



**BY JAMES LUCENO**

**THE ROBOTECH SERIES**

(AS JACK MCKINNEY, WITH BRIAN DALEY)

**THE BLACK HOLE TRAVEL AGENCY SERIES**

(AS JACK MCKINNEY, WITH BRIAN DALEY)

**THE YOUNG INDIANA JONES CHRONICLES**

*The Mata Hari Affair*

**STAR WARS**

*Star Wars: Cloak of Deception*

*Star Wars: Darth Maul: Saboteur (eBook)*

*Star Wars: The New Jedi Order—Agents of Chaos I:*

*Hero's Trial*

*Star Wars: The New Jedi Order—Agents of Chaos II:*

*Jedi Eclipse*

*Star Wars: The New Jedi Order: The Unifying Force*

*Star Wars: Labyrinth of Evil*

*Star Wars: Dark Lord—The Rise of Darth Vader*

*Star Wars: Millenium Falcon*

*Star Wars: Darth Plagueis*

*Head Hunters*

*A Fearful Symmetry*

*Illegal Alien*

*The Big Empty*

*Kaduna Memories*

*The Shadow*

*The Mask of Zorro*

*Rio Passion*

*Rainchaser*

*Rock Bottom*

*Hunt for the Mayan Looking-Glass: The Adventures of 3Sky and Flint*

**STAR  
WARS®**

---

T A R K I N

---





*James Luceno*



DEL REY  
NEW YORK

*Star Wars: Tarkin* is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Copyright © 2014 by Lucasfilm Ltd. & ® or TM where indicated. All rights reserved.

Excerpt from *Star Wars: Heir to the Jedi* by Kevin Hearne copyright © 2014 by Lucasfilm Ltd. & ® or TM where indicated. All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Del Rey, an imprint of  
Random House, a division of Random House LLC,  
a Penguin Random House Company, New York.

DEL REY and the HOUSE colophon are  
registered trademarks of Random House LLC.

This book contains an excerpt from *Star Wars: Heir to the Jedi* by  
Kevin Hearne. This excerpt has been set for this edition only and  
may not reflect the final content of the forthcoming edition.

ISBN 978-0-345-51152-2  
eBook ISBN 978-0-553-39289-0

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

[www.starwars.com](http://www.starwars.com)  
[www.delreybooks.com](http://www.delreybooks.com)  
[facebook.com/starwarsbooks](https://facebook.com/starwarsbooks)

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

First Edition

*Book design by Christopher M. Zucker*

*For my elder son, Carlos, frequently my sounding board,  
who this time provided a plot point just when I needed one;  
and for Pablo Hidalgo, who led me down a  
couple of paths I had never explored.*

*In loving memory of Rosemary Savoca,  
my aunt and most forgiving fan.*





**A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. . . .**



**STAR  
WARS®**

---

T A R K I N

---

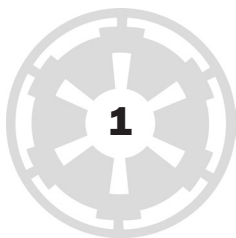


**Five standard years have passed since Darth Sidious proclaimed himself galactic Emperor. The brutal Clone Wars are a memory, and the Emperor's apprentice, Darth Vader, has succeeded in hunting down most of the Jedi who survived dreaded Order 66. On Coruscant a servile Senate applauds the Emperor's every decree, and the populations of the Core Worlds bask in a sense of renewed prosperity.**

**In the Outer Rim, meanwhile, the myriad species of former Separatist worlds find themselves no better off than they were before the civil war. Stripped of weaponry and resources, they have been left to fend for themselves in an Empire that has largely turned its back on them.**

**Where resentment has boiled over into acts of sedition, the Empire has been quick to mete out punishment. But as confident as he is in his own and Vader's dark side powers, the Emperor understands that only a supreme military, overseen by a commander with the will to be as merciless as he is, can secure an Empire that will endure for a thousand generations . . .**





---

## THE MEASURE OF A MAN

---

**A SAYING EMERGED** during the early years of the Empire: *Better to be spaced than based on Belderone*. Some commentators traced the origin to the last of the original Kamino-grown soldiers who had served alongside the Jedi in the Clone Wars; others to the first crop of cadets graduated from the Imperial academies. Besides expressing disdain for assignments on worlds located far from the Core, the adage implied that star system assignment was a designator of worth. The closer to Coruscant one was posted, the greater one's importance to the Imperial cause. Though on Coruscant itself most effectives preferred to be deployed far from the Palace rather than anywhere within range of the Emperor's withering gaze.

For those in the know, then, it seemed inexplicable that Wilhuff Tarkin should be assigned to a desolate moon in a nameless system in a remote region of the Outer Rim. The closest planets of any note were the desert world Tatooine and equally inhospitable Geonosis, on whose irradiated surface the Clone Wars had begun and which had since become a denied outlier to all but an inner circle of Impe-

rial scientists and engineers. What could the former admiral and adjutant general have done to merit an assignment most would have regarded as a banishment? What insubordination or dereliction of duty had prompted the Emperor to exile one he himself had promoted to the rank of Moff at the end of the war? Rumors flew fast and furious among Tarkin's peers in all branches of the military. Tarkin had failed to carry out an important mission in the Western Reaches; he had quarreled with the Emperor or his chief henchman, Darth Vader; or his reach had simply exceeded his grasp, and he was paying the price for naked ambition. For those who knew Tarkin personally, however, or had even a passing familiarity with his upbringing and long record of service, the reason for the assignment was obvious: Tarkin was engaged in a clandestine Imperial enterprise.

In the memoir that was published years after his incendiary death, Tarkin wrote:

After much reflection, I came to realize that the years I spent at Sentinel Base were as formative as my years of schooling on Eriadu's Carrion Plateau, or as significant as any of the battles in which I had participated or commanded. For I was safeguarding the creation of an armament that would one day shape and guarantee the future of the Empire. Both as impregnable fortress and as symbol of the Emperor's inviolable rule, the deep-space mobile battle station was an achievement on the order of any fashioned by the ancestral species that had unlocked the secret of hyperspace and opened the galaxy to exploration. My only regret was in not employing a firmer hand in bringing the project to fruition in time to frustrate the actions of those determined to thwart the Emperor's noble designs. Fear of the station, fear of Imperial might, would have provided the necessary deterrent.

Not once in his personal writings did Tarkin liken his authority to that of the Emperor or of Darth Vader, and yet even so simple a task as overseeing the design of a new uniform was perhaps a means of



casting himself in garb as distinctive as the hooded robes of the former or the latter's signature black mask.

"An analysis of trends in military fashion on Coruscant suggests a more tailored approach," a protocol droid was saying. "Tunics continue to be double-breasted with choker collars, but are absent shoulder-boards or epaulets. What's more, trousers are no longer straight-legged, but flared in the hips and thighs, narrowing at the cuffs so as to be easily tucked into tall boots with low heels."

"A commendable alteration," Tarkin said.

"May I suggest, then, sir, flare-legged trousers—in the standard-issue gray-green fabric, of course—accented by black knee boots with turndown topside cuffs. The tunic itself should be belted at the waist, and fall to mid-thigh."

Tarkin glanced at the silver-bodied humaniform couturier. "While I can appreciate devotion to one's sartorial programming, I've no interest in initiating a fashion trend on Coruscant or anywhere else. I simply want a uniform that *fits*. Especially the boots. The stars know, my feet have logged more kilometers aboard Star Destroyers than during surface deployments, even in a facility of this size."

The RA-7 droid canted its shiny head to one side in a show of disapproval. "There is a marked difference between a uniform that 'fits' and a uniform that suits the wearer—if you take my meaning, sir. May I also point out that as a sector governor you have the freedom to be a bit more, shall we say, *daring*. If not in color, then in the hand of the cloth, the length of the tunic, the cut of the trousers."

Tarkin considered the droid's remarks in silence. Years of ship-board and downside duties had not been kind to the few dress and garrison uniforms he retained, and no one on Sentinel Base would dare criticize any liberties he might take.

"All right," he said finally, "display what you have in mind."

Dressed in an olive-drab body glove that encased him from neck to ankles and concealed the scars left by wounds from blasterfire, falls, and the claws of predators, Tarkin was standing on a low circular platform opposite a garment-fabricator whose several laser readers were plying his body with red beams, taking and recording his measurements to within a fraction of a millimeter. With his legs and

arms spread, he might have been a statue mounted on a plinth, or a target galvanized in the sights of a dozen snipers. Adjacent to the fabricator sat a holotable that projected above its surface a life-sized hologram of him, clothed in a uniform whose designs changed in accordance with the silent commands of the droid, and which could be rotated on request or ordered to adopt alternate postures.

The rest of Tarkin's modest quarters were given over to a bunk, a dresser, fitness apparatus, and a sleek desk situated between cushioned swivel chairs and two more basic models. A man of black-and-white tastes, he favored clean lines, precise architecture, and an absence of clutter. A large viewport looked out across an illuminated square of landing field to a massive shield generator, and beyond to the U-shaped range of lifeless hills that cradled Sentinel Base. On the landing field were two wind-blasted shuttles, along with Tarkin's personal starship, the *Carrion Spike*.

Sentinel's host moon enjoyed close to standard gravity, but it was a cold forlorn place. Wrapped in a veil of toxic atmosphere, the secluded satellite was battered by frequent storms and as colorless as the palette that held sway in Tarkin's quarters. Even now an ill-omened tempest was swooping down the ridge and beginning to pelt the viewport with stones and grit. Base personnel called it "hard rain," if only to lighten the dreariness such storms conjured. The dark sky belonged chiefly to the swirling gas giant that owned the moon. On those long days when the moon emerged into the light of the system's distant yellow sun, the surface glare was too intense for human eyes, and the base's viewports had to be sealed or polarized.

"Your impressions, sir?" the droid said.

Tarkin studied his full-color holo-doppelgänger, focusing less on the altered uniform than on the man it contained. At fifty he was lean to the point of gaunt, with strands of wavy gray streaking what had been auburn hair. The same genetics that had bequeathed him blue eyes and a fast metabolism had also granted him sunken cheeks that imparted a masklike quality to his face. His narrow nose was made to appear even longer than it was courtesy of a widow's peak that had grown more pronounced since the end of the war. As well, deep creases now bracketed his wide, thin-lipped mouth. Many described

his face as severe, though he judged it pensive, or perhaps penetrating. As for his voice, he was amused when people attributed his arrogant tone to an Outer Rim upbringing and accent.

He turned his clean-shaven face to both sides and lifted his chin. He folded his arms across his chest, then stood with his hands clasped behind his back, and finally posed akimbo, with his fists planted on his hips. Drawing himself up to his full height, which was just above human average, he adopted a serious expression, cradling his chin in his right hand. There were few beings to whom he needed to offer salute, though there was one to whom he was obliged to bow, and so he did, straight-backed but not so low as to appear sycophantic.

“Eliminate the top line collars on the boots, and lower the heels,” he told the droid.

“Of course, sir. Standard duranium shank and toes for the boots?”

Tarkin nodded.

Stepping down from the platform, out from inside the cage of laser tracers, he began to walk circles around the hologram, appraising it from all sides. During the war, the belted tunic, when closed, had extended across the chest on one side and across the midsection on the other; now the line was vertical, which appealed to Tarkin’s taste for symmetry. Just below each shoulder were narrow pockets designed to accommodate short cylinders that contained coded information about the wearer. A rank insignia plaque made up of two rows of small colored squares was affixed to the tunic’s left breast.

Medals and battle ribbons had no place on the uniform, nor in the Imperial military. The Emperor was scornful of commendations for sand or pluck. Where another leader might wear garments of the finest synthsilk, the Emperor favored robes of black-patterned zeyd cloth, often concealing his face within the cowl—furtive, exacting, ascetic.

“More to your liking?” the droid asked when its cordwainer program had tasked the holoprojector to incorporate changes to the boots.

“Better,” Tarkin said, “except perhaps for the belt. Center an officer’s disk on the buckle and a matching one on the command cap.” He was about to elaborate when a childhood recollection took him down a different path, and he snorted in self-amusement.

He must have been all of eleven at the time, dressed in a multi-pocketed vest he thought the perfect apparel for what he had assumed was going to be a jaunt on the Carrion Plateau. On seeing the vest, his grand-uncle Jova had smiled broadly, then issued a laugh that was at once avuncular and menacing.

*"It'll look even better with blood on it,"* Jova had said.

"Do you find something humorous in the design, sir?" the droid asked in what amounted to distress.

Tarkin shook his head. "Nothing humorous, to be sure."

The foolishness of the fitting wasn't lost on him. He understood that he was simply trying to distract himself from having to fret over delays that were impeding progress on the battle station. Shipments from research sites had been postponed; asteroid mining at Geonosis was proving unfeasible; construction phase deadlines had not been met by the engineers and scientists who were supervising the project; a convoy transporting vital components was due to arrive . . .

In the ensuing silence, the storm began to beat a mad tattoo on the window.

Doubtless Sentinel Base was one of the Empire's most important outposts. Still, Tarkin had to wonder what his paternal grand-uncle—who had once told him that personal glory was the only quest worth pursuing—would make of the fact that his most successful apprentice was in danger of becoming a mere administrator.

His gaze had returned to the hologram when he heard urgent footsteps in the corridor outside the room.

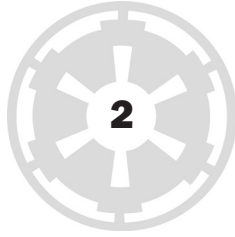
On receiving permission to enter, Tarkin's blond-haired, clear-eyed adjutant hastened through the door, offering a crisp salute.

"A priority dispatch from Rampart Station, sir."

A look of sharp attentiveness erased Tarkin's frown. Coreward from Sentinel in the direction of the planet Pii, Rampart was a marshaling depot for supply ships bound for Geonosis, where the deep-space weapon was under construction.

"I won't tolerate further delays," he started to say.

"Understood, sir," the adjutant said. "But this doesn't concern supplies. Rampart reports that it is under attack."



---

## BLOWS AGAINST THE EMPIRE

---

**THE DOOR TO TARKIN'S QUARTERS** whooshed open, disappearing into the partition, and out he marched, dressed in worn trousers and ill-fitting boots, with a lightweight gray-green duster draped over his shoulders. As the adjutant hurried to keep pace with the taller man's determined steps, the strident voice of the protocol droid slithered through the opening before the door resealed itself.

"But, sir, the *fitting!*"

Originally a cramped garrison base deployed from a *Victory*-class Star Destroyer, Sentinel now sprawled in all directions as a result of prefabricated modules that had since been delivered or assembled on site. The heart of the facility was a warren of corridors linking one module to the next, their ceilings lost behind banks of harsh illuminators, forced-air ducts, fire-suppression pipes, and bundled strands of snaking wires. Everything had an improvised look, but as this was Moff Wilhuff Tarkin's domain, the radiantly heated walkways and walls were spotless, and the pipes and feeds were meticulously organized and labeled with alphanumerics. Overworked scrubbers purged staleness and the smell of ozone from the recycled air. The

corridors were crowded not only with specialists and junior officers, but also with droids of all sizes and shapes, twittering, beeping, and chirping to one another as their optical sensors assessed the speed and momentum of Tarkin's forward march and propelling themselves out of harm's way at the last possible instant, on treads, casters, repulsors, and ungainly metal legs. Between the blare of distant alarms and the warble of announcements ordering personnel to muster stations, it was difficult enough to hear oneself think, and yet Tarkin was receiving updates through an ear bead as well as communicating continually with Sentinel's command center through a speck of a microphone adhered to his voice box.

He wedged the audio bead deeper into his ear as he strode through a domed module whose skylight wells revealed that the storm had struck with full force and was shaking Sentinel for all it was worth. Exiting the dome and moving against a tide of staff and droids, he right-angled through two short stretches of corridor, doors flying open at his approach and additional personnel joining him at each juncture—senior officers, navy troopers, communications technicians, some of them young and shorn, most of them in uniform, and all of them human—so that by the time he reached the command center, the duster billowing behind him like a cape, it was as if he were leading a parade.

At Tarkin's request, the rectangular space was modeled after the sunken data pits found aboard *Imperial*-class Star Destroyers. Filing in behind him, the staffers he had gathered along the way rushed to their duty stations, even while others already present were leaping to their feet to deliver salutes. Tarkin waved them back into their swivel chairs and positioned himself on a landing at the center of the room with a clear view of the holomagers, sensor displays, and authenticators. Off to one side of him, Base Commander Cassel, dark-haired and sturdy, was leaning across the primary holoprojector table, above which twitched a grainy image of antique starfighters executing strafing runs across Rampart's gleaming surface, while the marshaling station's batteries responded with green pulses of laser energy. In a separate holovid even more corrupted than the first, insect-winged Geonosian laborers could be seen scrambling for cover in one of the

station's starfighter hangars. A distorted voice was crackling through the command center's wall-mounted speaker array.

"Our shields are already down to forty percent, Sentinel . . . jamming our transmiss . . . lost communication with the *Brentaal*. Request immediate . . . Sentinel. Again: request immediate reinforcement."

A skeptical frown formed on Tarkin's face. "A sneak attack? Impossible."

"Rampart reports that the attack ship transmitted a valid HoloNet code on entering the system," Cassel said. "Rampart, can you eavesdrop on the comm chatter of those starfighters?"

"Negative, Sentinel," the reply came a long moment later. "They're jamming our signals net."

Peering over his shoulder at Tarkin, Cassel made as if to cede his position, but Tarkin motioned for him to stay where he was. "Can the image be stabilized?" he asked the specialist at the holoprojector controls.

"Sorry, sir," the specialist said. "Increasing the gain only makes matters worse. The transmission appears to be corrupted at the far end. I haven't been able to establish if Rampart initiated countermeasures."

Tarkin glanced around the room. "And on our end?"

"The HoloNet relay station is best possible," the specialist at the comm board said.

"It is raining, sir," a different spec added, eliciting a chorus of good-natured laughter from others seated nearby. Even Tarkin grinned, though fleetingly.

"Who are we speaking with?" he asked Cassel.

"A Lieutenant Thon," the commander said. "He's been on station for only three months, but he's following protocol and transmitting on priority encryption."

Tarkin clasped his hands behind his back beneath the duster and glanced at the specialist seated at the authenticator. "Does the effective roster contain an image of our Lieutenant Thon?"

"On screen, sir," the staffer said, flicking a joystick and indicating one of the displays.

Tarkin shifted his gaze. A sandy-haired human with protruding ears, Thon was as untried as he sounded. Fresh from one of the academies, Tarkin thought. He stepped down from the platform and moved to the holoprojector table to study the strafing starfighters more closely. Bars of corruption elevatored through the stuttering holoovid. Rampart's shields were nullifying most of the aggressors' energy beams, but all too frequently a disabling run would succeed and white-hot explosions would erupt in one of the depot's deep-space docks.

"Those are Tikiars and Headhunters," Tarkin said in surprise.

"Modified," Cassel said. "Basic hyperdrives and upgraded weaponry."

Tarkin squinted at the holo. "The fuselages bear markings." He turned in the direction of the spec closest to the authenticator station. "Run the markings through the database. Let's see if we can't determine whom we're dealing with."

Tarkin turned back to Cassel. "Did they arrive on their own, or launch from the attack ship?"

"Delivered," the commander said.

Without turning around Tarkin said: "Has this Thon provided holoovid or coordinates for the vessel that brought the starfighters?"

"Holoovid, sir," someone said, "but we only got a quick look at it."

"Replay the transmission," Tarkin said.

A separate holotable projected a blurry, blue-tinted image of a fan-tailed capital ship with a spherical control module located amidships. The downsloping curved bow and smooth hull gave it the look of a deep-sea behemoth. Tarkin circled the table, appraising the hologram.

"What is this thing?"

"Begged and borrowed, sir," someone reported. "Separatist-era engineering more than anything else. The central sphere resembles one of the old Trade Federation droid control computers, and the entire forward portion might've come from a Commerce Guild destroyer. Front-facing sensor array tower. IFF's highlighting modules consistent with CIS *Providence*-, *Recusant*-, and *Munificent*-class warships."

"Pirates?" Cassel ventured. "Privateers?"



"Have they issued any demands?" Tarkin asked.

"Nothing yet." Cassel waited a beat. "Insurgents?"

"No data on the starfighter fuselage markings, sir," someone said.

Tarkin touched his jaw but said nothing. As he continued to circle the hologram, a flare of wavy corruption in the lower left portion captured his attention. "What was that?" he said, standing tall. "At the lower— There it is again." He counted quietly to himself; at the count of ten he fixed his gaze on the same area of the hologram. "And again!" He swung to the specialist. "Replay the recording at half speed."

Tarkin kept his eyes on the lower left quadrant as the holovid restarted and began a new count. "Now!" he said, in advance of every instance of corruption. "Now!"

Chairs throughout the room swiveled. "Encryption noise?" someone suggested.

"Ionization effect," another said.

Tarkin held up a hand to silence the speculations. "This isn't a guessing game, ladies and gentlemen."

"Interval corruption of some sort," Cassel said.

"Of some sort indeed." Tarkin watched silently as the prerecorded holovid recycled for a third time, then he moved to the communications station. "Instruct Lieutenant Thon to show himself," he said to the seated spec.

"Sir?"

"Tell him to train a cam on himself."

The spec relayed the command, and Thon's voice issued from the speakers. "Sentinel, I've never been asked to do that, but if that's what it's going to take to effect a rescue, then I'm happy to comply."

Everyone in the room turned to the holofeed, and moments later a 3-D image of Thon took shape above the table.

"Recognition is well within acceptable margins, sir," a spec said.

Tarkin nodded and leaned toward one of the microphones. "Stand by, Rampart. Reinforcements are forthcoming." He continued to study the live holovid, and had begun yet another count when the transmission abruptly de-resolved, just short of the moment it might have displayed further evidence of corruption.

"What happened?" Cassel asked.

"Working on it, sir," a spec said.

Repressing a knowing smile, Tarkin glanced over his right shoulder. "Have we tried to open a clear channel to Rampart?"

"We've been trying, sir," the comm specialist said, "but we haven't been able to penetrate the jamming."

Tarkin moved to the communications station. "What resources do we have upside?"

"Parking lot is nearly empty, sir." The comm specialist riveted her eyes on the board. "We have the *Salliche*, the *Fremond*, and the *Electrum*."

Tarkin considered his options. Sentinel's *Imperial*-class Star Destroyer, the *Core Envoy*, and most of the flotilla's other capital ships were escorting supply convoys to Geonosis. That left him with a frigate and a tug—both vacant just then, literally parked in stationary orbits—and the obvious choice, the *Electrum*, a *Venator*-class Star Destroyer on loan from a deepdock at Ryloth.

"Contact Captain Burque," he said at last.

"Already on the comm, sir," the specialist said.

A quarter-scale image of the captain rose from the comm station's holoprojector. Burque was tall and gangly, with a clipped brown beard lining his strong jaw. "Governor Tarkin," he said, saluting.

"Are you up to speed on what is occurring at Rampart Station, Captain Burque?"

"We are, sir. The *Electrum* is prepared to jump to Rampart on your command."

Tarkin nodded. "Keep those hyperspace coordinates at the ready, Captain. But right now I want you to execute a microjump to the Rimward edge of this system. Do you understand?"

Burque frowned in confusion, but he said: "Understood, Governor."

"You're to hold there and await further orders."

"In plain sight, sir, or obscure?"

"I suspect that won't matter one way or another, Captain, but all the better if you can find something to hide behind."

"Excuse me for asking, sir, but are we expecting trouble?"

"Always, Captain," Tarkin said, without levity.

The hologram disappeared and the command center fell eerily silent, save for the sounds of the sensors and scanners and the tech's update that the *Electrum* was away. The silence deepened, until a pressing and prolonged warning tone from the threat-assessment station made everyone start. The specialist at the station thrust his head forward.

"Sir, sensors are registering anomalous readings and Cronau radiation in the red zone—"

"Wake rotation!" another spec cut in. "We've got a mark in from hyperspace, sir—and it's a big one. Nine hundred twenty meters long. Gunnage of twelve turbolaser cannons, ten point-defense ion cannons, six proton torpedo launchers. Reverting on the *near side* of the planet. Range is two hundred thousand clicks and closing." He blew out his breath. "Good thing you dispatched the *Electrum*, sir, or it'd be in pieces by now!"

A specialist seated at an adjacent duty station weighed in. "Firing solution programs are being sent to downside defenses."

"IFF is profiling it as the same carrier that attacked Rampart." The spec glanced at Tarkin. "Could it have jumped, sir?"

"If the ship was even there," Tarkin said, mostly to himself.

"Sir?"

Tarkin shrugged out of the duster, letting it fall to the floor, and stepped down to the holoprojector. "Let's have a look at it."

If the ship in the orbital-feed holovid was not the same one that had ostensibly attacked Rampart, it had to be her twin.

