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## Balance of Power

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### Part 1

It was dusk on Imperial Center when Lord Darth Vader's shuttle landed upon the spacious skyport two hundred meters from the palace. The Sith Lord noticed the spectacular beauty of the sunset as he strode from the now-still craft and sat down in the waiting landspeeder which would whisk him into his Emperor's anticipatory presence. It was the height of summer in the capital, and as the blood-red sun slipped past the western horizon, the white-marbled columns of the palace and the government buildings were temporarily suffused in lovely rose light. The golden cupolas of the Treasury and Justice buildings were nearly blinding in their brilliance, and Vader could not gaze at them long.

For several minutes each evening, the city was thus transformed. So it was also at each dawn, the time when a young Anakin Skywalker had many years ago first looked upon the capital. Then the youth had been enchanted, admiring, and lustful all at once, as if the city had been a lonely, beautiful woman who was only waiting for him to arrive and make her complete. He had been power-hungry even then, but also incredibly innocent in his longing, Darth Vader now knew. Skywalker had seen only the splendor, and had not known of the corruption which lurked beneath the surface.

He had soon learned it, however, for Palpatine had already become his mentor, and wasted no time in showing the youth the poverty, bribery, and senatorial privilege and dishonesty which lived within the fair city. Republican Center had contained in microcosm all the problems which had plagued the last days of the Old Republic. Skywalker, who had himself lived in poverty, had seen his early naive idealism shattered, for he had been one of the Jedi Knights dedicated to preserving the charade, the lie.

As Darth Vader, the young man had just as idealistically, but with a great deal more anger and violence, devoted himself to restoring the galaxy's true promise. He'd wanted the occasionally ethereal beauty of Center to become reliable symbolism. Still a knight at heart even though now the dark prince, he had thought to rescue the maiden who had so thoroughly captured his affections. He had not succeeded, and that realization had cost him a great deal, probably more than even he knew. Republican corruption had only been replaced by Imperial corruption. The methods, means, and ends were now different, of course, but the fact still remained: his gorgeous city was an exquisite, expensive whore.

That was why Vader only spared the beauty before him a passing glance as the 'speeder took him to the palace. He had with him a transcript of the previous day's Senate hearing on Zanett -- a hearing at which he had delivered the keynote speech. He knew the media had carried highlights of the hearing on all the news broadcasts, but he brought the entire transcript with him for the Emperor's perusal. Vader flipped through the pages he held as he was driven to the palace, and ignored the way the structures around him offered their mocking, undeniable beauty to him and to all others who would look and be seduced. His driver may have thought him immune to it, cold or jaded. Vader was none of these; he was only concentrating on the task before him in order to avoid renewed melancholy.

Dusks and dawns were the worst times for him here, and he must not let himself be affected by it. If the Emperor were to sense it, the ruler would certainly not understand. That had been an even worse realization for the Dark Lord. For if the city were a whore, then who were her pimps? Had not he, more than most, benefitted from her services? Was he not merely jealous that he had not yet been able to ravish her himself, that he could not yet own her completely? No matter. He should stop trying to tread the impossibly thin line between virtue and vice

and merely reconcile himself to the knowledge that one day he and Center would make one another very happy.

Vader leaned his head back against the high upholstered seat and meditated on that future vision. Even so, he felt no more contented than before. He wished he had chosen a term other than 'happy' to describe his anticipated destiny. He wasn't certain what the word meant. As long as he could remember, he had comforted himself by thinking of deferred joy, suffering the journey for the sake of the destination. He had always envisioned some glorious future he never completely reached. Was that the city's fault? Hardly. She had not asked to be made the symbol of his eventual happiness, just as she had not asked to be made into a whore.

Suddenly the Dark Lord was heartily weary of his metaphor. He wanted to forget it, and to exorcise his lyrical and imaginative tendencies. He was tired of thinking at all, in fact. Perhaps that was the problem; he was tired. It had been a gruelling last several days... last several years, to be quite honest. With the war always escalating, there seemed to be little time for reflection, much less true meditation. When he did find them, it was usually at the expense of sleep, or of peace of mind.

Closing his eyes, he abandoned the transcript and laid it in his lap. The driver obviously took this as a cue. The young man sighed contentedly and asked, "Isn't the city beautiful tonight, my Lord?"

So much for trying to forget it. "I hadn't noticed, Lieutenant," the Dark Lord replied coldly. "Keep your eyes on the road."

Governor Akim Tarkin, head of the Lothyx planetary system, drummed his fingers in nervous annoyance on the chair's plush velvet arm. He didn't notice this, as he was preoccupied with wondering whether he dared pour himself a glass of wine from the Emperor's sideboard. He knew he should probably ask permission first, but didn't trust his voice not to reveal how angry and uneasy he was.

These thoughts were Tarkin's, but the Emperor could read them clearly, as he usually could with little effort. Part of this was due to the governor's many years of service to him, and the rest from the fact that Tarkin could not use the Force to shield his thoughts -- or to do anything at all, for that matter. Despite Tarkin's limitations, however, the man was immensely valuable to the galactic ruler, and had been one of his aides before Palpatine had even been elected president of the Old Republic. Tarkin was utterly without scruples, as was he; the main difference was that the governor was less able or willing to hide that fact. Cunning in many ways, Akim was nonetheless all-too-transparent in others.

Letting an amused half-smile cross his lips, the Emperor turned from the window out of which he'd been gazing and addressed his companion. "It is evening, Akim. If you want a drink, then by all means, indulge yourself."

Tarkin leapt gratefully for the decanter. "This whole affair with Governor Hardren has upset you unnecessarily," the ruler stated coolly, finally voicing the topic Tarkin had tensely avoided. The Emperor had not once believed Akim had come to the palace tonight for a purely social call.

The aide's eyes widened for a moment in slight surprise and then narrowed in skepticism. "Has it?" he asked doubtfully. He had long ago been allowed to abandon titles when speaking privately with the Emperor. "I think Vader would disagree with that opinion."

"Letting the Senate censure Hardren was my decision, Akim. The Bexoran massacre of last week was the final folly in a long line of them. Hardren lost control, and the whole planet is now in revolt. I simply refused any longer to prop up that idiot's failed regime."

"Fine, but Vader's speech made the decision sound like some damned moral crusade." The thin-faced governor rolled his eyes in disgust.

"It is, for him." Palpatine answered simply, giving his aide another small smile.

Tarkin snorted in inelegant laughter. "Please! You know how many times I've seen your Dark Lord in action. I'm supposed to believe that, even after the Purge of the Jedi?"

"That was also his moral crusade."

"Of course." Tarkin shook his head in disbelieving sarcasm.

"It was, friend. Remember? If you don't, I suggest you take a look at the general history texts again."

"I know the official line; we all wrote it together. Surely Vader hasn't come to believe it now?"

"He never believed anything else," Palpatine replied softly.

Tarkin stared at the ruler in amazement and quickly poured himself another brandy. The decanter chimed against the rim of the glass several times, and Palpatine saw that his aide's hands were shaking. "Does idealism so shock you?" he asked quietly. "Surely you've at least ascertained that Vader is an idealist?" The Emperor's tone held gentle disparagement.

"I've never thought of him that way," the governor admitted. "He certainly wouldn't."

"Ah," Palpatine smiled. "But to me, that is the source of his charm. Or rather, one of them."

"I had wondered."

The ruler's eyes narrowed dangerously. Tarkin had overstepped his bounds with that remark. "Tell me this, Akim," he murmured. "Could you have gone into the Senate yesterday and presented a speech which brought me a unanimous vote? Vader gained even Organa's approval. Could you have brought me that?"

"Organa and Vader have both wanted Hardren's demise for years. It's probably the only thing they have in common."

"Could you have done it?"

Tarkin's eyes fell. "Probably not," he admitted.

"No, and I knew that. Idealism carries a certain weight that no amount of coercion can supply."

"Particularly idealism backed up by the unspoken threat of coercion and violence," Tarkin realized aloud.

