

Star Wars

Insider #85

A Two-Edged Sword(sequel to In His Image)

by Karen Traviss

"What can you teach a clone in a few months what a man takes a lifetime to learn?"—Emperor Palpatine to Lord Darth Vader

YINCHORR, MID RIM: IMPERIAL TRAINING CENTER.

For a dead man, Sa Cuis still had a fine lightsaber technique. Lord Vader swung his blade and the two beams of red energy-rasped off each other.

Cuis—one of his clones, anyway—circled and Vader matched him, keeping a constant distance between them. He had no intention of killing the assassin again. Arkanian Micro had spent more than a year creating this clone of the Dark Jedi and it would have been wasteful to destroy him or any of his five brothers simply to prove superiority.

Besides, they were men. Vader tried not to lose sight of that. If he had wanted mindless predictability, he would have commissioned droids for the Imperial Army.

He was aware of two people watching the duel intently from the dais set a little above the training-hall floor; his master Emperor Palpatine and one of his aides, Lieutenant Erv Lekauf. Part of his mind could sense Lekauf's discomfort at being so close to the Emperor without Vader beside him.

"Enough," said Vader, and shut down his lightsaber. The Cuis clone snapped his blade off too but watched Vader cautiously until he stood back to allow the clones to continue their lightsaber drill with the instructor. Vader was satisfied. The clones had retained all the speed and sharp reflexes of the unfortunate Emperor's Hand whose genome was now theirs. He hoped they had somehow inherited his extraordinary loyalty, too.

I wonder if the Emperor knew Cuis would never reveal he was his Hand. I wonder if my master values that kind of devotion, or just expects it.

Vader went back to the dais to watch the clones continue their lightsaber training. They ran through parry and riposte, re-doublment and remise, red blades shimmering. The cavernous hall echoed with the hum of lightsabers and the clack of armor plates, a combination that Vader found oddly disturbing. Their instructor was yet another of Palpatine's many Hands—an assassin called Sheyvan, who had a taste for vibroblades as well as the more conventional lightsaber.

Vader paced up and down the hall, watching the sparring pairs with a careful eye. Hands often thought they were the only personal assassin in Palpatine's service, and most were unhappy if they found they were not. Sheyvan looked as if he was in that majority. His occasional glance at Palpatine was more accusing than adoring.

"Men need to believe they're unique," said Palpatine quietly. He always lowered his voice to make people listen carefully to him. "And women, too. We all like to think we are special and irreplaceable. It is a great motivator."

Sometimes Vader suspected Palpatine could read more than his emotions. "You made me feel I alone could help you defeat the Jedi Council, master."

"And that was true, was it not?"

Vader had wondered just once—and no more—how his life might have unfolded had he not been seduced by Palpatine's assurance that he was the only member of the Jedi Council whom he could trust. It was true, yes. But if he had resisted, Padme would still have died. At least now he had the power and position to remake the galaxy as he wished—orderly. He used it. He used it more every day.

"Not only do all men wish to be special," said Vader. "They also wish to know there is someone they can trust."

Palpatine's yellow eyes betrayed no reaction, just as he didn't seem troubled by Sheyvan's discomfort. The disappointment of those around him was of no consequence until they ceased to serve their purpose, and then they were discarded.

You will not discard me, master.

"One day, I may form a legion of Dark Jedi," said Palpatine as if the idea had just struck him. "They have great potential. This Cuis would be honored to see what's become of him."

It was as if he had never known Cuis. Vader had never mentioned that he knew Palpatine had sent Sa Cuis to kill him. He wouldn't name

you, my master. Not even when I offered to spare his life. That's what I want in my troops. Loyalty.

Vader hadn't taken the assassination attempt personally. It was part of his training. The path towards Sith mastery had to be hard because the power it yielded was not for the weak or lazy. Vader understood that.

