

STAR WARS

The Power of the Dark Side

by Brendon Wahlberg

Although the Empire continues to fade, its lost Emperor is determined to resurrect it. Assembling a great fleet, Palpatine plans his return and final victory.

But on the dark side of the world of Byss, treacherous adepts have banded together to plot the downfall of the leader who had failed them.

A deadly coup will destroy all that the Emperor has worked to build, unless he can reclaim his lost dark side strength...

Note:

the character of Grand Admiral Saren and the Zingali are the creation of Michelle Slaughter. The final quote from the Book of Anger in this story, concerning Force Storms, is from Dark Empire, by Tom Veitch.

"The Force is an energy field, fed by all living things. All living things have darkness within them that feeds the dark side of the Force. The universe rages. My own anger can unlock and unleash the anger of the cosmos. From this act flows the power of the dark side."

-From The Book of Anger

"Tell me, Savuud Thimram," said Palpatine, "why have you not betrayed me in my time of weakness?" The former Galactic Emperor leaned back in his chair, regarding the powerful adept across the heavy table. Thimram hid it well, but a flicker of anxiety still showed in his thin semi-human face. The question had caught him by surprise. They had, after all, been deep in a discussion about the weakness of inferiors, such as the citizenry of Byss, and how their life energy was stolen by the adepts. Stolen to pay the price of physical decay demanded by the dark side. Savuud Thimram had never once thought of Palpatine as weak or inferior. Not even after Endor, when Palpatine had returned to Byss shorn of most of his dark might. To him, Palpatine would always simply be The Master.

It was that fact that had led to Thimram being chosen as the adept who would guide Palpatine in his attempts to regain his power. Palpatine

had always trusted Thimram, and trust was something rare among followers of the dark side. So why was he asking about betrayal? Thimram was unable to block out vivid memories of the fates of others who had betrayed Palpatine in the past. Vader's death was one of the more gentle examples. He quickly buried those thoughts and forced himself to consider the question seriously.

Thimram placed both hands on the table, formally showing that no Force generated attacks were being made. His small lips tight above his pointed chin, he took a moment to choose carefully how to answer. If his loyalty was in question, it was a serious matter.

"Before the events at Endor," Thimram began, "no one would have thought they could betray you and survive. Even Vader, deluded as he was, knew he took his life in his hands when he began to plan his treason. Your power was immense. You didn't need to be concerned about adepts like myself because your link to us gave you the ability to observe us at any time. But Master, you must believe, I never even considered treason, and not simply because it would have meant my death. I was amazed by your strength and knowledge, and I have always felt fortunate that you have shared some of it with me. My loyalty was always that of the apprentice to the Master."

Savuud paused, searching Palpatine's face for a hint of where this was leading. The Master's emotions were hidden, and his expression was unreadable. Thimram had known that face in many guises. Just now it was the face of a man in his early thirties. Palpatine had aged very little since the day, two years ago, when he had left the mind of Mara Jade and returned to life in one of his own clones. But then, it was the heavy use of the power that led to accelerated aging, and Palpatine had been brought low. It was almost as if the dark side had withdrawn its favor from him. Perhaps the dark side was the most unforgiving Master of all.

"And now?" Palpatine prompted him quietly.

"And now..." Thimram felt a nervous dampness break out on his brown skin. "I am still your student, Master. Despite your raw strength being diminished, your knowledge has only grown. No one alive knows more than you about the lore of the dark side. Besides, with your determined research into new sources of power, it will not be long before your strength surpasses what it once was. There are rewards for loyalty to the true powers in life, especially for loyalty during hard times." Thimram tried to remain calm. Palpatine continued to screen his thoughts. Thimram began to wonder if someone else had been trying to turn the Master against him.

Palpatine leaned aggressively towards Thimram. "And yet, my research into the hidden lore is recorded in my archives and books. I have but few secrets that I have not committed to my compendium. If I were gone, you could use that knowledge to dominate all the other adepts. Byss would be yours. You are stronger than I am. Why not destroy me and take my place?"

Thimram decided to get to the bottom of this uncomfortable situation. Perfect frankness, although dangerous, was called for. "Master, I must assure you of my present and continued loyalty. I don't covet your position, nor do I think I'm suited for it. If someone has been informing you to the contrary, I tell you it is a lie. To oppose you, even now, in your 'weakness', would be folly. Here on Byss, you are secure in your fortress. Four hundred Sovereign Protectors remain absolutely loyal to you. My own powers, formidable though they are, couldn't preserve my life against them. You control hundreds of Sentinels as well. Again, I'd dismiss my chances of survival against so many of those giants. Then there are the stormtroopers, the Royal Guard, and all your technology. Of what use would your destruction be, if I didn't live to reap the rewards? And then there is the plain fact that if I tried to kill you right now, and succeeded, I still would have failed. You would transfer to a clone, and secure in the clone labs, you could decree my death at the hands of your legions." Thimram waited, uneasy, for the Master to reply.

"Very good, Savuud. I appreciate honesty. And I don't believe you would betray me."

Thimram felt the tension drain from him.

"However," Palpatine continued, frowning, "I have felt something in the Force lately. A sense of danger. Something is going to happen." Palpatine looked away. "Of all the things I have lost, the power of vision is what I miss most. Before, I could simply have foreseen the threat. No longer..."

"Master," said Thimram, confident once more, "I haven't heard of any danger, but your feelings must not be ignored. It could be the beginning of your vision returning. If we remain alert, we can catch any threats before they begin."

Thimram could see that the Master was still troubled. Palpatine's old arrogant posture had been replaced by a visible restlessness. The traumatic events involving Luke Skywalker and Lord Vader had left their scars. Palpatine's supreme confidence had been undermined. Thimram, perhaps experiencing a premonition of his own, sensed that an even more terrible trial lay in the near future.

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"My Empire was built on the power of the dark side. Without that power, it could not hold together. My own dark will drove the Imperial war machine, and its wheels were lubricated by fear and anger--anger at the Rebellion, and fear of my punishment. But fear, anger, and military might were not enough to hold it all together. Without the dark side, that same fear and anger were enough to tear the Empire apart."

-From The Book of Anger

"Dinner is served, Master," said Sate Pestage. He entered Palpatine's chambers carrying two steaming trays. Placing both of them on a shining table, Pestage gathered his jeweled hems together and settled down, breathing in the aroma of savory flangth. He looked over at the room's other occupant with good-natured impatience. Palpatine was at a huge desk, engrossed with an alien book on the Tyia, an alternate way of viewing the Force. Pestage knew his Master was ranging far and wide in his studies to find new insights into the power of the Force. More alien adepts than ever before had been gathered on Byss, as Palpatine invited them in order to simultaneously teach them and learn their secrets.

The former Emperor was oblivious to Pestage's presence. The old man cleared his throat. "It is unkind to keep your elder waiting, Espaa," suggested Pestage.

Palpatine looked up from his book, frowning. "Perhaps you will recall that I have told you not to call me that."