"Precisely. I am not even sure the threat went unspoken. Nor do I care. The point is that the hearing was tremendously successful."

"Yes, and that is what frightens the governors. Many of us thought Hardren was well within his rights. We all have to deal with unrest, but now our hands are tied as to the means. How far can we go before we are hauled up in front of the Senate for scrutiny? How much autonomy are we actually allowed? With all due respect, this is appalling. There is no precedent for --"

"There is now, Governor." Tarkin and the Emperor turned to see Vader standing in the doorway.

"Your Highness." Vader bowed. "The guards allowed me to enter. Should I --"

"They did so on my orders. Come in, my friend."

The Dark Lord entered the sitting room of the Emperor's chambers and handed Palpatine the transcript he'd carried in with him.

"Ah, very good," the ruler nodded, and handed the papers in turn to Tarkin. "Read this, Akim, and some of your many questions may be answered." Palpatine then stepped away from his aide and motioned to Vader, who followed him into the adjoining bedroom, where they could speak privately. The door slid shut behind them.

"Tarkin is quite distraught," the ruler observed.

"So I gathered, Master." Vader sighed slightly. "I made it very clear in my speech that we were condemning Hardren's abuses, not attacking gubernatorial powers or prestige."

"Yes. I heard the speech as you delivered it. You said exactly what I wanted you to, and with great elegance."

"Thank you."

"Nevertheless, the governors are tense. They are jealous of your power and fearful for their own. They think you poisoned me against Hardren; or, at least, Tarkin does."

Vader was plainly startled. "Master," he said slowly, shaking his head, "Hardren blatantly killed millions, not asking permission first or offering excuses afterward. That was criminal, idiotic, and treasonous. Should we provide the Rebels with their own accusations to use against us? He had to be stopped."

"My friend," Palpatine said, not unkindly, "the passion you have just displayed is precisely what so terrifies Tarkin."

"Hardren is still alive. I think we showed a great deal of restraint."

"You know as well as I do that Hardren is doomed. He is surrounded in his fortress by the furious mob, which now knows we will not retaliate if they seize him."

"It still might not be enough," the Sith said quietly.

"I know you want to go to Bexor and capture Hardren. We've discussed this before also. I understand your reasons, Vader, but you must understand mine. If Akim and the other governors are this worried now, think what they would be if I allowed you to execute Hardren yourself."

"They might be more inclined to behave."

"Or to rebel, if only covertly. We cannot afford that, and certainly not until our new battle station is operational. That will be several months from now, and until then we must tread lightly where the governors are concerned."

"I understand, Master."

"Good." Palpatine sensed Vader's discouragement and continued, "I also want you to realize that my sympathies are with you in this. Men like Hardren only reflect badly on the Empire you've labored so ceaselessly to help me build." Vader looked at him in gratitude, and Palpatine was pleased. He would reap the rewards of such devotion, and that was why he was

Careful to replenish it from time to time. Vader had begun to waver in his absolute reverence of late, but there was no need for Palpatine to use discipline yet if rewards would bolster the Sith's loyalties just as nicely. Vader had always responded better to positive incentives, anyway.

"Thank you," the Sith replied again with genuine contentment, and the Emperor was doubly pleased with his own intuitiveness.

Ignoring the distaste he normally felt upon making physical contact with anyone, the ruler smiled at his pupil and touched him on the arm. He was surprised at the weariness he sensed in the Dark Lord; he often forgot that Vader was no longer twenty-five years old. By contrast, his own energies only grew as time elapsed; but then, there was a direct connection between Vader's occasional fatigue and his own stamina and power. He'd known of it for years. He demanded a great deal, just as Vader nearly always delivered, but he was not so foolish as to ask too much.

"Tarkin needs reassurance that you are not his enemy," he said aloud.

"He's very insecure," Vader murmured.

"The word you were looking for, my diplomatic friend," Palpatine chuckled, "is paranoid."

"What should I do?" the Dark Lord asked with a tired shrug.

"He came here today to invite me to his home for the Winter Festival," the ruler improvised.

"I'm certain that was not his only reason."

"I am certain you are correct. However, I have accepted the offer, both because Tarkin will be mollified and because the summer heat here is so oppressive. There are no palace functions scheduled for the next few days, so the timing is convenient."

"I see," Vader replied, and thought he understood. "Do you need me to remain here?"

"No, I want you to come with me."

Vader stared at him in surprise.



"Akim's worries will be allayed by the gesture. I know you don't like him, but you'll only need to put in a few token appearances. The rest of the time shall be your own, to meditate, rest, converse with me, do whatever you like."

The Sith Lord nodded his assent. Although Palpatine had phrased it as such, it had not really been a request.

"Tarkin will be pleased," the ruler replied. "He wanted to invite you personally, but was afraid you would decline. I'll go notify him of your decision. Perhaps you should rest in here until I return, and then you can give me the details of the Senate hearing when you are more refreshed. As always, my friend, your welfare is my primary concern." As the door slid shut behind the Emperor, Vader could not see him smiling.

Palpatine entered the parlor again to find Tarkin with the transcript on his lap, staring off into the distance, clearly lost in thought. "Akim," the ruler said quietly, hiding his satisfaction at his manipulation of Vader, "I apologize for the delay. I trust you had time to read the report?"

"Yes," the governor replied, "but I confess my fears are not completely diminished. Little mention is made of what will happen to Governor Hardren now."

"Ex-Governor Hardren," Palpatine corrected smoothly, a bit irritated at his aide's continued nervousness. "I thought Vader made that quite clear in the speech. We shall not rescue Hardren from the follies he himself has wrought."

"What if his people capture him?"

"Then he shall most probably be killed. If the Bexorans imprison him instead of ripping him apart, then the Empire will press for his extradition and trial. You know, Vader wants Hardren executed," the ruler pointed out. "He wants it very badly. I have refused to send him to Bexor, partially out of consideration for gubernatorial sensitivity on this issue. However, if the Bexorans seize Hardren and do not rend him into bits, why should I not let Vader have his way? You have to realize, Akim, that I am in a very sensitive position here,

caught between my Dark Lord and my governors. I do not want to alienate either camp, for I see both points of view quite clearly." Palpatine projected a reluctant tone into his voice so that he sounded simultaneously pressured and yet generously hesitant to reveal it.

Guiltily, the aide dropped his gaze. The ruler could feel the man's warring senses of culpability and of loyal outrage. Both were expressed in his next words: "I apologize if I have seemed too aggressive or selfish in this. However, Vader has done his part to put you in that position also. He has no business pushing you into making a choice when that prerogative is yours alone!" Tarkin's voice grew louder with each sentence; the man was now filled with protective loyalty and jealous resentment.

"Keep your voice down, Akim," Palpatine chided gently. "Now you see why I am hoping Hardren will be seized and executed by his own people. In the long run, it would be better for relations within top Imperial ranks. That way some sort of balance would be maintained; Vader could not execute Hardren, and the governors could not save his life."

"I understand. Please don't think I want to pressure you in regard to all this."

The Emperor nearly laughed aloud; he knew damned well that was the exact reason Tarkin had come to Center in the first place. Furthermore, the ambitious, jealous aide had hoped to make the Sith Lord seem the unreasonable party in the whole debate over Hardren's fate. Tarkin's 'admission' of reluctance to apply pressure had been intended to imply that Vader by contrast felt no such compunctions. Palpatine knew both men intimately, knew how their minds worked, and knew how very much mistaken about Vader's motives his aide was. If anything, Tarkin was more inclined to selfishness and to trying to manipulate the ruler in subtle ways. What Akim did not realize was that Palpatine would not let himself be manipulated by anyone.

"I think Vader is dangerous to you, Your Highness," the governor stated gravely, obviously using the title to seem more impartial and selfless in his reasons for saying this. Palpatine smiled enigmatically: Akim was so transparent.