Lekauf—loyal, intelligent, with no special powers beyond the capacity for hard work—hovered at his elbow, radiating anxiety. Clones had been created from him, too, but he was very much alive to see them. He had even trained them. Now they were being evaluated, and they had passed inspection in all core skills except hand-to-hand combat.

"You still seem worried," said Vader.

"No, sir...."

Lekauf had spent six months on this miserable, barren ball of rock training his clones. If they passed muster, he could finally return to Coruscant. It was clear what his fears were.

"You haven't seen your wife and children for six months, and you worry that if your clones don't perform well, you'll be here for another six," said Vader.

Lekauf swallowed hard and nodded. "Yes, sir. I do."

His courageous honesty was one of the qualities that made him both a good clone donor and instructor. Vader's memories of missing someone dear—the memories that he had learned to wrap and lock away, almost without pain now—echoed in response.

And I trusted you too, Padme. I'm practiced at handling betrayal now.

"You'll see your family soon," said Vader.

Lekauf looked toward the training hall doors. He was a strongly built man in his thirties with an incongruously open face and scrubby light-brown hair. "I always worry about disappointing you, sir. But when I see what Dark Jedi can do, I wonder how ordinary humans can ever compete."

"Stormtroopers will never have to fight Jedi," said Vader. "Only Rebels."

Lekauf inhaled and held his breath as the six clones marched in. Vader heard it, however hard the man tried to suppress it. They looked as Lekauf himself might have done a few years earlier with that same expression of permanent optimism. And, Vader hoped, they would be equally efficient soldiers.

The clones, wearing the same Imperial armor as the Cuis batch, lined up in front of the dais and saluted. They were flash-trained from decanting to make them competent soldiers who could function in any army, but Vader needed them to be better than that. He needed them to meet the standards of the Kaminoan-cloned troops that still made up the majority of his storm-troopers.

"No lightsabers." Vader's voice boomed across the training hall. "Use durasteel staffs. This is an exercise. I want no serious injury."

Palpatine turned his head very slowly to look at him. Vader hooked his thumbs over his belt, waiting for the challenge.

"How can you test their suitability if you handicap them?" Palpatine's voice was soft and insinuating as it always was when he was planting an idea. "Is this not a concession?"

"No, my master. It creates more realistic conditions for the test." Vader stood his ground. "They need only to perform well against Rebels, who are not Force users. Just men."

Palpatine paused for two heartbeats, his sign of silent disapproval. "Very well."

Vader beckoned to Sheyvan to join them on the dais to clear the training hall floor for combat. The clones paired off, one Lekauf to each Cuis.

"Begin," said Palpatine. Lekauf swallowed again.

The clones stalked each other, durasteel rods clasped in both hands. Then metal crashed as they smashed staff against staff, struggling to drive the other back. One Lekauf clone, the name "NELE" stenciled on his chest-plate, brought his staff round in a low arc to upend his opponent. But as soon as the man fell flat on his back, he sprang to his feet again in one move and threw the Lekauf clone almost the full width of the training hall with a massive Force push. He hit the wall, the impact of his back-plate making the room echo, and struggled back to his feet, shaking his head to clear it.

The other five Cuis clones laid aside their staffs and sent their opponents' weapons spinning from their hands with a single gesture. All the Lekauf clones were knocked flat on their backs and pinned down by an invisible hand.

It had been a very brief demonstration. Lekauf looked resigned to his fate, hands clasped behind his back, eyes fixed straight ahead.

"I would not expect any man to defeat a Jedi without adequate weapons," said Palpatine.

Vader wasn't sure if that was a verdict of failure or simply an observation. He glanced at Lekauf. "No, master," he said, addressing the

Emperor but watching his aide."Perhaps we should now try this again without allowing use of their Force powers."

"No, I have seen enough." Palpatine pulled his cowl a little further over his face."I will take the Cuis clones and train them further. Your Lekauf batch may yet prove useful for other tasks."

We could simply clone an entire army of the Cuis template. We know what they can do. But a soldier is the product of constant training. They need to see action.

