them to emerge and hunt down the Jedi. The Jedi were no easy prey, and all of the Sith except Vader were destroyed. With nowhere to go, Vader had become the Emperor's servant. That was when Palpatine's troubles began.

Vader had been a Skywalker once, and too many of the traits of that line remained in him. A fierce individuality, a quickness to anger, a certain recklessness, and very great strength in the Force all combined to make a servant of unquestionable value but perhaps too much power.

Palpatine had used Vader as his foremost agent. Vader eventually became the most visible symbol of the Empire. His mask, his stature, his voice, and his powers presented an image that struck fear into most people. They obeyed him, and thus obeyed Palpatine. They did not fear their Emperor, though in reality, they most certainly should have. In Vader, the Emperor had an instrument through which he could project something of his true self, while retaining an image of relative benevolence for himself.

Also, Palpatine admitted to himself, it was simply satisfying to have beside him a living symbol of his victory over the Jedi. Anakin had been one of the brightest and the best of the Jedi, and now here he was, twisted and corrupted, every last trace of goodness eradicated from him. As Vader, he was strong in the Force, but he kneeled to Palpatine, debasing himself and groveling at his Master's displeasure, and taking his only sustenance from his Master's praise. Yes, it was better than having a dead Jedi, better by far.

A few years ago, the Emperor had seen the first signs that all was not well with Vader. When Vader had met and killed his old teacher, then discovered he had a son, old, long unfelt connections to the past had stirred in him. It became worse when Vader was given command of the fleet and he used it to indulge his obsession with finding his son. At the time, Palpatine had swallowed his doubts, and perhaps that was a mistake. For, when Vader had finally caught up with his son, his true colors had shown at last.

The Emperor had agreed to try to turn Luke Skywalker, and Vader had agreed to be the one to do it, or else kill the boy. Vader laid a complicated trap, placing Luke's friends in danger, knowing that the boy would feel their pain and come to their rescue. It worked perfectly, and before long, the boy, full of bravado, faced his father with ignited lightsaber. As he had done so many times before, Palpatine had used the Force to watch his servant. He was keen to take the measure of this boy who inexplicably figured so strongly in his own destiny. As the battle unfolded, Vader tested the boy, urging him to draw power from the dark side by encouraging the emotions that would open him to it. The boy resisted, but by the time he realized he was out of his depth, it was too late for him. That fierce Skywalker determination kept him fighting on, though Vader was by far his superior. Palpatine had been certain that Vader would be forced to kill the boy. The Dark Lord had bludgeoned his way through Luke's defenses and sliced off his right hand. He cornered Luke, leaving no way out but to turn or die. Then had come the moment that Palpatine even now recalled with dismay and rage. The moment of betrayal.

There is no escape, Vader had told Luke, Don't make me destroy you. You do not yet realize your importance. You have only begun to discover your power. Join me and I will complete your training. With our combined strength, we can end this destructive conflict and bring order to the galaxy. Treachery! Their combined strength! By the dark side, it would never be. Vader belonged to him! Skywalker was his! It would never be. But betrayal had followed treachery. Vader revealed his identity, and although the boy reacted with anguished disbelief, Palpatine had thought he felt the assertion touch something deep inside Skywalker. Vader had felt it, too. Search your feelings. You know it to be true. Luke. You can destroy the Emperor. He has foreseen this. It is your destiny. Join me, and together we can rule the galaxy as father and son.

Remembering the words, Palpatine began to shiver with anger. Indeed, his visions of Skywalker's threat to him had opened Vader's eyes to the possibility of Palpatine's vulnerability. But there was much to the notion of "destiny" that Vader did not grasp. He would learn that to covet Palpatine's power was to earn death. From the moment of that betrayal, the Emperor had begun to plot the destruction of Darth Vader. His plan had a great symmetry to it. He would mold events such that one Skywalker would kill the other, and in that act, turn to the dark side and replace him at Palpatine's side. He would use Vader's great hope as the very instrument of his murder, and corrupt the son as he had corrupted the father. It was the perfect destiny for both of them.

Except that nothing was certain anymore. The boy was strong, and he had made his servant strong. It would be a risky endeavor. After long decades of being above risk, the Emperor did not like it at all.

The great throne room doors opened, and Vader strode in, preceded by Sate Pestage, flanked by six Imperial guards, and followed by, of all things, a droid. Vader completed the long walk to the throne, then knelt at the Emperor's feet. This was a ceremonial audience, and Pestage was wearing full dress regalia. Pestage formally announced the presence of

the Lord Darth Vader and his request to report to his majesty, the Emperor. Palpatine had designed this formal meeting to remind Vader of his place, and besides, the formality helped Palpatine to mask the anger he felt towards Vader. It would not do to let Vader know how he felt before the moment of his revenge. Even so, Palpatine waited nearly a full minute before acknowledging Vader with a cold sounding, "Rise, and report on the events at Bespin."

Vader stood. If he was put off by this ceremony, he did not show it. Instead, he went along with it. He handed a datapad to Sate Pestage. "Your majesty," Vader intoned, "I have confronted and fought the young Rebel Force user, Luke Skywalker. I found him to be formidable, but his skills were undeveloped. He has enhanced physical abilities, the power to levitate objects, and reasonable skill with a lightsaber, but little else. What success he had in eluding me was due to a certain raw talent, perhaps inborn in him, as well as considerable good fortune. He resisted my attempts to turn him to the dark side. Kenobi must have prepared him for this before he died. The battle was ultimately one-sided, and when he was pressed to the last, he chose to leap to his death. His companions in the Millennium Falcon rescued him, and his current location is unknown. I am able to resume my search, but first I have brought something to you, your majesty. During the battle, Skywalker lost his right hand. I have recovered it for you. The Force gave me a sense of its importance." He waved a black gloved hand, and the medical droid, Beevee, came forward with the Bacta tank.

Palpatine had been stewing while listening, his anger growing hotter as Vader presented an account that omitted his betrayal. He was tempted to accuse Vader on the spot, but he sensed that Vader would only deny it. He had lied about Luke Skywalker's Force potential; Palpatine knew it was high. He would certainly lie to save his own life from a sentence of death for treason. But when Palpatine saw the hand, his rage evaporated. Here was an opportunity indeed--one that could tell him the future in a safe way. The Emperor actually smiled. "Well done, Lord Vader. The hand will be very useful indeed! But now I wish you to suspend your search for young Skywalker. Your new orders are to assemble as much of the fleet as possible at the new Death Star at Endor. Then you will oversee the final stages of construction. Moff Jerjerrod must be encouraged to complete the station on schedule. At the very least, the superlaser must be ready when I arrive at the station. Go now, and do my bidding."