"Sir, we've got multiple marks launching from the carrier—" The spec interrupted himself to make certain he was interpreting the readings correctly. "Sir, they're *droid* fighters! Tri-fighters, vultures, the whole Sep menagerie."

"Interesting," Tarkin said in a calm voice. One hand to his chin, he continued to assess the hologram. "Commander Cassel, sound general quarters and boost power to the base shields. Signals: Initiate countermeasures."

"Sir, is this an unannounced readiness test?" someone asked.

"More like a bunch of Separatists who didn't get the message they lost the war," another said.

Perhaps that was the explanation, Tarkin thought. Imperial forces had destroyed or appropriated most of the capital ships produced for and by the Confederacy of Independent Systems. Droid fighters hadn't been seen in years. But it was even longer since Tarkin had witnessed HoloNet subterfuge of the caliber someone had aimed at Sentinel Base.

He swung away from the table. "Scan the carrier for life-forms on the off chance we're dealing with a sentient adversary rather than a droid-control computer." He eyed the comm specialist. "Any separate channel response from Rampart?"

She shook her head. "Still no word, sir."

"Carrier shows thirty life-forms, sir," someone at the far end of the room said. "It's astrogating by command, not on full auto."

From the threat station came another voice: "Sir, droid fighters are nearing the edge of the envelope."

And a thin envelope it was, Tarkin thought.

"Alert our artillery crews to ignore the firing solution programs and to fire at will." He pivoted to the holotable. A glance revealed Sentinel Base to be in the same situation Rampart appeared to have been in only moments earlier, except that the enemy ships and the holofeed were *genuine*.

"Contact Captain Burque and tell him to come home."

"Tri-fighters are breaking formation and commencing attack runs."

The sounds of distant explosions and the thundering replies of ground-based artillery infiltrated the command center. The room shook. Motes of dust drifted down from the overhead pipes and cables; the illumination flickered. Tarkin monitored the ground-feed holovids. The droid fighters were highly maneuverable but no match for Sentinel's powerful guns. The moon's storm-racked sky grew backlit with strobing flashes and globular detonations, as one after another of the ridge-backed tri-fighters and reconfigurable vultures

was vaporized. A few managed to make it to the outer edge of the base's hemispherical defensive shield, only to be annihilated there and hit the coarse ground in flames.

"They're beginning to turn tail," a tech said. "Laser cannons are chasing them back up the well."

"And the capital ship?" Tarkin said.

"The carrier is steering clear and accelerating. Range is now three hundred thousand clicks and expanding. All weapons are mute."

"Sir, the *Electrum* has reverted to realspace."

Tarkin grinned faintly. "Inform Captain Burque that his TIE pilots are going to enjoy a target-rich environment."

"Captain Burque on the comm."

Tarkin moved to the comm station, where Burque's holopresence hovered above the projector.

"I trust that this is the trouble you were expecting, Governor."

"Actually, Captain, most of this is quite unexpected. Therefore, I hope you'll do your best to incapacitate the carrier rather than destroy it. No doubt we can glean something by interrogating the crew."

"I'll be as gentle with it as I can, Governor."

Tarkin glanced at the holotable in time to see squadrons of newly minted ball-cockpit TIE fighters launch from the dorsal bay of the arrowhead-shaped Star Destroyer.

"Sir, I have Rampart Station Commander Jae on the comm, voice-only."

Tarkin gestured for Jae to be put through.

"Governor Tarkin, to what do I owe the honor?" Jae said.

Tarkin positioned himself close to one of the command center's audio pickups. "How is everything at your depot, Lin?"

"Better now," Jae said. "Our HoloNet relay was down for a short period, but it's back online. I've sent a tech team to determine what went wrong. You have my word, Governor: The glitch won't affect the supply shipment schedule—"

"I doubt that your technicians will discover any evidence of malfunction," Tarkin said.

Instead of speaking to it, Jae said: "And on your moon, Governor?"

"As a matter of fact, we find ourselves under attack."

"What?" Jae asked in patent surprise.

"I'll explain in due course, Lin. Just now we have our hands full."

His back turned to the holoprojector table, Tarkin missed the event that drew loud groans from many of the staffers. When he turned, the warship was gone.

"Jumped to lightspeed before the *Electrum* could get off a disabling shot," Cassel said.

Disappointment pulled down the corners of Tarkin's mouth. With the capital ship gone, the remaining droid fighters could be seen spinning out of control—even easier prey for the vertical-winged TIE fighters. A scattering of spherical explosions flared at the edge of space.

"Gather debris of any value," Tarkin said to Burque, "and have it transported down the well for analysis. Snare a few of the intact droids, as well. But take care. While they appear to be lifeless, they may be rigged to self-destruct."

Burque acknowledged the command, and the holo vanished.

Tarkin looked at Cassel. "Secure from battle stations and sound the all-clear. I want a forensic team assembled to examine the droids. I doubt we'll learn much, but we may be able to ascertain the carrier's point of origin." He grew pensive for a moment, then added: "Prepare an after-action report for Coruscant and transmit it to my quarters so I can append my notes."

"Will do," Cassel said.

A specialist handed Tarkin his duster, and he had started for the door when a voice rang out behind him.

"Sir, a question if you will?"

Tarkin stopped and turned around. "Ask it."

"How did you know, sir?"

"How did I know what, Corporal?"

The young, brown-haired specialist gnawed at her lower lip before continuing. "That the holotransmission from Rampart Station was counterfeit, sir."

Tarkin looked her up and down. "Perhaps you'd care to proffer an explanation of your own."

“In the replay—the bar of interval noise you noticed. Somehow that told you that someone had managed to introduce a false real-time feed into the local HoloNet relay.”

Tarkin smiled faintly. “Train yourself to recognize it—all of you. Deception may be the least of what our unknown adversaries have in store.”



---

## COLD CASE

---

**IN SENTINEL'S MAINTENANCE HANGAR,** Tarkin paced the length of a high, blastproof partition. The storm had blown through and the base had resumed normal operations, but many of the soldiers and specialists were still parsing the fact that Sentinel had come under attack. For the youngest among them, recruits or volunteers, it was the first action they had ever seen.

On the far side of a series of massive transparisteel panels set into the partition, several hazmat-suited forensic technicians were examining wreckage from the battle and running tests on three droid starfighters grasped in cradles suspended from tall gantries. Elsewhere in the hangar loadlifters and other droids were sorting through piles of debris. The tang of lubricants and flame-scorched metals hung in the air, and the noise level created by the labor droids was grating. As Tarkin had warned, many of the vulture droids had transformed into bombs on losing contact with the warship's central control computer. Regardless, Captain Burque's salvage teams had managed to recover a droid whose auto-destruct mechanism had been damaged during combat.



Hung in walking configuration with its blaster cannon lateral wings split, the three-and-a-half-meter-long vulture looked less like its namesake scavenger than it did a long-legged alloy quadruped with an equine head. With the central nacelle open and the computer brain exposed and studded with instruments, the droid might have been undergoing torture rather than autopsy. The other two dangling captives—three-armed fighters that mirrored the appearance of the species that had designed them—were similarly exposed and quilled with probes.

Tarkin had lost count of how many back-and-forth meanders he had completed, and was standing opposite the vulture droid when a decontamination lock in the partition opened and a tech emerged, removing the hood of his anti-rad suit and wiping sweat from his face and balding pate with a bare hand.

Tarkin spun around to meet him halfway. “What have you learned?”

“Not as much as we’d hoped to, sir,” the tech said. “Analysis of data received by the command center’s friend-or-foe indicator confirms that the capital ship is a downsized version of a Separatist *Providence*-class cruiser-carrier, modified with modules taken from CIS frigates and destroyers. Ships of the sort made a name for themselves during the war by jamming signals and destroying HoloNet relays. Parts of the ship’s sensor array tower, which the Sep’s usually mounted aft rather than forward, appear to have come from the cruiser *Lucid Voice*, which saw action at Quell, Ryloth, and in a couple of other contested systems.”

Tarkin frowned. “How did the appropriation teams manage to miss confiscating that ship?”

“They didn’t, sir. Records show that the *Lucid Voice* was dismantled at the Bilbringi shipyards four years ago.”

Tarkin considered that. “In other words, some components of that vessel went missing.”

“Lost, stolen, sold, it’s impossible to say. Other sections of the warship appear to have come from the *Invincible*.”

Tarkin didn’t bother to mask his surprise. “That was Separatist Admiral Trench’s ship—destroyed during the Battle of Christophsis.”

“Partially destroyed, in any case. The ship was modular in design, and the modules that survived must have been worth salvaging and putting on the open market. Parts dealers in the Outer Rim are desperate for supplies, so the modules may have ended up in the Tion Cluster or the like.” The tech removed his other elbow-length glove and wiped his face again. “The Idellian scanner isolated thirty lifeforms—a crew of humans and near-humans—which is in keeping with the practice of placing sentients in command of most *Providence*-class ships. But for a ship of that size and armament, thirty sentients is virtually your definition of a skeleton crew. Sometimes the Seps substituted OOM pilot battle droids, and I’m guessing our skittish warship had some of those as well, because whoever cobbled the thing together retrofitted it with a rudimentary droid-control computer—possibly a redundant comp of the sort you used to find on first-generation Trade Federation Lucrehulks.”

“Whoever, as you say.”

“*Lucid Voice* was built by the Quarren Free Dac Volunteers Engineering Corps—much to the displeasure of the Mon Cals who share their planet with the Quarren. We’re checking to see if QFD or their erstwhile partners, Pammant Docks, might have supervised the reassembly. TradeFed and Separatist technology has been showing up lately in the Corporate Sector, so we’re also looking into the possibility that the ship was built there. The Headhunter starfighters seen in the holo vid could have come from anywhere. Tikiars are produced in the Senex, but it’s not uncommon to encounter them in this sector of the Rim.”

Tarkin nodded and motioned toward the hangar. “The droids?”

The specialist turned to face the viewports. “Relatively few modifications to the vulture. Same fuel slug propulsion, same weapons system. Alphanumeric identification indicates that this one belonged to a Confederacy battle group known as The Grievous Legion.”

“And also managed to find its way onto the black market . . .”

“So it appears, sir.”

Tarkin moved farther down the partition. “And the tri-fighters?”

“Unremarkable. But we’ve no evidence regarding their origin. Not yet anyway.”

Tarkin forced an exhalation through his nose. "Were you able to retrieve data regarding the warship's point of origin?"

The specialist shook his head. "Negative, sir. The memory modules of the droids don't log jump information."

"All right," Tarkin said after a moment. "Continue with the analysis. I want every weld and rivet investigated."

"We're on top of it, sir." The tech pulled the hood back over his head, slipped his hands into the long gloves, and disappeared through the lock.

Tarkin watched him enter the hangar, then resumed pacing, replaying the attack in his mind.

Harassment of Imperial installations by pirates and malcontents was nothing new, but in almost all cases the assaults had been hit-and-run sorties, and none had taken place so close to heavily defended Geonosis. The counterfeit real-time holotransmission had been designed to draw ships from Sentinel to Rampart Station, in the hope of leaving the former vulnerable. But the attack was clearly calculated to be suicidal from its inception. Even if he had dispatched the *Electrum* to the marshaling station—even if he had been taken in by the distress call and dispatched half his flotilla—the energy shields and laser cannons that protected Sentinel would have been sufficient to ward off any strikes, let alone from droids. The warship seen in the holovid the attackers had transmitted through the local HoloNet relay had shown up at Sentinel, but where were the modified starfighters, which had to have been flown by living pilots? Despite being crewed by sentients, the mysterious cruiser hadn't discharged any of its point-defense or ranged weapons. If destruction of the base was the goal, why hadn't whoever was behind the attack used the ship as a bomb by reverting from hyperspace in closer proximity to the moon? Planetary bodies larger than Sentinel had been shaken to their core by such events.

Equally worrisome was the question of how the counterfeiter had known about Lieutenant Thon, whose recent posting to Rampart should have been top secret. The creators of the false holovid had been able to improvise by transmitting a real-time hologram of the young officer in response to Tarkin's order that he show himself. Was

Thon involved in the conspiracy, or had the attackers merely doctored existing footage of him, lifted perhaps from the public HoloNet or some other source?

As troubling as it was to accept that the locations of Sentinel and Rampart bases had been compromised, he still couldn't make sense of the attack itself. What would pirates or privateers stand to gain by launching an ill-fated drone attack? What, for that matter, would political dissidents stand to gain?

Was it a case of vengeance?

One group fit the bill: the Droid Gotra, a lethal band of repurposed battle droids with what some considered legitimate grievances against the Empire for having been abandoned after their service during the Clone Wars. But recent intelligence reports stated that the Droid Gotra was still confined to an industrial complex in the bowels of Coruscant, serving as muscle for the Crymorah crime syndicate in robberies, protection, kidnapping, illegal salvage, and extortion. It was possible that the Gotra was branching out—it was even possible that the group had learned about Sentinel Base—but it was unlikely that the droids would make use of obsolete weapons to send a message to the Empire.

Tarkin shook his head in aggravation. In part, the deep-space mobile battle station was meant to put an end to harassments of any sort, whether driven by greed, political dissent, or revenge for acts committed during the Clone Wars or since. Once everyone in the galaxy grasped the weapon's capabilities, once the fear of Imperial reprisal took hold, discontent would cease to be a problem. But just now—and notwithstanding the covert nature of the Geonosis project—the Imperial Security Bureau and Naval Intelligence were continually trying to quash rumors and prevent information leaks. In the three years Tarkin had been commanding Sentinel and hundreds of nearby supply and sentry outposts, as well as administering a vast slice of the Outer Rim, no group had been successful in penetrating Geonosis space.

The chance that that could change shook *him* to the core.

If establishing the identity of Sentinel's enemies was already prov-

ing daunting, getting to the truth of the battle station's origin was nearly impossible. Everyone from celebrated ship designers to gifted engineers wanted to take credit for the superweapon. Tarkin himself had discussed the need for such a weapon with the Emperor long before the end of the Clone Wars. But no one outside the Emperor knew the full history of the moonlet-sized project. Some claimed that it had begun as a Separatist weapon designed by Geonosian Archduke Poggle the Lesser's hive colony for Count Dooku and the Confederacy of Independent Systems. But if that was the case, the plans had to have somehow fallen into Republic hands *before* the Clone Wars ended, because the weapon's spherical shell and laser-focusing dish were already in the works by the time Tarkin first set eyes on it following his promotion to the rank of Moff—escorted to Geonosis in utmost secrecy by the Emperor himself.

All the same, he had no compelling reason to solve the enigma of the battle station's beginnings. What bothered him was that, compliant with a strategy that no base commander—Moff, admiral, or general—should have unrestricted access to information regarding shipments, scheduling, or construction progress, no single person was in charge of the project, unless of course the Emperor was considered to be that person. But the Emperor's visits had been few and far between, and it was anyone's guess just how much information was getting past the Imperial Ruling Council the Moffs and others answered to and actually reaching the Emperor's ear. Certainly he was being briefed, but briefings were no longer enough. The project had reached a point where it had to rely on countless suppliers; and though each was being kept in the dark regarding the final destination of their contributions, millions of beings, perhaps tens of millions of beings galaxywide, were now involved with the battle station in one capacity or another. Yes, the project required the on-site presence of a think tank of scientists, weapons specialists, and habitat architects, but what did any of them know about *protecting* the station from saboteurs?

If Tarkin had his way, and at this point it was uncertain he ever would, he would adopt the hegemonic arrangement that was in place

on Coruscant and elsewhere, and appoint an overseer to coordinate all construction and defense considerations. A single overseer to whom others would answer—or be damned if they didn’t.

If whoever was responsible for the dubious attack on Sentinel was simply hoping to get his attention, then that part of the plan had succeeded, for in the end he was left with more questions than answers.

His restless pacing subsided as his adjutant hurried into the maintenance hangar’s safe area.

“A communiqué from Coruscant, sir.”

Tarkin assumed that it was Military Intelligence, responding to the after-action report he had filed, and said as much.

“No, sir. Higher up the chain of command.”

Tarkin arched an eyebrow. “How high?”

“Nosebleed altitude, sir.”

Tarkin stiffened slightly. “Then I’ll take the transmission in my quarters.”

Where Tarkin’s own uniformed holopresence had stood two days earlier, the holotable now projected a towering apparition of Vizier Mas Amedda, swathed in rich maroon robes, the cyan tint of the holofield darkening the Chagrian’s natural blue pigmentation. From bulging extrusions of flesh on either side of Amedda’s thick neck dangled tapered horns that matched the pair crowning his hairless cranium.

“We trust all is well at Sentinel Base, Governor.”

Tarkin couldn’t be certain if or how much Amedda knew about the recent attack. On Coruscant information was closely guarded, if only as a means of maintaining one’s cachet, and even the head of the Ruling Council might not have been made privy to details known to Military Intelligence and the Admiralty.

“Rest assured, Vizier,” Tarkin said.

“No surprises, then?”

“Only the expected ones.”

The ambitious amphibian vouchsafed a tight-lipped smile at his end of the duplex holocomm. Obstructive and fault finding during his years as vice chancellor of the Republic Senate, he had become

one of the Emperor's most valued advisers, as well as the Empire's most formidable intermediary.

"Governor, your presence is required on Coruscant," Amedda said after a moment.

Tarkin moved to his desk and sat down, centering himself for the holocam. "I'll certainly try to make time for a visit, Vizier."

"Permit me, Governor, but that will not suffice. Perhaps I should have said that your presence is *urgently* required."

Tarkin waved a hand in dismissal. "I'm sorry, Vizier, but that doesn't alter the fact that I have my priorities."

"Priorities of what sort?"

Tarkin returned Amedda's mirthless smile. There was probably no harm in sharing with Amedda information about the expected shipments of matériel from Desolation Station to Geonosis—including vital components for the battle station's complex hyperdrive generator—but he was under no obligation to do so.

"I'm afraid my priorities are on a need-to-know basis."

"Indeed. Then you are refusing the request?"

Tarkin glimpsed something in the thick-skulled Chagrian's pink-rimmed cerulean eyes that gave him pause. "Let's say that I'm reluctant to abandon my post at this time, Vizier. If you wish, I'll provide the Emperor with my reasons personally."

"That's not possible, Governor. The Emperor is presently engaged."

Tarkin leaned toward the cam. "So engaged that he can't speak briefly with one of his Moffs?"

Amedda affected a bored tone. "That's not for me to say, Governor. The Emperor's concerns are on a need-to-know basis."

Tarkin stared into the hologram. What his grand-uncle Jova wouldn't have given to be able to mount a Chagrian head on the wall of his cabin in the Carrion.

"Perhaps you're willing to clarify the need for such urgency?" he asked.

Amedda tilted his massive head to one side. "That's a matter for you to discuss with the Emperor, since it was he who issued the order that you report to Coruscant."

Tarkin concealed a grimace. "You might have said as much at the start, Vizier."

Amedda adopted a haughty look. "And deprive us of such verbal sport? Next time, perhaps."

Tarkin remained at his desk after Amedda ended the transmission and the hologram vanished. Then he signaled for the protocol droid.

"I'm going to need that uniform as soon as possible," he told the RA-7 as it entered.

The droid nodded. "Certainly, sir. I'll instruct the fabricator to begin at once."

Tarkin summoned the uniformed 3-D image of himself from the holotable and regarded it, thinking back to Eriadu and recalling Jova's comment once more.

*"It'll look even better with blood on it."*





---

## A BOY'S LIFE

---

**CYNOSURE OF THE** Greater Seswenna sector of the Outer Rim, Eriadu could trace its history to the earliest era of the Republic. At that time, the galaxy's dark age had ended, the Sith had been defeated and driven into hiding, and a true republic had emerged from the ashes. With a member of House Valorum presiding as Supreme Chancellor, a pan-galactic Senate had been created, and the military had been disbanded. Revitalized, the populations of the Core Worlds, ravenous for new resources and not above exploiting every opportunity to enhance the quality of their lives, were eager to expand their reach.

The planet was transformed from just another Outer Rim wilderness to a civilized world worth considering for inclusion in the Republic by adventurous pioneers who had been granted permission by Coruscant to procure and settle new territories, either by cutting deals with indigenous populations or simply by overrunning them, and finally to establish trading colonies capable of furnishing the Core with much-needed resources. It was a scenario played out in

many remote regions, and in Eriadu's case the resource happened to be lommite ore—essential to the production of transparisteel—rich deposits of which had been discovered on worlds throughout the Greater Seswenna. Lacking funds to mine, process, and ship the crude, Eriadu's settlers had been forced to secure high-interest loans from the InterGalactic Banking Clan, but in an era when hyperspace travel between the Seswenna and the Core required astrogating by hyperwave beacons—with numerous reversions to realspace necessary to ensure safe passage—shipments of ore were frequently delayed or lost due to one catastrophe or another. As debts mounted, Eriadu risked becoming a client world of Muun bankers until entrepreneurs from the Core world Corulag had intervened, rescuing the planet from servitude. It was likewise through Corulag's influence with the Republic Senate that the fledgling Hydian Way had been routed through Eriadu space and the planet placed on the galactic map.

Corulag's motives, however, were not altogether altruistic; the Core entrepreneurs forced Eriadu to increase the lommite supply and had demanded the bulk of the mining profits. Amplified operations led to rampant growth and an influx of impoverished workers from neighboring worlds. Eriadu's once lush mountains were soon stripped of cover, a pall of pollution hung over the major cities, and the standard of living plummeted. Still, there was prosperity for a few; quick credits to be made in ore processing, local and deep-space transport, and usury.

For the Tarkins, wealth came by providing security.

Their climb to the top had been hard won. Among Eriadu's earliest pioneers, the ancestral Tarkins had had to function as their own police force and defenders, countering attacks first by the ferocious predators that thrived in Eriadu's forests and mountains, then by off-world rogues and scoundrels who preyed on the exposed populations of the struggling settlements. Under Tarkin leadership local militias evolved slowly into a sector military. As a result, and despite his celebrated ancestors having had their start as hunters, freelance pilots, and mining contractors, Tarkin thought of himself as the product of a military upbringing, in which discipline, respect, and

obedience were held in the highest regard. Avowed technocrats as well, the family held a view that it was technology—more than Corulag—that had rescued Eriadu from savagery and had allowed Eriaduans to forge a civilization from a murderous wasteland. Technology in the form of colossal machines, swift starships, and potent weapons had helped convert the hunted into the hunters, and it would be technology that would one day usher the planet into the elite of the modern galaxy.

While Tarkin had been raised with all the advantages that came with wealth, it was a curious kind of privilege. In mansions that strived to emulate the architectural fashions of the Core but were little more than gaudy imitations of the originals, the Tarkins and others like them did their best to mimic the customs of the affluent, without ever succeeding. Their hardscrabble roots were far too apparent, and life on Eriadu seemed barbaric compared with life on cosmopolitan Coruscant. Tarkin understood this at an early age, particularly when dignitaries from the Core visited and made his parents feel smaller than he knew them to be; less evolved for living on a wild world whose outlands were racked by seismic quakes, whose rough cities lacked weather control and opera houses, and whose residents were still battling pirates and rapacious nature for supremacy. And yet he felt no need to search outside his own family for childhood heroes, since it was his ancestors who had fought back the wilderness, survived the odds, and brought order and progress to the Seswenna.

Even in relaxed and safe surroundings, then, Tarkin was not the entitled child one might have imagined judging by his tailored clothes or rambling home. As proud as his parents were of their achievements, they were also well aware of their low social standing among people who mattered. They never missed an opportunity to remind their son that life was inequitable, and that only those with an appetite for personal glory could succeed. One needed to be willing to crush underfoot anything or anyone. Discipline and order were the keys, and law was the only unanswerable response to chaos.

At every opportunity Tarkin's parents would emphasize what it meant to live in deprivation. Their sermons were designed to drill

into their son the fact that everything they owned was the product of having overcome adversity. Worse, affluence could vanish in an instant; without constant vigilance and the drive to succeed, everything one had could be wrested away by someone stronger, more disciplined, more committed to personal glory.

"How do you imagine we came to the point where we have so much," his father might say over dinner, "while so many outside the gates of this elegant home have to struggle to survive? Or do you imagine that we have always resided in such luxury, that Eriadu was accommodating from the start?"

Early on, young Wilhuff would only stare down at his plate of food in silence or mutter that he had no answers to his father's questions. Then, during one supper, his father—tall and straight-backed, with deep forehead creases that curved down past his eyes like parentheses—ordered the family's servant to remove Wilhuff's meal before he'd had a chance to take so much as a bite from it.

"You see how easy it is to go from having everything to having nothing?" his father asked.

"How would you fare if we now banished you to the city streets?" his mother added. Nearly as tall as her husband, she dressed in expensive clothes for every meal and affected elaborate hairstyles that were sometimes hours in the making. "Would you do what you needed to do to survive? Could you bring yourself to wield a club, a knife, a blaster, if weapons were what it took to keep you from starving?"