"I suggest that we put them all on active service and see how they perform," said Vader.

Palpatine paused again. "Yes. But commission a battalion of Cuis models from Arkanian Micro anyway. I'm impressed by how much the clones have retained of his Force abilities."

Lekauf's clones had picked themselves up and were waiting at stand easy with their hands clasped behind their backs.

"Does that mean we're returning to Imperial Center?" Lekauf asked, unable to disguise his desperation.

"Yes, Lieutenant, it does." Vader strode ahead and Lekauf managed to match his pace. His six clones collected their helmets and weapons, and followed him as did the Cuis batch. Sheyvan brought up the rear, looking sullen.

"I apologize for our performance, sir," said Lekauf.

Vader noted the use of the word our."I won't consider that failure in hand-to-hand combat until I see you fight ordinary men."

"That's very generous of you, sir."

No, it wasn't generous: it was fair. The test against the Cuis clones was merely an act of curiosity and not a reason to judge them unfit. Vader watched them mount the ramp of his Lambda-class shuttle and noted that even with their helmets on, he could tell the Lekauf from the Cuis by their bearing and their disciplined, synchronized stride alone. The Cuis clones moved more like athletes than soldiers, and—he couldn't help but notice this—they did not move like one machine.

"Smarten up," Lekauf snapped, instinctively knowing what Vader thought with his usual unerring accuracy. "You're in the 501st now."

COMMANDING OFFICER'S DAY CABIN, SHUTTLE ST 321, EN ROUTE FOR IMPERIAL CENTER.

"I think I might like the Cuis battalion under my own command," said the Emperor, leaning back in Vader's seat as the shuttle jumped to hyperspace.

Vader ignored his infringement of his territory and simply registered the fact that his master bothered to do it. It was another one of those little tests, the constant pushing and prodding designed to make Vader hungry for supremacy and angry enough to seize it. A thousand small threats would feed the dark side within him, but sometimes it seemed more for sport than education.

I don't need you to keep me sharp, master. I won't forget what drives me.

"They will not form part of the infantry, then, master?"

Palpatine's tone hardened a little. "I know how to command an army, Lord Vader."

"I mean that the Cuis clones are effectively all Hands and so might be ideal for special operations."

The Emperor accepted a glass of water from Lekauf, who never seemed to find menial tasks demeaning. "Yes, I shall train them to carry out many tasks."

Vader still managed to avoid the words that always hung between them now. "Cuis was loyal to his master to the end. He would not reveal his name."

"A commendable quality that I hope will be found in his clones."

"It may be genetic, but it can also be encouraged."

It can also be crushed. Vader thought of the man he had been— yes, there was no pain now, just a vivid and angry determination— and those who he had loved but who had betrayed him. He could still re-create that cold, focusing sense of disappointment when he realized that Palpatine had sent Cuis, and that the only thing he could trust him to do was to be a source of constant threat. Knowing how alone he truly was might have made him stronger, but it did not comfort him. He suspected it was why he surrounded himself with the Lekaufs of this world—not simply because loyal soldiers were good soldiers, but because it reassured the small part of him that had been Anakin, the part that still

seemed sufficiently useful not to suppress. Lekauf was soothing: a man who liked to know where he stood, a man who simply wanted to excel and be given clarity of purpose in exchange for his devotion.

You won't disappoint me. So many people disappoint me. "Lieutenant," said Palpatine, looking past Vader to where Lekauf stood in patient silence. "What makes you loyal to Lord

Vader?"

Lekauf, normally uncomfortable around Palpatine, relaxed a little. Vader could feel it. Lekaufs doubts and passions seldom showed on his face, but he had them, and Vader could always taste them and sometimes relied on them to understand what was happening within the Imperial Army.

"With your permission, sir," said Lekauf, and looked to Vader. "It's because my Lord never asks his men to do anything that he wouldn't do himself."