Vader bowed deeply, and left. The Emperor sensed his frustration at the orders. Beevee remained behind holding the tank. The droid looked intimidated by its surroundings. Palpatine turned to Sate Pestage. "Summon the Constable of Homunculi and Ars Dangor immediately. Return this droid to the command ship and bring the hand to the clone vat chamber. I shall wait for you in the conference room." With that, Palpatine left the room, leaning on his twisted cane.

Beevee was relieved to have the hand taken from him, and as he was escorted from the throne room, he reflected that he was glad he was not a protocol droid. There was much about human interactions that quite bewildered him.

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The Emperor gestured for Rollo Mon to take a seat at the large table where he, Ars Dangor, and Sate Pestage were gathered. Rollo Mon bowed to the other men at the table politely. He rarely saw them, as he was reclusive and habitually immersed himself in his work. Sate Pestage was a stick thin man who bore the weight of his uncounted years with a spry endurance. He wore a roomy cassock that glittered with rare gems from his homeworld, and he was quite lost in the gaudy garment. Its wealthy appearance contrasted with Pestage's face, which had the stamp of an ascetic on its weathered features. He looked utterly at peace. Ars Dangor, the Emperor's advisor, looked almost like a mirror image of Palpatine. Unlike most of the advisors, Dangor chose to garb himself in the fashion of the Emperor himself; stark black robes with a deep hood. Dangor had that hood removed now, and his widely spaced eyes gave his hot stare a disconcerting aspect. He wore a constant leer on his thin lips, and he had a towering reputation for ruthlessness. While Pestage dealt with Palpatine's personal matters and acted as an intermediary in communications, Dangor made public addresses and ran the Empire day to day. Dangor dealt with all the "little pictures" while Palpatine dealt with the "big picture", and Pestage dealt with Palpatine.

Rollo Mon himself was a short man who compensated for his lack of height with an almost absurd head ornament that nearly doubled his stature. He smiled nervously with his uneven teeth and sat down abruptly, unsure of social graces.

When all were seated, Palpatine rose. He was looking very old, and Rollo Mon well understood the reason. But the Emperor's eyes glittered with enthusiasm as he began to outline the reason for their gathering. "My friends, welcome. Lord Vader has brought us the means to clone our elusive enemy, Luke Skywalker. The Force has shown me that I will confront him soon, but the outcome remains unclear. I am sure you can appreciate the need for more information." The other three men murmured their agreement. Dangor displayed agitation at the mere mention of Skywalker's name, and Rollo Mon leaned forward in excitement, pleased at the notion of a new challenge. Looking at Rollo Mon, the Emperor continued, "I wish to clone Skywalker and test him, to see what he will most likely do when he comes before me. I need the clones soon. Can it be done?"

The Constable was in his element. "Yes, your majesty. If you don't need the clones to be stable long term, the standard growth term of one year can be shortened to as little as two months. The clones should remain sane for long enough to test them. Of course, they won't really be this Skywalker, but we can do better than we did with Bevel Lemelisk's clones. We'll have to implant them with very detailed false memories if they are to behave realistically. Recent advances in memory conditioning allow coherent experience construction to be carried out while the clone is still in the tertiary growth phase, so that the decanted product is

already identity established. The margin for error depends on the quality of the information we possess on the subject-" Rollo Mon realized he had left his seat and was pacing. Embarrassed, he took his seat and concluded quietly, "What background do we have available?"

The Emperor turned to Ars Dangor, who held up a datapad. "Here are the ISB reports on Luke Skywalker, collected from the battle of Yavin to the present. Our agents have been busy, and there is much information here. But the basic outline of what we know may be summarized as follows. Dangor activated a holographic display above the table. The identimage of Luke Skywalker, a moisture farmer of the rim world, Tatooine, shimmered into view. "The subject grew up on Tatooine, in the care of Owen and Beru Lars. Records are poor on such worlds, but we are sure they were not really related to him. It is very likely that the old Jedi, Obi-Wan Kenobi, was also in hiding on Tatooine, and that he helped to raise Skywalker. Kenobi must have instructed the boy in the ways of the Force. Skywalker is not a common name, and it is believed that his actual father was the famed Jedi, Anakin Skywalker. Since Kenobi and Anakin were close friends, it is easy to imagine Anakin giving Luke into Kenobi's care before his death some twenty years ago. The subject would then have an inborn aptitude for the Force, which must have been nurtured over the years by Kenobi."

Dangor looked at Palpatine, whose face was unreadable. He suspected that the Emperor already knew far more about Skywalker than the ISB ever would. "Shortly before the Battle of Yavin," Dangor continued, "two events occurred that may have strongly impacted the subject's personality and motivations. First, Lord Vader's search team killed the Lars family. Second, Vader killed Kenobi right in front of Skywalker. Therefore the subject is probably revenge motivated, especially if you take into account an unverified report that the subject's childhood friend, one Biggs Darklighter, was killed during the Battle of Yavin. After the battle, Skywalker was a hero in the Rebellion. His feat in destroying the Death Star probably gives him an exaggerated view of his own abilities. The death of the Jedi, Kenobi, left the subject without a mentor, so it is probable that his skills have not greatly improved since then. It is well known that Lord Vader has an obsession with hunting Skywalker down, probably to avenge his defeat at the Death Star. It was Lord Vader's conviction that Skywalker was present on Hoth, but his whereabouts were not confirmed until several months later, when Lord Vader confronted him on Cloud City. The subject escaped and remains at large. He is viewed as a significant threat due to his Force skills and his probable vengeance goals. Personally, I think his importance is exaggerated. With all due respect, your majesty, you and Lord Vader have destroyed Jedi Masters in the past. Why is so much attention being devoted to this young man?"

The Emperor's frown was like a knife edge. "I know him to be a threat, Ars Dangor. You know nothing of the workings of the Force. Events are in motion which have been predestined. Where the Force is concerned, a man's own power is as nothing. When I face Skywalker, he will be a Jedi. So long as the Force is with him, he is not to be underestimated."

Dangor stood and bowed. "Your majesty, I ask your forgiveness. I do not presume to question your judgment."