"You overexaggerate," the ruler replied firmly. The idea was ludicrous; Vader was completely his. If he needed any proof

of that (which he did not), he only had to remember how grateful the Dark Lord had been just a moment ago for the merest show of his consideration and regard. Nevertheless, he bit back the sharp retorts he wanted to utter, because he knew his goals would be better served by indicating no signs of favoritism for Vader. Just as he had criticized Tarkin to the Sith Lord, it was time now to do the reverse.

"But," he continued, "I do thank you for your concern on my behalf. Vader is not dangerous to me personally, but he could be to the Empire you have worked so long to help me build, Akim. You have to remember that in his pursuit of the Rebellion, he has been aboard EXECUTOR most of the time, apart from us and the Court. He is, I think, overly concerned that you have my ear and regard, more than he does, and that you want him to be excluded."

The Emperor chuckled silently to himself as the governor paled slightly. He knew that was precisely what Tarkin wanted. "It is ludicrous, to be sure," the ruler sighed, "But then, Vader's isolation tends to make him a bit paranoid, I'm afraid."

"I have nothing against him personally," Tarkin lied, contradicting his earlier words. Palpatine did not point this out, but merely offered another enigmatic smile.

"Perhaps you should make some sort of gesture of good will..." the ruler stated tentatively, as if he had just thought of the idea.

His aide cleared his throat, obviously uncomfortable at the prospect, but wise enough to remain silent. Palpatine pretended to ponder, and then finally said, "Why not invite him to your estate for the Winter Festival?"

Tarkin started. "I... of course I would, but it begins tomorrow."

"Akim, I can clear his schedule with no problem," Palpatine reminded gently, "and you certainly have room for one more guest."

"Yes, I suppose it would work," the governor assented slowly, clearly still reeling in shock and dread at the very idea.

"This means a great deal to me," Palpatine stated warmly. "A large amount of tension may be alleviated by this. I do not ask for a mutual understanding, but only peaceful coexistence between the two of you. You are both very important to me and the Empire."

Tarkin bowed at the praise and then nodded. "I hope it won't be too strained," he worried aloud.

"Would it help matters any if I went along?" the ruler then asked solicitously.

"Your Majesty, I would be most grateful to offer you my hospitality!" Tarkin blurted in amazement, clearly elated and relieved at the same time. He was about to score the social coup of the season, and had not been shown such favor in a long while.

Palpatine was immensely pleased with himself. His top two retainers would have to peacefully coexist, and he would be there to watch and control the process, making absolutely sure that some amount of tension still remained, for he would not risk the pair's forming any sort of real sympathy or practical alliance with one another. For the time being he needed Tarkin and Vader both, their skills and separate talents and complete loyalty to him. They would not sunder the Empire or distress him by fighting it out between them, but neither would they grow to resent him for the dissatisfactions and jealousies they would undoubtedly continue to feel. How could they when he was so sincerely playing the role of mediator to both and protector of each? It was an exquisitely fine line he had to walk, but he was confident he could do it with impunity. He knew them both completely, after all.

He said aloud, "Thank you, Akim. We shall arrive tomorrow afternoon. Do you have additional preparations to make for the festival?"

"Yes. I'll have two more rooms readied and the cooks will..." He stopped suddenly and then asked, "What about Vader? He can't eat with the rest of us, obviously."

This was perfect; he could keep his promises to the Sith Lord after all. "I think Vader will prefer to remain alone a great deal of the time. He is an intensely private individual."

Tarkin, a truly social creature, only shook his head at this. "He won't feel ignored?"

"No. I shall make it a point to dine with him, when I am not doing so with you, of course. It will work out, Akim. I want to thank you again for your generosity. When I first chose you for my aide, I had little idea how invaluable your support would be to me these many productive years."

"Thank you," Tarkin fawned, arrogant pride filling him completely. There was gloating there too, in the knowledge that he had served Palpatine longer than Vader had.

"Not at all. I shall discuss this Hardren issue more with Lord Vader now, and make it clear that I am opposed to any further action. Just as I am convinced Vader should believe you proffered the invitation to your home, I also know he should think my private opinions about Hardren's fate are in no way linked to gubernatorial interests in the matter. You see," he smiled sadly, "Vader's idealism and insecurities are such that I occasionally have to be dishonest with him in a way I do not with you. It is for his own sake, you understand, but I am thankful that I have never once had to lie or dissemble to you."

"I'm thankful for that too," Tarkin smiled, convinced now that he was the favored party.

"Vader must never know that," Palpatine reiterated. "He is, paradoxically, quite fragile, in a way you and I are not."

"I understand," the aide replied, now clearly feeling privileged to be in on Palpatine's vital secret. "I will do all I can to protect him."

"Good," the Emperor smiled, thinking: and I will protect him at all costs from you should that be necessary, while you think you are protecting the Empire from his shortcomings. The Emperor knew that in the long run he would be the person most defended. He would have Tarkin and Vader showing respect to one another, while each believed himself the favored, wholler being. There would be balance and order, and the truest win would be his, because he was inventing the game itself. Vader and Tarkin were vital players in it, but he knew what the outcome would be. After all the important moves had been made, and the drama fully played out, the battles completed and the victory won, in the end there would remain only pawns and king.

When the Imperial shuttle carrying the Emperor and the Sith Lord set down in the vast capital of Lothyyx City, a processionary cavalcade of vehicles was already there to meet them. Vader noticed that the ruler was a trifle amused at all the pomp and circumstance Tarkin had arranged for their arrival. The Dark Lord was merely scornful at the vain, ostentatious display.

This emotion only intensified as the heated, covered landspeeder in which they rode skimmed serenely over the capital's thoroughfares, their retinue of vehicles stretching hundreds of meters behind them. Lothyyx City -- technically renamed Tarkenian the previous year, but Vader loathed acknowledging that fact -- was festooned with ribbons and garlands and small glowing lights for the Winter Festival. It would have been enchanting to behold so long as one was blithely unaware of the human misery which lurked inside the capital's infamous slums. Having grown up in a slum himself, the Sith Lord was unable to forget their presence in this city.

Tarkin's gubernatorial privilege and sovereignty made galactic economic reform plans inapplicable to Lothyyx. The same was true for Bexor, where Vader's nemesis Hardren had ruled for over twenty years, and the same state of affairs generally held on nearly every system which had absolutist Imperial governors. Reforms were usually given lip service, and then were simply not enforced. Those worlds constituted over two-thirds of the galaxy now, and were deemed necessary to ensure direct Imperial control over as many systems as possible.

Palpatine had granted governorships to his powerful supporters and to victorious officers over the years as an incentive to retain their complete loyalties and thus gain greater hegemony over the galaxy.

Lately, he had even sold a few governorships to potent magnates, a decision that had literally made Vader physically ill. Learning of this innovative policy designed to bring in quick massive infusions of credits to help finance the war, the Sith Lord had retired to his meditation chamber on Executor with the most vicious headache he'd had in his life. Two days later he had emerged, still a bit weak, to ask Palpatine personally about the new decision. It was so unusual for him to subject

himself unbidden to palace ritual that Palpatine had listened, stunned and uncharacteristically subdued, to Vader's quiet criticisms of this venal practice.

On the day governorships were sold to the highest bidders, the Sith Lord had reasoned, planets and people became little more than property. The men with the staggering wealth that enabled them to make such a gigantic purchase naturally found the very idea of economic reform sheer anathema to their own ideologies and interests. Moreover, Vader had continued, his deep voice softly desperate, explaining that when offices themselves were owned, the possessors of these governorships could leave them to their heirs or might even try to sell them. Vader had concluded his private speech to the Emperor by saying that he had never thought the Empire would tolerate the same sort of dynastic oligarchies which had constituted the final corrupt days of the Republic's elites. That was what he had fought against, one of the main reasons he'd supported Palpatine long ago. Now that the Empire was not only tolerating the resurgence of control by virtue of sheer wealth, but was actually sanctioning it, he was no longer able to remain silent. His final exhausted words to the Emperor on the matter basically were: the sale of offices goes, or I do.