"Laudable" said Palpatine.

Honest, thought Vader. He could have said that the Empire was all that was holy and I was its instrument. But he gave a soldier's answer.

The Emperor went back to sipping his water, and Lekauf still stood motionless. He wouldn't sit unless Vader was seated. Vader was used to that now and occasionally had to order him to sit when it was clear he needed to.

"Call your wife, Lekauf," said Vader. "Tell her when you will be arriving."

There was a brief flare of excitement in Lekaufs spirit that illuminated the Force for a brief moment. "Thank you, sir. Tliank you"

Lekauf saluted and disappeared through the hatch toward the cockpit. Master and apprentice remained silent until he was out of earshot.

"You constantly surprise me with your capacity for...compassion," said Palpatine, somehow shaping the word into an insult.

"Motivation" said Vader, daring to correct Palpatine, and he hoped he didn't think he had managed to sting him. "There would be no point in denying Lekauf such a small thing. Exercising power for the sake of it achieves nothing. Knowing when to let it go does"

"Making people want to please you is an important skill," said Palpatine. "You are becoming adept at it. Fascinating, is it not? To see that desire for approval?"

Ah, he enjoyed it. It was his sport. This was more than the exercise of political power. He liked to see people, helpless lesser people, in his thrall.

Vader decided he was content to be a simpler man, relying on strength and clarity. Your need for games will one day be your undoing.

Vader settled down in the seat opposite—normally the first officer's—and occupied his time catching up with reports from Imperial bases in the Outer Rim.

It should have been a short, uneventful flight. And it was, right up to the time when something tingled at the back of his throat and he looked up, hand reaching instinctively for his lightsaber. Then the red action stations alarm lit up the bulkhead and the warning klaxon deafened him.

Palpatine, still all glacial calm, placed his glass carefully on the nearest table and opened up the coram to the cockpit.

"What is the problem?" he asked.

There was nothing but the crackle of static from the other end of the link. Vader was already at the hatch, his Force senses tearing their way through what seemed like layers of padding and smoke to feel clearly what had been hidden from him by a concerted effort. The Dark Jedi were in revolt, struggling to screen their intentions from him, but all he needed to know was that they had no plans to be loyal to him.

They were probably coming for him.

The Cuis clones were still on their donor's mission, it seemed.

VADER strode down the passage to the cockpit, lightsaber drawn, the pulsing red action stations light reflecting off his armor. He could hear blaster fire.

He opened his comlink. "Lekauf, what's happening:" "The Cuis clones killed the pilots and seized the entire forward section of the ship, sir." The h-dappp of a blaster bolt interrupted the lieutenant."It's just me, my clones, and the navigation officer back here. We're trying to blast the hatches open at the bulkhead." "Wait for me."

"I don't think you should come down here, sir."

"I will deal with it. They want me."

"Sheyvan seems to want the Emperor, sir, not you."

Vader felt die shuttle lurch as if it had made a sudden course correction. He strode back to the day cabin and checked the navigation display repeater to check the heading; the shuttle was now heading for the Outer Rim. Palpatine was still sitting calmly in his seat, his lightsaber hilt on his lap.

A thought crossed Vader's mind. He phrased it carefully."Is this a live-fire exercise you saw fit not to mention to me, master?"

"It is not," said Palpatine.



Another of his games, though. Perhaps he has tasked the Cuis clones to kill we. "You are in danger, master."

"I can handle seven Dark Jedi, Lord Vader. What neither of us can handle, though, is the vacuum of space. So let us ensure there is no hull breach."

"Seven" said Vader. "You include your own Hand, then."

"Either Sheyvan is dead, or he is part of this rebellion, in which case he will die anyway."

The Lambda was a small craft, 20 meters stem to stern, and Palpatine could fight as well with his Force powers from the day cabin as he could within lightsaber range of an enemy. Vader took his calm reaction as tacit proof that the Emperor knew he was not at risk but that Vader was. And suddenly, he resented him for compromising his crew, who deserved better than this.