"It is given." Palpatine turned to Sate Pestage. "Lord Vader is to be a part of the confrontation with Skywalker, but I do not wish to involve him at this point. You will recruit an actor to play his part. Outfit him convincingly, and prepare the throne room for the encounters. Only a single guard need be present. The clone and the actor are to be armed with specially modified lightsabers that I shall provide." Palpatine paused, then looked at Dangor. "Leave that report with the Constable. He will find it most useful. The real confrontation will occur on the new Death Star, where we shall destroy the cursed Rebel fleet and their Mon Calamari allies once and for all. Make certain that the throne room is completed there, and ensure that its view of the battle area will be unobstructed. As for the trap itself, information about a large Imperial construction project will be leaked to the Rebels. The Death Star plans will be copied and transferred from our secure vaults to Imperial Intelligence on Bothawui, via a seemingly defenseless freighter. The Rebels will take this freighter, and pay a convincing price for capturing the plans. Information concerning the shield generator and my own presence on the battle station has also been planted, and within a month, it will be 'discovered' by a Rebel cell we have identified on Aargau. Lord Vader is currently assembling a large fleet at Endor, in secret. The Rebels will suspect nothing. The trap will close around them, and they will realize that the bait is beyond their grasp. Then the Alliance will die." Palpatine gave a little laugh. "That is all for now. You are dismissed."

Dangor and Pestage rose and filed from the room, leaving the datapad behind. Palpatine gestured for Rollo Mon to remain. When they were alone, Palpatine leaned close to the diminutive Constable of Homunculi, whom he had trusted with his life many times in the past, and whispered to him. "There are a few other things to add to the clone's memories, that I must tell you of..."

* * *

Assembling the fleet, however secretly, was not fitting work for the Dark Lord of the Sith. It was properly delegated to Admiral Piett, and that was exactly what an irritated Lord Vader had done. Now he was alone in his meditation chamber, its black hemispheres fitted together like the shells of a Calamarian Deep Bivalve. With the chamber sealed, and the atmospheric pressure lowered, Vader could breathe even without his mask. He liked to have it off from time to time, to be free of its confines.

The mask was held by a robot arm above his head, which was a pasty white from decades of being hidden. A long burn scar ran down the back of his skull, the souvenir of his violent encounter with Kenobi before the mask was created. There were no mirrors in the chamber.

Vader was absorbed in studying his old lightsaber. It felt very strange to hold it again after so long. He guessed Kenobi had taken it,

then saved it, and given it to Luke. But why? It was an age-old Jedi custom to have an aspiring Jedi construct his or her own lightsaber. Why had Luke not done so? Now it was back in his gloved hands. What a strange road it had traveled.

He caressed the weapon, remembering how he had constructed it. Its power cell and hand grip were one unit, which was surmounted by an activation lever. Higher up the weapon were its controls, blade length and blade intensity adjustments. The emitter matrix was half shielded by a graceful arc of metal that housed the internal access lever. Vader's hands paused there. Something was different--the lever was raised higher than he remembered it. Had it been bent, or was something underneath preventing its proper closure? With a gentle twist, he used the lever to disengage the tiny circular access plate and peered within. He saw it immediately. A tiny recording chip was affixed to the rear of the emitter matrix.

Vader was mystified. He removed a delicate instrument from a nearby stand and used it to extract the magnetized chip. He rotated his seat to face his viewscreen and placed the chip in a reader. It was an old chip, of outdated design, but the reader should still be able to handle it. He waited. Long moments later, the screen flickered to life, and Vader found himself looking into the face of Obi-Wan Kenobi, some twenty years younger than the old man he had killed on the Death Star. That was in itself a surprise, but little could compare to the shock he felt when the image spoke. "Anakin...", it said.

* * *

Two decades earlier, Obi-Wan Kenobi was alone in his starship, breaking orbit from Horuz, fleeing the ruin of his greatest friendship. His body was beaten and his heart was broken. He ached all over from the wounds he had incurred in his narrow escape from the Sith. Kenobi was barely able to complete the coordinate entry for the jump to hyperspace that put that evil world of tragic loss behind him forever. Space outside the viewport flared with starlines, but Kenobi did not see them. He was desperately trying to attune himself to the Force, seeking solace for his pain. Gradually, he began to feel at one with the great energy field that bound that galaxy together. He was no longer alone, but in touch with life all around. He felt pain, but now it was shared. He was given healing as well. Kenobi's grief became bearable and he was able to meditate. His trim brown beard framed a mouth that formed an enigmatic almost-smile. The Force was still with him, and now it showed him something.

Within his trance, he saw a black armored figure with a ghastly pale visage that he recognized despite its wasted state. It was Anakin, and he was holding what Kenobi knew to be the very lightsaber he had taken from their battlefield on Horuz. The Force whispered to him, it seemed, of what he must do, and its importance. Still in his trance, he nodded. A minute later, he emerged gently from the meditation, and arose

to cross to his message recorder. Some part of the burden felt lifted from his shoulders, and he knew that the events of the past day would only really come to their conclusion on the far off day seen in his vision. He had no guarantee that what he saw would come to pass, or that anything would come of it, yet he had to try. Composing himself, he faced the recorder and turned it on.

"Anakin," he said, "If you are hearing this, then what I have foreseen has come to pass, and you are still alive, but in the grip of the dark side. I cannot decide if I hope you still live or not...I left your body on Horuz, hideously burned. I question whether you could survive."

"But if you still live...my friend-" Kenobi's voice caught. "I am sorry...for everything. When you were my student, I saw your anger at what was happening to the Republic. But I ignored it. I thought you would be able to control your feelings and work to save what was left. I was confident in the teachings I'd given you. But I didn't see what was happening until it was too late. You fell under the influence of Palpatine, and instead of fighting to save the Republic, you embraced what he wanted to put in its place."

"Oh Anakin, Palpatine showed you so much power--more than you ever knew existed. Power to impose order on a chaotic and corrupt society. It was the power of the dark side of the Force, and it seduced you. As your teacher, I should have helped you to face the dark side during your training--helped you to deny it. I failed in this duty, and Palpatine was the first to show it to you. Palpatine is so much more than he seems. As he gains more power, my fear for the galaxy grows. When I saw what he had done to you, I resolved to confront you, and to try to turn you back. When at last you left Palpatine's presence, and went to Horuz, I followed you. I didn't know why you were going, I only saw my chance to get through to you."