Pestage shrugged, smiling inwardly. This was a familiar conversation. "Will you not indulge an old man in his doddering sentiment?" Espaa was the name of Pestage's son from long ago, stolen from him by the Sith after his wife's death. Over the years, Pestage had come to believe that Palpatine was that son. He had not spoken of his belief until after the Battle of Endor, when he had told Mara Jade. The Emperor had been residing in her mind, and Pestage had suspected that he could hear him. Regardless of whether that was so, Palpatine's behavior towards the Grand Vizier had changed after that. There was a new level of trust between them. Pestage had saved his Master's life, and Palpatine had repaid that debt of gratitude by opening himself to the old man, sharing his fears and ambitions. Endor had humbled him enough to let one person into his life.

Pestage wasn't sure Palpatine considered him to be his father; he wasn't exactly the sort of person who had a father. But the simple fact that Palpatine now treated him as an equal made all that Pestage had gone through to save him absolutely worth it.

Palpatine loudly shut his book and came over to sit opposite Sate Pestage. "Old man indeed! I have sometimes thought that you have more of a chance of living forever than I do."

Pestage picked up his utensils and began to eat contentedly. He was old, a bony, wizened figure whose scarecrow-like body was lost in his sparkling cassock. In contrast, Palpatine for once looked the part of Pestage's potential son. His strong-boned face was crowned by a blonde widow's peak and short-cropped hair. His eyes never changed. They were as hard and as penetrating as ever. Pestage was pleased that whenever they fell on him, they softened a fraction. To bring out a tiny part of the deeply buried humanity of his Master was no mean feat.

"Let us discuss what is left of the Empire, Old Friend," said Palpatine after a while. "Tell me of the latest reports."

"The fragmentation continues unabated, Master. The various Grand Moffs and Generals continue to carve out their little pieces, fight each other over them, then lose what they had won. And much of it is still being done in your name. The most important new trend is the growing power of the Warlords. The days of vying for power politically are over for good, I think. Today, only military strength counts. We have followed the progress of one Warlord, Zsinj, in particular. With his Super Star Destroyer, he is causing heavy damage to various New Republic worlds. The man is a criminal, but he is effective. He is likely to be successful in carving out his own mini-Empire."

"Until I take it from him," Palpatine smiled grimly. "And what of the so called New Republic's gains?"

"Our intelligence estimates that they will have control of Coruscant within two years. Little stands in their way. Systems like Corellia and Kuat have become fortresses, turning completely inward. The Warlords are powerful, but self-interested. In fact, some of them have fought with loyal Imperial forces that defend the Core Worlds. The way is open to Coruscant." Pestage looked crestfallen. "They will take the Palace, Master."

Palpatine shrugged slightly. "But they will not destroy it. Anything that they have taken can be retaken when I am ready. And it will not be so easy for them to take Coruscant. I happen to know that Ysanne Isard, the Director of Intelligence, has a few surprises ready for the Rebels in Imperial City.

"Director..." Pestage frowned. "She thinks she is much more than that. She dares to act as your successor, when no one is fit to take your place. Even I would never have sat upon the throne, had you not ordered me to."

Pestage was uncomfortable with the memory of how, shortly after he had restored his Master to a clone body on Byss, Palpatine had ordered him to return to Coruscant to take power. Pestage had been exiled by Chief Advisor Ars Dangor, but now Dangor was dead. The Emperor, presumed dead by the rest of the Empire, had wanted someone he could trust to occupy the throne in his absence. Although the Grand Vizier had protested that he was not worthy, Palpatine had insisted.

To Pestage's surprise, the same ruling circle which had allowed him to be exiled accepted Pestage back as their new ruler. The central accusation which Dangor had used to exile Pestage was that he had used his position purposefully to give the Emperor treacherous advice which led to his death at Endor. Pestage was sent back to Coruscant with carefully prepared evidence that in fact, Dangor had been the traitor, and that Pestage's exile was for the sole purpose of removing Dangor's rival for the throne. Documents were "discovered" which named Pestage as the Emperor's chosen successor, and Pestage was presented as the only person who could rule effectively and resolve the chaos that had existed

since the death of Palpatine. The ruling circle had agreed, but privately, Pestage had wondered whether the other advisors had been influenced by Palpatine's dark adepts; it was the only explanation he could think of for their unlikely reversal towards him.

All too soon, Pestage had discovered how shallow their conversion was. Pestage was not nearly as capable as Palpatine was in controlling the intrigue and treachery of his court. His "rule" lasted a mere six months. All the while, Ysanne Isard had worked tirelessly against him, until finally, she and the other advisors managed to exile him a second time. After that, Palpatine had not made any more attempts to control who sat upon the throne, choosing instead to ignore the issue until the time of his own return.

"When I think of the indignities I suffered because of that woman..." Pestage said bitterly. "To be exiled from the Empire twice in six months..."

"Take comfort, old friend," said Palpatine. "You were not exiled from the true Empire, which exists here with me."

Pestage smiled a little. His Master was correct. He was where he belonged, Coruscant or no Coruscant.

"I do regret your ordeal," said Palpatine. "If I had been able to foresee the outcome, I would not have sent you back. Do not let questions of who rules in Imperial Center, or the games of these so called Warlords, distress you. As I have told you before, this chaos is to be expected. While I ruled, I gave power to ruthless and ambitious people. But they feared me, and rightly so! They didn't try to take more than they were given. Now, it is only their natural tendencies taking over. Let them have their petty squabbles, my friend. It will keep them all busy while I prepare my forces. When I go forth with the World Devastators and the Eclipse, nothing that the Warlords or the Rebels have done will matter. Specific territories do not matter. I am going to crush the spirit of the galaxy."

Palpatine's gaze turned inwards, perhaps visualizing the conflict to come. Pestage ate quietly for a few minutes, then, raising a skeletal finger, he interrupted his Master's introspection. "There are other players in the game to be accounted for, Master. There is Grand Admiral Thrawn."

"Yes." Palpatine rested his chin on his hand. "Thrawn is still in Wild Space, but he is due to return in three years. I would prefer that he not be wasted in pointless fighting with the Rebels, but knowing Thrawn, that is precisely what he will want. When I am ready, he would make an excellent Commander for my forces. We will see. If he returns, and if he survives, we will see. I will not reveal myself until the proper time has come."

"The proper time?" asked Pestage.

"It will depend on my recovery of my power, and on Luke Skywalker," said Palpatine. "There must be no surprises this time. But, so far there is little cause for concern. I have followed his progress. His powers have not greatly increased, and his sister remains untrained. No new Jedi have been trained. Skywalker will find it very hard to grow in power. The lore of the Jedi was swept clean from the galaxy during the Purge. He cannot hope to become a Master."

"That is, unless you train him." Pestage took every chance he got to promote this idea. Luke Skywalker worried Sate Pestage. Pestage felt certain, deep inside, that he somehow did have the power to be a threat in the future. He was determined not to see his beloved Master lost again, so he tried to convince Palpatine to plan for Skywalker's alliance rather than his destruction.

Palpatine made a noncommittal noise. "And create another Vader, perhaps?"

Pestage had no answer to that.