In an effort to calculate the expected response, Wilhuff glanced between the two of them and puffed out his chest. "I would do whatever I had to do."

His father only grinned in disdain. "A brave one, are you? Well, you'll have that bravery put to the test when you're taken to the Carrion."

*The Carrion.*

There it was again: that strange word he had heard so often growing up. But just then he asked: "What is the Carrion?"

His father seemed pleased that his son had finally wondered aloud. "A place that teaches you the meaning of survival."

In the quiet comfort of the family dining room, rich with the heady odors of exotic spices and long-simmered meats, the statement had no meaning. "Will I be afraid?" he said, again because he sensed he was meant to ask.

"If you know what's good for you."

"Could I die there?" he said, almost in self-amusement.

"In ways too numerous to count."

"Would you miss me if I did die?" he asked them both.

His mother was the first to say, "Of course we would."

"Then why do I have to go there? Have I done something wrong?"

His father placed his elbows on the table and leaned toward him.

"We need to know if you are simply ordinary or larger than life."

To the best of his ability, he mulled over the notion of being *larger than life*. "Did you have to go there when you were young?"

His father nodded.

"Were you afraid?"

His father sat back into his tall, brocaded armchair, as if in recall.

"In the beginning I was. Until I learned to overcome fear."

"Will I have to kill anything?"

"If you wish to survive."

With some excitement, Wilhuff said: "Will I get to use a blaster?"

His father shook his head in a grave manner. "Not always. And not when you'll need one most."

Wilhuff grappled with imagining the place, this Carrion. "Does everyone have to go there?"

"Only certain Tarkin males," his mother said.

"So Nomma never had to go?" he asked, referring to their diminutive, heavily jowled near-human servant.

"No, he didn't."

"Why not? Are Tarkins different from Nomma's family?"

"Who serves whom?" his father responded with force. "Have you ever placed a meal in front of Nomma?"

"I would."

His mother's expression hardened. "Not in this house."

"What you learn on the Carrion will one day allow you to show Nomma how to be content with his station," his father went on.

Wilhuff struggled with the word *station*. “To be happy about serving us, you mean.”

“Among other things, yes.”

Still on unsure ground, Wilhuff fell silent for an even longer moment. “Will you be taking me there—to the Carrion?” he asked finally.

His father narrowed his eyes when he smiled. “Not me. Someone else will come for you when the time is right.”

A more delicate, impressionable child might have lived in fear of that day, but to Wilhuff the threat of sudden change, the abrupt undermining of his effortless life, and the need to forge his own future eventually became a promise: a parable, an adventure on which he yearned to embark, made real in his imagination long before it actually came to be.

The day arrived shortly after his eleventh birthday; Wilhuff was, by then, a shipshape kid burning with desire for bigger things, already something of a dreamer, an actor, an exaggerator. He was seated with his parents for the evening meal. The litany of harsh reminders was about to commence when three men looking as if they had just crawled out from beneath a mine collapse barged through the front door and into dining room. Tracking mud across the polished stone floors, they began to stuff the pockets of their ragged longcoats with food snatched from the dinner table. When Wilhuff looked to his suddenly silent parents, his mother only said, “They’ve come for you.”

But if his parents and the three intruders thought they had taken him by surprise, he had one of his own in store for them. “First I need to get my gear,” he said, hurrying up the curving stairway as expressions of puzzlement began to form on the faces of the uninvited guests.

The looks were still in place when he returned a moment later, dressed in cargo pants and a multipocketed vest he had stitched together in secret over many weeks. Dangling from his neck was a pair of macrobinoculars that had been a birthday gift. His gear, his outfit, his uniform for when it would be needed.

Scanning Tarkin from head to toe, the tallest and grimmest of the

three launched a short laugh that shook the anteroom chandelier. Then he stepped forward to take the boy by shoulders that would remain bony and narrow throughout his life, shaking him as he said: “That’s a beauty, it is. A uniform fit for a future hero. And you know what? It’ll look even better with blood on it.”

His father stepped forward to say: “Wilhuff, meet my father’s brother, your grand-uncle Jova.”

Jova grinned down at him, showing even teeth, whiter than Wilhuff would have expected considering his uncle’s dirt-streaked face.

“Time to go,” Jova announced.

So: whisked from his home without a reassuring embrace from either parent, the two of them standing instead in each other’s arms, expressions of sad resolve on their faces. This was something he needed to experience. And through the gate into Eriadu’s pitch-black pall, safe for the moment within the uniform, exhilaration stifling the hunger he was already feeling. Whisked not only from the manicured grounds but also from the city itself in an aged airspeeder, on a shaky flight across the finger-shaped bay and up into the hills beyond to follow the meandering Orrineswa River to a region he had never known to exist on his homeworld, one that seemed more the stuff of holodramas and escapist literature: an untamed expanse of flat-topped mesas separated by surging boulder-strewn rivers, and in the far distance volcanic mountains that were perhaps still active. Even more shocking was Jova’s explanation that while vast areas of Eriadu were much like this one, everything the boy’s wide blue eyes could take in from horizon to horizon was family land—Tarkin land, procured twenty generations earlier and never allowed to fall into the hands of developers, miners, or anyone with designs on the region. A protected place and more: a natural monument, a reminder of what the planet could devolve into should sentient beings lose their grip and surrender their superiority to nature, to savagery. For young Wilhuff, a place of initiation; and central to it all, the Carrion Plateau.

A rickety speeder listing to one side because of a faulty repulsorlift carried them up onto the tabletop summit: Wilhuff, Jova, two other headclothed elders, and a pair of elderly Rodians who worked as guides, caretakers, trackers, all six of them perched atop the ailing

machine and Wilhuff's five keepers carrying long-barreled slugthrowers. His hunger partially staved by dried meat almost too tough to swallow, Wilhuff was beginning to have serious misgivings, though he refused to let them be known. This was a much darker and more dangerous place than the one his imagination had conjured. Fixed on masking his unease and on seeing an actual animal in the wild, he sat with the macrobinoculars glued to his eyes as the speeder navigated immense stretches of grassland and forest, passing thick-boled tenthousand-year-old trees with skinny, near-leafless limbs; monolithic ruins and cliffside petroglyphs ten times older; and shallow seasonal lakes dotted with flamboyant birds.

At length that first twilight he spotted something: a stately quadruped two meters tall, striped in black and white and crowned with graceful, curving horns. *My first animal in the wild.* The others spied it, as well, without the aid of magnifying lenses, and Jova brought the speeder to a jarring halt. But not, as it happened, to gaze on the beauty of the beast. In unison, the antique rifles came up and half a dozen shots rang out. Through the glasses, Wilhuff watched the majestic creature leap up, then fall heavily onto its side. And a moment later they were all hurrying through the sharp grass in an effort to reach their kill before other predators or scavengers could arrive—and also to get to it while it was still warm.

Wilhuff asked himself what the creature had done to deserve such a fate. If it, too, had come to the Carrion to learn the meaning of survival, it had failed miserably.

The Rodians rolled the animal onto its back, and from a sheath strapped to his thigh Jova drew a well-used vibroblade.

"Cut straight up from between the legs to the throat," he said, handing Wilhuff the knife. "And take care not to make a mess of the innards."

Fortifying himself—worried as much about fainting as about disappointing his elders—Wilhuff plunged the point of the weapon through the creature's fur and flesh and tasked the vibroblade to cut. Hot maroon blood spurted, striking him full in the face. The Rodians seemed almost gleeful as it dripped from the tip of his nose to his



chin and down the front of his pristine vest, saturating the seams and pockets he had stitched with such care.

“Good cut,” Jova said when the carcass had parted, the smell of the beast’s entrails nearly overwhelming Wilhuff. “Now, you reach deep in there”—he indicated a place in the torso—“and follow the rear curve of the breathing muscle until your hands find the liver. Then you pull it out. Go on: Do it. Do it, I said!”

In went his hesitant, shaking hands, maneuvering through squishy bulbous organs until they found a heavy lump rich with blood. He had to yank several times before the liver broke free of its fibrous net of blood vessels and ligaments, and he nearly fell backward when it did. Then Jova took the slippery, uncooperative thing into his callused hands and began tearing chunks from it.

“This one’s for you,” his uncle said, placing the largest of the pieces in the palm of Wilhuff’s already bloodied hand. He motioned with his chin: “Go ahead now. Down it goes.”

Once more Wilhuff focused on living up to expectations, and when he had gotten past his revulsion and devoured the chunk, his uncles and the Rodians celebrated his act with a short song in a language Wilhuff didn’t understand; celebrated Wilhuff’s first step, the opening stage in an initiation that wouldn’t conclude until years later at the Carrion Spike.

While Eriadu didn’t have indigenous creatures as large as the rancor or as unusual as the sarlacc, it did boast ferocious felines, carnivorous crustaceans, and a species of veermok far more fierce and cunning than others in its primate family. For the next month Wilhuff did little more than follow in the tracks of his elders, observing predators of many varieties killing and devouring one another, and learning how to keep himself from being similarly devoured. There was no denying that witnessing death up close was a far more visceral experience than watching such events transpire in holodramas viewed in the airy tranquillity of his bedroom. Still, he struggled to understand just what he was supposed to be taking away from the close encounters. Could daily brushes with death transform a simply ordinary

person into one who was larger than life? Even if that was possible, how could that transformation have an impact on the lives of Nomma and others like him? He might have been able to puzzle out the answers were he less preoccupied day to day with being set upon and eaten by the beasts they stalked.

Gradually the routine changed from merely observing kills to *stealing* them. Frequently the Rodians would use their vibro-lances to drive killer beasts back from their quarries and hold them at bay while Wilhuff rushed in to complete the theft. Other times it would be Wilhuff's turn to wield a vibro-lance, and someone else who would make the grab.

"We're teaching them how to behave in the presence of their betters," Jova said. "The ones who learn, profit from the laws we lay down; the rest die." He wanted to make certain Wilhuff understood. "Never try to live decently, boy—not unless you're willing to open your life to tragedy and sadness. Live like a beast, and no event, no matter how harrowing, will ever be able to move you."

When his uncle decided that Wilhuff had experienced enough stealing, it came time to do the actual hunting. And so Jova and the others began to teach him tactical methods for taking advantage of the wind or the angle of the light. They taught him how to defend against attacks by groups of beasts by confounding them with unexpected moves. They taught him to kill by concentrating all his power on one point. All the while the vest became more bloodied and tattered, until ultimately it was useless except as a rag, and he was on his own, without a uniform or costume to hide within.

The routine of tracking, hunting, killing, and cooking over fire continued as the land surrendered the last of its moisture to the blinding sky. His feet turned raw and his sunburned skin blistered, his mind given over to memorizing the names of the Carrion's every tree, animal, and insect—all of them serving one purpose or another. Late one evening the speeder's powerful forward lamps illuminated a rodent as it leapt from the saw grass, and with a carefully aimed collision Jova sent it flying. Wilhuff was instructed to use his vibroblade to excise a scent gland buried where the animal's thin, hairless tail

met its plump body. From that gland the Rodians prepared a musky gel that they then used in their hunts for more of the same rodents. Similarly, they prepared stimulant concoctions from residue drained from the stomach of long-necked ruminants or the droppings of felines that had ingested certain plants. Wilhuff grew accustomed to eating every part of an animal and to drinking blood on its own or mixed with mind-altering plants gathered during treks across the plateau.

Over time he became so inured to the sight, smell, and taste of blood that even his dreams ran red with it. He kept waiting for the adventure to conclude at some log-walled shelter stocked with prepared food and soft beds, but the days grew only more harrowing, and at night half-starved scavengers would circle and howl at the edge of a meager cook fire, their eyes glowing furiously in the dark, waiting for a chance to rush in and steal back what food they could.

The tight-knit band of humans and Rodians didn't always succeed at remaining at the top of the food chain. Jova's cousin Zellit was killed during a nighttime raid by a gang of reptiles whose saliva contained a powerful poison. By midseason Wilhuff knew real hunger for the first time, and came close to dying of an illness that caused him to shake so violently he thought his bones would break.

Sometimes even the smallest of the plateau's creatures would catch them unprepared and get the better of them. One night, when they had been too exhausted to set up a perimeter of motion detectors, he dreamed that something was feasting on his lower lip, and what his numb fingers found there was a venomous septoid, its pincers anchored in his soft flesh. Waking with a start, he hurried through the open flap of the self-deploying tent only to land in a stream of the segmented critters, which were all over him in a moment, hungry to find purchase wherever they could. By then his pained cries had woken the others, who themselves became targets, and shortly all of them were all hopping around in the dark, yanking septoids from themselves or plucking them off one another. When at last they had retreated to safety, it became clear that the assailants comprised only a narrow tributary of the insect river; the principal torrent had gone

up and over the tent to where the Rodians had stored pieces of the beasts the group had slaughtered and dressed earlier in the day—all of it now devoured to the bone.

But regardless of whether they had won or lost the day, Wilhuff would be treated to tales of his ancestors' exploits: the lore of the early Tarkins.

"All of Eriadu was similar to the Carrion before humans arrived from the Core to tame it," Jova told him. "Every day, on their own, as pioneers and settlers, they waged battles with the beasts that ruled the planet. But our ancestors' eventual triumph only altered the balance, not the reality. For all that sentients have achieved with weapons and machines, life remains an ongoing battle for survival, with the strong or the smart at the top of the heap, and the rest kept in check by firepower and laws."

Jova explained that the Tarkin family had produced a succession of mentors and guides through the many generations. What made him unique was his decision to make the Carrion his home following his initiation in young adulthood. That was how he came to have tutored Wilhuff's father, and why he might even live long enough to tutor Wilhuff's son, should he have one.

They spent the remainder of the dry season on the plateau, leaving only when the rains came to that part of Eriadu. Wilhuff was a different person when the speeder carried them down from the mesa and back into civilization. Jova had no need to lecture him on what technology had allowed his ancestors to achieve in the planet's handful of cities, since it was evident everywhere Wilhuff looked.

But Jova had something to add.

"Triumphing over nature means better lives for sentients, but dominance is sustained only by bringing order to chaos and establishing law where none exists. On Eriadu, the goal was always to rid the planet of any creature that hadn't grown to fear us, so that we could rule supreme. Up the well, outside Eriadu's envelope, the goal is the same, but with a different caliber of predators. When you're old enough to be taken there, you're going to find yourself faced with prey who are every bit as quick thinking, well armed, and determined to succeed as you are. And unless you've taken the lessons of the Car-

rion to heart, only the stars themselves will bear witness to your cold airless death, and they will remain unmoved.”

Returned to his comfortable bedroom, Wilhuff wrestled with what he had been put through, the experiences on the plateau infiltrating his sleep as vivid dreams and night terrors. But only for a short time. Little by little, the experiences began to shape him, and would become the stuff of his true education. Each of the next five summers would find him on the Carrion, and each season his education would widen, right up until the day he had to endure his final test at the Spike.

But that was a different story altogether.



---

## PREDACITY

---

**TARKIN WAITED UNTIL** the *Carrion Spike* was in hyperspace to announce an impromptu inspection of the officers and enlisted ratings who were accompanying him to Coruscant. In the starship's austere main cabin, furnished only with a round conference table and chairs for half a dozen, eighteen of his crew were standing smartly in two rows, arms at their sides, shoulders squared, chins held high. Each wore a uniform similar to his, though the tunics were slightly longer and the trousers slimmer and more threadbare than those the fabricator had produced for him. The officers wore brimmed caps studded with identity disks, and displayed code cylinders in their appropriate pockets.

Hands clasped behind his back and looking stylish in his new garments, Tarkin had reached the last crewmember in the second row—a midshipman—when he stopped to peer down at the instep of the junior officer's left boot, where a smudge of what looked like grease or some other viscous substance had left a large circular stain.

"Ensign, what is *that*?" he asked, pointing.

The young man lowered bloodshot eyes to follow Tarkin's forefin-

ger to the spot. "That, sir? Must have spilled some hair product I was applying in preparation for the inspection." His gaze was unsteady when he looked up at Tarkin. "Permission to wipe it off, sir?"

"Denied," Tarkin said. "To begin with, it's obviously a *stain*, Ensign, not some blemish you can simply rub out." He paused to scan the midshipman from head to toe. "Remove your cap." The youth's brown hair was regulation length, but it did indeed have the stiff look that hair gel might have imparted.

"Attempting to train it, are you?"

The midshipmen stood stiffly, eyes front. "Exactly, sir. It can be unruly."

"No doubt. But that blot on your boot is not hair product."

"Sir?"

"One can tell simply by the way it congealed that it is lubricant—lubricant of a type used almost exclusively in the repulsor generator of our T-Forty-Four landspeeders." Tarkin's eyes narrowed as he focused on the stain. "I see, too, that the lubricant is impregnated with grit, which I suspect came from outside Sentinel's auxiliary dome, almost certainly from where the landing platform is undergoing renovation."

The youth swallowed. "I don't know what to say, sir, I could have sworn—"

"One of our landspeeders was recently sent to the repair bay of the vehicle pool after having become fouled by construction dust," Tarkin said, as if to himself. "There are areas in the bay that are not entirely accessible to our security holocams. However, I often tour the vehicle pool to review repairs, and recently have chanced upon envelopes of a sort that have become fashionable for the storage of a particular class of stimulant spice." His gaze bored into the youth's face. "You're sweating, Ensign. Are you certain you're fit for duty?"

"A touch of hyperspace nausea, sir."

"Perhaps. But nausea doesn't account for the fact that the thumb and index finger of your right hand bear yellow-ocher stains, which are often the result of pinching plugs of spice that hasn't been sufficiently processed. I observe, too, that your left eyetooth reveals what appears to be a nascent cavity, such as might be caused by dipping

spice. Finally, your record indicates that you have recently been late in reporting for duty, as well as inattentive when you deign to report.” Tarkin paused for a moment. “Have I forgotten anything?”

Embarrassment mottled the midshipman’s face.

“Nothing to say for yourself, Ensign?”

“Nothing at this time, sir.”

“I thought not.”

Tarkin swung to a female officer standing at the opposite end of the row. “Chief, Ensign Baz is relieved of duty. See to it that he is escorted to the crew berth and confined to quarters for the remainder of the voyage. I will decide his fate once we reach Coruscant.”

The petty officer saluted. “Yes, sir.”

“Also, alert Commander Cassel that the vehicle pool has become a rendezvous area for spice users. Tell him to perform a flash inspection of all barracks and personal lockers. I expect him to confiscate all inebriants and other illicit substances.”

“Sir,” she said.

Dismissed, the rest of the crew scattered with haste, and Tarkin blew out his breath in irritation. The conversation with Mas Amedda had left him on edge, and he was taking his frustration out on his crew. He understood and fully supported the idea of a chain of command, but he took it personally when power plays interfered with his duties. He trusted Cassel to attend to Sentinel’s responsibilities in his absence, but he wasn’t comfortable with being summoned away at such a critical time, much less without full explanation. If the purpose of the visit was to discuss the recent attack, then perhaps he should have delayed filing the report. If not about the attack, what matter could be so vital that it couldn’t wait until after the looming shipments were safely escorted to Geonosis?

What was done was done, however, and he was determined to present the best possible face to the Emperor.

Leaving the main compartment, he walked forward through two hatches to the ship’s command cabin, which he had designed to be more spacious than those found on similar ships, as it was here that he spent most of his travel time. Immediately he found himself relaxing, and let out his breath in slow reprieve. If exasperated by Corus-



cant's demands, he should at least be able to find some solace in the ship.

At just under 150 meters in length, the corvette fit neatly between the old Judicial cruisers and Corellian Engineering's new-generation frigates. Heavily armed with turbolasers, ion cannons, and proton torpedo tubes, and featuring a Class One hyperdrive that made it the fastest ship in the Imperial Navy, the *Carrion Spike* had been designed specifically for him—and to meet many of his personal specifications—by Sienar Fleet Systems. Based on a prototype stealth corvette that had been introduced during the Clone Wars at the Battle of Christophsis to counter Separatist Admiral Trench's blockade of the planet, the triangular-shaped ship was unique in having cloak technology. Powered by rare stygium crystals, the stealth system rendered the ship essentially invisible to ordinary scanners.

Hearing Tarkin enter, the captain—a slim, dark-complected man who had served under Tarkin during the war—swiveled in his acceleration chair.

“Sir, do you wish to assume the controls?”

Tarkin nodded and replaced him in the command chair, running his hands over the instruments as he settled in. The *Carrion Spike*'s ion turbine sublight arrays, countermeasures suite, and navicomputer were also state-of-the-art, the latter allowing the ship to make the jump from Sentinel Base to Coruscant without exiting hyperspace to retrieve routing data from relay stations or primitive hyperwave beacons.

Gazing into the nebulous swirl of hyperspace, he decided that, yes, he could take comfort in having such a ship. In many respects the *Carrion Spike* was a sign of just how far he had come, and where he now stood in the Imperial hegemony.

And what Eriadu wouldn't have given for such a vessel in the decades leading up to the Clone Wars! At that point the sector's problems were pirates lured by sudden wealth, privateers hired by Eriadu's competitors in the lommite trade, and resistance factions protesting the unjust practices of shipping conglomerates operating with impunity in the free trade zones. Eriadu would eventually triumph with

the defenses it had at its disposal; but a ship like the *Carrion Spike* might have granted the Seswenna the edge it needed to vanquish its enemies with greater efficiency and added flourish.

In the absence of a Republic military, and as punishment for refusing to provide the Core Worlds with profitable deals, Judicials—the Republic’s non-Jedi law enforcers—were often withheld from intervening in disputes, leaving the Seswenna little choice but to create its own armed forces. A loosely knit group that came to be known as the Outland Regions Security Force, the sector’s response to pirates and privateers had to make do with second-rate ships built on Eriadu or at Sluis Van, and with laser and ion cannons purchased from arms merchants who for a century had been ignoring the Republic’s ban on the sale of weaponry to member worlds.

Not six standard months after passing his ultimate test on the Carrion Plateau, sixteen-year-old Wilhuff was sent up the well to begin his training in space combat, his tutelage supervised by an entirely new cast of characters, some of them Tarkins, but others from worlds as distant as Bothawui and Ryloth. Jova had neither a taste nor the tolerance for space, but would sometimes sedate himself with anti-nausea drugs and accompany his grand-nephew, less to offer hands-on instruction in astrogation, combat maneuvering, and weapons training than to make sure that Wilhuff was applying in zero-g the lessons he had learned on the plateau.

“More than fifty Tarkins have lost their lives to marauders,” his uncle told him, “and the number of Eriaduans who’ve been killed is beyond estimation.”

To drive home the point, their first stop was a colony world of Eriadu that had suffered a recent attack by pirates. Wilhuff had had ample time to grow accustomed to the sight, scent, and taste of blood, but he had never seen so much human blood spilled in one place. The mining colony had been attacked without warning, thoroughly plundered, and burned to the ground. Those settlers who hadn’t died of laser wounds or been incinerated in the fires had been mercilessly butchered and left to be picked over by scavengers or consumed by insects. It was clear to Wilhuff that many of them had been tortured.

Hundreds of settlers had been abducted and perhaps already sold into slavery.

Wilhuff was sickened, physically and spiritually, in a way he had never experienced on the Carrion, and the disgust he felt gave rise to despair and a hunger for revenge.

"This is the way of things among the lawless," Jova said as they moved grimly through the destruction, not so much to defuse Wilhuff's outrage as to anchor the massacre in a moral context. "Pirates, privateers, or activists, they're no different from the vermin and predators we dealt with on the Carrion. They need to be educated, and acquainted with our notion of law and order. So you treat them just like the ones we hunted or forced into submission, striking fast and in full commitment. You make use of asteroid fields, nebulae, star flares, whatever you find, to intensify the havoc. You keep them off balance with unexpected maneuvers, and you let your starfighters function like vibro-lances in the hands of our Rodians. You establish supremacy like we showed you, by concentrating all the force at your command on one point, hammering away like you would with a vibroblade, through armor like you would through scales or cartilage or bone, and you show no quarter. You stay on your quarry until you've found the soft spot that brings death, and you put the fear into the rest by gutting your victim, ripping out his liver, and devouring it."

As he was expected to, Wilhuff took his uncle's instructions to heart, by demonstrating in space the mettle he had shown on the Carrion.

The incident that would garner the most attention in the academies he would later attend was one involving Eriadu's ore convoys and a Senex sector pirate group known as Q'anah's Marauders. Loans from offworld financiers had enabled the Greater Seswenna to create the Outland Regions Security Force, but the militia had far too few vessels to protect every lommite shipment traveling between Eriadu and the Core. Making the most of the shortage, several pirate groups had forged an alliance wherein some would monitor or engage Outland's warships while others preyed on the unguarded convoys.