"I will deal with this, master. There is no need for you to be involved." Don't put obstacles in my way. Don't try to test me further. Keep out of this fight. "Lekauf and I will restore order."

Vader strode back down the passageway and came out at the hatch one compartment aft of the cockpit bulkhead. Smoke and the smell of discharged blaster filled the air; Lekauf, the navigation officer Pepin, and the Lekauf clones had stacked crates as a defensive barrier and were alternating between blasting at the hatch and attempting to force the sections apart with a durasteel bar.

"If we didn't have Jedi on the other side of the hatch, this would be open by now," said Pepin, grunting with the effort as he put all his weight on the metal bar.

"It's Sheyvan, sir," said Lekauf. "He led them."

Vader walked up to the hatch, moved Pepin out of the way with an assertive hand, and struck his balled fist against the durasteel twice.

"Sheyvan, give up. You can never defeat me."

Sheyvan's voice was muffled. Vader's amplified hearing picked out the words clearly even through the heavy durasteel.

"He betrayed us," said Sheyvan. "The Emperor betrayed us all."

"Open this hatch."

"He Uses us, Lord Vader. Don't you understand?"

Oh yes, indeed I do. And I could rip this hatch apart with the power of my will, but I want to hear more. How did you find the strength to defy Palpatine?

"I said open the hatch"

"He makes us believe we're each the only Hand and then we find—he throws away our lives, Lord Vader, and our loyalty deserves better."

Indeed it does. So did mine. Who am I still angry with—Palpatine or Kenobi? Which master disappointed me most?

"Cuis clones!" He rapped the hatch again. "You cannot have your donors memories. What makes you feel betrayed enough to threaten your Emperor?"

A dead man's voice answered with a slightly different accent, the accent of Sheyvan. "We're loyal to the man who trained us, Lord Vader."

"Terrific," said Lekauf. "Smart way to turn their qualities against us."

There was no disputing their capacity for loyalty, and Vader had been right to spot that quality in Cuis; but he hadn't known how betrayed Sheyvan would feel by finding he wasn't the only Hand, and by discovering what had happened to Cuis.

But Palpatine must have known the reaction was likely. Had he engineered this, putting a bitter man in charge of training

Dark Jedi who were highly likely to take on their instructor's cause? Had he influenced Sheyvan's mind? Vader never knew how many layers there were to Palpatine's intrigue, only that he was tired of it.

Lekauf was right. Loyalty was a two-edged sword. It was a pity that it was working against him at the moment.

"Lord Vader," said Shey-van. "Lord Vader, help us overthrow Palpatine. You could rule in his place."

Yes, I will oust him. But now seemed very soon, too soon. Vader considered it for a moment. He turned and caught Lekauf staring at him and dismissed the thought.

"Stand back and let me open this hatch, Lieutenant."

The Cuis clones heard him. One felt as if he had moved closer to the hatch. "If you attempt to storm the cockpit," he shouted, "we'll overload the laser cannons and destroy the ship."

Lekauf nodded. "They can do that, sir," he said quietly. "They have control of all weapons systems."

"Then we need to neutralize them safely."

"Safe for them?"

"Safe for us."

"If you're prepared to cope without life support for a while, my Lord, I can probably cut power to the whole ship," said Pepin. "The generator is on our side of the hatch."

That would cripple the laser cannons. It meant fighting in darkness, but Vader and the clones all had helmet enhancements that enabled them to see in infrared and low light. Pepin could manage somehow.

"They still have their lightsabers, sir, even if we kill the power," said Lekauf. "They're very good at deflecting blaster fire, and any heavier ordnance might blow a hole in our hull anyway."

"I've got something they'll have trouble deflecting" said Nele, the Lekauf clone who had been thrown across the training hall. He hefted a large rifle with a cylindrical chamber mounted where an optical scope would have been on a conventional blaster rifle. "Instant barbecue."