Shocked, absolutely stunned at the uncharacteristic passion and pain emanating from his Dark Lord, who he'd believed had become nearly as constant and cold as the stars, Palpatine had relented. Vader knew the ruler had been reminded of the young idealist he had once known and had never expected to see resurface. It was probably this wonder more than anything else, and Palpatine's own real lack of bargaining power, that had made the ruler agree. Vader had known his continuing service was more than worth the credits lost by abandoning the reckless policy. That had been the first and last time in the past decade that the Sith Lord had displayed such willfulness to his master -- perhaps another reason Palpatine had tolerated it. The Emperor was shrewd enough to know when to bend, Vader knew. He always weighed both costs and benefits.

Vader realized all this, his shields raised lest his master sense it, as the ruler and Sith Lord -- accompanied by two Imperial guards -- rode from the city to Tarkin's massive country estate. The Dark Lord wondered what his master hoped to gain from his attendance at this festival. He knew Palpatine was quite aware of the mutual antipathy the Dark Lord and aide shared, and he knew that the ruler wanted it contained and

restricted. What he had never understood, however, was why Palpatine valued Tarkin so much in the first place. The governor was intelligent and shrewd, but he was also paranoid, jumpy, and abrasive. He was a favorite propaganda target of the Rebellion, and also despised by many Imperials. Vader could not help but wonder what services the man provided to Palpatine that he was unaware of. The thought made him highly uncomfortable.

There was also something bizarre in the way the governor behaved toward him, nearly as if he considered Vader an interloper... yes, that was precisely it. Tarkin seemed to think that the Dark Lord had appeared out of nowhere, or out of some vile and secretive background, to take a high position at Palpatine's side. But that was ridiculous, considering that, like Tarkin, Anakin Skywalker had served Palpatine before the Empire had even been established. Tarkin hardly had the monopoly on being one of the ruler's original supporters, but he acted as if he did. Oh well. Vader sighed to himself and attributed the governor's irrational behavior to jealousy.

A few moments later, they had reached Tarkin's manor. Ostentatious at best, the mansion was now gaudy in commemoration of the festival, lit from end to end and each window, door, tree and shrub outlined with garish twinkling lights of all hues. Vader mentally cringed to think of the power cost, and then cringed again to think that the Treasury was in effect picking up the bill. Tarkin's salary was one of the absolute highest in the Empire, and Vader had no doubt that more of it was spent in socializing than in any useful investment.

Even if the opposite had been true, he would not have been much appeased; Tarkin's business dealings were usually shady at best. Vader was no saint, and did not consider himself one, but he drew the line at slaving, arms running, and investing in the narcotics trades. There had long been sketchy evidence and vague rumors which indicated that the governor did not draw the same line, laws or no laws. Tarkin clearly believed that his proximity to the Emperor placed him above Imperial law, and had said nearly as much in the Dark Lord's presence upon more than one occasion.

What set Tarkin apart from most other grasping officials and businessmen-criminals was his carefully constructed veneer of civility and philanthropism. Evidence of this strategy met the Sith Lord's eyes everywhere he turned, both outside and in the manor house. From the healthy, articulate male servants who



opened the landspeeder's doors for him and the Emperor; to the pleasant, lovely and richly gowned maids who seemed privileged to curtsy deeply and escort them to chairs; to the framed awards and certificates pronouncing Tarkin's memberships in various academic and charitable organizations, it was obvious that Akim Tarkin spared nothing in his attempts to appear generous, kind, and eminently respectable. Vader's own cynicism only redoubled, and he knew he would have to put on pleasantness as a role for the next day or so, for goodwill would certainly elude him in reality.

Almost as soon as they had been shown into the parlor, Tarkin himself appeared, trotting in from the hallway, looking flushed and excited. "You're here!" he exclaimed, and then said, "Forgive me for not being in Tarkenia to meet you personally, but I needed to oversee some last-minute preparations."

Vader nodded in distant greeting and then looked to Palpatine, who replied, "There's no need to apologize, Akim. We had a very pleasant journey here." The ruler then praised, "I'd nearly forgotten how lovely your home is."

"Thank you, Your Highness. Lord Vader, this is your first time here, isn't it?" Tarkin asked expectantly, virtually daring Vader to pay him a compliment.

"Yes, Governor. Your home suits you perfectly."

The older aide beamed again, choosing to accept the words as flattery. "It is the place I'd always dreamed of as a boy. I'm certain you understand, my Lord. You have a magnificent estate yourself, from what I hear."

Vader was tempted to say that as a boy, he had dreamed of having a roof over his head, period. Instead, he curbed his acidity and replied to the unsubtle hint, "Actually, I do very little entertaining."

"Why is that?" Tarkin had just been presented with the unfathomable.

"Lord Vader is seldom there, Akim," Palpatine explained, saving the Dark Lord the necessity of making either an improvised or an antisocial reply. "He's almost always aboard Executor or with me at Center."

"Well, I must admit that this is my favorite place in all the galaxy. Besides the palace, of course. Now that I have the two of you here, my contentment is absolute," Tarkin fawned. Palpatine smiled. Vader had to fight the urge to laugh.

"When do your other guests arrive?" the ruler asked.

"Merriban and his wife are finishing up shopping in the city," Tarkin answered, referring to his brother, the planet's lieutenant-governor. "They'll join us when they've finished. My cabinet members and other government guests will arrive around 19:00. Dinner is scheduled at 20:30. After that there will be games and caroling, and some will leave for the religious services around midnight or so. The rest will depart whenever they retire; some may decide to spend the night."

"It sounds delightful," Palpatine said. "How many do you expect?"

"I've invited fifty, although I don't know how many will bring their wives." Tarkin sighed. "Female companionship is so very important to those of us who usually move about in male circles. It will be a great treat to have some ladies here. My own wife will enjoy their company very much."

"How is Lady Tarkin?" Vader asked quietly. The few occasions he'd met the woman, he was struck by her genuine warmth, and thus sympathetic that she had such a bastard for a husband.

A fleeting shadow crossed the governor's features for a moment, and his eyes narrowed as he looked at Vader closely. The Sith Lord was taken aback; there was genuine suspicion there suddenly, and Vader had no idea why.

After a few seconds, Tarkin relaxed. "She's fine," he murmured, and then turned to the Emperor. "Since we still have several hours until the guests arrive, would you like to see the rest of my estate? I know you've seen most of it, Your Highness, but I've made some innovations recently, and I know Lord Vader has never been here until today."

"That would be pleasant," Palpatine agreed affably, and Vader knew he would not be permitted yet to retire to his designated rooms for seclusion.

"Good," the senior aide beamed. "Since it is a mild afternoon for this time of year, I suggest we begin with the outer grounds. It's supposed to turn colder later today, and if we're careful, we can avoid being out in it."

The temperature had slowly but steadily begun dropping by the time Tarkin, Palpatine and Vader completed the tour and returned indoors, where there were tea and pastries waiting for the two older men.

"How thoughtful of you, Akim," the Emperor murmured as he sat down near the roaring fireplace and his aide handed him a steaming cup. "I'm quite impressed with the innovations you've made on the estate. The gardens are particularly charming." The ruler sensed the tension that had been emanating from Vader for the past half hour, and was attempting to steer conversation clear of its cause. Truthfully, gardens bored him to distraction.

"Thank you. My wife is especially fond of them. What did you think of my growing vexin enterprise? It promises to become quite lucrative eventually -- both socially and financially." Tarkin's eyes glittered excitedly, as they had done when he'd proudly displayed the caged animals to the ruler and Sith Lord.

"Lord Vader has extensive gardens at his estate," Palpatine said quietly, sipping his tea and pointedly ignoring his aide's last question. Really, the ruler mused, Tarkin could be so blind. Palpatine had felt Vader stiffen beside him the moment the governor had taken them to the pens of russet-furred wild canines. He had not needed to see Vader's offense to know it existed, but apparently Tarkin had not even noticed the visual clues. Furthermore, Tarkin was obviously still blithely unaware of the Sith Lord's derisive disapproval, despite the Emperor's gentle hints, for he continued to discuss the vexin.