The titular head of the alliance was a human female known only as Q'anah, whose audacious raids throughout the Senex sector had made her something of a folk hero. A native of the Core world Bren-taal IV, she was the only daughter of a former bodyguard for House Cormond, who had accepted a lucrative offer to leave the Core to oversee security for House Elegin on the world Asmeru. Trained in combat by her father and eager for adventure, Q'anah became the mistress of the youngest son of the noble house, who was himself leading a secret life as a pirate and whose group Q'anah eventually joined. Fighting alongside the members of her lover's crew, Q'anah lived a colorful and bawdy life until the young Elegin was captured, sentenced to death, and executed on Karfeddion. Having by then given birth to Elegin triplets, Q'anah dedicated herself to avenging the death of her paramour by targeting ships and settlements strewn across the Senex-Juvex sectors.

At the point she became a nuisance to Eriadu, she had already become the subject of breathtaking HoloNet tales and scandalous rumors, having survived starship collisions and starfighter crashes, blaster-bolt and vibroblade wounds, and countless fistfights and personal duels. Said to be as fast on the draw as a circus sharpshooter and as talented on the dance floor as a double-jointed Twi'lek, Q'anah had chewed off her own infected hand while awaiting rescue on an isolated moon, and was known to wear artificial arms and at least one leg—from the knee down—in addition to an ocular implant and who knew what else. Twice she had been captured and sentenced to lengthy terms in maximum-security prisons, and had escaped from each thanks to daring rescues mounted by her soldiers, who all but worshipped her. Only her link to House Elegin had saved her from execution. But following an encounter with Judicial Forces, during which she destroyed six ships, the Republic also put a high price on her head, and it was that bounty that had landed her in the Greater Seswenna, a sector rarely if ever patrolled by Judicials, notwithstanding repeated entreaties by Eriadu and other harassed worlds.

Lommitte convoys typically comprised up to a score of unpiloted container ships slave-rigged to a crewed shepherd vessel, now and then with an armed gunboat trailing. Each container was capable of

jumping to hyperspace, but during those years before the era of affordable and reliable navicomputers, the convoys had to navigate by hyperspace buoys located along the route, and experience had proved that jumping in single file was safer than going to hyperspace in clusters, even though the maneuver left the containers vulnerable to attack on their reversions to realspace.

Outland capital ships would ride herd on valuable shipments, but ordinary convoys frequently found themselves targeted by Q'anah's flotilla of deadly frigates and corvettes. With the swiftest ships engaging the shepherd vessel, the rest would deliver boarding parties to some of the containers and separate them from the pack. Once the slave-rigs of the ore carriers were disabled, the boxy vessels would be slaved to a dedicated pirate frigate and jumped in line to hyperspace. By the time Outland could respond to the distress calls, Q'anah's crews were already selling the stolen ore on the black market or turning it over to the companies that had hired them to carry out the raids.

The convoys became easier and easier pickings, and Eriadu Mining began to accept that it was more cost-effective to surrender the containers than to risk having their overpriced lead or follow ships destroyed in defensive engagements. The company attempted to trick the pirates by placing empty container ships among the fully loaded ones, but the dummy ships only prompted an increase in the number of raids. The company also tried concealing explosive devices and even, on a few occasions, parties of armed spacers in some of the containers. Not once, however, did Q'anah's raiders take the bait, and over time the strategy of including dummy containers and armed troopers was also deemed too expensive. Attempts were made to predict which containers the pirates would target, but in the end Eriadu Mining's battle analysts decided that Q'anah was choosing containers at random.

Just coming into his own as a lieutenant in Outland's anti-piracy task force, Wilhuff refused to accept the disheartening analysis and devoted himself to a detailed study of the raids in which Q'anah had participated—failures and successes both—in the hope of deciphering her method for choosing containers. Her attacks weren't at all like

the hunts he had witnessed on the Carrion Plateau, where solitary predators or prides would select the stragglers, the young, or the weakest of the herd animals, and for some time it indeed appeared that her choices had neither rhyme nor reason. But Wilhuff remained convinced that a pattern existed—even if Q'anah herself wasn't consciously aware of having created one.

The scheme that ultimately emerged was so deceptively simple, he was surprised no one had unraveled it. *Q'anah* turned out not to be the pirate's original name, but rather one she had adopted after her father had relocated the family to Asmeru. In the ancient language of that mountainous world, the word referred to an ages-old festival that always fell on the same day of the planet's complex calendar: the 234th day of the local-year, in the 16th month. Q'anah had assigned each of the five numbers to a letter of her name, and had used that sequence as her basis for choosing targets. Thus on her initial attack on an Eriadu Mining convoy, she had targeted the second container ship counting back from the lead ship; then the third from that one, then the fourth from that one, and so on, until she had grabbed five containers. On subsequent attacks the sequence might commence substituting the last targeted container for the lead vessel. Sometimes she would reverse the sequence, or move forward in the line rather than toward the rear. Occasionally a pattern would begin in one convoy but wouldn't conclude until the next convoy or even the one after that. The numeric sequence itself, however, never changed. Q'anah was essentially spelling out her sobriquet over and over, as if leaving her mark on every convoy she attacked.

Once Wilhuff had grasped the pattern and persuaded Outland's commanders that his months of obsession hadn't driven him completely mad, Eriadu Mining agreed to sacrifice several container ships to the pirates as a means of confirming the theory. Emboldened by the results, the company urged Outland to stock the predicted convoy targets with soldiers, but Wilhuff's paternal cousin, Ranulph Tarkin, proposed an alternative method for exacting revenge by secreting a computer virus in the containers' hyperdrive motivators. One of Outland's most respected commanders, Ranulph—who so resembled Wilhuff's father they could have passed for twins—had

designed the ploy years earlier, but Eriadu Mining had balked, based on the cost of having to outfit countless containers with the virused computers. With a lead on which containers Q'anah would target, however, the company agreed to finance the measure, even though the strategy entailed dispatching only one convoy at a time and often operating at a loss.

To make matters worse, the attacks suddenly ceased. It was almost as if the pirates had learned of the ploy, and with increasing pressure from Core buyers for added shipments and wasting funds on attempts to ferret out spies in their midst, Eriadu Mining was on the brink of financial ruin when the Marauders finally struck, targeting precisely those containers Wilhuff had predicted. No sooner did the pirates slave the containers to their frigate than the virus wormed its way into the ship's navicomputer, overriding the requested jump coordinates and delivering it to a realspace destination where Outland warships were lying in wait. Once the frigate had been crippled and boarded, and Q'anah and her crew rounded up and shackled, Ranulph—always the gentleman—insisted on introducing the pirate queen to her eighteen-year-old “captor.”

Her sneering expression ridiculed the very idea of it. “Barely a whisker on his chin, but luck enough for a professional sabacc player.”

“It was your vanity that turned out to be a laudable substitute for luck,” Wilhuff told her. “Your need to leave your signature all over Eriadu's convoys.”

Her real eye opened wide and she quirked a grin that told him she understood what he had accomplished, but she followed up the begrudging grin with a snort of contempt. “There isn't a prison that can contain me, boy—even on Eriadu.”

Wilhuff offered the sly smile that would later become a kind of signature. “You're confusing Eriadu with worlds that have noble houses and trials by jury, Q'anah.”

She searched his youthful face. “Execution on the spot, is it?”

“Nothing so straightforward.”

She continued to appraise him openly and defiantly. “There's hardly a part of me that hasn't been replaced, boy. But take my word: I'm not the last of my kind, and your convoys will continue to suffer.”

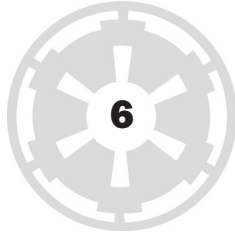
He allowed a nod. "Only if we fail to discourage your followers."

Outland had Q'anah and her crew transferred to one of the stolen containers, whose sublight engines were programmed to send the ship slowly but inexorably toward the system's sun. The plight of the captives was broadcast over the pirates' own communications network, and several of Q'anah's cohorts succeeded in determining the point of origin of the transmission and hastening to her rescue. Their ships were destroyed on sight by Outland forces. The rest were wise enough to go into hiding.

Wilhuff demanded that the container ship's audio and video feeds be kept enabled to the very end, so that Outland's forces and any others who might have been listening could either savor or lament the agonized wails of the pirates as they were slowly roasted to death. In the end, even the notorious Q'anah succumbed to the torture and wailed openly.

"Your task is to teach them the meaning of law and order," Jova would hector his nephew. "Then to punish them so that they remember the lesson. In the end, you'll have driven the fear of you so deeply into them that fear alone will have them cowering at your feet."





---

## IMPERIAL CENTER

---

**BRIGHT-SIDE CORUSCANT** air-traffic control directed the *Car-rion Spike* to the Imperial Palace, and there into a courtyard landing field that was large enough to accommodate *Victory*- and *Venator*-class Star Destroyers. As repulsors eased the ship down through the busy skyways and into the court, Tarkin realized that the Emperor's current residence had once been the headquarters for the Jedi—though practically all that remained of the Order's elegant Temple complex was its copse of five skyscraping spires, now the pinnacle of a sprawling amalgam of blockish edifices with sloping façades.

At the edge of the landing courtyard, centered among a detail of red-robed Imperial Guards armed with gleaming force pikes, stood Mas Amedda, dressed in voluminous shoulder-padded robes and carrying a staff that was taller than him, its head ornamented by a lustrous humaniform figure.

"How charitable of you to make time for us, Governor," the Chagrian said as Tarkin approached from the corvette's lowered boarding ramp.

Tarkin played along. "And for you to welcome me personally, Vizier."

"We all do our part for the Empire."

With crisp turns, Amedda and the face-shielded guards led him through elaborate doors into the Palace. Tarkin was familiar with the interior, but the expansive, soaring corridors he walked years earlier had contained a rare solemnity. Now they teemed with civilians and functionaries of many species, and the walls and plinths were left unadorned by art or statuary.

Tarkin felt curiously out of step, perhaps because of the increased gravity, the pace, the crowds, or a combination of all those things. For three years the only non- or near-humans he had seen or had direct contact with had been slaves or recruited laborers at outlying bases or at the battle station's construction site. He had heard that one needn't have been absent from Coruscant for years to be startled by the changes, in that each day saw buildings raised, demolished, incorporated into ever larger and taller monstrosities, or merely stripped of Republic-era ornamentation and renovated in accordance with a more severe aesthetic. Curved lines were yielding to harsh angles; sophistication to declaration. Fashions had changed along similar lines, with few outside the Imperial court affecting cloaks, headcloths, or garish robes. By most accounts, though, Coruscanti were satisfied, especially those who lived and worked in the upper tiers of the fathomless cityscape; content if for no other reason than to have the brutal war behind them.

Tarkin's most carefree years had been spent on Coruscant and neighboring Core Worlds before he had been elected governor of Eriadu, with some help from family members and influential contacts. He had a sudden desire to sneak outside the Palace and explore the precincts he had roamed as an adventurous young adult. But perhaps it was enough to know that law and order had finally triumphed over corruption and indulgence, which had been the hallmarks of the Republic.

Someone called his name as he and Amedda were moving down a colonnaded walkway, and Tarkin turned, recognizing the face of a man he had known since his academy years.

"Nils Tenant," he said in genuine surprise, separating himself from the Chagrian's retinue to shake Tenant's proffered hand. Fair-skinned, with a prominent nose and a downturning full-lipped mouth, Tenant had commanded a Star Destroyer during the Clone Wars, and displayed on his uniform tunic the rank insignia plaque of a rear admiral.

"Wonderful to see you, Wilhuff," Tenant said, pumping Tarkin's hand. "I came as soon as I learned you were coming."

Tarkin affected a frown. "And here I thought my arrival would be a well-kept secret."

Tenant sniffed in faint amusement. "Only some secrets are well kept on Coruscant."

Clearly bothered by the delay, Mas Amedda tapped the base of his staff on the polished floor and waited until the two had joined the retinue before moving deeper into the Palace.

"Is that the new uniform?" Tenant asked as they walked.

Tarkin pinched the sleeve of the tunic. "What, this old thing?" then asked before Tenant could respond: "So who let it be known that I was coming? Was it Yularen? Tagge? Motti?"

Tenant was dismissive. "You know, you hear things." He moved with purposeful slowness. "You've been in the Western Reaches, Wilhuff?"

Tarkin nodded. "Still hunting down General Grievous's former allies. And you?"

"Pacification," Tenant said in a distracted way. "Brought back to attend a Joint Chiefs meeting." Abruptly he clamped his hand on Tarkin's upper arm, bringing him to a halt and encouraging him to fall back from Amedda and the guards. When they seemed to be out of earshot of Amedda, Tenant said: "Wilhuff, are the rumors true?"

Tarkin adopted a questioning look. "What rumors? And why are you whispering?"

Tenant glanced around before answering. "About a mobile battle station. A weapon that will—"

Tarkin stopped him before he could say more, glancing at Amedda in the hope that he and Tenant were, in fact, out of the Chagrian's range.

"This is hardly the place for discussions of that sort," he said firmly.

Tenant looked chastised. "Of course. It's just that . . . You hear so many rumors. People are here one day, gone the next. And no one has laid eyes on the Emperor in months. Amedda, Dangor, and the rest of the Ruling Council have taken to dispatching processions of Imperial skylimos simply to maintain an illusion that the Emperor moves about in public." He fell briefly silent. "You know they commissioned an enormous statue of the Emperor for Senate—I mean, Imperial Plaza? So far, though, the thing looks more terrifying than majestic."

Tarkin raised an eyebrow. "Isn't that the idea, Nils?"

Tenant nodded in a distracted way. "You're right, of course." Again he regarded the nearby columns with wariness. "The scuttlebutt is that you're scheduled to meet with him."

Tarkin shrugged noncommittally. "If that's his pleasure."

Tenant compressed his lips. "Put in a word for me, Wilhuff—for old times' sake. A great change is coming—everyone senses it—and I want to be back in the action."

It struck Tarkin as an odd request, even a trifle audacious. But in considering it, he supposed he could understand wanting to be in the Emperor's good graces, as he was certainly grateful to be there.

He clapped his fellow officer on the shoulder. "If the occasion arises, Nils."

Tenant smiled weakly. "You're a good man, Wilhuff," he said, falling back and vanishing as Tarkin hurried to catch up with Amedda and the retinue turned a corner in the hallway.

Tarkin attracted a good deal of attention as the group climbed a broad stairway and debouched into a vast atrium. Figures of all stripe and station—officials, advisers, soldiers—stopped in their tracks, even while trying not to make an obvious display of staring at him. Subjugator of pirates; former governor of Eriadu; graduate of Prefsbelt; naval officer during the Clone Wars, decorated at the Battle of Kamino and promoted to admiral after a daring escape from the Citadel prison; adjutant general by the war's end, and named by the Em-

peror one of twenty Imperial Moff's . . . After years of absence from the Imperial capital, was Tarkin here to be forgiven, rewarded, or punished with another mission that would send him chasing Separatist recidivists through the Western Reaches, the Corporate Sector, the Tion Hegemony?

He sometimes wondered where fate might have taken him if he *hadn't* entered the academy system after his years with Outland, when a move to civilian instruction had seemed the best strategy for introducing himself to the wider galaxy. Perhaps he would still be in pursuit of Outer Rim pirates or mercenaries, or slaved to a desk in some planetary capital city. No matter what, it was unlikely that he would ever have crossed paths with the Emperor—when he was still known as Palpatine.

It was while Tarkin was attending the Sullust Sector Spacefarers Academy that they met—or rather that Palpatine had sought him out. Tarkin had just returned to the academy's orbital facility from long hours of starship maneuvers in an Incom T-95 Trainer when someone called his name as he was crossing the flight deck. Turning to the voice, he was astonished to find the Republic senator walking toward him. Tarkin knew that Palpatine was part of Supreme Chancellor Kalpana's party, which included his administrator Finis Valorum and several other senators, all of whom were on station to attend the academy's commencement and commissioning day ceremonies. Most of the graduates would be moving on to positions in commercial piloting, local system navies, or the Judicial Department. Dressed in fashionable blue robes, the red-haired aesthete politician flashed a welcoming smile and extended a hand in greeting.

"Cadet Tarkin, I'm Senator Palpatine."

"I know who you are," Tarkin said, shaking hands with him. "You represent Naboo in the Senate. Your homeworld and mine are practically galactic neighbors."

"So we are."

"I want to thank you personally for the position you took in the Senate on the bill that will encourage policing of the free trade zones."

Palpatine gestured in dismissal. "Our hope is to bring stability to

the Outer Rim worlds.” His eyes narrowed. “The Jedi haven’t provided any support in dealing with the pirates that continue to plague the Seswenna?”

Tarkin shook his head. “They’ve ignored our requests for intervention. Apparently the Seswenna doesn’t rate highly enough on their list of priorities.”

Palpatine sniffed. “Well, I might be able to offer some help in that regard—not with the Jedi, of course. With the Judicials, I mean.”

“Eriadu would be grateful for any help. Stability in the Seswenna could ease tensions all along the Hydian Way.”

Palpatine’s eyebrows lifted in delighted surprise. “A cadet who is not only a very skilled pilot, but who also has an awareness of politics. What are the chances?”

“I might ask the same. What are the chances of a Republic senator knowing me on sight?”

“As a matter of fact, your name came up in a discussion I was having with a group of like-minded friends on Coruscant.”

“My name?” Tarkin said in disbelief as they began to amble toward the pilots’ ready rooms.

“We are always on the lookout for those who demonstrate remarkable skills in science, technology, and other fields.” Palpatine allowed his words to trail off, then said: “Tell me, Cadet Tarkin, what are your plans following graduation from this institution?”

“I still have another two years of training. But I’m hoping to be accepted to the Judicial Academy.”

Palpatine waved in dismissal. “Easily done. I happen to be personal friends with the provost of the academy. I would be glad to advocate on your behalf, if you wish.”

“I’d be honored,” Tarkin managed. “I don’t know what to say, Senator. If there’s anything I can do—”

“There is.” Palpatine came to an abrupt halt on the flight deck and turned to face Tarkin directly. “I want to propose an alternative course for you. Politics.”

Tarkin repressed a laugh. “I’m not sure, Senator . . .”

“I know what you must be thinking. But politics was a noble enough choice for some of your relatives. Or are you cut from so

different a cloth?" Palpatine continued before Tarkin could reply. "If I may speak candidly for a moment, Cadet, we feel—my friends and I—that you'd be wasting your talents in the Judicial Department. With your piloting skills, I'm certain you would be an excellent addition to their forces, but you're already much more than a mere pilot."

Tarkin shook his head in bewilderment. "I wouldn't even know where to begin."

"And why should you? Politics, however, is my area of expertise." Palpatine's relaxed expression became serious. "I understand what it's like to be a young man of action and obvious ambition who feels that he has been marginalized by the circumstances of his birth. Even here, I can imagine that you've been ostracized by the spoiled progeny of the influential. It has little to do with wealth—your family could buy and sell most of the brats here—and everything to do with fortune: the fact that you weren't born closer to the Core. And so you are forced to defend against their petty prejudices: that you lack refinement, culture, a sense of propriety." He stopped to allow a smile to take shape. "I'm well aware that you've been able to make a name for yourself in spite of this. That alone, young Tarkin, shows that you weren't born to follow."

"You're speaking from personal experience," Tarkin risked saying after a long moment of silence.

"Of course I am," Palpatine told him. "Our homeworlds are different in the sense that mine wished no part of galactic politics, while yours has long sought to be included. But I knew from early on that politics could provide me with a path to the center. Even so, I didn't get to Coruscant fully on my own. I had the help of a . . . teacher. I was younger than you are now when this person helped me realize what I most wanted in life, and helped me attain it."

"You . . .," Tarkin began.

Palpatine nodded. "Your family is powerful in its own right, but only in the Seswenna. Outland forces will soon have the sector's pirate pests on the run, and what will you do then?" His eyes narrowed once more. "There are larger fights to wage, Cadet. When you graduate, why not visit me on Coruscant? I will be your guide to the Senate District, and with any luck I'll be able to change your mind about

politics as a career. Unlike Coruscant, Eriadu hasn't been corrupted by greed and the welter of contradictory voices. It has always been a Tarkin world, and it could become a beacon for other worlds wishing to be recognized by the galactic community. You could be the one to bring that about."

As it happened Tarkin wouldn't enter politics for many years, though he did accept Palpatine's help in gaining admission to the Judicial Academy. There—and precisely as the senator from Naboo had predicted—his fellow cadets had initially viewed him as a kind of noble savage: a principled being with abundant energy and drive who had the misfortune of hailing from an uncivilized world.

In part, Tarkin's father and the top echelon of the Outland Regions Security Force were to blame. Eager to impress the Core with their achievements and the fact that they were willing to contribute one of their finest strategists to the Republic, Outland's leaders had personally delivered Tarkin to the academy in one of its finest warships, its glossy hull emblazoned with the symbol of the fanged veermok and Tarkin himself turned out in the full regalia of an Outland commander. His arrival caused such a stir that the academy's provost marshal had mistaken him for a visiting dignitary—which, while certainly the case on worlds throughout the embattled Seswenna sector, carried no weight in the Core. Were it not for Palpatine's influence once more, Tarkin might have been dismissed from the academy even before he had been enrolled as a plebe.

Tarkin understood that he had neglected to heed the lessons he had learned at Sullust and had committed a tactical blunder of the worst sort. Both on the Carrion Plateau and in Eriadu space he had grown so accustomed to flying boldly into confrontation and announcing himself with flourish and dash that he hadn't stopped to consider the staid nature of his new testing ground. Instead of sowing chaos of the sort that had so often served his purposes on land and in deep space, he had succeeded only in rousing the instant scorn of his instructors and the ridicule of his fellow plebes, who took every chance to refer to him as "Commander" or to offer facetious salutes when- and wherever possible.



Early on, the derisive teasing led to brawls, which he mostly won, and also to disciplinary action and demerits that sentenced him to remain at the bottom of the class. That a plebe could be expelled from the Judicials for standing up for himself was something of a revelation, and perhaps he should have seen it as emblematic of the stance the Republic itself would adopt in the coming years, when its authority would be challenged by the Separatists. But he couldn't keep himself from answering fire with fire. Gradually he came to suffer the mockery of his peers without resorting to retribution, though demerits would continue to accrue owing to mischief making and impulsive outbursts. Even so, he refused to allow himself to be cut down to size, choosing instead to bide his time and wait for an opportunity to show his peers just what he was made of.

Halcyon would prove to be that opportunity.

A Republic member world located in the Colonies region, Halcyon was suffering a crisis of its own. A cold-blooded group of would-be usurpers clamoring for the planet's right to manage its own affairs had abducted several members of the planetary leadership and was holding them hostage at a remote bastion. After attempts at negotiation had been exhausted, the Republic Senate had granted permission for the Jedi to intervene and, if necessary, to employ "lightsaber diplomacy" to resolve the crisis. Tarkin was chosen to be one of the eighty Judicials the Senate ordered to attend and reinforce the Jedi.

Never having seen let alone served alongside a Jedi, he was fascinated from the start. His theoretical grasp of the Force was as keen as that of most of his academy peers, but he was less interested in furthering his understanding of metaphysics than in observing the aloof Jedi in action. How adept were they at tactics and strategy? How quick were they to wield their lightsabers when their commands fell on deaf ears? How far were they willing to go to uphold the authority of the Republic? As a self-considered expert in the use of the vibrolance, Tarkin was equally captivated by their lightsaber skills. Watching them train during the journey to Halcyon, he saw that each had an individual fighting style, and that the techniques for attacks and parries seemed unrelated to the color of the energy blades.

At Halcyon the Jedi divided the Judicials into four teams, assigning one to accompany them to the fortress and inserting the others on the far side of a ridge of low mountains to block possible escape routes. While Tarkin saw a certain logic in the plan, he couldn't quite purge himself of a suspicion that the Jedi merely wanted to rid themselves of responsibility for law enforcement personnel they clearly thought of as inferiors.

What the Jedi hadn't taken into account was the fact that Halcyon's usurpers were a tech-savvy group who had had ample time to prepare for an assault on the bastion. No sooner were the Judicial teams inserted into the densely forested foothills than the planet's global positioning satellites were disabled and surface-to-air communications scrambled. In short order, Tarkin's team lost touch with the two cruisers that had brought them to Halcyon, their Jedi commanders, and the other Judicial teams. The prudent response would have been to hunker down while the Jedi attended to business at the fortress and wait for extraction. But the team's commander—a by-the-numbers human with twenty years of Judicial service whose piloting and martial skills had earned him Tarkin's reluctant respect—had other ideas. Convinced that the Jedi, too, had fallen prey to a trap, he got it in his head to strike out overland, traverse the ridge, and open a second front on reaching the fortress. This struck Tarkin as pure arrogance—no different from what he had seen in some of the Jedi he had come to know—but he also realized that the commander likely couldn't abide being stranded in a trackless wilderness with a group of raw trainees.