Lekauf looked embarrassed for a moment. "A flamethrower, sir. He's right. Better to char the section than put a big hole in it. And it's quick."

Vader couldn't imagine his ultra-formal lieutenant teaching his clones phrases like instant barbecue, but there was clearly a side to the man he hadn't yet seen.

"Fire is the greatest danger in a vessel."

"Not as dangerous as letting them blow up the ship, sir."

"Very well," said Vader. He could use the Force to contain damage if he had to. Feeling a presence approaching, he looked around to see Palpatine, standing serene at the end of the passageway and simply...observing. "Make ready."

Vader regretted the waste of Cui's clones. But this was a matter of survival, and if a Hand could turn on the Emperor, the man who had originally inspired his devotion, then he had instilled in his trainees a capacity to do the same.

Clones were always fast learners. That was a two-edged sword as well.

PALPATINE remained at the end of the passageway that ran the length of a Lambda's starboard side. He had projected a shimmering field in front of him, a silent statement that he would not participate in the fight.

"I have confidence in you, Lord Vader." That trick no longer works on me, master.

"And I have confidence in my men." Vader could see from the tight control on Lekauf's face that he was now far from inspired by the Emperor. For once, here was someone that he didn't appear able to imbue with the desire to please him. Lekauf seemed to feel what Vader felt. It was unsettling to see that in an ordinary man.

Pepin stood with a hydrosponder in his hand, ready to shut down the shuttle's drives and generator. Lekauf positioned the six clones on either side of the hatch with flamethrowers and blasters ready.

Vader stood back. What they needed was not so much his fighting skills as his ability to prevent the Dark Jedi from using the Force. They almost certainly had a danger sense as acute as his; and seven of them together could reach out from behind that hatch and thwart Pepin or any of the clones.

He took a breath and centered himself, shutting out almost everything around him until he was aware of only the living beings in the shuttle. He could feel Lekauf and his men. He could feel Pepin at the power controls. And he could feel the seven vortices of dark energy behind the bulkhead in the forward section as if the durasteel wasn't between them at all.

There was a click and whirr of blasters charging and a faint hiss as three of the clones adjusted the pressure in their flamethrowers.

"Ready when you are sir," said Lekauf. Vader concentrated on Pepin and enveloped him in a Force shield.

Vader felt a sense of focus from behind the hatch, and as seven minds seemed to sense the threat and reached out, Pepin cut the generator and the shuttle was plunged into darkness, except for the shimmering red blade of his lightsaber. He raised his left hand, knowing exactly where the weakest point of the hatch was, and sent a massive Force push that swept the two halves of the hatch doors apart.

For a moment, frozen in time, Vader saw a forest of red lightsaber shafts exactly like his own. He punched a Force shockwave into the cockpit just as his field of vision erupted in hot yellow light and the loud whoomp of flame filled the ruptured compartment ahead of them, fire licking across bulkheads and darting into the cockpit hatchway.

He could see inside now. He heard screams. Three lightsabers had disappeared, appearing to merge with the flames. Fierce gold reflections danced on white armor. But three shafts of energy continued to glow, and he could see three of Cui's clones enveloped in Force shields of their own, managing to hold off the flamethrower assault.

The stormtrooper plates and bodysuit were fire-resistant, and Lekauf's men had overcome that hard-wired human terror of fire to walk through the inferno and continue to shoot jets of burning gas into the compartment before them. Vader could see three bodies on the floor, matte-black from charring, and three moving saber blades, but where was the fourth?

He reached out with his mind, searching behind burning panels and control fascias. Another ball of fire rolled up to the deckhead from the muzzle of a flamethrower. Lekauf, tight at Vader's side and without a respirator, coughed as acrid smoke billowed back.

"Get clear," said Vader, and stabbed his Force reach through the shield of the Cuis clones, seizing their throats and crushing them. One yielded and Vader moved in fast, taking three strides forward and slashing his saber down to fell the clone.