"Do you indulge in hunting at your estate?" Tarkin asked courteously of the Dark Lord.

"As I said, Governor, I do little entertaining, and seldom have guests of any kind."

"Ah, but what of recreational pleasure? My Lord, I should think you would excel at such sportsmanship!"

Palpatine rolled his eyes in private exasperation and absently held his hands out to the fireplace, awaiting Vader's reply and ready to lessen its impact should it prove too scathing. Tarkin, however, deserved whatever Vader gave him, if only because of the aide's sheer insensitivity. Perhaps Tarkin would learn intuition and tact from this.

Vader was graciously controlled in his reply. "Thank you for the compliment, but I participate quite enough in the hunt of Alliance members to suit my predatory tastes." It was an elegant answer, and also one which hinted that Vader found Tarkin's pastime rather petty when compared with his own activities. Palpatine smiled in appreciation and picked up his teacup again. He nearly dropped it when Tarkin revealed that he too had detected Vader's subtle insult and had not appreciated it:

"I realize that you find my pastime distasteful, my Lord, and perhaps a bit foolish. However, I would rather hunt vexin than engage in the widespread and regular murder of sentient beings."

"Tarkin," Palpatine interjected smoothly, "Vader is a warrior, and what he does is on my orders, remember?" His voice was sweet, but the aide nevertheless flushed slightly at the reprimand.

"Forgive me, Lord Vader," Tarkin murmured. "I forgot myself for a moment."

"Did you?" Vader asked coolly. "Governor, I was not offended, since I care very little about your moral opinion of me. My only suggestion is that you analyze your motives carefully. Is it more rewarding to hunt beasts because they are only beasts, or because they cannot fight back in any effective way? Your excitement and your safety margin are both well-ensured when vexin are the prey. War is a bit different."

"Don't judge me. I have a military background myself. You're not the only 'hero of the Empire', you know."

"Akim, calm down," Palpatine advised. "Lord Vader was not maligning your reputation. Were you, my Lord?"

"Certainly not. I was only posing a philosophical question." The ruler nodded in satisfaction. He sensed that Tarkin felt a bit humiliated, wondering whether he had just overreacted. A little humility would do the man some good; Akim should remember his place. Vader, on the other hand, was holding himself remarkably well in check, considering the absolute loathing for the governor that Palpatine sensed welling up inside the Sith Lord. However, the very reason Palpatine had come here, besides flattering Tarkin, was to diffuse such tense situations. The guests would arrive very soon, and it was time he granted Vader a reprieve. He would retain the delicate balance of his two most prized and differently volatile men. Tarkin would relax after several hours of socializing and as many alcoholic beverages, and Vader would in turn be less tense after a time of meditation and solitude. Later that night the three of them would gather together again for a more affable conversation. All in all, the Emperor was content with his relative success.

"Well," he said aloud, having drained his cup, "I think Lord Vader and I shall retire to our rooms now. I'll change into something a bit more formal. Lord Vader, you may join us at your leisure."

"Of course," Tarkin said, and the ruler stood. "I'll show you to your chambers." The relief both the governor and the Sith Lord felt was nearly palpable, and the air quickly cleared. Again the Emperor was pleased with his intuitiveness. So long as he managed things carefully, all would be well.

"And these rooms are yours, Lord Vader." The Sith Lord nodded and stepped aside so that his host could punch in the locking code that would unseal the door. As the governor stepped into the large sitting room and Vader followed, Tarkin moved to turn on the lights, and then closed the door behind them.

"You should have no security concerns, my Lord," Tarkin said. Vader nodded again. He could sense his master nearby, and he raised his Force-shields a bit. This was more in reaction to Tarkin, who although courteous, nevertheless radiated jealousy and wounded pride. When the aide had shown the Emperor to his rooms, Palpatine had merely instructed him to take Vader to his and had then shut the door to begin preparing for the evening's

festivities. Tarkin's immediate reaction to this brusqueness had been worry; now he was angry, and Vader sensed that he was the target of the aide's ill-will. He refused to concern himself with it; if this were the first time Palpatine had seemed a trifle cold to Tarkin, then the governor had been damned fortunate. Whatever the reason for the ruler's mood, the Sith Lord was not responsible for it.

"If you need anything else, please call my servants. The intercom is here, by the bureau."

"Very well." Vader glanced out the windows which looked down into the front lawn. He could see that guests were arriving, and that it had begun to snow. "Thank you," he said, and turned just in time for Tarkin to depart.

The Dark Lord sighed. It was obvious that he and the older man weren't going to reach much of a friendly rapport, now or in the near future. Before Vader had been able to express his appreciation for having been invited here and for the fact that his bedchamber was equipped with an atmospheric purifier, the governor had exited, clearly feeling slighted and resentful.

By contrast, Vader had started to relax ever since learning he was allowed several hours of solitude. As long as he didn't dwell on Tarkin's methods of acquiring the vast wealth he'd had constantly paraded before his eyes this day, and as long as he didn't think about the vexin, he'd be fine. It disturbed him more than was sensible to see creatures confined in cages -- something he never mentioned outright to anyone. Tarkin could not have known about that, but the aide should have abandoned the topic when Vader had obviously been less than enthusiastic about the subject. The Emperor had even been dropping every hint in the galaxy to get Tarkin to shut up.

Vader smiled to himself. Palpatine had been highly attentive to him the last few days, and he couldn't help but notice it. Limited as it was, the victory he had scored over Hardren had exhilarated the Dark Lord, as did renewed demonstrations of the Emperor's regard for him. If Tarkin's barely leashed hysteria of a moment ago was any indicator, the governor too seemed to think that right now the Sith Lord was firmly in the ruler's good graces. Perhaps Vader was once again on the ascendancy after the several years of relative political inertia he'd experienced after taking command of Executor and her formidable fleet. Nonetheless, he would not get his hopes up

just yet; the very fact that Palpatine had come to Tarkin's home for the Winter Festival was indicative of something -- Vader knew not what.

The Dark Lord glided over and closed the door which separated the bedchamber from the outer parlor. He activated the room's sterilization unit and moved to the window once more while he waited for the air to be purified. Snow continued falling from the now-dark skies, in large wet flakes that clung to the outside planes. He was grateful for the fireplace in the room, although the mansion was certainly heated by more efficient means in addition to the ancient hearths scattered liberally throughout the edifice.

Extravagance be damned, Vader went to the fireplace and added a couple of logs to it himself. He did not require servants to do the sort of work he'd performed as a child in the orphanage before he'd run away more than forty years ago. The crackling warmth he didn't really need was comforting; it added to his sense of well-being and safety, and reminded him that the days of poverty and cold were well behind him now.

Despite that, his past would forever prevent him from becoming a hedonist. If anything, his tastes tended toward the spare and ascetic. However, regardless of the trials, disappointments and unmitigated pain he'd unexpectedly had to endure, he had also undisputedly achieved the security from material deprivation he had once only dreamed of possessing. Knowing this made many other facets of his existence more endurable. His musings were interrupted as the sterilization unit chimed softly, and he was finally able to remove the helmet and mask which were necessary impediments to his physical freedom and comfort.

Carrying these with him, Vader moved over to the ancient large four-poster bed, a relic similar to the one in the seldomly occupied master bedroom of his own estate. Yes, for all Tarkin's exorable taste, this particular room was quite acceptable. Feeling self-indulgent, Vader used the Force to turn off the lights. He laid the ebon mask and helmet on the table next to the bed and poured a goblet of wine from the flagon which rested on the same wooden stand. He sipped the liquor slowly, and realized appreciatively that even the vintage was good.

Settling back against the high pillows and headboard, the Sith Lord felt himself relax further in the peaceful stillness of

the near-darkened room. He had needed this even more than he'd known, he now discovered, and was nearly grateful that Palpatine had wanted him to come here. Perhaps that was why the ruler had insisted upon it, after all. Whatever the reason, Vader would use it to his advantage.