They ate in silence. Finally, the table's comlink chirped. Palpatine touched a key, leaning towards it. The voice of Savuud Thimram grated from the small speaker. "Master, the Eclipse has arrived, and is now in orbit around Byss." Palpatine and Pestage looked at each other. Both knew what that meant. Pestage felt a pang of anxiety.

"Thank you Savuud. Have my shuttle prepared. I shall be there shortly." They both stood. "We will continue our discussion...another time. Until then, Old Friend."

"Until then, Master", said Pestage, bowing deeply. It was a habit he could not break. Palpatine strode quickly out of the room, leaving Pestage to stare at the empty doorway for a long moment. May the Force be with you, Espaa. And be careful. The risks you take are so that you can regain the power, and with it, the greatness you deserve. You will succeed. You will because you must.

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"The new technology of destruction is an extremely useful tool for furthering the aims of the dark side. Star Destroyers and Death Stars were viewed by some as tools of political conquest. They missed the point entirely. My vision for the galaxy has always been to fill its uncounted worlds with the emotions that serve the dark side. If a civilization is burned down by the guns of a Star Destroyer, it is gone forever, but if it can be made to fear that destruction, the true power in the galaxy grows ever stronger."

-From The Book of Anger

Alone in his private shuttle, Palpatine rose past the moons of Byss and faced the star-crowded heavens of the Deep Core. He could feel the stellar energies like a warm breeze, laced with the distant chill of the great black hole at the center of the galaxy. For a long time, he simply looked at the galaxy, as he used to when he was Emperor. To rule over every one of those stars...it was a seductive thought.

Then he felt an approaching presence, a thing of vast energies contained, threatening. Ahead, the profusion of stars was blotted out by a black shape that slowly expanded. The ship was majestic. It ate the light and shed darkness. The Eclipse was twice the length of the lost Executor. From its foreboding bridge to the gigantic triangular plain of its upper hull, it was made of a superdense ebony alloy. Instead of coming to a point, the hull flared downwards into a huge frontal spine that held a gaping rectangular mouth of fire. That baleful glow was the firing portal of the weapon that dictated the staggering length of the Eclipse, a superlaser capable of destroying a planet regardless of planetary shields.

The ship was unfinished. It had been under construction for years, ever since the Battle of Hoth had suggested the utility of combining a Star Destroyer with the Death Star's prime weapon. Even after Endor, when many Imperials wanted to cease its unbelievably costly creation, construction implacably continued. Palpatine's dark side adepts saw to that.

The axial superlaser was complete, as was the hyperdrive. Still to come were the fighters, gravity well projectors, tractor beams, turbolasers, and ion cannons. But Palpatine did not mean to take the ship into combat. It was Palpatine's means of reclaiming his former might. With it, he meant to tap into the power of the dark side.

Years ago, when the first Death Star had destroyed the rebellious planet Alderaan, Palpatine had discovered to his stunned surprise that the event tremendously strengthened the dark side of the Force while weakening the light side. The terrified death of an entire living world had sent more power than he could possibly contain coursing through him. His plans to take advantage of that had been rudely disrupted by the interference of Obi-Wan Kenobi and his young student, Luke Skywalker. But the idea was never lost, and now Palpatine had the ability to make it a reality.

This time, he would not be fully at one with the dark side, lest the power should overwhelm or even kill him. Instead, he would enter a meditative state, receiving a lesser share of the power. The next time, he would be able to take more. In this manner, planet by planet, he meant to once again become Master of the dark side.

And though the destruction of several worlds might be felt by those sensitive to the light side, distance and the energies of the Deep Core should mask the loss completely. Skywalker would not suspect a thing. It was, of course, his fault that Palpatine faced this dangerous necessity. Skywalker had driven him to seek survival within the mind of Mara Jade.

Her tiny node of Force sensitivity had been unable to contain his total energy. He had left most of it behind in order to retain his basic self. And even though his clone was capable of harboring great power, when he entered it he was as weak as he had been decades ago. Unless he found a radical solution, he faced a return climb that was also decades long.

Palpatine hoped this would be it. His shuttle joined a small convoy of ships carrying crew and supplies for the voyage. They were all soon lost against the awesome starship that eclipsed the stars. The shuttle sailed into a docking bay large enough to hold a Victory-class Star Destroyer. Immediately he felt the dark aura of the ship surround him. The ship was crewed by many dark side adepts, and everywhere in its enormous volume, the seductive whisper of the dark side could be heard. It was a space going world devoid of light, clotted with rage.

Palpatine immediately felt right at home.

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Urn Zelotes relaxed in his tower in Velarium, the city of adepts, watching one of his favorite segments from Palpatine's Book of Anger. Zelotes was a tall, reedy Thaarnian, with four-fingered clawed hands, lizard like skin, and a wedge-shaped head with widely spaced eyes. Zelotes had the disconcerting habit of glaring with one milky eye while leaving the other slitted in suspicion. Rattling his bracelets slightly, Zelotes lifted one claw to place against his pointed chin and smiled grimly. His moment of moments was drawing near, the fruition of all his plans.

Before Zelotes shimmered a life-sized hologram of Palpatine, speaking in that arrogant, pedantic way of his. The Book of Anger was an unfinished hologram recording of Palpatine's teachings that he shared with all of the adepts. Palpatine had admitted that he was unable to create his own Holocron, and so this means of recording was his only similar option. Unlike a Holocron, the Book of Anger was not interactive. It could not be questioned; it would not reply. It simply droned on and on. Zelotes wished he could hold a conversation with the image. He wanted to berate it, accuse it, punish it, and tell it how he planned to kill it forever.

The best he could do was to freeze the image periodically and vent his recriminations at it.

"The universe is full of power," Palpatine was saying. "To release it, you must harness the emotions of hate, anger, fear, and aggression. Release your own anger and the anger of infinity is released. By itself, the dark side is a thing of chaos and irrationality. It has no control, no conscience, no restraint. But domination is its goal. There is a bargain to be made with it. It gives you power and exacts its price. In order to let the power flow through you, you must let the destructive emotions flow through you. But that is not all. It is a great danger to

those who cannot control their emotions. Only with a strong will can you control your rage and make the power your servant. When anger is controlled intelligently, there is nothing you cannot do."

Zelotes paused the recording. "Nothing you can't do! But you never share the most powerful secrets with us, do you? Keeping us below you, always below. Now you are the one brought low. Low enough to step on." He resumed the recording.

"Throughout history, followers of the dark side have never been organized as the Jedi were. I have changed that. I am creating a compendium of knowledge and gathering students. The Jedi are destroyed, and I will replace them with a stable order of Dark Jedi. I will replace the Moffs and Grand Moffs, the Captains, Generals, and Admirals, the Governors and Presidents, all with followers of the dark side. The Empire is just a first step towards the birth of a Dark Empire. All who follow me will take up positions of power in the Final Order. The light side of the Force will be utterly forgotten--"

Zelotes angrily froze the image. He leaned very close to Palpatine's glittering face and spat his hate and frustration at it. "Promises, promises, Master. Where is your Dark Empire now? You called us to you, promised to teach us and give us positions of power. And what did you do? You let your Empire die! You indulged your obsession with the last Jedi until it destroyed you. You're in no position ever to give me what you told me would be mine or even to get back what you once had, but still you make promises! You called us to you, not to teach us, but to get our knowledge to add to your own. Now it's time to pay what you owe, and because you have failed and cannot give us worlds to rule, we will take as payment your life itself. In your own words, you have said it: betrayal and death. You have betrayed us, and earned death."