Two were left, plus Sheyvan. He was still alive. Vader could feel him yet not see him. Lekauf's men fired rapid bursts of flame at the last two Cuis clones standing, pinning them against the port bulkhead as Vader moved in and they struggled to maintain the protective bubble around them. Smoke rolled from every surface. The shuttle's interior was made from fire-resistant materials, but the temperature in the confined space was now getting unbearable.

Nele fired another burst of burning gas at the Dark Jedi. Then one of the Cuis clones made a massive effort and sent the ball of flame back at Vader.

Vader's suit could withstand nearly every assault. But Lekauf, a man trained to react without pausing to debate, flung himself in front of him and took the brunt of the flame. He fell, gasping, as the clones closed in on the Dark Jedi and Vader burst apart their Force shields with pure focused rage.

Lightsabers winked out of existence.

Pepin, firre control, now! Vader shouted.

The shuttle's power came back, and a fine rain of fire retardant began falling from the conduits in the deckhead, dousing the smoldering surfaces. Vader dropped to one knee to grab Lekaufs shoulders and pull him clear.

Lekauf's action had been a foolish gesture and one Vader didn't need. But this was a painful reminder for him. Not so long ago, he had been the one burning and desperate for help: And the master he had trusted, Obi-Wan Kenobi, had abandoned him and left him to die.

Vader would not abandon Lekauf as he had been abandoned. He supported the officer's head, not to win his allegiance as Palpatine might, but because it was what Vader believed Kenobi should have done for him.

Lekauf's skin was blackened, but his eyes were open, wide and white in a shocked face. Vader called for bacta and Nele and Pepin ran to him with medpacs. Lekauf raised an arm and looked at the blistered back of his hand as if it wasn't his own. "My wife's going to be furious with me," he said in that nonsensical way that badly injured men often did.

"I bet your wife will just be glad to see you back in one piece," said Pepin. "Let's get you into the cabin."

Vader straightened up. The other clones were searching the charred and twisted forward compartment, blasters aimed.

Sheyvan had to be in there somewhere. It was too small a ship in which to hide. Vader stepped carefully through the steaming debris, now slippery with a coating of fire-retardant liquid, and gestured to the clones to leave him to the search. He felt the Dark Jedi was alive, but with a black layer of wet ash covering everything, it was hard to tell what was a body and what was simply a melted sheet of plastoid. He prodded lumps with his boot, light-saber in hand.

He counted eight bodies; six Cuis clones and the two crew who were already dead when the assault began. Then one blackened shape yielded slightly when he kicked it.

Sheyvan sprang to his feet, a nightmare smeared in wet, black ash. His lightsaber cut through the damp, hot air, and Vader blocked it with an upward thrust.

"He'll betray you too, sir," said Sheyvan, his lightsaber locked against Vader's.

"Few men will not try to betray me," said Vader and swung back at him. He could only focus on Lekaufs plight at that moment, an echo of his own, and rage was a fine lens through which to concentrate his power. He drove Sheyvan back across the slippery deck, sending him stumbling. Even now, after holding back flame and surviving smoke, the Dark Jedi was still a formidable fighter, and Vader genuinely regretted the final stroke that sliced him from shoulder to hip and left him dead on the deck.

Sheyvan was what Palpatine had made him. Vader had once thought he was made as Palpatine had planned, but now he could be his own man.

The Emperor could even have influenced Sheyvan to do this. So many layers. So many games.

The cockpit was too badly damaged to pilot the shuttle back to Imperial Center. Vader sent out a distress signal and waited for rescue. He walked back to the day cabin to check on Lekauf and found Palpatine watching the emergency first aid as if it was a demonstration.

"Will he survive?" Vader asked. I know how this feels. I know the pain. "Are his lungs damaged?"

Pepin took him to one side. "He's very badly burned, sir," he said in a whisper.