"The moment I saw you, waiting for me on that ridge near the pits with anger in your heart, I realized you had known I was following all along. I was shocked by how you had changed, by how far gone you were. You didn't listen to my appeals to our friendship, or to my pleas that you remember your wife, who still loves you, despite everything. Nothing got through. I think Palpatine had warned you that I was going to try to take away your power, so that all you wanted was to fight me and be rid of me." Kenobi hung his head in sorrow. It was all so fresh, still an open wound in his soul.

"I taught you all you know about lightsaber combat. You couldn't have won. I...didn't want to hurt you...but you attacked with such ferocity that I had no choice. To save my own life, Anakin, I had to strike you down. It was the hardest thing I ever did. I saw you fall from the ridge, into the pit...I would have come after you, tried to help you, but at that moment, I felt a devastating attack through the Force." Kenobi's face was full of rue. "Too late, I realized why you had come to Horuz, and how foolish I had been to follow you. I had stumbled onto the lost Monastery of the Sith. I thought it was long vanished, but Palpatine knew where it was, and he sent you there to learn from them. I knew I

could not stand against them alone, and I fled. I barely escaped with my life, using all the power at my command. Maybe the Sith saved you...If I had not been attacked, I would have tried to save you." Earnestly, he leaned towards the recorder. "Anakin, hear me. If you still live, it is not too late. Palpatine gave you power, but he took so much more. Things of infinitely greater value. Your friends, your wife, all that is good and loving in a man's life that makes it worth living. Let go of your hatred. The dark side can only destroy everything it touches. Turn away from it."

Kenobi sighed deeply. "What am I doing? This is probably for nothing. If the dark side has you, then the man who was my friend is dead. I must face that fact. I will never forget you. I will miss you, Anakin...good-bye."

Unable to take any more, Kenobi slapped the recorder switch off. Smoothly, it ejected the finished chip. He stared at it for a long time. Then he reached for his friend's lightsaber, finally letting himself cry as he did so.

* * *

Darth Vader sat very still as the screen went blank, the message finished. He stared at the glassy surface, disturbed at it without knowing why, until he realized with a start that he was looking at his own face, dimly reflected on the blank screen. He turned away, made acutely uncomfortable by the sight. His thoughts were in turmoil, and he tightly clenched the lightsaber in his gloved fists. Without understanding why, Vader had a strong, clear memory of his son leaping to his death rather than joining him. He was filled with feelings he could no longer name.

Vader hastily punched the control keys next to him, and his black mask and helmet descended over his troubled face, sealing against his armor with a hiss. Now there was only the angular breath mask, an iron face that never showed weakness of any kind. Safe in his fortress, Vader began to feel better. He told himself that there was no conflict inside of him as he took the chip between his black gloved machine fingers and crushed it into fragments that fell glittering to the deck plates.

* * *

Two and a half months later, Emperor Palpatine sat in the throne room on Coruscant, waiting for the fourth clone of Luke Skywalker to enter. So far, the project had been frustrating, and he had learned little, but he thought that this next encounter might be the breakthrough. In any case, he sensed that time was running out. All too soon, the real moment would be upon him. Palpatine reflected on the many

variables involved in this testing. Skywalker was a complex individual. Ars Dangor's report had contained little real knowledge of the boy's psychology. The truth of Luke's parentage had not been in it at all. Where it had discussed Luke's feelings about Vader, it had concluded that Luke must want him dead. The first clone had been created according to the report, to satisfy the Emperor's curiosity, and sure enough, he had killed Vader. But Palpatine had been unsatisfied. The act had not held the passion required for turning Luke to the dark side; the clone had killed out of a sense of justice. Luke must feel the anger and hatred, he must let the dark side empower him to kill his father. Finally, he must become his father.

Besides, despite Palpatine's inability to penetrate the nexus, he could see the events leading up to it with unusual clarity. He saw Skywalker coming to Vader of his own free will, hoping that his father could be turned. He knew the boy had great compassion for his father. It was a strange aspect of Luke, but the Emperor knew it could be the boy's undoing. If the boy couldn't kill his own father, then Vader would destroy him. No matter what Vader felt about his son, he could not defy the Emperor's direct command. If Luke was driven in the end to kill his father, then he would belong to the dark side, and to Palpatine.

The boy's fatal compassion for his father was incorporated into the second clone. The clone had solemnly entered, accompanied by a replacement stand-in for Vader. The Emperor had welcomed him, and asserted that he was now the clone's new master. The boy had resisted, but as before, Palpatine had "revealed" to him that the Rebel fleet had been lured into a trap around Coruscant, and that it was being destroyed. Viewscreens had even been set up to simulate the battle, and with growing anguish, the clone had cried out for it to stop. But of course, it did not, and Palpatine had crowed over the end of Luke's allies. He had taunted Luke for his helplessness, and urged Luke to take his anger out on him. As the first clone had, this one had finally tried to move on Palpatine. The stand-in for Vader had intervened and placed himself in Luke's way, and Luke had begun a reluctant fight. While the first clone had fought aggressively, the second, in his compassion, fought purely defensively, angling around for a chance to rush the Emperor. He didn't get the chance. The false Vader cornered him. Then, to Palpatine's disgust, the actor had balked at actually killing the boy. The Emperor had been forced to go over to them and finish both of them with Force lightning.

The third clone had been accompanied by a ruthless Royal Guard in the Vader role. But the change was to no avail. The clone could not be goaded into attacking Palpatine at all. He had watched as the fleet was "destroyed", and Palpatine could tell that the boy's helplessness had paralyzed him. Putting the fleet in danger was not a sure thing to push Luke over the edge. Irritated, Palpatine had ordered the clone destroyed.

Then the Emperor had felt he was at an impasse. He needed Luke to enter into combat with Vader, but there seemed to be insufficient impetus for Luke to give in to his anger. It was Sate Pestage who finally solved the problem. The Grand Vizier had pointed out what Vader had already learned; the real Luke Skywalker had felt the pain of his friends, Han

Solo and Leia Organa, from across space, and tried to come to their rescue. He had been close to them for three years, and would most likely lay down his life for them. Why not simply put them in mortal danger? Palpatine had cursed himself for not seeing the obvious. Of course, when Skywalker came to Endor, he would be accompanied by his friends. Yes, that was the key, he was sure of it. Imperial databanks were searched for images of the Princess-Senator and the Corellian, and then the Emperor was ready.