Tarkin was immediately aware of the potential for disaster. The commander's datapad contained regional maps, but Tarkin knew from long experience that maps weren't the territory, and that triple-canopy forests could be confounding places to negotiate. At the same time, he realized that the opportunity for finally proving his worth couldn't have been more made to order if he had designed it himself. Mission briefings had acquainted him with the local topography, and he was reasonably certain he could follow his nose almost directly to the bastion. But he decided to keep that to himself.

For three days of foul weather, mudslides, and sudden tree falls, the commander had them stumbling through thick forest and bogs, occasionally circling back on themselves, and growing increasingly lost. When on the fourth day their blister-pack rations ran out and exhaustion began to set in, all semblance of team integrity vanished. These scions of wealthy Core families who thought nothing of journeying across the stars had forgotten or perhaps never known what it meant to stand or sleep beneath them, far from artificial light or sentient contact, in an isolated wilderness on a far-flung world. The frequent, intense downpours dispirited them; the hostile-sounding but innocuous calls of unseen beasts unnerved them; the overhead roar of swarming insects left them huddling in their confining shelters. They grew to fear their own shadows, and Tarkin found his strength in their distress.

The chance to show just what he was made of came on the pebbled shore of a wide, clear, swift-flowing river. Off and on for some hours, the team had been moving parallel to the river, and Tarkin had been studying the current, making parallax observations of objects on the bottom and observing the shadows cast by Halcyon's bashful suns. Hours earlier, downstream of a waterfall, they had passed a stretch they would have been able to ford without incident, but Tarkin had held his tongue. Now, while the commander and some of the team members stood arguing about how deep the water might be, Tarkin simply waded directly into the current and trudged to the middle of the river, where wavelets lapped at his shoulders. Then, cupping his hands to his mouth, he yelled back to the team: "*It's this deep!*"

After that, the commander kept him by his side, and eventually surrendered point to him. Navigating by the rise and set of Halcyon's twin suns, and sometimes in the sparing illumination of the planet's array of tiny moons, Tarkin led them on a tortuous forest course that took them through the hills and into more open forest on the far side. Along the way he showed them how to use their blasters to kill game without burning gaping holes in the most edible parts. For fun, he felled a large rodent with a hand-fashioned wooden lance and entertained the team by dressing and cooking it over a fire he conjured

with a sparkstone from a pile of kindling. He got his fellow plebes used to sleeping on the ground, under the stars, amid a cacophony of sounds and songs.

At a time when the Clone Wars were still a decade off, it became clear to his commander and peers that Wilhuff Tarkin *had already tasted blood*.

When they had walked for three more days and Tarkin estimated that they were within five kilometers of the usurper's fortress, he fell back to allow the commander to lead them in. The Jedi were astounded. They had only just put an end to the insurrection—somehow without losing a single eminent hostage—and they had all but given up on finding any members of the Judicial team alive. Search parties had been dispatched, but none had managed to pick up the team's trail. Relieved to be back on firm ground, the cadets were at first reserved about revealing the details of their ordeal, but in due course the stories began to be told, and in the end Tarkin was credited with having saved their lives.

For those Judicals who knew little of the galaxy beyond the Core, it came as a shock that a world like Eriadu could produce not only essential goods, but also natural champions. A clique of congenial cadets began to form around Tarkin, as much to bask in the reflected glow of his sudden popularity as to be taught by him, or even to be the butt of his jokes. In him they found someone who could be as hard on himself as he could be on others, even when those others happened to be superiors who shirked their responsibilities or made what to him were bad decisions. They had already witnessed how well he could fight, scale mountains, pilot a gunboat, and succeed on a sports field, and—as crises like the one at Halcyon grew more common—they grew to realize that he had a mind for tactics, as well; more important, that Tarkin was a born leader, an inspiration for others to overcome their fears and to surpass their own expectations.

Not all were enamored of him. Where to some he was meticulous, coolheaded, and fearless, to others he was calculating, ruthless, and fanatical. But no matter to which camp his peers subscribed, the stories that emerged about Tarkin in the waning days of the Judicial

Department were legendary—and they only grew with the telling. Few then knew the details of his unusual upbringing, for he had a habit of speaking only when he had something important to add, but he had no need to brag, since the tales that spread went beyond anything he could have confirmed or fabricated. That he had bested a Wookiee in hand-to-hand combat; that he had piloted a starfighter through an asteroid field without once consulting his instruments; that he had single-handedly defended his homeworld against a pirate queen; that he had made a solo voyage through the Unknown Regions . . .

His strategy of flying boldly into the face of adversity was studied and taught, and during the Clone Wars would come to be known as “the Tarkin Rush,” when it was also said of him that his officers and crew would willingly follow him to hell and beyond. He might have remained a Judicial were it not for a growing schism that began to eat away at the department’s long-held and nonpartisan mandate to keep the galaxy free of conflict. On the one side stood Tarkin and others who were committed to enforcing the law and safeguarding the Republic; on the other, a growing number of dissidents who had come to view the Republic as a galactic disease. They detested the influence peddling, the complacency of the Senate, and the proliferation of corporate criminality. They saw the Jedi Order as antiquated and ineffectual, and they yearned for a more equitable system of government—or none at all.

As the clashes between Republic and Separatist interests escalated in frequency and intensity, Tarkin would find himself pitted against many of the Judicials with whom he had previously served. The galaxy was fast becoming an arena for ideologues and industrialists, with the Judicials being used to settle trade disputes or to further corporate agendas. He feared that the Seswenna sector would be dragged into the rising tide of disgruntlement, without anyone to keep Eriadu and its brethren worlds free of the coming fray. He began to think of his homeworld as a ship that needed to be steered into calmer waters, and of himself as the one who should assume command of that perilous voyage. The time had come to accept Palpa-

tine's invitation to join him on Coruscant, for his promised crash course in galactic politics.

Entering one of a bank of turbolifts that accessed the centermost of the Palace's quincunx of spires, Tarkin was surprised when Mas Amedda charged the car to descend.

"I would have expected the Emperor to reside closer to the top," Tarkin said.

"He does," the vizier allowed. "But we're not proceeding directly to the Emperor. We're going to meet first with Lord Vader."



---

## MASTERS OF WAR

---

**TWENTY LEVELS DOWN**, in a courtroom not unlike the one in which Tarkin had tried to make a case against Jedi apprentice Ahsoka Tano for murder and sedition during the Clone Wars, stood the Emperor's second, Darth Vader, gesticulating with his gauntleted right hand as he harangued a score of nonhumans gathered in an area reserved for the accused.

"Was this where the Jedi Order held court?" Tarkin asked Amedda.

In a voice as hard and cold as his pale-blue eyes, the vizier said, "We no longer speak of the Jedi, Governor."

Tarkin took the remark in stride, turning his attention instead to Vader and his apparently captive audience. Flanking the Dark Lord was the deputy director of the Imperial Security Bureau, Harus Ison—a brawny, white-haired, old-guard loyalist with a perpetually flushed face—and a thin, red-head-tailed Twi'lek male Tarkin didn't recognize. Bolstering the commanding trio were four Imperial stormtroopers with blaster rifles slung, and an officer wearing a black uniform and cap, hands clasped behind his back and legs slightly spread.

"It appears that some of you have failed to pay attention," Vader

was saying, jabbing his pointer figure in the chill, recirculated air. "Or perhaps you are simply choosing to ignore our guidance. Whichever the case, the time has come for you to decide between setting safer courses for yourselves and suffering the consequences."

"Wise counsel," Amedda said.

Tarkin nodded in agreement. "Counsel one dismisses at one's own peril, I suspect." Glancing at the Chagrian, he added: "I know Ison, but who are the others?"

"Riffraff from the lower levels," Amedda said with patent distaste. "Gangsters, smugglers, bounty hunters. Coruscanti scum."

"I might have guessed by the look of them. And the Twi'lek standing alongside Lord Vader?"

"Phoca Soot," Amedda said, turning slightly toward him. "Prefect of level one-three-three-one, where many of these lowlifes operate."

Vader was in motion, pacing back and forth in front of his audience, as if waiting to spring. "The liberties you enjoyed and abused during the days of the Republic and the Clone Wars are a thing of the past," he was saying. "Then there was some purpose to turning a blind eye to illegality, and to fostering dishonesty of a particular sort. But times have changed, and it is incumbent on you to change with them."

Vader fell silent, and the sound of his sonorous breathing filled the room. Tarkin watched him closely.

*"The Tarkin heritage will grant you access to many influential people, and to many social circles," his father had told him. "In addition, your mother and I will do all within our power to help bring your desires within reach. But nothing less than the strength of your ambition will bring you together with those who will partner in your ascension and ultimately reward you with power."*

Since the end of the war, Vader had on occasion been such a partner in Tarkin's life, both in Geonosis space and in political and military campaigns that had taken them throughout the galaxy. Tarkin had long nursed suspicions about who Vader was beneath the black face mask and helmet, as well as how he had come to be, but he knew better than to give open voice to his thoughts.

"Lest any of your current activities infringe on the Emperor's de-



signs,” Vader continued, “you may wish to consider relocating your operations to sectors in the Outer Rim. Or you may opt to remain on Coruscant and risk lengthy sentences in an Imperial prison.” He paused to let his words sink in; then, with his gloved hands akimbo and his black floor-length cape thrown behind his shoulders, he added: “Or worse.”

He began to pace again. “It has come to my attention that a certain being present has failed to grasp that his recent actions reflect a flagrant disrespect for the Emperor. His brazen behavior suggests that he actually takes some pride in his actions. But his duplicity has not gone unnoticed. We are pleased to be able to make an example of him, so that the rest of you might profit at his expense.”

Vader came to an abrupt stop, scanning his audience and certainly sending shivers of fear through everyone—Toydarian, Dug, and Devaronian alike. As his raised right hand curled slowly into a fist, many of them began nervously tugging at the collars of their tunics and cloaks. But it was the Twi’lek prefect, standing not a meter from the Dark Lord, who unexpectedly gasped and brought his hands to his chest as if he had just taken a spear to the heart. Phoca Soot’s lekku shot straight out from the sides of his head as if he were being electrocuted, and he collapsed to his knees in obvious agony, his breath caught in his throat and blood vessels in his head-tails beginning to rupture. His eyes glazed over and his red skin began to pale; then his arms flew back from his chest as if in an act of desperate supplication, and he tipped backward, the left side of his head slamming hard against the blood-slicked floor.

For a long moment, Vader’s breathing was the only sound intruding on the silence. Without bothering to gaze on his handiwork, the Dark Lord finally said: “Perhaps this is a good place to conclude our assembly. Unless any of you have questions?”

The stormtrooper commander made a quick motion with his hand, and two of the white-armored soldiers moved in. Taking hold of the prefect by his slack arms and legs, they began to carry him from the room, tracking blood across the floor and passing close to Tarkin and Amedda. The vizier’s blue face was contorted in angry astonishment.

Tarkin hid a smile. It pleased him to see Amedda caught off guard.

"Lord Vader," the vizier said as the Emperor's deputy approached, "we've refrained from requesting that you grant stays of execution to those in your sights, but is there no one you are willing to pardon?"

"I will give the matter some thought," Vader told him.

Amedda adopted a narrow-eyed expression of exasperation and withdrew, leaving Tarkin and Vader facing each other. If Vader was at all affected by the Chagrian's words, he showed no evidence of it, in either his bearing or the rich bass of his voice.

"We haven't stood together on Coruscant in some time, Governor."

Tarkin lifted his gaze past Vader's transpirator-control chest plate and grilled muzzle to the unreadable midnight orbs of his mask. "The needs of the Empire keep us elsewhere occupied, Lord Vader."

"Just so."

Tarkin directed a glance at the exiting stormtroopers. "I am curious about Prefect Soot."

Vader crossed his thick arms across the illuminated indicators of the chest plate. "A pity. Tasked with controlling crime in his sector, he succumbed to temptation by hiring himself out to the Droid Gotra."

"Well, clearly his heart wasn't in it," Tarkin said. "Strange, though, that the Crymorah crime syndicate had no representation in your audience."

Vader looked down at him—blankly? Perturbed?

"We have reached an accommodation with the Crymorah," Vader said.

Tarkin waited for more, but Vader had nothing to add, so Tarkin dropped the matter and they set out for the turbolifts together, with Amedda and his retinue of Royal Guards trailing behind.

Nothing about Vader seemed natural—not his towering height, his deep voice, his antiquated diction—yet despite those qualities and the mask and respirator, Tarkin believed him to be more man than machine. Although he had clearly twisted the powers of the Force to his own dark purposes, Vader's innate strength was undeniable. His contained rage was genuine, as well, and not simply the re-

sult of some murderous cyberprogram. But the quality that made him most human was the fierce dedication he demonstrated to the Emperor.

It was that genuflecting obedience, the steadfast devotion to execute whatever task the Emperor assigned, that had given rise to so many rumors about Vader: that he was a counterpart to the Confederacy's General Grievous the Emperor had been holding in reserve; that he was an augmented human or near-human who had been trained or had trained himself in the ancient dark arts of the Sith; that he was nothing more than a monster fashioned in some clandestine laboratory. Many believed that the Emperor's willingness to grant so much authority to such a being heralded the shape of things to come, for it was beyond dispute that Vader was the Empire's first terror weapon.

Tarkin didn't always agree with Vader's methods for dealing with those who opposed the Empire, but he held the Dark Lord in high esteem, and he hoped Vader felt the same toward him. Very early on in their partnership—soon after both had been introduced to the secret mobile battle station—Tarkin grew convinced that Vader knew him much better than he let on, and that behind the bulging lenses of his face mask, whatever remained of Vader's human eyes regarded him with clear recognition. More than anything else it was those initial feelings that had provided Tarkin with his first suspicion as to Vader's identity. Later, observing the rapport the Dark Lord shared with the stormtroopers who supported him, and the technique he displayed in wielding his crimson lightsaber, Tarkin grew more and more convinced that his suspicions were right.

Vader might very well be Jedi Knight Anakin Skywalker, whom Tarkin had fought beside during the Clone Wars, and for whom he had developed a grudging appreciation.

"How is life on the Sentinel moon, Governor?" Vader asked as they walked.

"In a week we'll be back on the bright side of the gas giant, where security is improved."

"Is that the reason you were opposed to coming to Coruscant?"

Vader shouldn't have known as much, but Tarkin wasn't surprised that he did. "Tell me, Lord Vader, does the vizier always share confidences with you?"

"When I ask him to, yes."

"Then he should have qualified his statement. I may have been reluctant to leave my post, but I wasn't opposed to doing so."

"Certainly not when you learned that the request originated with the Emperor."

Tarkin smirked. "Why not simply call it an order, then?"

"It is unimportant. I might have done the same."

Tarkin looked at Vader askance, but said nothing.

"Will your absence affect the construction schedule?"

"Not at all," Tarkin was quick to say. "Components for the hyperdrive generator will be shipping on schedule from Desolation Station, where initial tests have been completed. Work continues on the navigational matrix itself, as well as on the hypermatter reactor. At this point I'm not unduly concerned about the status of the sublight engines or shield generators."

"And the weapons systems?"

"That's a bit more complicated. Our chief designers have yet to reach an agreement about the laser array, and whether or not it should be a proton beam. The designers are also debating the optimum configuration for the kyber crystal assembly. The delays owe as much to their bickering as to production setbacks."

"That will not do."

Tarkin nodded. "Frankly, Lord Vader, there are simply too many voices weighing in."

"Then we need to remedy the situation."

"As I've been proposing all along."

They fell silent as they entered a turbolift that accessed the Palace's primary spire, leaving Amedda and the Royal Guards no choice but to wait for a different car. The silence lingered as they began to ascend through the levels. Vader brought the lift to a halt one level below the summit and exited. When Tarkin started to follow, Vader raised a hand to stop him.

"The Emperor expects you above," he said.

. . .

The turbolift carried him to the top of the world. He stepped from the car into a large circular space with a perimeter of soaring windows that provided a view for hundreds of kilometers in every direction. A curved partition defined a separate space that Tarkin assumed was the Emperor's personal quarters. Prominent in the main area was a large table surrounded by oversized chairs, one of them with a high back and control panels set into the armrests. Alone, Tarkin wandered about admiring artworks and statues positioned to catch the light of Coruscant's rising or setting sun, some of which he recognized as having been moved from the Supreme Chancellor's suite in the Executive Building, in particular a bas-relief panel depicting an ancient battle scene. A circular balcony above the main level contained case after lofty case of texts and storage devices.

The Emperor emerged from his quarters as Tarkin was regarding a slender bronzium statue. Dressed in his customary black-patterned robes, with the cowl raised over his head, he moved as if hovering across the reflective floor.

"Welcome, Governor Tarkin," he said in a voice that many thought sinister but to Tarkin sounded merely strained.

"My lord," he said, bowing slightly. Gesturing broadly, he added: "I like what you've done with the place." When the Emperor didn't respond, Tarkin indicated the bronzium statue of a cloaked figure. "If memory serves, this was in your former office."

The Emperor laid a wrinkled, sallow hand on the piece. "Sistros, one of the four ancient philosophers of Dwartii. I keep it for sentimental value." He gestured broadly. "Some of the rest, well, one might call the collection the spoils of war." His glance returned to Tarkin. "But come, sit, Governor Tarkin. We have much to discuss."

The Emperor lowered himself into the armchair and swiveled away from the window-wall so that his ghastly face was in shadow. Tarkin took the chair opposite and crossed his hands in his lap.

As Nils Tenant had reaffirmed, there were as many rumors circulating about the Emperor as there were about Darth Vader. The fact that he rarely appeared in public or even at Senate proceedings had convinced many that the Jedi attack on him had resulted not only in

the ruination of his face and body, but also in the death of the sanguine politician he had been before the war, betrayed by those who had served him and had supported the Republic for centuries. Some Coruscanti even confessed to having fond memories for ex-chancellor Finis Valorum, about whom they could gossip to no end. They yearned to see the Emperor strolling through Imperial Plaza or attending an opera or officiating at the groundbreaking of a new building complex.

But Tarkin didn't speak to those things; instead he said: "Coruscant appears prosperous."

"Busy, busy," the Emperor said.

"The Senate is supportive?"

"Now that it serves rather than advises." The Emperor swiveled slightly in Tarkin's direction. "Better to surround oneself with fresh loyal allies than treacherous old ones."

Tarkin smiled. "Someone once said that politics is little more than the systematic organization of hostilities."

"Very true, in my experience."

"But do you even need them, my lord?" Tarkin asked in a careful, controlled voice.

"The Senate?" The Emperor could not restrain a faint smile. "Yes, for the time being." With a dismissive gesture, he added: "We've come far, you and I."

"My lord?"

"Twenty years ago, who would have thought that two men from the Outer Rim would sit at the center of the galaxy?"

"You flatter me, my lord."

The Emperor studied him openly. "I sometimes wonder, though, if you—born an outsider, as I was—feel that we should be doing more to lift up those worlds we defeated in the war? Especially those in the Outer Rim."

"Turn the galaxy inside out?" Tarkin said more strongly than he intended. "Quite the opposite, my lord. The populations of those worlds wreaked havoc. They must earn the right to rejoin the galactic community."

"And the ones that waver or refuse?"

"They should be made to suffer."

"Sanctions?" the Emperor said, seemingly intrigued by Tarkin's response. "Embargoes? Ostracism?"

"If they are intractable, then yes. The Empire cannot be destabilized."

"Obliteration."

"Whatever you deem necessary, my lord. Force is the only real and unanswerable power. Oftentimes, beings who haven't been duly punished cannot be reasoned with or edified."

The Emperor repeated the words to himself, then said, "That has the ring of a parental lesson, Governor Tarkin."

Tarkin laughed pleasantly. "So it was, my lord—though applied in a more personal manner."

The Emperor swiveled his chair toward the light, and Tarkin glimpsed his sepulchral visage; the molten skin beneath his eyes, the bulging forehead. After all these years, he was still not accustomed to it. "*When one consorts with vipers, one runs the risk of being struck*," the Emperor had told Tarkin following the attack on him by a quartet of Jedi Masters.

There were many stories about what had occurred that day in the chancellor's office. The official explanation was that members of the Jedi Order had turned up to arrest Supreme Chancellor Palpatine, and a ferocious duel had ensued. The matter of precisely how the Jedi had been killed or the Emperor's face deformed had never been settled to everyone's satisfaction, and so Tarkin had his private thoughts about the Emperor, as well. That he and Vader were kindred spirits suggested that both of them might be Sith. Tarkin often wondered if that wasn't the actual reason Palpatine had been targeted for arrest or assassination by the Jedi. It wasn't so much that the Order wished to take charge of the Republic; it was that the Jedi couldn't abide the idea of a member of the ancient Order they opposed and abhorred emerging as the hero of the Clone Wars and assuming the mantle of Emperor.

"I thank you for remaining in service to the Empire and not turning your hand to writing," the Emperor said, "as some of your contemporaries have done."

"Oh, I still dabble, my lord."

"Doctrinal writings?" the Emperor said in what seemed genuine interest. "Examinations of history? A memoir perhaps?"

"All those things, my lord."

"Even with your obligations as sector governor, you find the time."

"Sentinel Base is remote and mostly tranquil."

"It suits you, then. Or is it that you are well suited to it?"

"Sentinel isn't exactly privation, my lord."

"Even when attacked, Governor?"

Tarkin restrained a smile. He knew when he was being goaded. "Is this the reason you summoned me, my lord?"

The Emperor sat back in the chair. "Yes and no. Though I am familiar with the report you transmitted to the intelligence chiefs. Your actions at Sentinel bespeak a keen intuition, Governor."

Tarkin adopted an expression of nonchalance. "The important thing is that the mobile battle station remains secure."

The Emperor imitated Tarkin's affected indifference. "This isn't the first time we've been forced to deal with malcontents, and it won't be the last. From both near and far." He paused. "There is no refuge from deception when adversaries remain."

"All the more reason to safeguard the supply lines, especially through sectors that aren't under my personal control."

The Emperor placed his elbows on the table and steepled his long fingers. "Clearly you have thoughts about how to rectify the situation."

"I don't wish to be presumptuous, my lord."

"Nonsense," the Emperor said. "Speak your mind, Governor."

Tarkin compressed his lips, then said: "My lord, it's nothing we haven't discussed previously."

"You are referring to the need for oversector control."

"I am. Each oversector governor would then be responsible for maintaining control beneath him—if only as a means of policing districts without having to request guidance from Coruscant."

The Emperor didn't reply immediately. "And who might assume your position if I were to remove you from Sentinel?"

"General Tagge, perhaps."



“Not Motti?”

“Or Motti.”

“Anyone else?”

“Nils Tenant is very competent.”

Again the Emperor fell briefly silent. “Are you certain that Sentinel’s unknown assailants managed to override the local HoloNet relay station?”

“I am, my lord.”

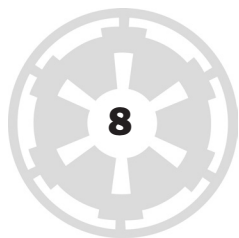
“Have you some notion as to how they achieved this?”

Tarkin wet his lips. “Travel to Coruscant prevented me from carrying out a complete investigation. But yes, I have some ideas.”

“Ideas you are willing to share with our advisers and intelligence chiefs?”

“If it will serve your purpose, my lord.”

The Emperor exhaled forcibly. “We will see at length just whose purpose it serves.”



---

## THE EMPEROR'S NEW SPIES

---

**SIMILAR IN DESIGN** to the pinnacle room, the audience chamber on the penultimate level of the central spire was a circular space, but without partitions and featuring a ten-meter-tall podium reserved for the Emperor, who accessed it by private turbolift from his residence. Tarkin arrived by means of the more public turbolift, entering the vast room to find nearly a dozen people waiting, all of whom he knew or recognized, loosely divided into three groups that made up the Empire's uppermost tiers. First, and positioned closest to the podium, was the Ruling Council, represented just then by Ars Dangor, Sate Pestage, and Janus Greejatus, all three dressed in baggy costumes of riotous color and floppy hats more befitting a night at the Coruscant Opera. More or less on equal footing, the two other groups were made up of members from the Imperial Security Bureau and the more recently created Naval Intelligence Agency, with Harus Ison and Colonel Wullf Yularen speaking for the former, and Vice Admirals Rancit and Screed for the latter. Feeling like the odd man out, Tarkin gravitated to where Mas Amedda and Darth Vader were standing, off to one side of the podium.