"I survived burns once," said Vader. "And so will he." He leaned over Lekauf and stared into his face, seeing a fraction of the image that

Palpatine must once have seen of him. "You are too loyal for your own good, Lieutenant."

"That's my job, my Lord."

He might have been attempting humor. Judging by the expressions on the faces of the clones he had trained, he had created that same sense of allegiance in them. They had almost formed a defensive line around him. Nele handed Pepin a succession of bacta-soaked swabs.

"You never disappoint me," said Vader. Lekauf, face and hands swathed in wet gauze, blinked a few times. "Your apology was premature."

Lekauf would recover in time, and he might even train men again. But he would now be the progenitor of a clone battalion; his men had defeated Dark Jedi and, even if assisted by Vader, they had still given a good account of themselves.

Lekauf could be proud. And at least he would see his family again. Scarred or not, he had certain things that others—even Vader—might envy.

IMPERIAL PALACE, CORUSCANT: TWO DAYS LATER.

"How is your lieutenant?" asked the Emperor.

Vader studied the ranks of the 501st Legion from the window overlooking the parade ground. There was a certain comfort in knowing that for most of them—those whose whole life was soldiering and who had no ambitions beyond that—life was a straightforward process of doing their job with no thought of who they might oust or assassinate or outmaneuver.

"He's improving, master."

"Loyalty is a fine quality."

"I have asked Arkanian Micro to produce a battalion of Lekauf clones. I think they have proved themselves."

"Yes." Palpatine wandered across to the window to stand beside Vader as if curious about whatever had caught his attention. "Cancel the orders for the Cuis clones. For the time being."

I already have. "It will be done, my master."

"You are still troubled. I feel it."

Vader decided to risk the question that was on his mind. Palpatine knew it was there anyway. The only issue was whether Vader would ask it.

"Master, was Sheyvan's rebellion designed to test me?"

Palpatine turned his head sharply. The cowl shadowed his eyes: Once his face had seemed kindly to Vader. "If it was a test, Lord Vader, it was for the clones, not for you. And if it was, then the Lekauf batch proved the most worthy."

So that was your motive. With a little mental manipulation to turn Sheyvan's resentment into hatred. And what a poor reward for Lekauf.

Vader curbed his anger simply to deny his master the taste of victory. "A real crisis shows what a man is made from." "I have not ruled out more Cuis clones, of course."

sparring; the Emperor neither lied nor told the truth. Now it had ceased to be a challenge, and Vader longed for a simpler relationship. There was a very fine line between strengthening a man through constant challenge and turning him into an enemy.

"Perhaps the solution to having to watch your back is to make your enemy watch theirs instead," said Vader.

I will come for you one day.

"Or have others want to watch it for you," said Palpatine and turned to leave his apprentice alone in the anteroom.

Vader now knew there were no Force users, dark or otherwise, who he could wholly trust, and he trusted his own master least of all. Vader had no loyalties beyond himself—except for his interest in the wellbeing of the likes of Lekauf, men with no extraordinary gifts or powers whatsoever.

How far ahead do you plan your little games? You waited decades to defeat the Jedi. You used trillions of lives to achieve it. Will I ever be able to think enough steps ahead of you?

"I feel Dark Jedi are not suitable for the Imperial Army."

"With the right commander they would be."

"And who would train them?"

"You, Lord Vader."

"I prefer ordinary soldiers. They don't covet power. I would spend all my time watching my back." "Indeed you would," said Palpatine.

It had been a game at first, an annoying one, but just verbal

Unless, of course, you counted simple honesty as a gift.

At that moment, he thought that it was the equal of any Force power. Yes, Vader preferred ordinary men made excellent by effort. The



part of him that was Anakin Skywalker remembered the few things he had struggled to achieve—love, excitement, freedom—and thought how much more they had thrilled him than his prodigious and easy powers.

He had been a man himself, once. Thinking of Lekauf, he wondered if he would ever choose to be one again.