Now he waited, alone, for the fourth clone. His guards were absent. He had learned from the first encounter that their presence was not a good idea. The far doors opened, and Vader entered with Luke. This time, one of Palpatine's dark side adepts was standing in for Vader. He was an admirer of the Dark Lord, and he knew Vader's mannerisms well. They came up close to his throne, and Palpatine smiled. "Welcome, young Skywalker. I have expected you. You will complete your training with me, my young apprentice."

Luke was defiant. "Obi-Wan Kenobi was my Master, killed at the hands of your servant. He would never turn to the dark side, and neither will I. I came here to try to save my father from you, but I'll die before I join you."

"Oh, no, my young apprentice," the Emperor corrected Luke. "Your hopes for your father are empty. He will never go with you. He is forever mine. As for you, young Skywalker, there is much for you to learn. I will show you the true nature of the Force, and you will serve me."

Luke stood firm. Palpatine knew he was nurturing the planted hope that the attacking Rebel fleet would either contrive to aid him somehow, or else destroy the Palace and put an end to the Emperor's reign. "None of this matters, your Highness," Luke protested. "The Rebel fleet is on its way here now. The Imperial fleet has been lured away from Coruscant and this Palace is defenseless. Both of us will die. You'll never have the chance to turn me." Luke turned to face Vader. "Father, come with me now. We can escape together. Leave this place and your cruel Master." Luke was getting anxious. Vader didn't move a muscle.

Palpatine stood and crossed the dais, looking down mockingly at Luke despite his smaller stature. "Your father can never be turned, my young apprentice. As for your fleet, it will never penetrate Coruscant's planetary shield." The Emperor's voice went sickeningly soft. "You think I am mistaken, don't you." Palpatine laughed mirthlessly. "In fact, the Imperial fleet is poised to arrive via hyperspace at any moment, trapping your Rebel fleet and destroying it. We are in no danger, boy." Palpatine leaned in very close to Luke, speaking in a low voice. "Perhaps you are counting on your friends to disable the shields." He was pleased to see Luke begin to sweat. Smiling, the Emperor reached to trigger a control on the arm of his throne. Luke was startled as an enormous wall screen lit up. On it was the security camera transmission from deep in the bowels of the Palace. Luke could see the furtive shapes of Rebel commandos scurrying for cover as a patrol of security guards passed by. The image moved into a tight focus, and Luke gasped audibly as the faces of Han Solo and Princess Leia came clearly into view. "Oh, yes, my young

apprentice. I know of your friends' mission. I lured them here, after all. They have been a thorn in my side, and now I shall enjoy torturing them. Perhaps I shall let you listen to their screams." Palpatine laughed again, and Luke's hands clenched.

Suddenly, on the screen, two dozen heavily armed stormtroopers came up behind the commandos. Han Solo spun and fired, blindingly fast, but he wasn't able to stop several troopers from wounding him terribly in the arms and legs. He dropped to the floor, his heavy blaster spinning into the shadows. Leia screamed and fired frantically, but she, too, was swiftly taken down. Luke couldn't tell if either of them was still alive. Then the screen image changed to a view of the space around Coruscant. Rebel ships were careening madly away from the dimly visible planetary shield as dozens of Star Destroyers came screaming out of hyperspace to array themselves like a giant net around the Rebel fleet. Without warning, hundreds of turbolasers spoke fiery death into the void as swarms of TIE interceptors descended upon the Rebels. Luke watched helplessly as the Alliance ships were cut to pieces. Explosions bloomed in the darkness, and the dying began in earnest.

"It is the end for the Alliance, my young apprentice," The Emperor told Luke. "There is no hope left for you. Your friends are now in my power. I will see that they are a long time dying. You may beg me for their lives. Perhaps I will give them to you, If you serve me... if they survive."

Luke could stand no more. He ignited his lightsaber and shouted, "Father, stay back, this isn't your fight." He moved up onto the dais, menacing the Emperor. "Maybe you'll trade your own life for the lives of Han and Leia," Luke said fiercely. But Vader was already moving. Igniting his own weapon, he chased after Luke and drove him away from the Emperor.

Luke defended himself easily, his green blade blurring in the air. "I'm not here to fight you, Father," Luke grated. "You don't have to fight me. Together we can defeat the Emperor, you know that."

But the man playing Vader would hear none of it. "The Emperor is my Master. Now he is yours, too. The only chance for you is to serve him." He attacked, more aggressively. "I tortured your friends on Cloud City, and now they will be mine again. Leia Organa will scream a dozen times for every minute that you deny your destiny. I will kill Han Solo before your eyes. The Rebel Alliance is dead and soon, your friends will die, too!"

Luke was hard pressed to fend off Vader's attacks, but his anger had been growing. His rage began to show on his face as the room seemed to spin before his eyes. Vader pressed the attack, his blade flashing blindingly against Luke's again and again. The wall screen showed a huge Rebel cruiser annihilated in a billowing fireball. The image shifted, and Han and Leia appeared again, screaming as they were shot over and over. The Emperor laughed, long and loud in Luke's ears.

Luke's anger was suddenly alive in him, a clamoring thing writhing in its desire for destruction. And the dark side answered its call. Luke

felt strength pour into him, and he easily beat Vader's blade aside. He had been so wrong about his father. There was no good left in him. If Vader now stood between him and the Emperor, then he would have to fall. Look at him! The Dark Lord of the Sith, retreating before me. You won't escape, Vader--you die now! You didn't deserve the power you had. Now, mine is greater! My father...I hate the day I ever learned I was your son! No--don't try to run--it ends here! Yes! On your knees! Down! Down on the floor! A fitting place for you to DIE! Luke suddenly found himself with no one between Palpatine and himself. The hate was singing in his ears, a red haze was before his eyes, and a bloody taste was in his mouth.

"Good!" the Emperor cried out. In his triumph, he cared nothing for the dark side adept he had sacrificed. "Well done, Lord Skywalker! Your father is dead at your own hand, and you are now my servant. It is exactly as I have predicted. Come and kneel before your Master."

Luke could not focus his thoughts. He was oddly surprised to find Vader dead at his feet. His lightsaber fell from his fingers, forgotten, striking Vader's helm once before clattering to the floor. He was aware of an overwhelming urge to go to the Emperor, and do as he asked. He remembered feeling differently, but his anger at the Emperor no longer seemed important. He stepped over Vader's body, and went to kneel before Palpatine. A vast emptiness had opened up inside him, and much to his pleasure, being near the Emperor filled up that void.

But Palpatine's attention was no longer on him. The Emperor was walking away, talking to himself. "So will it be when we meet, young Skywalker. You will be mine...soon...soon."