Tarkin acknowledged his military comrades with a friendly nod to each. Some he had known since his academy days; others he had served with during the Clone Wars. Interestingly, the Emperor's advisers were also a kind of clique, having attached themselves to the Emperor since his early years as an untested senator from Naboo. Perhaps their outlandish garb was in some sense a tribute to the sartorial extravagance of Naboo's nobility. Even those who should have known better tended to dismiss Dangor, Greejatus, and Pestage as sycophants, when in fact members of the Ruling Council oversaw the everyday affairs of the Empire and wielded wide-ranging and sometimes menacing powers. Even the Empire's twenty Moffs were obligated to answer to the Imperial cadre.

On receiving a signal from the Emperor, Amedda banged his statue-tipped staff on the floor as a sign that the briefing should commence. First to step forward was white-haired ISB deputy director Ison, who bowed to the Emperor before turning to address everyone else in the chamber.

"My lords, Moff Tarkin, Admirals . . . With your permission, and for the benefit of those of you who may not be fully conversant with the matter at hand, I offer a brief summary. Three weeks ago, one of our intelligence assets reported a startling find on Murkhana."

Tarkin came to full alert at Ison's mention of the former Separatist stronghold world.

"Due to the nature of the find, ISB wasted no time in bringing the matter to the attention of the Ruling Council, as well as to our counterparts in Military Intelligence." Ison glanced at Rancit and Screed. Having lost an eye in the war, Screed was sporting a cybernetic implant. "Normally ISB would have pursued an investigation on its own, but on Vizier Amedda's recommendation we are opening it up to discussion, in the hope of resolving how best to proceed."

Tarkin wasn't surprised by Ison's equivocal introduction. ISB functioned under the auspices of COMPNOR, the Commission for the Preservation of the New Order, which itself had arisen from the dregs of the Commission for the Protection of the Republic, and the deputy director was determined to spearhead the investigation without appearing overly proprietary and ambitious. And so he was gener-

ously “opening the matter up to discussion,” when it was clearly his hope that the Ruling Council would grant ISB full oversight, exempting the bureau from having to share sensitive information with Military Intelligence or anyone else.

“Please don’t leave us hanging, Deputy Director,” Amedda said in his most sniping voice, “and come to the point.”

Tarkin watched Ison’s square jaw clench. The deputy director was surely biting his tongue, as well.

“The Murkhana discovery consists of a cache of communications devices,” Ison said. “Signal interrupters, jammers, eradicators, and other apparatus, which, to ISB, suggests evidence of a potential stratagem to incapacitate the HoloNet, as was temporarily achieved by the Separatists during the Clone Wars.”

Obviously in the dark about the find, advisers Greejatus and Dangor traded looks of bewilderment. Where Greejatus’s dark sunken eyes and puffy face granted him an ominous look, Dangor’s long, braided mustachios and broad, furrowed brow imparted a bit of élan to an otherwise surly aspect.

“Director Ison,” Dangor said, “perhaps these devices—though recently discovered—are nothing more than a cache left over from the war. They may even have been discovered elsewhere by beings unfamiliar with such devices, and relocated to their present site.”

Ison had an answer ready. “That’s entirely possible. The cache is so large that our agent didn’t have time to inspect every crate and container, much less catalog every component. However, his preliminary report suggests that some of the devices may not have been available to the Confederacy during the war.”

“Accepting that at face value for the moment,” Dangor went on, “what importance do you attach to this technological trove?”

Colonel Yularen took over for Ison. “My lords, ISB fears that political dissenters may be planning to launch a propaganda operation similar to the wartime Shadowfeeds but directed, of course, against the Empire.”

Close to Tarkin’s age—though with more gray in his hair and especially in his bushy mustache—Yularen had traded a distinguished career in the Republic Navy for a position in Imperial Security, head-

ing a division devoted to exposing instances of sedition in the Senate. He now served as a liaison between ISB and Military Intelligence. But not everyone in the audience chamber was touched by the colonel's justified concerns. In fact, Greejatus appeared to be *cackling*.

"That's a bit far-fetched, Colonel," he managed to say, "even for ISB."

"Has there been any evidence of HoloNet tampering that might support such a claim?" Dangor asked in a more serious tone.

"Yes, there has," Yularen said, though without explanation or so much as a glance in Tarkin's direction.

Vice Admiral Rancit stepped forward to speak. "My lords, while Naval Intelligence agrees with ISB regarding the possibility of HoloNet sabotage, we feel that Deputy Director Ison is understating the importance of the evidence and the real nature of the threat. Yes, Count Dooku succeeded in using the HoloNet for Separatist propaganda purposes, but Republic forces were quick to shut down those Shadowfeeds." He looked at Ison. "If memory serves, COMPOR itself was established as a result of the navy's actions at the time."

"No one in this chamber needs a history lesson, Vice Admiral," Ison interrupted. "Do you actually intend to go down that path?"

Rancit made a calming gesture. Exceedingly tall, he had a full head of jet-black hair and the symmetrical facial features of a HoloNet idol. The fit of his uniform was equal to if not superior to the fit of Tarkin's.

"I'm merely pointing out that Naval Intelligence should not be left out of the loop here," Rancit said. "For all anyone knows, this newly discovered cache is merely part of a much more sinister plot—one that could require military intervention."

Ison shot Rancit a polar look. "You weren't worried about the cache when it was first brought to your attention. Now all of a sudden you're convinced that it's part of a plot against the Empire?"

Rancit spread his hands theatrically. "What became of opening the matter to discussion, Deputy Director?"

Tarkin smiled to himself. His history with Rancit went back even farther than his history with Yularen. Rancit had been born in the Outer Rim, had graduated from the naval academy on Prefsbelt, and

served as an intelligence case officer and station chief during the Clone Wars, dispatching operatives to Separatist-occupied worlds to foment resistance movements. After the war, he had commanded Sentinel Base during the mobile battle station's initial stage of construction, while Tarkin had been busy doling out punishments to former Separatist worlds. Replaced at Sentinel by Tarkin—a circumstance Rancit's rivals enjoyed interpreting as a demotion—he had been reassigned by the Emperor himself to head Naval Intelligence. Fond of art and opera, he was a very visible presence on Coruscant, though few were aware of the covert nature of his work.

As the backbiting between Rancit and Ison continued, Tarkin was tempted to raise his eyes to the podium to see if the Emperor was smiling, since it was his policy to encourage misunderstanding as a means of having his subordinates keep watch over one another. A form of institutionalized suspicion, the policy had proven an efficient fear tactic. He recalled Nils Tenant's wariness in the Palace corridors. The competition for status and privilege and the jockeying for position brought to mind the waning years of the Republic, but with one major difference: Where during the Republic era cachet could be purchased, present-day power was at the whim of the Emperor.

"Now who's understating the risk," Ison was saying, "despite abundant evidence to the contrary?"

Rancit kept his head. "We would have been glad to step aside and allow ISB full oversight if not for recent events." He made no secret of looking directly at Tarkin.

"What recent events?" Dangor asked, glancing back and forth between Rancit and Tarkin.

Mas Amedda banged his staff on the floor in a call for quiet. "Governor Tarkin, if you please," he said.

Tarkin stepped out from between Amedda and Vader to place himself where everyone in the chamber could see him.

"As regards the matter of whether ISB, Naval Intelligence, or some combination of our various intelligence agencies should be tasked with the investigation, I offer no opinion. I will allow, however, that the concerns of Deputy Director Ison and Vice Admiral Rancit are warranted. A base under my command was recently attacked by un-

known parties. The attack followed the successful sabotaging of a HoloNet relay station and the insertion of both prerecorded and real-time holovids, in an attempt to mislead us into dispatching reinforcements to a secondary base. The details of my after-action report are available to anyone here with proper clearance, but suffice it to say that if a connection exists between the discovery on Murkhana and the sneak attack on the base, then it stands to reason that something more nefarious than anti-Imperial propaganda may be in the works.”

Ison nearly groaned, and the Emperor’s advisers conferred in confidence before Dangor said: “With all due respect, Governor Tarkin, it is my understanding that this base you go to some lengths to leave unidentified is far removed from Murkhana—on the order of several sectors.”

Tarkin gestured negligently. “Irrelevant. Communications devices are cobbled together in one place to be deployed elsewhere. What’s more, we’ve seen incidents of attack in many sectors these past five years.”

“By pirates and outlaws,” Greejatus said.

Tarkin shook his head. “Not in every instance.”

“The Separatist war machines were shut down,” Dangor went on. “Their droid warships were confiscated or destroyed.”

“Most were,” Tarkin said. “Clearly, some escaped our notice or were made available by insiders to a host of new enemies.”

Ison glared at him. “Are you accusing ISB—”

“Review my report,” Tarkin said, cutting Ison off.

“Furthermore, not every Separatist warship was crewed by droids,” Rancit said. “As Governor Tarkin can attest, our navy was still chasing Separatist holdouts as late as a year ago.”

Sate Pestage, who had remained silent throughout the meeting, spoke up. “Governor Tarkin, we’re curious to know how you knew you were being deceived at your base of operations.” With his shaved head, pointed chin beard, and raking eyebrows, Pestage resembled some of the pirates Outland had chased through the Seswenna.

Rancit stepped forward before Tarkin could utter a word. “May I, Wilhuff?”

Tarkin nodded and stepped back.

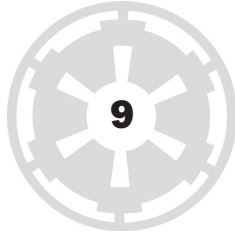
“Governor Tarkin—*Moff* Tarkin,” Rancit began, “back when he was merely *Commander* Tarkin, was personally instrumental in frustrating Count Dooku’s propaganda efforts. I know this to be fact because I was the case officer who supplied him with counterintelligence operatives. No doubt he was able to identify specific elements of corruption in the false holofeed—corruption even the Separatists were unable to purge from their intrusion signals.” He turned to Tarkin. “How am I doing?”

Tarkin nodded in appreciation. “My lords, that is the long and short of it. I recognized telltale noise in the holovid and knew then that the feed was originating at the HoloNet relay station and not being transmitted from our auxiliary base.” He paused to glance around the chamber. “Regardless, my first recommendation to the Joint Chiefs would be to issue an advisory to our base commanders that they should double-check the encryption codes of all Imperial HoloNet transmissions.”

Again the advisers leaned toward one another to confer, while Ison exchanged rancorous looks with Rancit and Screed. Tarkin returned to where he had been standing with Vader, who simply cast a downward gaze at him. After a long moment, Mas Amedda’s staff struck the floor with finality.

“The Emperor will take the matter under advisement.”





---

## AS ABOVE, SO BELOW

---

**“RISE, LORD VADER.”**

Vader stood from his genuflection and joined his Master, Darth Sidious, at the railing of the central spire’s west-facing veranda. Roofed but otherwise open to the sky, the small balcony—one of four identical overlooks, each oriented to a cardinal direction—crowned a finlike architectural projection located several tiers below the spire’s rounded summit. The air was thin, and a persistent wind tugged at Sidious’s robes and Vader’s long cape.

The briefing in the audience chamber had ended hours earlier, and just now that part of Coruscant was tipping into night. The long shadows of distant cloudcutters seemed to reach in vain for the gargantuan Palace, and the sky was swathed in swirls of flaming orange and velvety purple.

When the two Sith Lords had stood in silence for some time, Vader said, “What is thy bidding, Master?”

Sidious spoke without turning from the view. “You will accompany Moff Tarkin to Murkhana to investigate this so-called cache of communications devices. You will report your findings directly to

me, and I will decide what if any information needs to be conveyed to our spies and military. I won't have Ison and the others muddying the waters by conducting their own inquiries."

Vader took a moment to reply. "The governor's presence is unnecessary, Master."

Sidious swung to his apprentice, his eyes narrowed in interest. "You surprise me, Lord Vader. You have carried out previous missions with Moff Tarkin. Has he done something to prompt your disfavor?"

"Nothing, Master."

The Emperor exhaled with purpose. "A reply that conveys nothing. Provide me with a satisfactory reason."

Vader looked down at him, the sound of his regulated breathing diminished by the howl of the high-altitude wind. "Moff Tarkin should be ordered to return to Sentinel Base and resume his duties there."

"Ah, so you're arguing on Tarkin's behalf, are you?"

"For the Empire, Master."

"The Empire?" Sidious repeated, miming surprise. "Since when do you put the needs of the Empire before *our* needs?"

Vader crossed his gauntleted hands in front of him. "Our needs supersede all, Master."

"Then why do you contradict me?"

"I apologize, Master. I will do as you have commanded."

"No—not good enough," Sidious snapped. "Of course you will do as I command, and of course Moff Tarkin needs to resume his duties on the Sentinel moon. The sooner the battle station is completed, the sooner you and I can devote ourselves to more pressing matters—matters *only* you and I can investigate and that have little to do with the *Empire*."

Vader allowed his hands to hang at his sides. "Then why is Murkhana important, Master?"

Darth Sidious moved from the railing to a chair snuggled up against the spire's curved wall and sat down. "Do you not find it intriguing that both you and Moff Tarkin have ties to the very planet where this newly discovered cache of jamming devices has been

found? Tarkin, to quash Dooku's Shadowfeeds, and you—in one of your first missions, I seem to recall—to effect an execution. Or perhaps you feel that no connections exist, that this is mere coincidence."

Vader knew the reply. "There are no coincidences, Master."

"And *that*, my apprentice, is why Murkhana matters to us. Because the dark side of the Force has for whatever reason brought that world to our attention once more—as you should well understand."

Vader turned his back to the railing, and the wind wrapped his cape around him. "Which of us would be in command of the mission, Master?"

A sudden glint in his eye, Sidious shrugged. "I thought I would allow you and Moff Tarkin to work that out."

"Work that out."

"Yes," Sidious continued. "Reach a compromise, of sorts."

"I understand, Master."

Sidious's tortured face was a mask. "I wonder if you do . . . But let us return to Moff Tarkin for a moment. Has it never struck you that all three of us—you and Tarkin and I, the Empire's architects, if you will—hail from worlds that occupy but a narrow slice of galactic space? Naboo, Tatooine, Eriadu . . . all within an arc of less than thirty degrees."

Vader said nothing.

"Come, Darth Vader, you of all people should accept that some are born for greatness. That some are larger than life."

Vader remained silent.

"Yes, Lord Vader—*Tarkin*." Sidious softened his tone. "You are a true Sith, Lord Vader. Your dedication is unerring and your powers unparalleled. Perhaps, however, you are under the misimpression that only Sith and Jedi have trials to pass."

"What trials has Governor Tarkin passed?"

"Have you never been to Eriadu?"

"I have."

"Then you know what that world is like. Venture outside the safe haven of Eriadu City and the land is every bit as bleak and hostile as Tatooine. That land forged Tarkin in much the same way Tatooine forged you."

Vader shook his head. "Tatooine did not forge me."

Sidious stared at him, then grinned faintly. "Ah, I see. Slavery and the desert forged Skywalker. Is that what you mean?"

Vader left the question unanswered. "What trials did Tarkin endure?"

Sidious took a long moment to respond. "Trials that helped transform him into the military mastermind he has become."

Vader was silent for a moment. Then he said, "We will go to Murkhana, Master, as you command."

Sidious tilted his head to regard Vader. "Sometimes there is more to be gained by stepping into a trap than by avoiding it. Particularly when you're interested in learning who set it."

"Are you suggesting that Murkhana is a trap?"

"I'm suggesting that you pay close attention to what you and Moff Tarkin uncover there. Getting to the heart of this matter may require us to peel away layer upon layer of purpose."

Vader bowed his head in a gesture of obedience.

Sidious pressed the tips of his fingers together. "Do you know why Tarkin's ship is named the *Carrion Spike*?"

"I do not, Master."

Sidious looked past Vader to the darkening sky. "You should ask him."

On being informed of the Murkhana mission by Mas Amedda, Tarkin had contacted Commander Cassel to say that he would be delayed in returning to Sentinel Base, and had sent everyone but the *Carrion Spike*'s captain and communications officer back to the moon. For the moment, the crew would be limited to the dozen stormtroopers Vader had handpicked to accompany them. Amedda hadn't said whether he or Vader had command of the mission, and Tarkin was trying to puzzle that out on his own. Vader held an invisible rank. But the *Carrion Spike* was Tarkin's ship, which gave him authority. Tarkin was also a Moff, but the title alone didn't grant him jurisdiction in the sector to which Murkhana belonged. Disdain crept into his thoughts. That Vader was a Sith shouldn't factor into

the question of authority, and yet how could Vader's dark side powers and crimson lightsaber *not* factor into the matter?

The whole business had the taint of *politics*.

Twenty years earlier, Tarkin had been on a career track to be appointed provost marshal of the Judicial Department when he resigned his rank and position. Coruscant at the time had been in the throes of an economic upswing for those senators, lobbyists, and entrepreneurs who had placed themselves at the service of the galactic industrial conglomerates. Availing itself of loopholes built into the free trade zone legislation, the monolithic Trade Federation was expanding its reach into the Outer Rim, as well as its influence in the Republic Senate. Against expectation, Finis Valorum's supporters had managed to secure his reelection to the Republic chancellery, but Valorum was scarcely a year into his second term when the citizens of Coruscant began to place bets on whether he would be able to hold on to his office. Palpatine's name was already being whispered as someone who might replace Valorum as Supreme Chancellor.

Tarkin and Palpatine had had only sporadic in-person contact during the years of Tarkin's service with the Judicials, but they had been faithful correspondents, and Palpatine had remained a staunch supporter of legislation that benefited Eriadu and the Seswenna sector. When Tarkin asked to meet with him on Coruscant, Palpatine made the travel arrangements. Tarkin was one of few people to be on a first-name basis with the senator, but out of respect for his elder and mentor of a sort, he most often referred to him by his title.

"You need a new battlefield," Palpatine said after he had listened in silence to Tarkin's tale of disillusionment. "I sensed from the moment we met that the Judicial Department was too insular to contain a man of your talents—despite your having garnered a following superseding the one you attained at Sullust."

They were sitting in stylish chairs in the senator's red-roomed apartment in one of Coruscant's most prestigious buildings.

"The Judicials are at the end of their tenure, in any case, as the Jedi seem to have become the Senate's arbiters of choice." Palpatine shook his head ruefully. "The Order has been given approval to intercede in

matters it normally would have avoided. But complicated times beget wrongheaded decisions.” He blew out his breath and looked at Tarkin. “As I told you so many years ago at Sullust, Eriadu will always be a Tarkin world, no matter who resides in the governor’s mansion. Now more than ever, your homeworld needs the guidance of a leader who is astute in both politics and galactic economics.”

“Why now?” Tarkin asked.

“Because something dangerous is brewing in our little corner of the Outer Rim. Discontent is on the rise, as are criminal enterprises and mercenary groups in the employ of self-serving corporations. In the Seswenna sector, several lommite mining concerns are vying for the attention of the Trade Federation, which is determined to forge a monopoly in the free trade zones. Even on my own Naboo, the king finds himself embroiled with the Trade Federation and offworld bankers with regard to our plasma exports.”

Palpatine held Tarkin’s gaze. “Ours are remote worlds, but what transpires in those sectors of the Outer Rim could very well have galactic repercussions. Eriadu needs you, and, perhaps more to the point, we need someone like you on Eriadu.”

Palpatine’s use of the plural was more than an affectation, and yet as close as their relationship had become, the senator never spoke in detail of those like-minded friends and allies he frequently alluded to. Not that that had kept his political opponents from speculating. Aside from the cabal of senators with whom he was often grouped—along with a following of devoted aides who had followed him from Naboo—Palpatine was rumored to have wide-ranging links to a host of shadowy beings and clandestine organizations that included bankers, financiers, and industrialists representing the most important sectors of the galaxy.

“I’ve been away from Eriadu for many years,” Tarkin said. “The Valorum dynasty enjoys an influential presence there, and a political victory by me can hardly be assured. Especially given what happened on Coruscant.”

Palpatine waved his thin hand in negligence and what seemed annoyance. “Valorum didn’t *win* the election; he was merely *allowed* to win. The Senate’s special-interest groups require a chancellor who

can be easily entangled in bureaucratic doubletalk and arcane procedure. That is how loopholes are maintained and illegalities overlooked. But as regards your doubts, we have sufficient funds to counter the Valorums and guarantee your victory.” He fixed Tarkin with a gimlet stare. “Perhaps you and I could serve each other, as well as the Republic, by taking Valorum down a notch.” His shoulders heaved in a shrug of uncertainty. “With the backing of your family, you may not even need our help, but rest assured that we will bolster you if necessary.” Palpatine quirked a sly smile. “You will be Eriadu’s finest leader, Wilhuff.”

“Thank you, Sheev,” Tarkin said, with obvious sincerity, and using Palpatine’s given name. “I will do what’s best for my homeworld, and for the Republic—in any manner you deem fit.”

Palpatine’s words about Naboo and Eriadu turned out to be prophetic.

After the Naboo Crisis and Palpatine’s election as Supreme Chancellor, many of Tarkin’s former Judicial peers would pin their hopes on Palpatine to keep the Republic from splintering. But the Separatist movement grew only stronger, and Tarkin and others were forced to accept that Palpatine, for all his talents, had come to power too late. Social injustices and trade inequities prompted hundreds of star systems to secede from the Republic, and local skirmishes became the norm. And then came war—a war that soon raged across the galaxy.

Owing to its strategic location in the Outer Rim and its geopolitical alliances, Eriadu found itself in a thorny situation with regard to the Republic and the Separatists. Perhaps Governor Tarkin, too, should have found himself in a quandary. But in fact, there was never a question as to whose ambitions he was ultimately going to serve.

Dawn the following morning, Tarkin went to the Palace landing field to ready the *Carrion Spike* for the voyage to Murkhana, only to find Vader and a contingent of stormtroopers already on the scene. Unencumbered by helmets or armor, most of the bodysuited soldiers were engaged in overseeing the transfer of a featureless black sphere from a *Victory*-class Star Destroyer into one of the larger of the *Carrion*

*Spike's* cargo holds. Some three meters in diameter, the sphere was flattened on the bottom, and evidently made to nestle in a hexagonal base that was also being lifted toward the corvette. Vader was pacing beneath the repulsorlift cranes in what was either agitation or concern. When the stormtrooper operating the equipment accidentally allowed the flattened sphere to bang against the edge of the cargo hold's retracted hatch, Vader stamped forward with his gloved hands clenched.

"I warned you to be careful!" he shouted up at the trooper.

"My apologies, Lord Vader. Wind shear from—"

"Excuses won't suffice, Sergeant Crest," Vader cut him off. "Perhaps you are aging too quickly to remain on active duty."

Tarkin couldn't make sense of the remark until he realized that Crest's was a face he had seen countless times during the war—the face of an original Kamino clone trooper. The bare-headed others comprising Vader's squad were human regulars who had enlisted after the war.

"It won't happen again, Lord Vader," Crest said.

"For your sake it won't," Vader warned.

Tarkin turned his gaze from Vader to the dangling black sphere, unsure about just what he was looking at. A weapon, a laboratory, a personal toilet, a hyperbaric chamber—some merger of the three? Had Vader become reliant on the sphere in the same way he was on the transpirator and helmet? Perhaps the chamber was nothing more than a private space in which he could temporarily free himself from the confines of the suit.

Whatever the sphere was, it lacked a proper hatch, though two longitudinal seams appeared to indicate that the device was capable of parting. Tarkin glanced at Vader again: gauntleted fists on his hips, black cloak snapping in the wind whipped up by departing warships, the morning light reflecting off the top of his glossy, flaring helmet. He was being as short with his men as Tarkin had been with his during the jump to Coruscant. Worse, Vader was clearly as irritated as Tarkin was about having been tasked to head for Murkhana.

Vader seemed to regain his composure as the sphere and its platform were successfully lowered into the cargo hold. A trio of storm-



troopers was already uncoiling cables with which to link the device to the *Carrion Spike*'s power plant. Passing close to Tarkin on his way to the ship's boarding ramp, Vader paused to say, "This shouldn't take a moment, Governor. Then we can be on our way."

Tarkin nodded. "Take as long as you need, Lord Vader. Murkhana isn't going anywhere."

Vader stared at him before marching off.

That look again, Tarkin thought—or at least that *suggestion* of a look that always made him feel as if Vader knew him from some previous life.

"*We no longer speak of the Jedi*," Mas Amedda had said when they had watched Vader issue his warnings to members of Coruscant's underworld. It struck Tarkin now that the Chagrian's attitude wasn't one that was confined to the Emperor's court. In the five short years since the Order had been eradicated—Jedi Masters, Jedi Knights, and Jedi Padawans wiped out by the very clone troopers they had commanded and fought beside—the Jedi already seemed a distant memory.

Despite their refusal to come to Eriadu's aid against pirates, Tarkin had respected the Jedi as peacekeepers, but as generals they had proven failures. The Jedi Master with whom he had served most closely during the Clone Wars was Even Piell, to whom Tarkin's cruiser had been assigned. Brusque and bellicose, the Lannik excelled in lightsaber combat, seeming to have integrated every possible fighting style, but he, too, had his flaws as a strategist. If Piell had deferred to Tarkin during their mission to investigate a hyperlane shortcut into Separatist-held space, they might have avoided capture and imprisonment, and perhaps the Lannik would have survived at least until the end of the war.