Palpatine resumed speaking. "--and the dark side will dominate forever. The Empire itself is an excellent tool for paving the way for this transformation. It produces the emotions that strengthen the dark side at every turn. There are threats to survival such as slavery and imprisonment. There is the loss of culture, government, rights, and identity. There is the ever-present whisper of atrocity and injustice. The populace of the galaxy is filled with fear...Where adepts have gathered in the past, there have been battles, betrayal, and death. They mistrust one another and are driven to fight each other for dominance. But in the Dark Empire, among the followers of the dark side, there must be a basic cooperation. Betrayal is capable of provoking an explosive outpouring of anger, but the Final Order cannot tolerate it--"

Zelotes froze the image one last time. "Master of hypocrisy! You speak of a stable, trusting order of Dark Jedi, but you never trusted anyone, and so long as you stood high above all the others, anyone who betrayed another was encouraged. But if they betrayed you... Now you'll feel betrayal for the last time. You'll feel the contempt, the humiliation, and then you'll die." Zelotes made the former Emperor vanish, then went to the window. In the distance, several kilometers away, but still highly visible, the Imperial Citadel penetrated the sky. The betrayer had left that great spire and gone to his new warship. Even

now, Zelotes' allies were on the ship with Palpatine, waiting for the moment of justice. The other adepts had the task of slaying Palpatine without warning. Zelotes himself faced the more dangerous mission; he would have to prevent the betrayer from returning to life. He must invade the most closely guarded place on the planet, Palpatine's cloning laboratory.

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"Betrayal is capable of provoking an explosive outpouring of anger, but the Final Order cannot tolerate it, or its consequences. When the Dark Empire is complete, the followers of the dark side will share my power of being able to observe each other. Betrayal will no longer be practical. Only with this basic cooperation can the order of Dark Jedi attempt the next task, the conquering of the entire galaxy, and then, in the distant future, other galaxies..."

-From The Book of Anger

Rollo Mon shuffled through the halls of the Imperial Citadel. He had just finished his scheduled checking on Palpatine's clones with Sate Pestage, and as usual, his thoughts were full of biotechnology. He didn't even notice, as he entered his quarters, that the lights were dimmer than usual. Thus he also failed to see the hulking shape standing in the room's far corner. He began sifting through a stack of files on his desk, and was very startled when he heard someone clear his throat loudly. He spun, dropping papers everywhere, to see one of the Emperor's adepts lounging in his favorite chair.

"AAH! Don't do that!" he exclaimed. You shouldn't scare people like that. How did you get in here? Wait, don't I know you? The exiled...ah...Magian from Thaar? Adept Zemekkis, right?"

"Zelotes, Constable. I'm sorry I frightened you. But you see, I'm in need of your assistance." Zelotes stood up. "I need to get into the innermost cloning laboratory, and I need your help with the access codes." The adept's hands clenched oddly as his face took on a look of concentration. It still felt strange to him to use the Force without talismans.

Rollo Mon backed away. "I'm sorry, Adept Zelotes, I can't share that information. The Emperor forbids it. No one else is to enter those labs, especially while he is away. I...I just can't...help you." He stopped his retreat abruptly.

"Yes, Constable, I commend your loyalty, but the Emperor needs me to get into the lab. Before he left, he gave me special orders. He wants an experimental solution tested on his clones, and he said you would help

me. He told me to come to you. You are the only one who can help me carry out his wishes."

Rollo Mon said slowly, "I'm the only one who can help you. Do you wish to go there now?"

"No Constable. First we need to wait for a little more protection. The solution is highly valuable and very rare." Zelotes picked up a clear cylinder of yellow liquid. "I have strict orders to prevent it from being stolen by his enemies. He thinks certain of his adepts may be plotting against him, but he doesn't know which ones. You and I might not be able to hold off a traitorous attack on our own. So I brought my Sentinel."

Zelotes gestured, and the giant stepped out of the corner. It was a silent titan, carrying a tall pole arm. Its body was hidden under many layers of clothing, and its shadowed helm hid all of its face save two glinting reddish eyes. The Sentinels were cloned creatures, linked to their adepts and dependent on them for their purpose. They could share their perceptions with their adepts, and they were fearsome fighters. Palpatine had access to several hundred, but the lesser adepts were allotted only one each. Zelotes had brought his own, and his ten allies had contributed theirs. Eleven Sentinels would have to be enough.

"We await the arrival of ten more Sentinels, Constable. His Majesty informed me that several uniforms were stolen from the Sovereign Protectors. We may run into enemies who look like our allies. Have patience."

Rollo Mon was quite overwhelmed. His defenseless mind had fallen swiftly to Zelotes, and he was further caught up in the intrigue. "Do you really think there'll be fighting? That's incredible...Well, you can count on me. But, ahh, there is a slight complication. Usually the Emperor enters the innermost labs with me. Now that he is away, he has entrusted his portion of the access code to the Grand Vizier. We were just there a while ago. I'm not sure where he went after that, but we can probably find him. How much time do you have?" Rollo Mon looked at Urn Zelotes with concern. The adept had begun to curse, very loudly.

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Rollo Mon watched, curious, as Adept Zelotes paced nervously back and forth. Standing rigidly beyond the agitated alien were eleven towering Sentinels. They made the Constable uneasy, they always had. Even with his meter high head ornament, the little scientist only came up to a Sentinel's chest. And they were so very still. It was eerie.

There was a gentle knock at the door, and Zelotes' agitation redoubled. "Answer it. If it's Sate Pestage, let him in, but don't tell him I'm here."

Rollo Mon nodded, pleased to see some action after so much waiting. He hurried into the hall and opened the door to see the elderly Grand Vizier looking tensely at him. There was no need for tension. Once the Grand Vizier saw how things were so well in hand with Adept Zelotes there, he would be so much more at ease.

"Constable, I've come as you asked. Now tell me what you know about a threat to the Emperor. What have you discovered?"

Rollo Mon waved Sate Pestage into the hall. "Not out here," he hissed, and hurried into the main room. Pestage followed.

Zelotes summoned his will as the Grand Vizier came into view. This new and unexpected development had greatly increased the difficulty of his task. Now he would have to control two minds as well as coordinate the actions of eleven Sentinels. The labs were about ten minutes away. It promised to be a quite an ordeal.

Pestage saw the gathered Sentinels first, and an expression of startled suspicion was born on his face. Zelotes clamped an instant coercive hold on both Rollo Mon's and Pestage's minds. The time for brain-washing was over. He saw Pestage's eyes fill with outrage at his captivity, but the Vizier could not move.