Luke was confused. What was going on? Hadn't he knelt as asked? What more did he need to do? What was his Emperor saying? His confusion was in no way diminished when Palpatine left the room altogether, and six red robed Imperial guards came in to kill him.

* * *

Palpatine felt much better. The future was still closed to him, but now he felt confident that he knew exactly what Skywalker would do. He tested no more clones. One day, six months after the Emperor's vision trance in which he had seen his own death (which now seemed like a faded, bad dream to him), a message came from Lord Vader. Sate Pestage delivered it personally, because a curious item accompanied it that was to be delivered directly into the Emperor's hand. It was a lightsaber.

Pestage reported that the fleet was assembled at Endor, and that the Death Star's prime weapon was ready. Vader had arrived on the Death Star, and had made the station ready for Palpatine's arrival. As the Emperor had commanded, Vader had assigned a legion of the Empire's most elite stormtroopers to guard the bunker on Endor that housed the shield

generator. All was in readiness, and Palpatine received the message with satisfaction.

But the lightsaber puzzled him. Vader had said in his message only that it had once belonged to Anakin Skywalker. It was a gift, Vader had said, to place in his Emperor's personal collection. That was all well and good, but the why of it eluded Palpatine. Finally, he concluded that Vader had had the lightsaber since Cloud City, and that he had decided that this vestige of the man he had once been did not belong to him anymore. He had sent it to Palpatine, as a statement that Anakin was no more, and that the weapon belonged with those of other vanquished Jedi. It pleased him, but he had other, more important matters to be concerned with. Vader was already dead, anyway. He just didn't know it, yet. Palpatine gave the weapon to Sate Pestage to be stored away, and didn't give it another thought as he prepared for his journey to Endor.

* * *

Darth Vader paced the command bridge of the Executor, staring at the unfinished Death Star. It floated above the green moon of Endor, its vast surface full of gaps. Roughly an entire hemisphere gaped with exposed superstructure that trailed off into space, awaiting completion. One section that was fully finished was the huge circular dish of the prime weapon. Vader knew it was ready even now, and that in the near future, it would bring death to entire worlds. Vader shuddered. Even for him, there were atrocities that went too far. When Alderaan was destroyed, what Vader had felt in the Force had shaken him deeply. So much destruction had unbalanced the Force itself, and threatened the very order of the galaxy that he cherished as an ideal. The Emperor had been pleased; it had made him stronger. Somehow Vader saw, as Palpatine did not, that the Force was a single entity with two aspects. Perhaps it was because he had belonged to both sides in his lifetime. Greatly weakening one side of the Force must, in the end, weaken the whole thing. The Emperor's audacity in constructing a second Death Star was ultimately self-defeating, but Vader could not allow it to be used.

He did not dare any overt sabotage; he could not defy his Emperor to that extent. The answer had come to him in the form of the Emperor's orders that the shield generator was to be guarded by the group of elite stormtroopers from which the Imperial guards were chosen. Vader used the Force to cloud the minds of several officers, and arranged for a legion of new recruits to be deployed on Endor instead. They didn't even remember what they had done afterwards. It was very easy, but also risky. He had to hope it wouldn't be discovered by Palpatine, and he knew that the ultimate result of his action depended on the resources of the Rebels. But it was the most he could do. He already knew the Emperor's trust in him was failing. Why else had Palpatine allowed Prince Xizor to have temporary power on Coruscant? The ordeal of defeating the crime lord of Black Sun was meant to test Vader's loyalty under duress. Vader had passed that test, but a far greater one awaited him now. And he was

disloyal, in his heart. The only question was, how much of that disloyalty did his Master perceive?

Vader leaned wearily against the wall as gazed at the station. Soon, he had been told, he, the Emperor, and his son would all meet there. The thought depressed him. He had hoped that he could persuade his son to join him, that together they could be powerful enough to do what Vader could not do, and transform the Empire. Now that Luke was to be delivered to Palpatine, that would never be possible, if indeed it ever had been.

Vader also felt old. Ever since he had seen Kenobi's damnable message, he had been acutely aware that he had lived two lifetimes, both of which had exacted their price. He had the feeling that for him, the end was near, though he could not say why. Perhaps he would welcome the end, when it came. His only regret would be the boy. His son. What would he become in the Emperor's hands?

Luke continued to stir conflict within him. His son belonged to his old life, and though he wanted very much to bring Luke into his new one, Vader understood that it could never be. He had made his choices long ago, and it was too late for him by far. Obi-Wan had been wrong to think differently.

A flicker of pseudomotion among the stars caught Vader's attention. He knew without checking that it was the arrival of the Star Destroyer New Order, one of the Emperor's personal transports. He felt his Master's presence like a signal fire on a nearby hill. He craved its heat, and despite himself, he longed to go and be near it.

Even before the recognition signal had been received by the flagship, Vader announced, "The Emperor has arrived. Prepare a military salute. I will receive him on the Death Star." Admiral Piett hurried to obey as Vader turned on his heel and swiftly left the bridge, his black cape flaring. Vader felt a curious calm, a peace that came with the certainty that whatever the outcome, the end of the game was at hand. He hoped that the Force would be with him.

* * *

As it has been told in detail in the Journal of the Whills, The Jedi Nexus finally arrived at the moment that Darth Vader stepped into the throne room with Luke Skywalker and entered the presence of the Emperor Palpatine. The Force itself took part in the events that followed. As he faced a dark side Master who had slaughtered a multitude of great Jedi in the past, Luke Skywalker was not simply an untested Jedi student. He was the agent of the light side itself. For too long, the balance of the Force had been upset. The dark side had taken too much, destroyed too much. In that room, the balance was restored.

By now you must know your Father can never be turned from the dark side, the Emperor told Luke. But he was wrong. The light side of the Force had acted in a way Palpatine had never foreseen in any of his visions. It had manifested in Luke's courage to face his father, and opened the eyes of a man long since blinded by the darkness. Thus was the paradox that had troubled Palpatine finally resolved. As he had thought, a barely trained youth could not be a threat to him, but that same youth awakened and inspired the man who could be.