The Force had endowed the Jedi with wondrous powers, but their biggest failing was in not having used the Force in all ways possible to bring the war to a quick end. By remaining faithful to their ethical code, they had allowed the war to drag on and spiral downward into a meaningless bloodbath. The conflict's sudden conclusion and the Order's decision to depose Supreme Chancellor Palpatine had taken nearly everyone by surprise. But Tarkin suspected that even if the

Jedi had restrained themselves from rising against Palpatine in his moment of glory, the esoteric Order had doomed itself to extinction. Where their flame had burned bright for a thousand generations, technological might was the new standard.

Tarkin had never been able to make sense of the Clone Wars, in any case. A battle on Geonosis, an army of clones springing up out of nowhere . . . Almost from the beginning he had suspected that an elite outsider, or a group of elite outsiders, had been tampering with or manipulating events; that the battles had been waged in support of a surreptitious agenda. In the meandering prewar conversations Tarkin had had with Count Dooku, the former Jedi had never made a convincing case for Separatism, much less for galactic war. If, as some claimed, Dooku had never actually left the Jedi Order, why then hadn't the Jedi thrown in with the Separatists from the start?

In their final meeting, only weeks before the Battle of Geonosis and the official outbreak of the Clone Wars, Dooku had tried to persuade Tarkin to bring Eriadu into the Confederacy of Independent Systems.

By then Tarkin's homeworld had transformed itself into a major trade center along the Hydian Way. With the Trade Federation monopoly on Outer Rim shipping broken as a result of the Naboo Crisis, and the loss of prestige suffered by Valorum Shipping as the result of scandals and Finis Valorum's truncated term as supreme chancellor, Eriadu Mining and Shipping was prospering beyond the wildest dreams of the Tarkin family. Tarkin himself was just completing his second term as planetary governor and was being urged by many to run for a seat in the Republic Senate, even while many of his academy friends—convinced that a war between the Republic and the Separatists was inevitable—were urging him to leave himself open to the possibility that the Military Creation Act could be pushed through the Senate, and a Republic Navy instated.

Count Dooku of Serenno had been most responsible for bringing the galaxy's disenfranchised worlds under one umbrella. Tarkin had never known him when he had been one of the Jedi Order's most dashing duelists, but they had met shortly after the count's quiet dis-

affiliation, introduced to each other on Coruscant by Kooriva senator Passel Argente, who would himself go on to become a member of the Separatist leadership. Tarkin was intrigued by the tall, charismatic count, not so much because he had been a Jedi but because he had surrendered a family fortune that would have guaranteed him a place among the galaxy's most powerful and influential beings. During that first meeting, however, they had spoken not of wealth but of politics and the escalating tensions that had been stirred by trade inequities and intersystem conflicts. Tarkin agreed with Dooku that the Republic was in danger of imploding, but he held that a supervising government—even if ineffectual—was preferable to anarchy and a fractured galaxy.

For some eight years following his leave-taking from the Jedi Order, Dooku was scarcely heard from. Amid rumors about his fomenting political turmoil on a host of worlds, most people were convinced that he had gone into self-exile, intent on founding an offshoot of the Jedi Order. Instead he had staged a theatrical return to public life by commandeering a HoloNet station in the Raxus system and delivering a rousing speech that condemned the Republic and essentially set the stage for the Separatist movement. Moving about in secrecy—some said one step ahead of assassins hired by Republic interests—Dooku became the focus of galactic attention, backing coups on Ryloth, meddling in the affairs of Kashyyyk, Sullust, Onderon, and many other worlds, and spurning all opportunities to negotiate with Supreme Chancellor Palpatine.

Chiefly because of its location at the confluence of the Hydian Way and the Rimma Trade Route, Eriadu became something of a contested world early on, and as adjacent and neighboring sectors seceded or joined the Separatists, Tarkin found himself pressured by both sides to declare his loyalties. Dooku went out of his way to meet with Tarkin on several occasions, as if to demonstrate that he had taken a personal interest in Eriadu's future. In fact, having already laid the groundwork for the creation of a southern Separatist sphere by bringing Yag'Dhul and Sluis Van over to his side, he needed Eriadu to seal the deal. If Dooku could achieve in the Greater Seswenna

what he had achieved elsewhere, he could effectively collapse the Core back into itself, reversing the expansion that had resulted from millennia of space exploration, conquest, and colonization.

At each meeting Dooku had emphasized that for most of its history Eriadu had either been ignored by or been at the economic mercy of the Core. Having forged its own destiny, it owed no allegiance to Coruscant. But on the occasion of their final meeting, threat replaced persuasion. Recent turmoil at Ando and Ansion had left the galaxy staggered, and Dooku seemed caught up in the feverish rush of events. Still, he had arrived on Eriadu in his usual caped finery, elegant and urbane. At Tarkin's residence overlooking the bay and the glittering lights of the distant shore, they dined on foods prepared by Tarkin family chefs and rare wines provided by the gray-bearded count. Even so, Dooku was restless throughout, ultimately dropping his guise to storm from the long table to the balcony railing, where he whirled on Tarkin.

"I need an answer, Governor," he began. "This is a pleasant evening and I have always enjoyed your company, but circumstances demand that we conclude the matter of Eriadu's commitment."

Tarkin set his napkin and wineglass down and joined him at the balcony. "What has happened to bring this to a head?"

"An imminent crisis," Dooku allowed. "I can't say more."

"But I can. I suspect that you are now close to persuading your secret allies to initiate an economic catastrophe."

Dooku's response was limited to a faint smile, so Tarkin continued.

"Eriadu's friendships are wide ranging. Nothing happens in this or any other sector without our knowledge."

"Which is precisely why your world is so important to our cause," Dooku said. "But sometimes economic pressures are not enough to guarantee success—as you well know, Governor. Or do you believe you could simply have bought off the pirates who harassed this sector for so long? Of course not. Eriadu established the Outland Regions Security Force to deal with them. You went to war."

"Is war what you have in the works?"

Instead of answering the question directly, Dooku said, "Consider

Eriadu's current situation. I realize that you have been successful in shipping lommite through Malastare, and circling around Bestine to reach Fondor and the Core. But where will Eriadu be when Fondor opts to join the Confederacy?"

"Opts to join, or falls to you?"

"Join us and you can continue to transact business in Confederacy spheres—through Falleen, Ruusan, all the way to the Tion sectors." He paused. "Is your friend and benefactor on Coruscant in any position to offer you a similar guarantee, with the Core contracting around him?"

"The Supreme Chancellor is not required to bribe me into remaining loyal to him."

"As a complement to previous bribes, you mean. In allowing your illegal actions in the Seswenna to go completely unchecked since you abetted in the undermining of Finis Valorum." Dooku snorted in scorn. "A strong leader would never have allowed galactic events to reach a point of crisis. He is weak and inadequate."

Tarkin shook his head negatively. "He is hemmed in by a corrupt and incompetent Senate. Otherwise the Republic would have already raised a military to oppose you."

"Ah, but the end of his second term is upon him, Governor, with no one of any merit to succeed him. Unless, of course . . . some crisis results in his term being extended."

Tarkin tried to decipher the count's inference. "One might almost conclude that you're positing an *advantage* to going to war. But how would that work? The volunteer security forces of the Confederate worlds against—what, Judicials and ten thousand of your former Jedi brethren?"

Dooku adopted an arrogant expression. "Don't be too surprised, Governor, if the Republic has access to secret forces."

Tarkin regarded him in open astonishment. "Mercenaries?"

"*Proxies* is perhaps a more accurate term."

"Then you have already committed to war."

"I am committed to the idea of a galaxy ruled by an enlightened leader, with laws that apply universally—not one set for the Core Worlds, another for the Outer Rim worlds."

"An autocracy," Tarkin said. "Guided by the count of Serenno."

Dooku gestured in dismissal. "I am ambitious, but not to that degree."

"Who, then?" Tarkin pressed.

"We'll leave that for another day. I'm simply trying to keep you from finding yourself on the losing side."

Tarkin studied him. "Will there actually be a losing side for men like you and me? I sometimes suspect that this crisis is a mere charade."

Dooku appraised him. "Would you be opposed to being part of a charade if it meant that the galaxy could be brought under the rule of one?"

Tarkin regarded him for a long moment. "I wonder what you mean, Dooku."

The count nodded in assessment. "I may not be able to forestall repercussions, Governor, but should this situation escalate to war between the Confederacy and the Republic, I will do my best to see that no lasting harm comes to your homeworld."

Tarkin's brows beetled. "Why would you?"

"Because in the end, you and I are likely to find ourselves under the same roof."

Tarkin had long wondered why Dooku's prophecy had never come to pass. It was the Separatists who had wound up on the losing side, along with Dooku and, most unexpectedly, the entire Jedi Order, and the Emperor and Tarkin who had found themselves under the same roof.

"The *Carrion Spike* has launched, Your Majesty," 11-4D told Darth Sidious.

The droid resembled a protocol model, except for its several arms, only two of which terminated in what might be considered hands; the rest were devoted to tools of varied purpose, including computer interface and power charge extensions. The droid had once been the property of Sidious's tutor, Plagueis, and had been in Sidious's possession since his former master's death, though in several different guises.

The announcement roused Sidious from meditation, and he took a moment to reach out to Vader, his perturbed apprentice.

“Alert me when the ship makes planetfall on Murkhana,” Sidious said.

The droid bowed its head. “I will, Your Majesty.”

The two of them were in Sidious’s lair, a small rock-walled enclosure beneath the deepest of the Palace’s several sublevels that had once been an ancient Sith shrine. That the Jedi had raised their Temple over the shrine had for a thousand years been one of the most closely guarded secrets of those Sith Lords who had perpetuated and implemented the revenge strategy of the Jedi Order’s founders. Even the most powerful of Dark Side Adepts believed that shrines of the sort existed only on Sith worlds remote from Coruscant, and even the most powerful of the Jedi believed that the power inherent in the shrine had been neutralized and successfully capped. In truth, that power had seeped upward and outward since its entombment, infiltrating the hallways and rooms above, and weakening the Jedi Order much as the Sith Masters themselves had secretly infiltrated the corridors of political power and toppled the Republic.

Save for Sidious, no sentient being in close to five thousand years had set foot in the shrine. The room’s excavation and restoration had been carried out by machines under the supervision of 11-4D. Even Vader was unaware of the shrine’s existence. But it was here that they would one day work together the way Sidious and Plagueis had to coax from the dark side its final secrets. In the intervening years he had actually come to appreciate Plagueis for the planner and prophet he had been. Such perilous machinations required two Sith, one to serve as bait for the dark side, the other to be the vessel. Success would grant them the power to harness the full powers of the dark side, and allow them to rule for ten thousand years.

Sidious found himself unable to return to his meditations. Stretching out with his feelings, he endeavored to assess the mood aboard the *Carrion Spike*. Vader had made clear his thoughts about the mission, but Sidious had learned from Vizier Amedda that Tarkin, too, was displeased with the assignment. During the Clone Wars, Sidious had made every attempt to promote a rapport between Skywalker

and Tarkin, but the relationship had never prospered to his satisfaction. Then came that business with Skywalker's Togruta apprentice, Ahsoka Tano, which, while it had provoked further disaffection in Skywalker, had also created a rift between him and Tarkin that perhaps had yet to mend. Yes, they had partnered since the end of the war, but—to Sidious's own annoyance—absent a true appreciation for each other's talents.

Well, if they were going to continue to serve him, Sidious thought, it was long past time that they found a way to work out their differences.

The fact that Sidious held Tarkin in such approbation made the matter all the more wearisome. They had met several years after Sidious—still an apprentice of Darth Plagueis at the time—had been appointed Naboo's representative to the Republic Senate. Despite the fact that Naboo and Eriadu were very different Outer Rim worlds, Sidious had recognized Tarkin, some twenty years his junior, as a fellow colonial. And more: a human who had the potential to become a powerful ally, not only with regard to Sidious's political ambitions, but also in helping to implement his true agenda of destroying the Jedi Order.

Toward that end, Sidious had brought Tarkin into the fold early on, even facilitating a meeting between Tarkin and many influential Coruscanti, if only to solicit their opinions of Eriadu's local hero. The more Sidious investigated Tarkin's past—his unusual upbringing and exotic rites of passage—the more he grew to feel that Tarkin's thinking about the Republic and about leadership itself was in keeping with his own, and Tarkin hadn't disappointed him. When Sidious had asked for help in weakening Supreme Chancellor Valorum so that Sidious himself could win election to the position, Tarkin had stonewalled Valorum's attempts to investigate the disastrous events of an Eriadu trade summit, thereby helping to foment and hasten the Naboo Crisis. Tarkin had remained loyal during the Clone Wars as well, enlisting in the military on the side of the Republic, despite repeated entreaties by Count Dooku—which Sidious had arranged as a test of Tarkin's dedication.

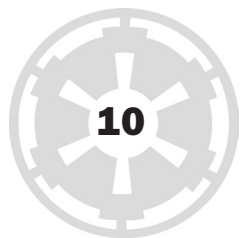
Sidious assumed that Tarkin had puzzled out that Vader had once



been Anakin Skywalker, under whom Tarkin had served during the war. Tarkin may also have determined that Vader was a Sith. If so, it followed that he accepted that Sidious was Vader's dark side Master. But Tarkin's intuitions were important only in the sense that he never revealed them and never allowed them to interfere with his own ambitions.

For his own sake as much as Tarkin's, Sidious had been careful to keep those ambitions in check. He understood that Tarkin was frustrated with his current position as sector governor and base commander, but overseeing construction of the mobile battle station was too grand an undertaking for any one person, even one of Tarkin's caliber. As powerful as the battle station might become, its real purpose was to serve as a tangible symbol and constant reminder of the power of the dark side, and to free Sidious from having to portray that part.

Darth Plagueis had once remarked that "*the Force can strike back.*" The death of a star didn't necessarily curtail its light, and indeed Sidious could see evidence of that sometimes even in Vader—the barest flicker of persistent light. Attacks like the one directed against Tarkin's moon base and discoveries like the one on Murkhana were distractions to his ultimate goal of making certain that the Force *could not* strike back, and that whatever faint light of hope remained could be snuffed out for good.



---

## A BETTER WOMP RAT TRAP

---

**LIKE MANY FORMER** Separatist bastions, Murkhana was a dying world. The lingering atmospheric effects of years of orbital bombardment and beam-weapon assaults had raised the temperature of the world's seas and killed off coastal coral reefs that had once drawn tourists from throughout the Tion Cluster. What had been wave-washed black beaches were now stretches of fathomless quicksand, and what had been sheltered coves were stagnant shallows, rife with gelatinous sea creatures that had risen to the evolutionary fore when the fish had died. Battered by relentless squalls of acid rain, the once graceful, spiraling structures of Murkhana City were pitted and cracked, and had turned the color of disease-ridden bone. Even when the rains ceased, menacing clouds hung over the bleached landscape, blotting out light and leaving the air smelling like rancid cheese. Descending through the atmosphere was like dropping into a simmering cauldron of witch's brew.

Below was what remained of the seaside hexagonal spaceport and the quartet of ten-kilometer-long bridges that had linked it to the city; the Corporate Alliance landing field was slagged and tipped on

the massive piers that had supported it, and the bridges had collapsed into the frothing waters. Arriving starships were now directed to the city's original spaceport at the base of the hills.

"Governor Tarkin, we have a visual on the landing zone," the captain said as the ship pierced a final low-lying layer of dirty cloud, revealing the ravaged city spread out beneath them from sea to surrounding hills like some terrain exported from a nightmare. "Spaceport control says that it's up to us to find a place to set down, as their guidance systems are no longer in service and the terminal has been shut down. Immigration and customs have relocated to the inner city."

Tarkin shook his head in disgust. "I suspect no one makes use of them. What do our scanners tell us of the atmosphere?"

"Atmosphere is a mess, but breathable," the comm officer said, her eyes fixed on the sensor board. "Background radiation is at tolerable levels." Swiveling to Tarkin, she added, "Sir, you might want to consider wearing a transpirator."

Tarkin watched smoke pour into the sky from fires that might have been burning for six years. He considered the specialist's advice for a moment, gradually warming to the idea of being the only one among the mission personnel to be bare-headed, thus appearing more the commanding officer.

"Looking for an adequate site, Governor," the captain said.

Tarkin leaned toward the viewport to assess the landing field. It was impossible to tell the bomb craters from the circular repulsorlift pits that had once functioned as service areas for the Separatists' spherical core ships. The edges of the field were lined with ruined hemispherical docking bays and massive rectangular hangars, their roofs blown open or caved in. The façade of the sprawling terminal building had avalanched onto the field, and the interior had been gutted by fire. Ships of various size and function were parked at random, though most of them looked as if they hadn't seen space in a long while.

"Twenty-five degrees east," Tarkin said finally. "We'll have just enough room."

Vader entered the command cabin as repulsors were lowering the corvette toward the cracked permacrete.

"A world I never expected to see again," Tarkin said.

"Nor I, Governor," Vader said. "So let us be quick about it."

Tarkin scanned the immediate area as *Carrion Spike* began to settle on her landing gear and the instruments were shut down. Only a handful of starships occupied their corner of the uneven field, including a decrepit forty-year-old Judicial cruiser and a sleek and obviously rapid black frigate bristling with weapons, its broad bow designed to suggest slanting eyes and bloody fangs thrusting from a cruel mouth.

"Charming," Tarkin said. "And very much in keeping with the surroundings."

Wedging a brimmed command cap into the pocket of his tunic, he joined Vader and eight of the stormtroopers as they were filing from the ship. Barely through the air lock, he could already taste acid on his tongue. They had just reached the foot of the boarding ramp when a teetering low-altitude assault transport soared into view, its wing-mounted repulsorlift turbines straining as it dropped from the sky to hover alongside the *Carrion Spike*. Two Imperial stormtroopers in scratched and dented armor leapt from the open side hatch, while well-armed door gunners kept watch over the field.

"Welcome to Murkhana, sirs," their squad leader said, offering a lazy salute.

Tarkin heard stifled laughter from someone inside the gunship. Adorning the vehicle's vaned sliding hatch was the faded insignia of the Twelfth Army.

His posture reflecting obvious displeasure, Vader appraised the noisy gunship. "Are you certain that this relic is capable of carrying us, Squad Leader, or might *we* end up carrying *it*?"

The stormtrooper glanced over his shoulder at the gunship. "Sorry to report that we've no choice, Lord Vader. The rest are in even worse shape."

"Why is that?" Tarkin stepped forward to ask.

"Sabotage, sir. We're not well liked by the locals."

"No one asked them to like you, Squad Leader," Vader snapped. With a swirl of his cloak, he climbed aboard the gunship, followed by his personal stormtroopers.

Tarkin paused to comlink *Carrion Spike's* captain. "We're leaving four stormtroopers to guard the ship. Keep the comlink open and contact me at the first sign of trouble."

"Acknowledged, Governor," the comm officer said.

Vader extended a hand to Tarkin and pulled him up onto the deteriorated deck plates of the gunship's deployment platform.

"Go," the Dark Lord shouted to the cockpit crew.

The gunship lifted shakily off the landing field and began to wheel toward the heart of Murkhana City. Placing himself behind one of the door gunners, Tarkin grabbed hold of an overhead strap and peered out the open hatchway.

He wasn't surprised to see that most of the city's charred, devastated buildings had yet to be demolished. Facing sanctions, the local government had not been able to grow the economy, and the substantially reduced population had been forced to rely on black marketeers for goods and resources. Rusting remnants of the war, carbon-scored Hailfire, spider, and crab droids stood idle in the desolate streets, picked clean of usable parts by gangs of scavengers. Scattered among them were a couple of burned-out Republic AT-TE and turbo tanks, along with a Trident transport. The hulk of a Commerce Guild warship protruded like a broken tooth close to what remained of the Argente Tower, which was itself a husk.

Breath-masked residents scurried for cover as the gunship raced over glass-littered avenues, past boarded-up storefronts, toppled monuments, and gloomy cantinas. Packs of famished animals roved the alleyways, and nearly every street corner hosted crews of smugglers and hoodlums. Tarkin caught glimpses of limping war veterans—Koorivar with broken cranial horns, Aqualish with missing tusks, and Gossams with crooked necks—along with children stricken with hideous birth defects.

As the gunship veered through a turn, a hunk of twisted metal slammed into the hatch's retracted door, hurled by a young woman who had stepped boldly from a lopsided doorway and stood in the street, hands on hips, as if challenging the Imperials to reply.

"Permission to exterminate, sir," one of the stormtroopers said, his blaster rifle braced against his shoulder.

Vader stretched out his gloved hand to lower the weapon. "We haven't come all this way to instigate a riot."

And yet two city blocks later, catching sight of defaced military recruitment posters and walls vandalized by hand-scrawled insults aimed at the Emperor, he turned to Tarkin to say: "We should put this place out of its misery."

"Too magnanimous," Tarkin said. "Though it may come to that."

The gunship began to shed velocity as it crossed a cratered plaza; it came to a hovering halt in the middle of a broad concourse obstructed by a collapsed coral archway.

"We're here, sirs," the squad leader said.

"Which building?" Tarkin asked, then followed the line of the stormtrooper's extended hand to see a squat structure with rounded corners three blocks away.

"Originally the property of the Corporate Alliance, sir," the squad leader continued. "A medcenter, until it was used to house a deflector shield generator that protected a vital Separatist landing platform."

"And the current proprietor?"

"Unknown, sir. The place has changed hands several times since the end of the war. Identities of the various owners are buried under layers of phony documentation."

"You have been maintaining surveillance?" Vader asked.

"Continuous since receiving orders from Coruscant three weeks back, Lord Vader. But we haven't observed anyone coming or going. The locals tend to steer clear of this entire area."

"Then you have no one in custody?"

"No one, Lord Vader."

Tarkin's eyes clouded over with suspicion. "Yes, but who might have been watching you while you were watching the building?"

Vader nodded. "Yes, Governor, it might very well be a trap."

The stormtrooper indicated several nearby buildings. "We've installed rooftop snipers there, there, and there, Lord Vader."

"Are you carrying remotes?"

"We have a couple of AC-ones onboard, along with an ASN retrofitted with a holotransmitter."

"Those will do. Prepare them."

The gunship touched down and Vader stepped from the deployment platform, all but floating to the buckled street. When his stormtroopers had followed, he turned to Sergeant Crest.

“Take four of your men and trail the remotes inside. We will monitor the holofeeds from here. Perform a full reconnaissance of the building, but do not enter the room where the devices are said to be located until we follow on your all-clear.”

Crest saluted and pointed to four of the stormtroopers. By then the spherical remotes had already been tasked and were whirring off toward the building. The squad leader placed a handheld holoprojector on the deployment platform deck plates and enabled it. A moment later the device began receiving transmissions from one of the remotes. While Vader paced, Tarkin watched as illuminated views of narrow hallways and short staircases resolved above the holoprojector. The squad leader shifted feeds from one remote to the next, but the views and sounds remained largely unchanged: puddled hallways, dark stairwells, dripping water, creaking doors, indistinct noises that may have come from still-working machines.

Almost an hour passed before the voice of Sergeant Crest issued from the comlink of one of his subordinates. “Lord Vader, the building is clear. We’re holding at the head of a corridor leading to the device storage room. I’ve tasked one of the remotes to guide you to our position.”

Leaving the local stormtroopers to establish a perimeter outside the building, Tarkin, Vader, and the remainder of the Coruscant contingent entered, glow rods in hand as they trailed the tasked remote through some of the corridors and up and down some of the stairways they had been shown earlier. In short order they had rendezvoused with Crest and the others, fifty meters from massive, retrofitted sliding doors that appeared to seal the storeroom.

Vader gestured for the squad leader to send one of the remotes down the final stretch, then to follow with four of his troopers. Tarkin tracked their wary advance on the sliding doors, which Crest parted just widely enough to allow passage for the remote. When after a long moment the remote exited, Crest signaled for Vader, Tarkin, and the others to proceed.

First to reach the sliding doors, Vader came to a sudden halt.

"The remote found nothing untoward?" he asked Crest.

"Nothing, Lord Vader."

Vader's breathing filled the corridor. "Something . . ."

Tarkin watched him closely. Vader's exceptional instincts had alerted him to a threat of some sort. But what? He began to think through the holotransmissions of the remotes' dizzying exploration of the confused interior of the building. On every level the surveillance droids had reached dead ends similar to the one he, Vader, and the stormtroopers now faced. Did that mean that the storeroom was several stories high? Perhaps it had been an atrium before it became a storage space. Tarkin thought back to the squad leader's description of the building: "*A medcenter . . . Housed a deflector shield generator . . .*"

Tarkin couldn't imagine such an enormous piece of machinery having been assembled in place. Which could mean—

"Lord Vader, this isn't the primary entrance," he said.