"Welcome, Grand Vizier Pestage," said Zelotes. "You are just in time to help me destroy your Master once and for all." The adept forced Rollo Mon and Sate Pestage to stand to either side of him. He opened the door and sent his own Sentinel ahead as a scout. A single Sentinel would not immediately alarm the Sovereign Protectors; it could be going about the business of any of the adepts. His Sentinel would also give him visuals of what was around the next corner. Zelotes had planned his route in advance, but chance encounters with soldiers could still ruin him. He linked himself to the monster, and in moments, he could see out of its eyes. As usual, the sense of height was disorienting. With his two captives at his side and surrounded by the other Sentinels, Zelotes went out after his mute slave.

Soon the giant reached the first security cameras, and as planned, a small device it carried emitted a short burst of energy. The camera would pick up only static for a minute, enough time for Zelotes to hurry past. He didn't want any clear images of him to be made, in case he had to retreat. For two minutes, the route proved to be an excellent choice. Then they encountered a stormtrooper patrol. The Sentinels took the troopers by surprise, tearing into them and rending them limb from limb. Zelotes didn't need to direct their every move in combat. They were programmed for such ruthless violence.

Zelotes had to place a new Sentinel at point, as his was now blood-soaked. He was unused to the specific mind of that giant and had trouble linking his vision to it. As a result, the Sentinel marched straight through an intersection without revealing to Zelotes the Sovereign Protector standing in the cross-corridor. The elite warrior, however, detected Zelotes. He was trained in the use of the dark side of the Force, and the coercion being placed on the captives was like a beacon

drawing his attention. The Protector was there to investigate the failure of the stormtrooper squad to report, and he was fully alert.

Zelotes and his prisoners came into view, and the Protector was already in motion, barking a clipped command into his comlink for reinforcements. In one hand, he had a prototype blaster, in the other, an exotic Force Pike.

The adept went pale with shocked surprise, and lost his control over Rollo Mon and Sate Pestage. But the two men swayed and held their heads, unable to recover. The Protector's first shot ripped away the lead Sentinel's head with immense violence. As the others closed with him, the soldier spun and darted beneath the grasp of the nearest behemoth with impressive dexterity, twisting his Force Pike at full power into its vitals. Sparking and shuddering, the weapon penetrated the giant's light armor. But even as the discharges ravaged its brutish nervous system, the Sentinel forced itself forward. The Force Pike burned out its back as the Sentinel managed a powerful backhanded blow that broke the Protector's neck.

Zelotes recovered his wits. Two Sentinels picked up the prisoners, and the invaders left the dying Sentinel behind in an awful embrace with the corpse of the Protector. Pestage and Rollo Mon, now fully aware, were terrified and furious. The minutes ticked by as they came ever closer to Zelotes' goal. A sudden storm of blaster fire announced the arrival of the Sovereign Protector reinforcements. Zelotes spun and blocked some of the bolts with his hands, desperate to keep his captives alive. Several of the Sentinels went down, gaping holes burned dead center into their backs. Zelotes sent the rest back towards the Protectors, keeping only the two holding Pestage and Rollo Mon. Then he ran on towards the clone labs.

The meeting of the two forces was a fury of noise that washed over the fleeing adept. The Protectors were the most elite of the Empire's soldiers, chosen from the Royal Guard for their stamina, strength, dexterity, and intelligence. The Force further enhanced their perceptions and sped their reactions. The Sentinels were much stronger, but they were dependent on the will of their adepts. As Zelotes fled, they were doomed to failure.

Wielded with the astonishing skill of the Protectors, a few vibroweapons and heavy blasters spelled the end of Zelotes' force. The fight came to an abrupt end when the Protectors' Commander stepped up with a Prax Energy Rifle and fired microgrenades into the helmets of the last three standing Sentinels. There was a stunning report, and fragments of the giants' heavy robes soared flaming through the air as their headless forms slumped heavily to the floor.

Zelotes felt the loss of his Sentinels through the Force. Despairing, he experienced a moment of pure terror as the corridor became a dead end and he realized what the Sovereign Protectors would do to him. Then he understood that he had reached the clone labs at last. Before him was a heavy blast door with a complex control panel to one side. Zelotes

throttled his own panic and reasserted his control over Rollo Mon and Sate Pestage.

"Open it," he growled. They stumbled forward, rushing to do his bidding. The codes were entered, and moments later, Zelotes experienced the immense relief of the blast door hissing shut behind him.

"Disable all the lab security systems," he commanded. A plan to deceive the adept flickered across Pestage's thoughts. Zelotes caught it, and punished him with an angry constriction of his wrinkled throat. Gasping, Pestage went to his stick like knees. "Don't defy me, or you die. It's that simple." Zelotes pointed to the console. "One of you, turn it all off, and erase any recordings made so far. I'll know if you do it wrong."

Rollo Mon scurried to the controls and deactivated the system, but Pestage seemed unable to get up. He was weak, and getting weaker. Zelotes didn't care. He brought out the cylinder of yellow liquid, and passed it to Rollo Mon. "Feed this into the Spaarti Cylinders."

Rollo Mon thought of dashing the cylinder to the floor, but the thought was detected. His hands wouldn't obey him; instead they hooked the container up to the nutrient feed lines. He watched in impotent horror as the poison flowed out to find every clone. All his work was being destroyed. He wanted to die rather than watch, but watch he did. Some of the clones twitched violently, then they were still. The youngest forms did not react at all. One by one, the tanks began to whine with warning alarms as their contents died. At Zelotes' command, Rollo Mon shut those off, too. When the last alarm was silenced, the only sounds were the gasps of Sate Pestage, the whimpering of Rollo Mon, and the dull thud of the Sovereign Protectors' first attempt to get through the blast door. Zelotes was not worried. It would hold for a while, yet.

He trembled as a feeling of wild victory coursed through him. He had survived, and he had won! The clones of the betrayer were destroyed, and it was done in time. At any moment now, the betrayer himself would be destroyed, and Zelotes would get the message of ultimate success on the room's HoloNet terminal. He forced Rollo Mon to his knees next to Sate Pestage and waited.

* * *

"When rage leads directly to results, a sense of the omnipotence of expressed rage grows. Vader felt this sense of power, but he and I did not use it in the same way. I have truly learned to control my anger, while Vader could only partially control his. Like a berserker, he always struck out with his rage, but I am like a furnace. My rage burns deep within, contained and concentrated. Mine was ever the greater strength, for this reason. Many of my enemies were fooled by my apparent lack of

defenses. But rage, focused within and controlled, is a devastating weapon that can be used at any time, and without warning."

-From The Book of Anger

Standing on the bridge of the Eclipse, Admiral Dal reflected that his career had certainly had its ups and downs while serving Emperor Palpatine. Dal had first come to the Emperor's attention in the early days of the Empire, for his part in the massacre that ended the threat of the Zingali. He had climbed in the ranks swiftly, becoming an Admiral by the Battle of Endor. He remembered that day vividly. His Star Destroyer had been in a great fleet, trapping the Rebels between them and the Death Star. Evidently, a madman's order was given within the Rebel fleet, for the Rebel frigates and Mon Cal cruisers had flown directly into their midst and opened fire at point blank range. It broke all the rules of Capital Ship combat, and it was horrible to behold.