He set the glass aside and shut his eyes. Rest and meditation would rebuild his inner reserves. These had been depleted the past several weeks by an arduous string of missions and Court activities, of which appearing before the Senate had only been the latest. With the replenishment of his mental and spiritual resources, there was nothing Darth Vader couldn't handle, including Akim Tarkin and all of the governor's foolish insecurities.

Tarkin stormed into his study, and slammed the doors loudly behind him. He strode angrily to his private bar and poured himself a generous brandy. Raising the crystal goblet to his thin lips, he drank hastily, feeling the welcome warmth of the liquor slide comfortingly down his throat. Gulping less greedily, he repeated the ritual and finally felt calm enough to sit down at his desk.

He had never hated anyone in his life as he did Darth Vader. He resented the Sith's elegant sarcasm, his obvious physical prowess, his relative youth, his influence with the Emperor, and above all else, his quiet confidence in those very attributes. Vader was arrogance personified, and even though Tarkin knew this, he still felt inadequate and threatened whenever he was near the Dark Lord. Blunt, slight, nearly seventy, and utterly reliant upon Palpatine whom he adored but who rarely seemed to notice, Akim Tarkin was assailed with doubts and fears beyond his position and wealth's power to mollify.

Yet he had once known complete happiness, he mused as he leaned back in his chair and brooded into the flames of the fireplace. That had been more than two decades ago, when he had been the uncontested favorite, the clear successor should Palpatine win the throne. Life had been sweet then, his confidence high.

Then had come Vader the interloper, who had used sorcery, murder, and gods alone knew what else to insinuate himself into



Palpatine's good graces. Tarkin had never understood the attraction. So the Jedi had needed eliminating.... why hadn't Vader's own death followed the Purge? The Force was all nonsense anyway; what mattered was sheer power politics, and Akim Tarkin had spent his entire life involved in that particular game. He was damned if he was going to cede the victory to some crippled, opportunistic mystic!

Tarkin snorted inelegantly. He had gone to a great deal of trouble to accommodate Vader here, and the man had been utterly oblivious to all the effort taken on his behalf. Even Palpatine had not mentioned the extra features with which Vader's rooms had been equipped, but had merely accepted them as if they had been Vader's due.

The Emperor changed when he was with the Sith Lord, becoming more distant and inconsiderate of others' needs. Tarkin always felt better when he was alone with the ruler, his oldest and dearest friend; then Palpatine remembered and mentioned all his years of selfless service. Idealist!! Tarkin laughed aloud again, thinking of Palpatine's label for the Dark Lord. The very notion was ludicrous, simply because no idealist would deliberately and systematically seek to poison the ruler's mind against him the way Vader had done.

He thought again of Hardren's political demise, and viciously hurled his glass against the wall. Vader knew Hardren had been one of his dearest friends and most valuable allies. Only a few weeks ago, Hardren had in fact been in the aide's home, and the two had hunted vexin together. Afterward they had gone into the capitol and visited the warehouses there... and now, Hardren was ruined. Tarkin did not miss the symbolism. If Vader had his way, he would be next, and the Dark Lord's power increased.

With each governor that was eliminated, more would be compelled out of fear to embrace Vader's stupid, self-serving economic reform programs -- the same programs which had so inconvenienced some of Tarkin's friends' financial dealings on nongubernatorial worlds. It was also Vader who had quickly put an end to the sale of gubernatorial positions throughout the galaxy. If that scheme had succeeded, Tarkin would have ruled several worlds at once through his carefully chosen proxies. Everywhere he turned to supplement his income or consolidate his power and prove his worth to the Emperor, Vader was there to

block his move. Obviously, the Sith had his insolent ambitions set upon the throne

The mere thought made Tarkin's blood run cold. Rule by Darth Vader would bring ruin to the galaxy, overturn the natural order of things. No doubt the Dark Lord would continue to persecute big business and aristocratic prestige in order to placate the vile mob. If that happened, Vader would be the galaxy's greatest demagogue and tyrant, catering to the propertyless and indigent, the same sort of lazy low-life who routinely trespassed in Tarkin's forests, dared poach his game, and then whined that they were only hungry. Vader, who was at heart the worst kind of elitist snob that existed, above having anyone call on him in his own home!! Even Palpatine did not have such pretensions.

Well, if the Emperor would not actively seek to disillusion Vader's selfish hopes of ruining the Empire for the capitalists and nobles best suited to manage it, then Tarkin would. He would destroy the Dark Lord utterly, and liberate the galaxy from Vader's corruptive influence. Palpatine would no longer have to tread the middle ground between sense and disaster, for there was really no choice to be made between the two. Tarkin would fight for his survival, his rights, his class, his position, and his ruler. In the end he would be fighting for his throne.

He knew where he would begin. Smiling now, he unlocked the top drawer of his massive and varnished wooden desk and extracted a computer disc. This had been given him only a few days ago, by the agent who had done some private research for him. Recognizing the need for professionalism and secrecy, Tarkin had made certain that the disc was the only one of its kind, and then had killed the agent, a former member of Intelligence who had long worked under his private orders.

Tarkin had not had much opportunity to view the data the precious square of software contained, but he knew it would help him just the same. The moment he'd started scrolling through the disc's information, he'd realized his good fortune. Vader prided himself so much on tracking Rebels; well, here was one instance in which he'd been bested in his own field of expertise. This disc proved the traitorous leanings of the renowned House of Alderaan. It would be Tarkin, not Vader, who sealed the fates of Bail Organa and his treasonous regime, and forever silenced Organa's little bitch of a daughter. He would strike a blow for Empire and against Vader simultaneously, by virtue of his

ingenuity and tenacity. In reward, the Emperor would put a stop to this governor-baiting once and for all.

Palpatine had asked him to quietly investigate every member, past and present, of the Organa household. The request had come about a year ago, and now Tarkin held the satisfying results. He would present this to the ruler today as his gift for the Winter Festival. He knew Vader would not be able to offer a gift nearly as spectacular, and he wanted Vader to witness the triumph. He wanted the Sith Lord humiliated, and on the decline in comparison to what would be Akim Tarkin's glorious rise. His morale thus boosted, Tarkin knew it would be easy to behave graciously to Vader for the rest of his stay. More triumphs would follow as the Emperor increasingly recognized his greater value. Out Vader, in Tarkin. That would be his greatest gift to the Emperor, to the Empire. It was his greatest gift to himself.

Still replete from the sumptuous feast of a few hours ago, and mellow from the wine he'd sparingly sipped all evening, Palpatine sat in one of the plush chairs before the fireplace and lazily watched Tarkin's guests making merry. After the ruler had made it clear that he was not holding court today and that he wanted his subjects to celebrate as though he were merely one guest among many, they had obeyed him, gradually losing their self-consciousness and restraint. Save for the respectful bows and greetings he received as men and women passed him, he was more or less forgotten, which was what he wished. He could relax this way, and watch his people reveal their values and personalities through gesture and expression, by what they said and didn't, through which jokes they did or did not respond to with genuine mirth. He had long been an exceptional judge of character, and he honed this skill on such occasions. Indeed, he was already making a small mental list of whom he should discreetly have investigated.

The ruler could feel Tarkin's satisfaction, radiating from nearly every corner of the room. The aide was clearly elated by the success of his celebration; playing the host was one of Akim's favorite activities. Palpatine watched as Tarkin flitted about, ordering his harried servants to keep glasses filled and the hearths blazing, and exchanging pleasantries with groups of conversants and card players. The governor treated every man

with apparent joviality, and was charming and witty with every woman present.

Only with his own wife did the aide seem merely polite and coolly gracious. Given the circumstances, that was to be expected. Tarkin had mostly married her to get an heir, and there had been no children born to them. Mutually civil to each other in public, in private the Tarkins were rarely together. From the little the governor had told him, Palpatine knew this was a mutual choice. As long as there was no scandal, he cared not in the least what Akim did in his personal life. The ruler had no sexual life of his own, and so worried little about others' sensual activities.