It was Darth Vader who fell before the lightsaber of his enemy, but when Luke renounced the dark side's offer of power, and turned away from killing him, it was Anakin Skywalker who climbed to his feet. The words of his son filled his ears. I'll never turn to the dark side. You've failed, your Highness. I am a Jedi, like my Father before me. The words became truth. When the enraged Emperor unleashed the full power of his hatred on Luke Skywalker, searing him with blast after blast of Force lightning, Anakin had fulfilled his destiny. Although he had not known it, his son had been more to him than the hope of taking the Emperor's throne and freeing himself from servitude to Palpatine. His son was the path back to his old life, the chance to reclaim himself. The agony of facing his son's death, and with it, the loss of that chance forever, drove out the seductive whisper of the dark side at last. Standing by the Emperor's side in his accustomed position of trust, he had lifted his Master and hurled him into the violent energies of the seemingly bottomless core shaft.

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 Palpatine, having foreseen this moment, was ready.

His essence easily reached the small room at the base of the throne tower on the Death Star, where he had hidden a single clone body. A person like the Emperor did not ignore his visions. Months ago, a terrifying vision of his death had started him on this course, but he had been determined to outwit his seeming destiny. He knew that if worst came to worst in his meeting with Skywalker, he would not die so far from Byss that he could not reach one of his clones. He poured into the clone with relief. Somewhere above him, he was sure, Luke Skywalker was still alive. That must be changed.

He forced himself to wait patiently as the decanting mechanisms activated at a touch of his mind, but it took a supreme effort. The Emperor was still full of searing anger. Everything had seemed so close to success. Vader had brought his son to the Death Star as a willing prisoner. Young Skywalker had reacted to all of Palpatine's manipulations as expected. The boy's friends and the Rebel fleet had all fallen neatly into the trap. With everyone he cared for in mortal danger, Luke had given in to his anger. The final push had come when Vader made the stunning discovery that one of the lives at risk was Luke's own unsuspected twin sister. Palpatine hadn't even planned it, but Vader had gone too far by threatening to turn the sister to the dark side as well. Luke had called on the dark side in his desperate need for power to crush

his father, who could not ever be redeemed. The boy had clearly been about to kill the Sith Lord. Palpatine had felt the hate in him, seen the blade at Vader's throat. Somehow he had resisted. How was it possible? Luke's unexpected words had infuriated the Emperor. You've failed, your highness... Upon hearing that, Palpatine had decided instantly that the boy must die as painfully as possible. The Force lightning had come forth with a vengeance, fueled by burning rage.

That rage still coursed through the Emperor as the nutrient bath level swiftly dropped. He realized where he had made his mistake. He had known Vader was treacherous, but he had thought the Dark Lord to be too weak to be a threat. He had been completely absorbed in the punishment of the boy when Vader made his move. Vader had always wanted Palpatine's power. He had taken his chance to kill his Master and seize that power for himself.

Palpatine wasted no more thought on Vader. He knew that the Force lightning had struck enough blows to end his one time servant's life for certain. Vader had been paid in full, but Skywalker, he sensed, had survived. It was time to finish what he had begun. The clone vat smoothly opened. The youthful Emperor stepped out of the tank and into the cramped storage room with murder in his yellow eyes. He shrugged on a robe to cover his nakedness. The sparks had already begun to arc from his fingertips.

Suddenly, there was a deafening thunder and the floor leaped away from his bare feet. The heavy clone tank crashed without warning onto his legs, crushing him to the deck. Bewildered, the Emperor reached out through the Force with his inner sight. What he saw stunned him. The deflector shield was gone, and the Rebel fleet was no longer trapped. He felt his carefully laid plans fall to dust, including those concerning his own survival. The Super Star Destroyer, Executor, had plunged into the Death Star like a titan's arrow finding its mark in the belly of the beast. That had rocked the station, and now the Rebel fleet had begun a close range bombardment of the Death Star's unfinished side. Rebel fighters were inside the superstructure, heading for the main reactor.

There would be no time for vengeance. Skywalker would have to wait for another day. Palpatine used the Force to thrust the massive tank away from himself, and gazed at the ruin of his legs. He easily controlled the pain, but he knew he would not walk out of the room. There was no time for healing. With the Force, he opened the door to the hallway, where chaos reigned. Officers and stormtroopers ran in all directions, following or giving futile orders, or simply panicking. Palpatine spotted Moff Jerjerrod stumbling by in a daze, and called out to him.

Jerjerrod entered, sweating, his eyes darting crazily about until they fixed on Palpatine. He saw a young man who lay on the floor, his robes in disarray, his otherwise naked form slicked with yellow-green fluid. "Who are you?" he stammered.

Palpatine now regretted having chosen such a weak man as the Death Star Commander. He needed help, and he knew he would have to mind control the fool to get it. In a moment, Jerjerrod's face went blank, and he

stooped to help the Emperor to a standing position. Together, they stumbled into the corridor. With the Moff's help, Palpatine reached a comm panel. He swiftly keyed a sequence that would send a coded message to his Grand Vizier. Sate Pestage would know what to do to prepare for the future. Now he had to ensure that there would be a future.

Despite his precautions, he was very far from Byss now. To reach another clone, his essence would have to travel vast distances through the nether-realm while fighting the dissolution of the dark side's chaos. Such a journey might take too long to survive. But his studies with the Holocron had taught him about spirit anchors, how a consciousness could retain its individuality while entirely within the Force, provided there was a living mind to cling to. He planned to use one himself, to make sure he survived until he could reach Byss. It was no sure thing, but it was his only chance. He knew just the person. There was an operative named Mara Jade, code named the Emperor's Hand. She had the power to hear his call from anywhere in the galaxy, and he needed that ability now. He reached out with the Force and found her. The link was established in a moment, and just in time.

Deep inside the station, the main reactor was exploding. Emperor Palpatine's last thoughts were of hatred for Vader and Skywalker, and of the vengeance he would one day have. Then the Death Star erupted with cleansing fire, bringing Palpatine's Empire to an end.

* * *

It was over. Palpatine, Luke, and Vader had gone through their personal crucibles and emerged forged into new shapes. Vader had lost his life, but won back his soul. Luke had lost his father and his innocence, but gained maturity and become a Jedi at last. The Emperor had lost everything, but somewhere within the dark side of the Force, he lived on as a hatred that would not die. He knew he would try to live again in one of his clones, and return to menace the children of Anakin Skywalker once again. But for the present, the light side had triumphed.

The newborn New Republic was removing its forces from Endor. The threat of the Ssi-Ruuk had been countered, and now the weary freedom fighters could begin to return to their homes and undertake the monumental task of creating a new government. Mon Mothma wanted to leave Endor the way it had been before the Empire had moved in, pristine and unspoiled. A few Ewoks had decided to go adventuring in space with the former Rebels, but most of them bid farewell to their new tribe members and went back to their primitive lives among the lofty tree villages.