Most of all, Dal remembered the explosions of the Star Destroyers. The city-like ships almost brushed up against the Rebel cruisers and the tiny space between them was like a lace work of turbolaser bolts. Twin rows of fireballs blossomed along each hull as deflector shields crumbled and the pent-up hatred of years of conflict was given a savage outlet. A dying Mon Cal cruiser had aimed itself directly at Admiral Dal's bridge, but another Star Destroyer, spinning out of control, hit it first. Their collision had nearly taken Dal's ship with it. Dark and disabled, they had drifted away from the battle. A while later, the blackness of the bridge had been lit up by the distant annihilation of the second Death Star. Dal and his surviving crew had joined with another ship and escaped the Rebel mopping up action.

For one year, he had defended the shrinking Imperial territory. Then, to his mystification, he had been assigned to the Eclipse project. He couldn't believe it was still being funded. Nor did matters become clear when he was in the midst of the project. The source of the funding was hidden in a bureaucratic tangle he could never hope to unravel. The available evidence pointed to a powerful Imperial leader somewhere, but those who inquired too closely into the matter tended to vanish. A few weeks ago, just after the completion of the ship's hyperdrive and prime weapon, Dal had received orders to take the unfinished Eclipse into the Deep Core. He had obeyed, hungry to penetrate the mystery.

Perhaps the last thing Dal expected was to find the Emperor reborn awaiting him. Dal knew absolutely that it was the Emperor, but how could someone return from death as a younger man? Dal couldn't conceive of it. Like a proper Imperial, he had never believed in the Force. His grip on reality had begun to slip. Then he was told that he would be taking the ship to destroy several uninhabited Deep Core worlds for the Emperor. Enveloped by a sense of the surreal, Admiral Dal had agreed. Perhaps he had died at Endor, and he and his Emperor were carving out a new Empire in the afterlife. It didn't matter, so long as he could serve. Without service, Dal instinctively knew he would find a kind of living death.

The Eclipse emerged from hyperspace, pulling Dal into the present. The bridge crew went smoothly into action, placing the vast ship on a course for a nearby world, visible as a tiny blue sphere on the main screen. Dal admired his crew. They were some of the best remaining officers in the Empire. They were efficient and skilled, and completely loyal to the Emperor. Dal was really only comfortable on the bridge itself, surrounded by his human officers. Elsewhere on the Eclipse, he was unnerved by the presence of the alien dark side adepts. They filled him with a deep revulsion and sent a chill through him whenever he saw them.

The small planet ahead continued to grow in the viewscreen. Dal turned to look behind him at the special platform above the bridge. There sat the Emperor, on one of his technological thrones. He was in something called a meditation trance, supposedly in contact with the Force. The Emperor had told Dal privately that destroying the planet ahead would increase his power. Dal was struggling to include the Force in his view of reality, but after seeing the Emperor reborn, he believed many things were possible. He looked forward to reclaiming the Empire and erasing the New Republic from existence.

The Eclipse moved smoothly into firing range. "All crew stand ready," called out the Admiral. He glanced once more at the Emperor's still form. "Commence primary ignition." The Eclipse began to vibrate subtly. It was the barest indication of the incomprehensible forces about to be unleashed. The power of his ship intoxicated the Admiral. Very soon, the planet ahead would simply cease to exist. Dal hadn't served on either Death Star, but this more than made up for it. His prime weapon was stronger than those that had come before. Now he would see it in action at last. And just maybe, before too long, he would see it used on the worlds of the New Republic.

Dal was just about to give the order to fire, when he felt a startling and frightening constriction at his throat. His breath was choked off, and panicked, he grabbed at his neck to force away the hands that held it so painfully. There was nothing there. Terror surged up inside him, but there was nothing he could do. The Force was killing him, he realized in his final moments. He dimly saw that the officers around him were stricken as well. Irrationally, he thought he could see Lord Vader standing nearby. That makes sense, he thought as his mind cut loose from his pain-wracked body. Vader often punished people like this. But he had heard Vader was dead. On the other hand, the Emperor was still alive, was he not? Perhaps no one really died at all. Perhaps this wasn't the end, but only a beginning...

Palpatine let the Force flow through him. He could sense the balance of the dark against the light. Soon, he would disrupt that balance in a violent assault against nature itself. The new strength of the dark side would be shared with him, and once again he would become its greatest servant. But his servitude was not slavery; it was a position of ultimate mortal power. He was far above all other living beings. This was given to him to know by the dark side itself. This he believed absolutely.

The world ahead was full of life. Its oceans and continents were teeming with non sentient forms. Its loss would be strongly felt by the light side. Not only would the existing life be lost, but also all the potential life. Just as all the potential death had been lost with the destruction of the Death Star, weakening the dark side.

Despite being in a trance, Palpatine was partly aware of his surroundings. He heard the command to commence primary ignition as if it was spoken at a great distance. This was it. He was ready to reclaim his title as Master of the dark side, a title that meant more than Emperor to him.

But wait-

Something was wrong.

The command to fire had not been given.

Palpatine reached out with the Force and saw two things at the same moment. The entire bridge crew was dead, and he was completely surrounded by black-robed figures, their human and alien arms raised as if to reach out to him. He had a moment of utter clarity to realize that this, at last, was the source of his recent fears. It was his death.

Then, devastating waves of Force Lightning slammed into him from the ten adepts that ringed him. He was the center of a bright wheel of agony, its spokes twisting through fiery arcs that burned into him. The air shrieked, or perhaps it was Palpatine. He was off the throne, then falling from the platform, but there was no relief as the ten figures moved with him, their circle shrinking as they closed in. The writhing bolts illuminated a bearded human face here, a tentacled snout there. Hands, claws, and other appendages pushed hateful sizzling death at their betrayer.

Palpatine had no chance against so many. Barely able to think, he rolled his tortured body towards one side of the circle, seizing on a final, desperate plan. His hand thrust into his robes, and when it emerged, a hot orange lightsaber blade extended suddenly from it. He thrust it full into one of his attackers' hearts. As the adept died, the circle was broken, and Palpatine dragged himself to his feet. His respite lasted no longer than that. Recovering from their surprise, the other nine adepts unleashed another barrage of lightning at Palpatine's back. The lightsaber flew from his grip as he was hurled violently into the crew pit. The adepts advanced to deal the killing blows.

But Palpatine was right where he wanted to be. He brushed aside the dead hand of the Imperial gunner next to him and grasped the firing lever of the prime weapon. With pain-filled fingers, he drew it towards him.

The Eclipse became a titanic energy weapon. An unbearably bright bar of light appeared between the ship and the planet, bisecting the blackness of space. For an instant, the ship and the planet were linked, then the planet's surface boiled away like a ball of wax hurled into a

fire. The small world's rocky core lasted a moment longer, then it, too, wavered within the bar of light and was gone.

On the bridge of the Eclipse, the dark side adepts ignored the spectacle and relentlessly pressed their attack. Palpatine had kept his design a secret from his adepts because of his premonitions, so they knew nothing of what he hoped to gain by his action. One last act of defiance, perhaps? A world they would never rule over?