Nevertheless, of all the women present, Kathara Tarkin was the most interesting. She was soft-spoken and elegant, serene and intelligent. Her presence was commanding and her appearance striking. Yet, she was more than the sum of those qualities, and it was her mystery, rather than her outward attributes, which piqued Palpatine's interest. He sensed that deep within she was passionate, and possessed of a very strong will. Perhaps it was respect that made Tarkin not divorce her, or pride that he had captured such a prize.

Less than half Tarkin's age, Kathara was nevertheless the perfect hostess for his social gatherings. She was the quintessential political wife on the surface, but underneath was the unknown. From this distance, Palpatine could not read her emotions, for she did not usually broadcast to the extent her husband did. The ruler wanted to get inside her mind and decipher her; she was a puzzle to him, a not unenjoyable challenge. In fact, she reminded him of someone. She always had, and he had never quite been able to define the resemblance he sensed.

"It seems the party is going well," Tarkin announced happily at his elbow. Lost in thought, the ruler had not seen or heard the man's approach.

"Yes, Akim. A great success. I am glad I came," the Emperor smiled up at his aide.

"You know you're always welcome here," the governor replied, returning the smile, genuine warmth emanating from him. His eyes gleamed in the firelight, and Palpatine realized the man was slightly drunk, although not obviously so. "I've often wished

you were here, many times when you were too busy to accept my other invitations." The ruler heard faint recrimination in Tarkin's voice.

"Thank you," he replied a bit coolly.

"I'd do anything for you; you know that."

Palpatine nodded, sensing more to the aide's words than mere insecurity or desire to please. Uncomfortable beneath the intensity of the man's gaze and with the emotions underlining Tarkin's words, he replied, lightly, but meaning it, "I hope so, Akim. That is your duty to me, after all."

Tarkin flinched as if he'd been struck, but then forced another smile to his thin lips, saying, "I know, and am grateful to serve you in any capacity. I have a festival gift for you, and will bring it in after the guests leave."

"How pleasant," Palpatine murmured. "I think some of them are leaving now."

"Yes. The religious services in the city will begin very soon. Excuse me." Tarkin walked over to the people gathered in the hallway. Once again the Emperor was alone with his thoughts, which were mostly now of Akim. He nearly disliked Tarkin's fierce possessiveness of him, suddenly; it bordered on insolence. If the man wanted to control him, he would be sadly disappointed. Tarkin had never before been this insistent upon his loyalty, and what, by inference, the Emperor owed him in return for it.

As much as Palpatine disapproved of this, however, he understood the reason for it: Vader. The governor felt threatened by the Sith's influence and proximity more than Vader did of the aide's own favor and prestige. Sipping from his goblet, the Emperor pondered this, musing yet again on the thin line he had to tread between his two prized advisors. He was impatient with Tarkin's paranoia and constant need for assurance, and yet he knew how immense and valuable the governor's gratitude would be to him should he find a way of allaying Tarkin's doubts and fears.

Palpatine sighed. Akim had mentioned a gift, and he had not even thought of giving the aide a present. He should have; he was a guest in this house, after all, and not offering some reciprocal gesture would make Tarkin's gift seem nearly like

tribute. Given the governor's self-doubts, the man would almost certainly construe it as a deliberate slight if he did not receive something from Palpatine in return.

Then his paranoia and resentment would only increase, and Palpatine had come here in the first place partly to alleviate those very anxieties. He needed Tarkin and Vader to work together aboard the Death Star when it was completed, and that would be impossible if Tarkin was convinced of Vader's greater favor or of the ruler's lack of complete faith in him. Under such circumstances, Tarkin would act childishly, unreasonably; the man would be no fit commander of anything, not even his own senses, should he reach that conclusion.

Ah, and what about his Sith Lord? Palpatine doubted Vader would have difficulty commanding the space station on his own, but that would result in two potential dangers. The most serious problem with such a plan was that it called for Vader's frequent absence from Executor and the fleet. The fleet was critically important in tracking and combatting Rebels, as the Death Star would also be one day, and the ruler was convinced that Vader was really in his element there. Both fleet and Dark Lord might lose effectiveness by such a change. Moreover, Palpatine doubted that Vader would be satisfied with the battle station after the relative freedom of sailing through the stars.

The second potential danger was that Palpatine was not entirely certain it would be wise to grant Vader control over the greatest weapon the galaxy had yet seen. He did not mistrust Vader's current loyalties, but he saw no need to test them by providing a powerful incentive to the Dark Lord's not inconsiderable ambitions. Palpatine had not seduced Vader to the Dark Side and planned the Death Star weapon only to have to blast them both into atoms years later. No, the ruler needed Tarkin's suspicious influence aboard the space station with the Sith Lord.

However, if he subordinated Tarkin to Vader by making the governor the Sith's second in command, the aide would not be very useful. Tarkin's resentment and hatred would be so obvious that Vader might ignore him completely, if not murder him outright for treason. That would be understandable, but Palpatine needed Tarkin, and once again Vader would be left the Death Star, if such a situation were to arise.

That left the ruler with only one real choice, since Tarkin did not possess the navigational skills or battle expertise to

command the Death Star without Vader's assistance. That option was to put Tarkin in charge of the project and place Vader on board as his advisor. Even that arrangement might eventually cause problems. Vader would undoubtedly chafe under Tarkin's command. However, the Dark Lord was more mature than the aide would be under the same circumstances, and would be able to escape to Executor and to Center from time to time. When Tarkin was used to his new command, then Vader could depart the space station permanently. The Emperor need only tell Tarkin what his decision was, but would have to explain to Vader all the reasons he had just now pondered for what seemed like the fiftieth time. All, that is, except for his musings about the Sith's ambitions.

Surely Vader would understand. If not, he would nevertheless obey, if he knew what was good for him. The Emperor had no doubt that he did. His next decision was whether to tell the governor the news tonight, as the ruler's gift to him. Tarkin would be overjoyed, but Vader, less than enthusiastic.

As if on cue, the Dark Lord appeared in his line of vision and gave him a graceful bow. Palpatine greeted him, and noticed that most of the guests had departed. He had been lost in thought for a long while.

"My friend," the ruler said, "I am pleased you're here. There is something we need discuss, but I would welcome your company even if there were not."

"Typical party, eh?" Vader rumbled quietly and obeyed Palpatine's gesture to sit down in the opposite chair beside the fire. The Emperor sensed that the Sith was relaxed, more at ease than he'd been the past few days, or weeks. Good. That would make his decision easier for Vader to accept.

Nonetheless, the ruler was a bit reluctant to make his announcement just yet, not when there were still a few outsiders lingering in the corridor. They need not hear the news. Moreover, Vader seemed unusually content, and the Emperor did not want to shatter that mood so quickly. He knew that a content Vader was a strong asset to him, and he disliked the dis-satisfactions he knew Vader had increasingly experienced over the past several years. He remembered the shock and foreboding he'd felt on the day his Dark Lord had threatened to leave his service should the sale of gubernatorial offices continue.

He'd given in to Vader's quiet ultimatum both because he needed Vader's talents as much as he'd ever done and because he could see no other means of convincing the Sith Lord to stay. He could have killed his pupil that day, and had wanted to, but the Dark Lord's skills would have been just as irretrievably lost then as they would have been with Vader's resignation. Palpatine had then done all that was in his power to make certain Vader would never put him in such a position again. Darkness willing, he would have those guarantees very soon. Until that time, Vader's contentment was welcome and doubly valuable.

"Yes," the ruler replied aloud to Vader's question, giving no hint of what he was thinking. "Be glad you avoided it. I missed your wry commentary, however."

The Dark Lord chuckled so softly that only Palpatine could hear it. The sound was warm and genuine, and the ruler was gratified. "You mean the way I used to stand next to you at functions and say things for your private amusement and benefit?"

"Yes," the Emperor smiled. "Everyone else, if they heard you at all, thought you were briefing me on political developments. After you began wearing your mask, it was doubly effective. No one could read your lips."