The lights of departing starships dotted the night sky of Endor as one particular Rebel said his last good-byes to a place he might never see again. Luke Skywalker, Jedi Knight, gazed sorrowfully at the burned out funeral pyre of his father. The starlight of the clearing dimly showed him that there wasn't much left of Darth Vader's body, only blackened, melted armor. A far greater absence was felt in Luke's soul.

He had regained his father for such a brief time, then lost him forever. That made it much more painful, somehow. It was time to say farewell.

Slightly embarrassed, Luke spoke into the night softly. "Father. Anakin. I know you're at peace in the Force now. I think I saw you with Ben and Master Yoda, that night after I burned your body. I hope that was the right thing to do. You were turned before the end, but I felt your body should be freed from the machine that kept it a prisoner." Luke looked up at the stars. "I know you came to see Leia. She told me you wanted her forgiveness. It's a hard thing for her to forgive or forget. But she told me a while ago that she had made her peace with you, and that you would know it. I wonder if you can hear me? I wondered why you appeared to Leia and not to me. I'm sure you had your reasons, but there was more I wanted to say to you." Luke's voice trailed off. He stood there for several minutes, letting his silence convey the rest of what he felt. He turned to leave, his face full of disappointment. Luke was startled to find himself face to face with the glowing apparition of his father, standing at the entrance to the clearing. Anakin was dressed in plain gray robes, and as before, he appeared as a gentle faced late middle aged man. He was smiling at Luke.

"Have you--how long have you been standing there?" Luke demanded.

"I've been watching you, my son. I'm very proud of you, and of your sister. I meant to see both of you, Luke, and here I am. It was given to me to see and speak with each of you once only. I asked forgiveness of your sister. As for you, my son, I want to tell you about the Emperor."

Luke was pleased and saddened at the same time. "If that's all the time we can have, we should make the best of it. The Emperor is dead, what more is there to say about him?"

Anakin's face was troubled. "You can't be sure of that, Luke. I was very close to the Emperor. He was strong in the dark side, but it made him weak in the flesh. I don't think this was the only time he died."

Luke couldn't believe what he was hearing. "What do you mean, Father?"

Anakin spread his spectral hands. "I saw him become very old several times while I knew him. Suddenly, he would be young again. He never told me how he did it, but I suspect he used a clone of himself to regain his youth. If he is able to do so again..." Anakin let his hands fall.

Luke shuddered. Palpatine had been so evil, so powerful. Only his father's intervention had saved his life in the end. He doubted he could survive another encounter.

"However," Anakin tried to reassure him, "the Emperor always went to a mysterious location in the core worlds in order to be rejuvenated. It may be that he could not save himself here at Endor. He may be dead forever. For now, at least, the galaxy is free of him."

"You're free of him forever, Father," Luke smiled.

"Thanks to you, my son," said Anakin. "Somehow you knew there was good in me when the Emperor didn't know, and I myself didn't know. How could you tell?"

"I'm your son," Luke said simply. "I had to believe in the good in my father if I was to have any hope for the good in myself. Besides, once I accepted the truth that you were my father, I thought back to how on Cloud City, you could have killed me. But you didn't. There must still have been something of Anakin in you."

"It was a near thing, my son. You took a terrible risk. I would have killed you, had the Emperor commanded me to. You came close to killing me, too. Such is the power of the dark side. Never underestimate it, my son."

"I did come close. Too close." Luke remembered the moment all too well. The dark side had responded to him so quickly and powerfully once he had opened himself to it. "It was your threat to turn Leia to the dark side that pushed me over the edge. I'm not sure how to put this... I loved her, Father. I saw her image and followed it across the galaxy. I wanted her to be mine, to love me back. But she fell in love with Han, and then I learned she was my sister. I know she can never be mine, but I still love her, even now. I couldn't bear to think of her going through what I was going through. But in the end, when I had you at my mercy, when the Emperor was calling out for me to kill you, what held me back was this." Luke held up his prosthetic right hand. "I saw your severed hand, bionic like mine, and I realized that a vision I saw during my training was coming true. If I continued down the dark path, I would become Darth Vader. The hand that Vader cut off saved both of us."

Luke couldn't help but recall the horrible attack of the Emperor that had nearly killed him. "You saved my life, too, Father. The Emperor would have killed me then and there."

"The Emperor's hold on me was strong, Luke. I had to obey him, no matter what. Even when I realized he wanted me dead. When you and I fought, He didn't aid me with his powers. On the contrary, he clouded my mind as he once did to Obi-Wan. That, combined with the power given to you by the dark side, was enough to seal my fate as your victim. You withheld, but still I went back to my Master's side. I needed his presence to replace the emptiness of all that I had lost because of him. He knew that, and thought his hold on me was absolute. But then I saw you dying, and Anakin was reborn. I realized that what I felt for you was love, an emotion I had forgotten. Palpatine's hold on me was broken. I suddenly saw him, not as my dark Master, but as a small, twisted old man, full of spite and cruelty. And this foul creature was killing my son. I knew what I had to do. Though it killed me, I had to save you."

"Father, how did the Emperor come so close to winning? He seemed to know me completely, before I even arrived. He knew exactly what would tempt me to the dark side."

Anakin replied seriously, "The Emperor could foresee many things. Before our battle, he told me that you would turn to the dark side if all you held dear was threatened. Your friends, and the Rebel Alliance itself were to be in mortal danger, driving you to seek the power you couldn't find in the light side of the Force. He did know you, and so he would have won, except that he did not know me."

Luke smiled grimly at the irony. Palpatine had kept the instrument of his own destruction by his side for twenty years. His overconfidence had been his weakness after all. A man who had been one of the Jedi had avenged his kind against their conqueror in the end.

"Yoda tells me that your destiny is a great one, Luke. He says that restore the Jedi you will. Excuse me, that you will restore the Jedi. I believe in you, my son. One day, you will be a Jedi Master. Through you, the Jedi will return."

Luke smiled at his father. Anakin had begun to fade away. "I must leave you now, Luke. Be strong, and believe that someday, you will find love. The Force will be with you, always."

"Good-bye, Father," said Luke sadly. Luke's father shimmered and was gone, leaving Luke alone in the quiet starlit clearing. And you shall always be with the Force, Father, Luke thought. Deep in his heart, he knew the Jedi had already returned.