Their Lightning arced towards Palpatine one final time, carrying their justice with it.

The bolts never struck him.

A shimmering sphere had appeared around Palpatine, a coruscating globe of light that completely encased his prone form. The Force Lightning smashed into the sphere, but did not penetrate it. The wild play of fierce energies turned the sphere into a ball of flame. A moment later, all the power of the attack was hurled back at the adepts, vastly increased in magnitude. As one, they turned to flee, but shock waves of heat overtook all of them. Nine vaguely man-shaped masses of char and ashes spattered to the deck.

There had not been any chance to scream.

Silence settled over the bridge. The sphere continued to shimmer for a few minutes, then it winked out. Revealed within was the battered form of Palpatine. He was sprawled on the floor, nearly unconscious. His slitted eyes glowed with a baleful light, and black flames seemed to play along his limbs.

The Force was with him once more.

* * *

The signal that Urn Zelotes waited for did not come. There was no communication from the Eclipse at all. The HoloNet station in the clone lab was dark and quiet. Second by second, fear began to grow inside Zelotes, like a living thing that was born there and was eating his will in order to increase in size. There was no signal. What had happened? Were his allies dead? All dead? It was impossible. Their attack must have been delayed, or called off. But no--they would have let him know in that case, too. Dead. All dead. Was Palpatine dead too? Zelotes lost himself for a minute, indecision crushing down on him. The door to the clone lab shuddered and boomed. Heavy explosives had been brought in. That did it. There was no time left.

Zelotes faced his prisoners. "Show me another exit from this room!" he ordered them. Pestage still didn't seem able to rise, so Rollo Mon stood and walked, trembling, to a blank wall behind a row of Spaarti

Cylinders. He put a hand through the wall, revealing that it was only a hologram.

"Thank you Constable. I have to leave you now because I'm not sure if my allies have succeeded in their mission. I have to get to a place of safety and anonymity if I am ever to have another chance. No one must know who I am, and unfortunately, that means you both have to die. Come here, Constable. I'll make this as painless as possible seeing as how you've been such a help to me."

Rollo Mon helplessly walked back towards the gaunt, lizard like adept, tears streaming down his face. But Zelotes had made the mistake of turning his back on Sate Pestage. The Grand Vizier had not been helpless. He had been fighting for some control over his own body. In his fear and distraction, Zelotes had missed it. Pestage grabbed up the long cylinder that had held the poison and swung it as hard as he could against Zelotes' head. The adept's wedge-shaped skull was battered to one side, and in that moment, Rollo Mon was free. "Go!" rasped Pestage.

The Constable spun and ran behind another row of tanks. Urn Zelotes turned on Sate Pestage and grabbed him by his jeweled cassock with strong, claw like fingers. He shoved the old man hard and Pestage collapsed in a heap. "Stay there," Zelotes grated and ran to look behind the tanks for Rollo Mon. But the Constable was gone. There was a third exit somewhere back there.

Gone, too, was any hope of keeping his identity a secret, if Palpatine was indeed alive to learn it. Sate Pestage had effectively killed him. Not bothering to coerce the Grand Vizier, Zelotes stood over him. "This has all been for nothing, if Palpatine still lives. His clones are dead, but that was just a necessary precaution. All for nothing."

Pestage smiled at Zelotes. "Don't feel too bad. Others have tried. Others have failed. The glory is his and no one can take it from him. He will always be the Master."

Zelotes scowled. Rage twisted his features. He knew he had to flee. Palpatine was still off planet. If Zelotes could get to Velarium, he might survive. He knew he wasn't rational anymore. It didn't matter. He stepped away from Sate Pestage. If he could not destroy Palpatine, then he would destroy a part of Palpatine. One of the last two Sentinels came over to the Grand Vizier, picked him up, and squeezed.

Sate Pestage only managed to gasp out a few words. "And he will always be my son-" There was a sound of brittle bones breaking and the once powerful Grand Vizier of the Galactic Empire died. The Sentinel dropped the body to the floor, then waited for its next orders. Zelotes stared crazily at the corpse, a still heap glittering with gemstones. The face was peaceful. Son? Had he said son? This was the Emperor's father?! The lab reeled around Zelotes. He left the Sentinels standing there like grave markers and fled through the door Rollo Mon had shown him.

* * *

"Anger, concentrated by will in the vital center of the body creates a portal through which vast energies are released--the energies of the dark side of the Force. Standing watch with the mind, in my meditation of anger, I have slain my enemies from great distances, through the dark side power that permeates the galaxy. I have created lightening and unleashed its destructive fire. Using this knowledge, I can unleash the dark side energies that are all around us, even to shatter the fabric of space itself. In this way, I have created storms."

-From The Book of Anger

---Espaa.

---Father?

---Thank the Force, you are still alive! I had to know before I departed.

---What's wrong? What's happened?

---I am truly sorry, Master, but I have died.

---What do you mean? Where are you?

---I have died, Espaa. I am going to become part of the All. I am within your mind. I was able to see your mind like a beacon and come to it. You have become powerful again. The Force has chosen you as it did before. When you awaken, my identity will be gone. I can feel the pull now. It is very beautiful, actually.

---Will I see you again?

---I...I don't know. You walk a different path. I'm not sure it will be possible. But you may yet learn. In life, I worshipped your glory, but now I see it has its limits. The Force, the All, is one, my son. You feel only a part of the whole.

---A Jedi myth. The Force is only a power to use, to pay the price for, to master.

---I'm not here to argue. I am here to say I have loved you. Now I go to be with Gemsaa, my wife, in whatever way that is possible-

The insistent beeping of the HoloNet terminal finally reached Palpatine, and he awoke, groggy, grasping at the vanishing threads of a dream. He was on the deck of the crew pit of the Eclipse. All around him were dead bodies, his officers, Admiral Dal. On the upper walkway were several ash heaps. That sight brought the memory of his recent battle

crashing back to him. The dream was gone. He could not remember it. No matter. He was alive! He had won. The Force was with him and he had regained much of his old strength. He began to heal himself as he limped over to the beeping station. Rollo Mon appeared there as a small hologram. He looked frantic.

"You're alive! Then they didn't succeed! Master, There was an attack here at the Citadel. Adept Zelotes fought his way into the clone labs and destroyed all your clones. I'm ashamed to say he controlled me, that he had my help. And Master-" Rollo Mon's voice caught. "How can I tell you this? He also controlled Grand Vizier Pestage. He was going to kill us both but Sate Pestage attacked him, so that I could escape. He gave his...he was killed. He gave his life for me. Zelotes escaped. I don't know where he went. Master? How will we find him?"

Palpatine took a step away from the terminal, as if he could deny its message with distance. He shut his eyes. His head tilted back. Rollo Mon left his awareness. His hands became fists. Sate Pestage. Dead. His friend, his Grand Vizier, his faithful servant, a man once his father, dead. Murdered. Palpatine raised his arms, his fists held high. His teeth clenched as his face filled with violence. Dead. Murdered by Urn Zelotes. The only one who had come into his isolation and stayed there. The man who had saved his life. Murdered. Anger was there, in that moment, ravening, demanding release. He held it in, stoked its fire. The anger flared into rage, but he held it in, concentrating it deep within, at his center. Rage. Power. Power was everywhere, waiting to be used. It only needed an outlet. The rage was like a cold iron gate within him, closed against the power. He began to make the gate larger.