"That was a very long time ago," Vader mused, almost wistfully.

Palpatine sensed a nostalgic sort of near-sadness in Vader then, and was determined that this new mood would not take hold. "Even then," he praised, "I delighted in your scathing wit."

"I was so young and naive that I merely assumed you would appreciate my running commentary. So many promising young beings were there during your campaign for the presidency. I knew I had to do something unique to get you to remember me."

"My friend, you underestimated yourself. I noticed you the first moment you walked through the door and were in the same room with me." Palpatine spoke the truth, and felt Vader absorb it. The Dark Lord's faint sadness faded somewhat with the compliment, and the older man was gratified by how useful even truth could sometimes be.



Vader was silent for a moment, and then replied, "Well, I sometimes still wonder where I found the nerve to do that."

"Don't you know that if it were possible, I would give you all that you desire, even now?" Palpatine studied Vader closely, and discovered that he had actually stunned him. Perhaps he should not have said that, the ruler realized. The true danger was not that Vader would expect too much as a result, but rather that the Sith Lord simply did not believe him. Once the words would have been readily accepted, but too much time had elapsed for that now to be the case. Nearly sadly, the Emperor searched through the Force for what Vader was feeling, and was even more concerned when he discovered that the other man was tightly shielded. All he sensed was vague regret. Despite his best intentions, he had inadvertently ruined Vader's mellow mood. Therefore, he might as well announce his decision now, and get it over with. Yet, he hesitated.

Force-insensitive that he was, Tarkin nevertheless felt the tension between his Emperor and Vader when he walked back into the parlor, and he reveled in it, wondering delightedly at its cause. He pulled up a chair close to the fire so that he could join the silent pair. Palpatine seemed unusually distracted, and it was Vader who spoke to him first.

"Governor," the Sith said, "I thank you for providing my rooms with so many facilities for my comfort."

Tarkin inclined his head graciously, feeling generous from the wine he had consumed and with his impending victory over the black-clad enemy. It was about time his thoughtfulness was acknowledged. Silence again filled the room, the Emperor still obviously preoccupied. Finally, Vader spoke again: "The fireplace is particularly welcome."

"I'm glad," the aide replied, stealing a glance at his ruler and hoping his quiet were a result of anger at the Sith Lord. Perhaps that was the reason for Vader's uncharacteristic politeness; the Dark Lord was out of favor for something. Tarkin was determined to make the condition permanent, but the time was not ripe so long as Palpatine was so unresponsive. First he would impress the ruler with his outward good will toward Vader, and then give the Emperor his cherished gift.

"It's still snowing outside," Akim said brightly, "and very cold. I'm pleased the celebration was scheduled for today and not tomorrow, when travel might be hazardous."

"Indeed. If that had been the case, we might not have been able to come," Vader replied courteously. Tarkin bristled, sensing sarcasm in the words. He had never appreciated Vader's wit, which was often more like a lash. However, he relaxed after a moment, and injected sweetness into his tones.

"At least if the weather remains perverse, the two of you can stay here as long as necessary," he continued. "You needn't worry, Lord Vader," he added generously. "None of my other guests elected to spend the night. They hoped to beat the weather home."

"Why should I worry?" Vader asked mildly.

"I know you don't enjoy social gatherings," the aide explained, feeling somewhat embarrassed by his earlier words. His anger threatened to return as he was put once more on the defensive by this infuriating man, but he was determined not to show it. Just remember you're going to win, he comforted himself mentally, and caressed the pants pocket in which he carried his precious computer disc.

Vader laughed softly, and for some reason Tarkin tensed at the uncharacteristic sound, although it was not in itself threatening. He noticed that Palpatine shot Vader a sharp glance at this, but the Dark Lord's gaze remained focused on the aide. "I see you know me well, Governor," the Sith said quietly, "although I have disguised my hermetic tendencies these past two decades by appearing at a great many political functions. Tell me how you have suddenly become so perceptive."

"Well, I..." the aide hesitated, knowing Palpatine was the source of the information, and not knowing whether it would be wise to reveal that fact. So, he said, "I know you are an intensely private individual, and that you did not join us this evening until just now."

"True." Vader crossed one booted leg over the other with casual elegance, and Tarkin felt sheer envious hatred flood his soul. Vader was clearly savoring his defensiveness. "Has it

never occurred to you, Governor, that I may simply be exhausted from constant battle?"

"No. I'm sorry," the aide said lamely. He was astounded by the admission, and also confused by it. To his knowledge, Vader had not engaged the Rebels in battle for several weeks. In his helplessness, he glanced toward the Emperor, who was listening intently to the Dark Lord, wearing a look which was almost one of... concern. Jealousy flooded through Tarkin again.

"Also," Vader continued, "I did accept your offer to come here today, after all. I would hardly have done that were I as antisocial as you imply."

In his envy and confusion, and doubtlessly because of the wine, Tarkin genuinely forgot Palpatine's earlier instructions to him about their arrangement to have Vader come to the estate. He remembered only the initial advice put to him by the Emperor. "It was hardly my idea, so you needn't be so artificially gracious, Vader. It was the Emperor's suggestion that you stay here." His statement ended on a nearly shrill note of triumph. If Vader didn't want to be here, he could damn well leave! Breathing rapidly in his agitation, Tarkin was even more confused when Palpatine shot him an exceedingly cold sideways glance and then turned expectantly toward the Dark Lord.

Vader did not reply for a long while, and Tarkin frantically tried to ascertain what was happening. What had he said to cause this dreadful silence? He prayed that Palpatine would break it, but the ruler did not. Finally, the Dark Lord said, "Indeed, I must have been mistaken. Forgive me if I have caused either one of you any inconvenience."

Tarkin could not think of how to respond. He could not recall ever having heard Vader apologize before, and he was less exultant than amazed.

"There's nothing to forgive, my Lord," Palpatine answered softly, speaking for the first time in a long while. The ruler rose and went to stand a few meters behind Vader, glancing out the window nearly as if he didn't want to look directly at the Sith Lord. Tarkin felt as if he were being excluded from an important exchange. "Remember what I said a few moments ago about your immense value to me. I know that if you have been weary of late, it is my doing, and perhaps I should be the one to apologize to you."

Tarkin was astounded. He labored long and hard for the ruler, and yet had never heard such words from him. If he had, he would have fallen on his knees in adoring gratitude. And yet Vader, who was experiencing consideration he did not deserve, merely remained in his chair, staring into the fire. Resentment roiled deep within the governor, but he bit his tongue and remained silent.

"That is why," Palpatine resumed, walking back to stand directly behind and over Vader, "I do not want to add to your burdens now." He placed his hands on the Sith Lord's broad shoulders, and Tarkin gritted his teeth in near pain; the Emperor had not touched him in years, even though the governor had often fantasized about it.

"I have thought about this carefully," the Palpatine said, "and have not made this decision lightly. But upon weighing all the alternatives and variables, I keep arriving at the same conclusion." So intent upon his jealousy, Tarkin did not see Vader's slight stiffening in his chair, nor did he really hear Palpatine's quiet last sentence: "The Death Star project shall go to you, Akim."

"What?" the aide gasped, not certain he'd heard correctly.

"You are to be the commander of our new space station. Congratulations, Governor," Vader explained in a hollow voice.

"Oh, Gods!" the elder aide murmured aloud.

"The plans are in my rooms. I'll get them in a moment. You, Vader, are to be his chief advisor. We'll need your military expertise, but I also need you aboard Executor." The ruler sounded nearly apologetic even now, and Tarkin could not completely exult in his victory. Don't be stupid; you've won, he told himself firmly. Vader will answer to you. However, he could not help but watch as Palpatine, proceeding to sit back in his chair, stroked Vader's arm as he moved past the Dark Lord. Even as hope rose in Tarkin's soul, his heart constricted painfully with the knowledge that Palpatine, the physically

aloof, treated Vader with a certain gentleness he would never offer the aide.

end part 1

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