Urn Zelotes had tried to kill him. Zelotes had destroyed all the clones and his allies had nearly murdered Palpatine as well. He had been so close to final death and its unending chaos and he had not even known it. Now fear at that thought poured in with the anger, swelling the flow. The gate holding back the power grew. It now felt like it was meters thick, and yet it shook massively.

Zelotes was one of his older adepts. Palpatine had taken the exiled Thaarnian in and shared his knowledge. He had been repaid with betrayal, assassination, and murder. The murder of Sate Pestage. Betrayal and loss, fear and anger. Aggression must follow, but not yet. Palpatine found himself drawing more power than ever before. The pain of his loss had opened up untapped sources that he had not previously imagined. All men lost those close to them, and many cried out in rage. The universe did not care. But other men were not the Master of the dark side of the Force. The Master cried out in pain and rage...and the Universe answered!

The gate felt like part of a towering wall, a black fortress made of iron and stone. The power screamed and beat its fury against the gate, hammering relentlessly, a million voices yammering for release.

Palpatine opened the gate.

And a new thing was born into the galaxy.

Outside the Eclipse, a vortex of time and space began to grow. It spun ponderously, and soon, it had become a huge funnel like storm. Palpatine was struck with awe. The storm was his, and it wanted to destroy. Could he control it? The image of Urn Zelotes filled his mind. His links to his adepts had been restored. Zelotes was on Byss. He had gone to the city of adepts, perhaps to hide, perhaps to try to escape. There would be no escape. The storm responded to his hate. It whirled into hyperspace and burst forth over Byss. The great vortex roared down through the atmosphere, tearing defense satellites apart, rending ships and small fighters unlucky enough to be in its path. The automated defense systems of the Imperial Control Sector sent energy skyward like an inverse rain, but the storm only seemed to pick up velocity. In moments, it was above Velarium.

Urn Zelotes had made it back to his rooms. There is still time, he had told himself, over and over. Zelotes had mostly lost the capacity for planning. He had not reasoned that the Emperor's forces might already be at his quarters, waiting to take him prisoner. He did not know where he would go afterward, once he had retrieved his most important belongings. There hadn't really been a plan for failure. Maybe there could not have been one. Zelotes only knew he had to keep moving, to hide wherever he could. He gathered his books and talismans together in a tough sack. They were his last links to his homeworld of Thaarn and his old way of using the Force. Palpatine had taught him new ways, and Zelotes had tried to use those teachings against him. But perhaps there was something in his sacred books that he could use to survive the failure of his coup.

Hurrying to escape the room, Zelotes overturned the table holding the Book of Anger. It clattered to the floor on its side and activated. Palpatine's hologram projected horizontally and resumed its lecture. "-or its consequences. When the Dark Empire is complete, the followers of the dark side will share my power of being able to observe each other. Betrayal will no longer be practical."

Palpatine had more to say, but Zelotes was already gone.

The Force Storm descended upon Velarium. As it enveloped the city, buildings were torn up whole and went soaring up into the vortex, fragmenting as they rose. The Emperor's punishment claimed many lives that day. Dozens of adepts, innocent of any conspiracy, were swallowed up by the storm and lost. Urn Zelotes, too, met his doom in that merciless chaos. His building was pulled from its foundation and lifted towards the vortex of annihilation. It shattered under the stress on the way, and Zelotes suddenly found himself cast from the wreckage into mid-air. The greatest horror was that he did not fall. Fully aware, he rose toward the enormous whirlpool in the sky. He thought he could hear the Emperor laughing and laughing. Then his body was taken apart by the storm, and the unending chaos of the dark side took the rest of him.

A little while later, the storm began to recede. Witnesses spoke of how it seemed to do so reluctantly, as if, given the choice, it would

have ravaged the entire Imperial Control Sector. Left behind was a small city in rubble, with nothing moving in it. But only a few kilometers away, the Imperial Citadel was untouched.

* * *

Within a few days, the violent incidents surrounding the attempted coup had been mostly covered up. Sovereign Protectors told no tales, nor did Rollo Mon, so the knowledge of Palpatine's vulnerability, his lack of any mature clones, did not reach the ears of anyone else. The reason for the destruction of the city of adepts, however, was made common knowledge. It was 'revealed' that several adepts had plotted treason, that their scheme had been discovered before it could be implemented, and that all the traitors had been killed by Palpatine's power in the Force Storm. It was a lesson that would never be forgotten.

Palpatine had returned with the Eclipse, having decided to delay any further use of the ship while he attended to the damage on Byss. He made himself highly visible, and all who saw him could feel his new strength, and were more than a little afraid.

The Emperor was back.

Then, the time came for a decision regarding an important matter. Palpatine's eyes were hard and cold as he stared, brooding, at the Constable of Homunculi. Rollo Mon produced a small cryocontainer and placed it on the table between them.

"It is up to you, Master. We can clone him, make him any age you like. Then there is the question of what memories to give him..."

Palpatine's voice was distant. "We actually discussed this, he and I, a year ago. He thought I might want to bring him back this way, when he was gone. But he had this belief that he was my father..." Rollo Mon's eyes widened, but Palpatine only shook his head no. There was no reason to let Rollo Mon know the truth about Pestage, or what had really happened. That of course, Palpatine had once had parents like any other being. That when he was chosen by the dark side, no place remained in his life for such relationships. That only now, when Sate Pestage was gone, did he realize that the old man had meant something to him. "He said he didn't want anyone else to claim that honor, even if they were a clone of himself. Yes, Constable, clone him, but make him like he was ten years ago. Implant the things he needs to know to be my personal servant, to be the Emperor's Grand Vizier, but nothing more."

Rollo Mon stood and bowed. "It shall be as you desire, Master." He left Palpatine alone.

Palpatine was the undisputed Master of the dark side of the Force, and he had no companions left. His piercing yellow eyes gazed from a face that was unlined, but empty. Those eyes avoided the chair that Sate

Pestage used to sit in when they shared their meals. The way of the dark side was the way of isolation, of personal aggrandizement at the expense of all other relationships. Palpatine wondered if it was really that fact that had killed Sate Pestage.

He could think of only one way to honor him. When next he met Luke Skywalker, as he knew he would, Palpatine would do as Pestage had wanted, and approach his enemy as a potential ally. Palpatine's power of vision had returned, and he could still see Skywalker kneeling before him, saying, "My father's destiny is my own." But the boy was not ready to join him, not yet. In a few years, perhaps. He still had to learn the limits of what he could do with the light side. When Skywalker was ready, Palpatine would make his move, and the last of the Jedi would belong to him. It would be fitting vengeance on the rest of his enemies to turn their greatest hope against them.

Palpatine laughed his old laugh, a sound of sadistic mirth. Great things were coming to him. The galaxy would become his Dark Empire. And how could it not be so? For who could resist the power of the dark side...forever?