Vader turned to him.

"Who would be fool enough to haul communications devices through these corridors and up and down these stairways?" Tarkin gestured upward with his chin. "I suspect they were delivered here through a rooftop access. The sliding doors could lead to an ambush of some sort."

Vader took a moment to consider it, then looked at Crest. "You've failed me again, Sergeant."

"Lord Vader, the remote—"

"The rooftop," Tarkin interrupted.

Vader glanced at him but said nothing.

They exited the building by the same route they had taken earlier. Once outside, Vader ordered the squad leader to call for the gunship, and all of them scampered up onto the deployment platform. On the building's flat roof they discovered a well-concealed and functional turbolift shaft, five meters in diameter, transparent, and safe to use. Surveying the vast room while they were descending, Tarkin spotted the remains of a reception counter centered among stacks of metal shipping containers and exposed machines.



“No one touches anything until I’ve had a look,” he told the storm-troopers. “And take care where you walk. The doors may not be alone in being rigged.”

While Vader, Crest, and some of the others moved off to investigate the secondary entrance, Tarkin, feeling as if he were stepping back in time, began to meander through the rows created by the stacked containers and devices.

It had been just nine months after the Battle of Geonosis that Count Dooku’s scientists had succeeded in slicing into the Republic HoloNet by seeding the spaceways with hyperwave transceiver nodes of a novel design. The Separatists could have kept quiet about the infiltration and tasked the nodes to gather intelligence about Republic military operations. Instead, Dooku—as if suddenly intent on winning hearts and minds rather than defeating the Republic with his droid armies—began using the HoloNet to broadcast propaganda Shadowfeeds, providing Separatist accounts of battle wins and disinformation about Republic war crimes, and in the end spreading apprehension among the populations of the Core Worlds that a Separatist victory was imminent.

It was, however, Separatist success in jamming Republic communication relays that had brought Tarkin into play. Together with operatives of the Republic’s fledgling cryptanalysis department and elements of the Twelfth Army, Tarkin had been sent to Murkhana both to spearhead the invasion and to oversee the dismantling of the Shadowfeed operation.

Running his hands now over S-thread jammers, signal eradicators, and HoloNet chafing devices, he recalled being among the first wave of clone trooper platoons to fight their way into the building that was the source of the Shadowfeeds; then, on overpowering the Separatist forces, torturing the captive scientists into revealing the secrets of their jamming and steganographic technology, and putting to death thousands of beings who had contributed to Dooku’s scheme. The mission had constituted the first of Tarkin’s covert operations undertaken for then supreme chancellor Palpatine. Murkhana had kicked off a year of similar successes—though it had ended in Tarkin’s capture, torture, and incarceration in Citadel prison.

With the Emperor's proclamation of the New Order, some aspects of the HoloNet had come under strict Imperial control, as much to provide the military with exclusive communications networks as to censor unauthorized news feeds.

Tarkin was completing his initial survey of the components when Vader sought him out.

"The sliding doors were engineered to trigger a blast when opened fully," he said. "Odd that the remote failed to register the explosives."

Tarkin gestured to the stacks of devices. "Whoever assembled this array found a way to blind the remotes."

Vader looked around. "Imperial Security's operative made no mention of a rigged entrance."

Tarkin pinched his lower lip. "That could mean that the explosives were only recently installed."

"With the building under constant surveillance?"

"The street entrances, yes," Tarkin said. "Probably not the roof."

Vader absorbed that in silence, then said, "Puzzling, even so. All this merely to lure and murder an investigative team?"

"I doubt that the door trap was meant for us, Lord Vader."

"Intruders of a more ordinary sort? Would-be thieves, black marketeers?" Vader gazed about him in what struck Tarkin as mounting vexation. "Have you found any unfamiliar devices?"

"Not yet," Tarkin said.

"Then it is all too obvious. These devices were deliberately placed where they could be discovered. This is a stage set."

"Perhaps," Tarkin said. "But we're going to need to investigate every container to be certain there's nothing new among the devices. This cache may date from the war, but that doesn't negate that the components appear to be fully functional and capable of interrupting or corrupting HoloNet signals."

Vader was dismissive. "Technology that has been available for nearly a decade, Governor."

"The question is, why are these devices here?"

"Someone found them elsewhere and moved them here for safe-keeping until their value could be determined."

"That would explain the rigged doors . . .," Tarkin said. "But it's

also possible that whoever originally found the cache made use of some of the components to engineer the false distress call transmitted to Sentinel Base.”

Vader fell silent for a long moment, then said, “I agree. Your proposal, then?”

Tarkin glanced around. “We cam everything and record and transmit to Coruscant any serial numbers or markings we find. Any suspect components should be relocated to the *Carrion Spike* and also returned to Coruscant for further analysis. The rest should be destroyed.”

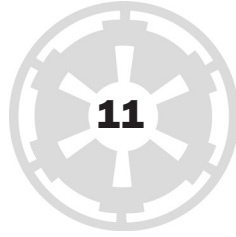
Vader nodded in agreement.

Tarkin glanced around again and sighed with purpose. “We have our work cut out for us.”

“The stormtroopers can see to most of it,” Vader said. “There is someone I wish to speak with before we return to the Core.”

Tarkin showed him a questioning look.

“The Imperial Security Bureau asset who first reported the find.”



---

## FAIR GAME

---

**AS THE GUNSHIP SPED** back toward the center of the city, Tarkin, gazing on the devastation, thought: This might have been Eriadu had he not warned the planetary leadership that supporting Dooku would have meant inviting cataclysm.

Not every member of the planet's ruling body had agreed with him, but in the end he'd gotten his way and Eriadu had remained loyal to the Republic. For Tarkin, though, the stewardship of his homeworld had come to an end. When word of his decision not to seek reelection became known, his aging and by then ailing father had summoned him to the family compound for a frank conversation.

"Politics hasn't been enough of a battleground for you?" his father had asked from the bed to which he was confined, his body punctured by feeding tubes and shunts. The view out the large window took in nearly all of the calm bay.

"More than enough," Tarkin said from a chair beside the bed. "But the immigration issues are solved, the economy is back on track, and our world is now thought of as a Core world in the Outer Rim." The

adjoining room of the master suite had been transformed into a kind of intensive care unit, with a bacta tank and a team of medical droids standing by in the event the elder Tarkin should desire resuscitation.

"Granted," his father said. "That, however, does not mean that your work is done. A lot of people worked very hard to get you in office."

"I've done what I set out to accomplish and paid them back in full," Tarkin said more harshly than he intended. "Some more than they even deserve." He fell silent for a moment, then added: "I'm exasperated by having to appease so many separate interests and fight to have laws passed and enacted. Politics is worse than a theater of war."

His father snorted. "This from someone who has always preached the importance of law and rule by fear."

"That hasn't changed. But it has to be on my terms. What's more, Eriadu's internal problems scarcely matter in the present scheme of things. When I met last with Dooku, he made it sound as though galactic war is both inevitable and imminent."

"And why wouldn't he? In his determination to persuade you to throw in with his Separatists, he would make use of enticement, threats, whatever it takes."

Tarkin thought back through his recent conversation with the count, and shook his head. "There was something else on his mind, but I couldn't pry it from him. It was almost as if he was offering me an opportunity to join some secret fraternity of beings who are actually responsible for this mess."

His father seemed to consider it. "What will you do, then? Wait for the Republic to instate a military and enlist?" He shook his head in disgust. "You served in Outland, you served in the Judicial Department. Enlistment would be a backward step just when Eriadu needs you most. *Especially* if this schism leads to war. Who will be able to keep Eriadu safe should it fall to Dooku's forces?"

"That's precisely the point. There's only so much one can do with words and arguments."

"So you'll race to the light of the lasers. Wasn't that what you used to exclaim as an Outland commander?" His father managed a rueful laugh. "You may as well adopt it as a personal motto."

"Death or renown, Father. I am, after all, your son."

"So you are," his father said, slowly nodding his head. "Has the supreme chancellor remarked on your decision?"

Tarkin nodded. "Palpatine is in my corner, as it were."

"I was afraid of that." His father regarded him for a long moment. "I urge you think back to the Carrion, Wilhuff. When a pride's territory is threatened, the dominant beast stands its ground. It doesn't run off to enlist in a larger cause. You must think of Eriadu itself as the plateau."

Tarkin stared out the window, and then turned to face his father. "Jova told me a story that bears on my decision. Long before you were born—long before even Jova was born—a group of developers had designs on the Carrion and all those resource-rich lands the Tarkin family had amassed. Our ancestors initially attempted to resolve the matter peacefully. They attempted to placate the developers with credits. At one point, as Jova tells it, they were even prepared to offer the developers all the lands north of the Orrineswa River clear to Mount Veermok, but their offer was rejected in the strongest terms. For the developers, it was either the entire plateau and all the surrounding territory or none at all."

His father smiled weakly. "I know how this story ended."

Tarkin smiled back at him. "The Tarkins understood that they weren't going to keep their adversaries at bay by posting NO TRESPASSING signs or encircling the Carrion with plasma fences. Giving all evidence that they were prepared to capitulate, they lured the leadership of the conglomerate to the bargaining table."

"And assassinated them to a man," his father said.

"To a man. And that was the end of it."

His father took a deep breath and loosed a stuttering exhale. "I understand. But you're naïve to think that the Republic has the guts to do that with Dooku and the rest. Mark my words, this war will drag on and on until every world pays a price. And I'm glad I won't be around to see that happen."

The ambassador to Murkhana was waiting at the top of the ornate stairway that fronted the principal building of the Imperial com-

pound. A tall, broad-shouldered woman, she was dressed appropriately for Murkhana, Tarkin thought, in that she was sporting stormtrooper armor.

Seemingly unable to decide whether to salute or bow as he and Vader approached, she simply spread her arms in a welcoming gesture and adopted a cynical smile. Murkhana's acid rain and soupy air had taken a toll on her hair and complexion, but she appeared otherwise healthy.

"Welcome, Lord Vader and Governor Tarkin. I was aware that Coruscant was sending an investigative team, but I had no idea—"

"Has the operative arrived?" Vader interrupted.

She gestured to the residence with a flick of her head. "Inside. I summoned him as soon as I received your comm."

"Show us to him."

She spun on her boot heels and made for the reinforced front door, two stormtroopers flanking the entrance stepping aside and saluting Vader and Tarkin as they passed. The entry hall and main room of the residence were sparsely furnished, and the dry air was artificially scented. A Koorivarn male taller than Tarkin and draped in tattered robes stood silently behind a curved couch. His cranial horn was of average size for his species, but his facial ridges were marred by intersecting scars.

The ambassador gestured for Vader and Tarkin to sit, but they declined.

"May I at least offer you something to—"

"Tell me, Ambassador," Vader interrupted again, "do you ever leave this compound of yours, with its high sensor-studded walls and company of armed sentries?"

"Of course."

"Then no doubt you have seen the obscene scrawlings and defacements displayed on every other building between here and this planet's wretched excuse for a spaceport."

She showed him a sardonic look. "My lord, as quickly as I have them expunged, new ones spring up."

"And what of the criminal rabble that cluster on every corner?" Tarkin asked.

She laughed shortly. "They proliferate even more quickly than the defacements, Governor Tarkin. The moment Black Sun moved out, the Crymorah moved in."

"The Crymorah," Vader said.

"Actually a local affiliate known as the Sugi."

Vader seemed to tuck the information away.

"You need to make an example of them," Tarkin said.

The ambassador looked at him as if he'd lost his mind. "You think I haven't tried?"

Tarkin cocked an eyebrow. "Meaning what, exactly?"

She started to reply, then blew out her breath and began again. "I've made appeal after appeal to Moff Therbon for additional stormtroopers, to no avail."

"And if we see to it that you have additional resources, you'll do what must be done?"

She continued to regard Tarkin with skepticism. "Excuse me, Governor, but I don't think you understand the situation fully. Officiating here has been like serving a sentence for a crime I didn't commit. The stormtroopers have a saying, *Better spaced than based on Belderone*, and we're a far cry from Belderone." She blew out her breath. "Yes, I can leave this compound, but my life is at risk whenever I do. Hence, the white wardrobe." She glanced between Tarkin and Vader. "Maybe you two haven't noticed, but Murkhana isn't Coruscant. The population here *hates* me. I sometimes think *Murkhana* hates me. I'm held responsible for every Imperial tax increase and every minor change to the legal system. The smugglers are the only ones who garner respect, because they're the only ones providing goods—even if at exorbitant rates. As for the crime lords, they're the only ones powerful enough to provide protection from the thieves and murderers this planet has bred since the war ended."

Vader took a step in her direction. "I will be sure to let the Emperor know of your dissatisfaction, Ambassador."

She didn't retreat. "I sure as hell wish someone would. I mean, I'm humbled that the Emperor deemed me worthy to serve him, but this assignment—"



Vader thrust his forefinger at her. "Allowing a cell of dissidents to operate under your watch is not what I would call serving the Emperor, Ambassador."

"Dissidents?" She shook her head in genuine bewilderment. "I don't understand."

Instead of explaining, Vader turned his attention to the Koorivar. "You are the intelligence asset?"

"I am Bracchia," the Koorivar said in little more than a whisper.

Tarkin knew that it was nothing more than a code name, but it was the only name Deputy Director Harus Ison had been willing to provide. "You were a Republic operative during the war."

Bracchia nodded. "I was, Governor Tarkin. I assisted in your anti-Shadowfeed operation here."

Tarkin adopted a thin-lipped expression of wariness. "Tell us about the Corporate Alliance building—the former medcenter."

The Koorivar nodded in deference. "Before entering, I watched the building every day for a week, Governor Tarkin. When I determined it to be unoccupied, I entered and made a quick inventory of the devices as directed."

"As *directed*?" Tarkin asked in surprise.

But before Bracchia could respond, Vader said, "You entered how?"

The Koorivar turned to him. "Through sliding doors, Lord Vader. I'm not aware of any other entrance, and the devices were just where I was told I would find them."

"How could you fail to notice the turbolift?" Vader said.

The Koorivar looked at the floor. "My apologies, Lord Vader. I was fixated on investigating the devices."

Tarkin placed himself deliberately between Bracchia and Vader. "Are you saying that you didn't make the discovery on your own?"

"No, Governor, I did not. I was merely tasked with verifying a report sent to me from Coruscant."

Tarkin's brow furrowed. "From Imperial Security?"

Bracchia nodded. "From my case officer at ISB, yes."

Tarkin had his mouth open to pursue the matter when his comlink sounded and he prized the device from its belt pouch.

"We're at the building, Governor Tarkin."

Tarkin recognized the voice of Sergeant Crest. "At what building?"

"Back at the Corporate Alliance building, sir."

"You're not at the landing field?"

Crest took a moment to reply. "Sir, you told us to return here after we'd off-loaded the devices at the corvette."

"Who told you?"

"You, sir." Crest sounded as confused as Tarkin.

"I sent no such orders, Sergeant."

"Excuse me, sir, but the order came by holotransmission from you just after we'd transferred the last of the devices you marked for the ship. Without the gunship, we had to commandeer an airspeeder at the landing field."

"Who is with the ship?" Vader stepped in to say toward the comlink's audio pickup.

"Two of our group, Lord Vader, in addition to the corvette's captain and comm officer."

Tarkin felt blood rush from his face. "Sergeant, return to the ship immediately."

"On our way, sir."

Vader looked at Tarkin while he was contacting the *Carrion Spike's* captain. "A second feature from the makers of the false holovid transmitted to the moon base?"

"In which *I* am now the principal actor," Tarkin said, trying not to sound too rattled. Checking the comlink again, he added: "I can't raise the ship."

"That happens all the time, Governor Tarkin," the ambassador said. "If it's not the city's power grid, it's the communications array."

He glanced at her with his mouth open, an uneasy feeling beginning to coil in his chest. Fingers dancing over the comlink's keypad, he opened a second channel that allowed him to communicate with the corvette itself, and entered a code that commanded the *Carrion Spike's* slave system to prevent anyone from so much as approaching the ship. But the system didn't respond.

"Nothing," he said to Vader. "Not from the command cabin, not from the ship itself."

Vader whirled on the ambassador. "Contact Coruscant by HoloNet immediately."

She spread her hands in apology. "Lord Vader, Murkhana hasn't had HoloNet communications since early in the Clone Wars." She cut her eyes to Tarkin. "The HoloNet was destroyed during the first Republic assault."

Tarkin recalled. The relay had been destroyed as a means of disrupting Dooku's Shadowfeeds to worlds along the Perlemian Trade Route. His thoughts reeled.

"Send a subspace transmission," Vader was saying.

"Governor Tarkin," Crest said from the comlink, "we're back at the landing field." He fell silent for a long moment, and when he spoke again his voice betrayed astonishment. "Sir, the *Carrion Spike* is nowhere in sight."

Tarkin stared at the comlink. "What?"

"It's not here, sir. It must have launched."

"Impossible!" Tarkin said.

"Where are your troopers, Sergeant?" Vader all but snarled.

Again the reply was long in arriving. "Lord Vader, we have a visual on four bodies—two stormtroopers, the captain, and the comm officer." Crest paused, then added, "Shot through and through, Lord Vader."

Vader clenched his right hand. "You've failed me for the last time, Sergeant."

"I get that, sir," Crest said in a somber voice.

Vader turned to Tarkin. "We sidestepped the smaller trap only to fall into the larger one, Governor. If nothing else, we now know the reason we were lured here." Bringing his left hand to the brow of his helmet, he paced away from Tarkin and the ambassador, then swung back to them. "The ship is still in the Murkhana system."

Tarkin didn't waste time asking how Vader knew that to be the case. Instead, he glanced at one of the stormtroopers. "The Judicial cruiser at the landing field."

The stormtrooper shook his head in a mournful way. "Not space-worthy, sir. We've been waiting on replacement parts for the hyper-drive motivator for three months, local."

"I know where to procure a ship," Vader said abruptly. He swept his arm in a gesture aimed at the stormtroopers. "All of you—come with me." Then he turned and pointed to Bracchia. "And you."

Tarkin fell in among them as they hastened from the ambassador's residence.

Tarkin had his doubts.

At Lola Sayu, when Skywalker, Kenobi, and Ahsoka Tano had participated in rescuing him from the Citadel, Tarkin had taken issue with the Jedi strategy of splitting into two teams. Surrendering group integrity for twice the number of potential problems made little sense, and that was precisely the way the mission had unfolded. Tarkin's general, Even Piell, had been killed, and the rest of them had nearly fallen back into the clutches of the Citadel's sadistic Separatist prison warden. Now, all these years later, Vader had split their forces, and here they were allowing themselves to be herded at blasterpoint into the den of a Sugi crime lord while the stormtroopers were elsewhere in Murkhana City carrying out their part of Vader's plan.

So Tarkin had his doubts.

But with the *Carrion Spike* apparently in the hands of shipjackers, and his captain, comm officer, and two stormtroopers dead, he had little choice but to go along with the subterfuge, in the hope that it would succeed.

"I *still* don't like splitting up the team," he said to Vader as one of the Sugi was shoving him from behind.

Vader glanced over at him, but as ever it was impossible to tell what was going on behind the black orbs and muzzle of his mask.

The headquarters building was in better condition than most in Murkhana City, its graceful swirls of coral and undersea colors having either survived the war or been restored since. Initially Tarkin had taken the Sugi for an insectile species, but in fact they were short bipeds who affected armored powersuits. The suits provided them with a second set of legs and a segmented, barb-tipped abdomen, which gave them the appearance of mythological creatures. The soldiers, at any rate. Others in the dank hall Vader and Tarkin were escorted into stood on their own two feet and wore cowl-like helmets,

with power packs of some sort on their backs. The outsized helmets made their large-eyed skeletal faces seem even smaller than they were.

Twenty soldiers complemented the half dozen who were holding weapons on Vader and Tarkin, with several repurposed Separatist battle droids augmenting the hall group. Their apparent leader lounged on a gaudy throne of coral, clicking orders to his minions.

Vader came to a halt five meters from the throne and spent a moment taking in the overstated surroundings. "You have done well for yourself since the demise of your former competitor, crime lord," he said at last.

"And for that I owe you a debt of gratitude, Lord Vader," the Sugi answered in heavily accented Basic. "That is the sole reason I have allowed you entry to my abode—to thank you personally for killing my predecessor and persuading Black Sun to abandon Murkhana for safer realms."

"You are as insolent as he was, crime lord."

"Given that I enjoy the upper hand here, Lord Vader, I can well afford to be."

Vader folded his arms across his massive chest. "Don't be too sure of yourself."

The Sugi dismissed the warning. "I have been apprised by my associates of your prowess, Lord Vader. But I doubt that even you could triumph over so many." When Vader said nothing, he continued: "Now, what is this drivel about commandeering my starship?"

Tarkin stepped forward to speak. "We take your meaning about being outnumbered. But perhaps there's a healthier way to persuade you to do as Lord Vader asks."

The Sugi's large eyes expanded. "I have not had the pleasure . . ."

"Meet Moff Tarkin, crime lord," Vader said. "Sector governor of Greater Seswenna and more."

The Sugi sat back in his chair. "Now I am impressed. That Murkhana should play host to two such luminary Imperials . . . Though many might say I would be doing the galaxy a favor by eliminating you here and now." He fixed his gaze on Tarkin. "But you were saying, Governor Tarkin . . ."

"That in meetings of this nature there are always alternatives to using brute force."

"I can't imagine any alternatives that will convince me to surrender my fanged beauty of a starship, Governor Tarkin."

Cautiously, Tarkin drew a portable holoprojector disk from the pocket of his tunic. "If I may?"

The Sugi waved permission.

"Sergeant Crest," Vader said toward the device. "Are you in the crime lord's warehouse?"

"Yes, Lord Vader. Ready to bring the entire place down on your command."

"Then you have redeemed yourself, Sergeant."

"Thank you, Lord Vader."

The crime lord's expression approximated entertainment. "You can't be serious. Or do you actually believe that I would surrender my ship for a warehouse full of weapons?"

"Your Crymorah associates on Coruscant might encourage you to do just that."

"I'll take my chances, Lord Vader."

"You're right of course," Tarkin said quickly. "But just now your warehouse contains more than weapons. We've arranged for your wives and brood to be present as well." He called up an image of the Sugi's family members huddled in a circle on the warehouse floor and surrounded by stormtroopers with raised weapons. "We understand that you are very attached to them. A product of your genetics, I suspect."

"You wouldn't!" the Sugi said.

His earlier doubts about Vader's plan beginning to fade, Tarkin lifted an arrogant eyebrow. "Wouldn't we?"

The Sugi fidgeted in apprehension. "I can have both of you killed where you stand!"

"We'll take our chances," Tarkin said, grinning slightly. "Your ship for their lives."

After a long moment of rapid clicking and nervous hand wringing, the Sugi broke the tense silence. "All right, take the ship! I will pur-

chase a replacement. I will purchase twenty replacements. Just let them live—let them live!”

Tarkin’s face grew deadly serious. “You’ll need to furnish us with all the necessary launch codes and order all of your underlings to leave the landing field at once.”

“Then I will do it,” the crime lord said. “Whatever you ask!”

Vader leaned slightly in the direction of the comlink. “Sergeant Crest, transport the crime lord’s family to the landing field and let me know when your troops are in possession of his ship.”

“Let them live,” the Sugi repeated, rising halfway out of his throne in supplication.

“Take heart,” Tarkin said. “They most certainly will survive you.”



---

## BURYING THE LEAD

---

**OUTBOUND FROM MURKHANA**, the *Carrion Spike*'s new pilot and three members of the new crew were gathered in the command cabin marveling at the wonders of the ship. The shipjackers—a human, a Mon Calamari, a Gotal, and a Koorivar—some standing, others seated in the chairs that fronted the curved instrument console, could hardly keep still, having pulled off an act of piracy that had been close to two years in the planning.

The human, Teller, was a rangy, middle-aged man with thick dark hair and eyebrows to match. His long face was perpetually shadowed with stubble, and his chin bore a deep cleft. Dressed in cargo pants, boots, and a thermal shirt, he stood between the principal acceleration chairs, watching as the Gotal pilot and the Koorivar operations specialist familiarized themselves with the ship's complex controls. The bulkhead left of the forward viewports bore traces of carbon scoring and blood from the brief blaster fight that erupted when the shipjackers had had to burn and battle their way through the command cabin hatch to deal with Tarkin's defiant captain and comm officer.



“Getting the hang of it?” Teller asked the Gotal, Salikk.

The twin-horned, flat-faced humanoid nodded without taking his heavy-lidded scarlet eyes from the instrument array. “She flies herself,” he said in accented Basic. A native of the moon Antar 4, he was short and dark-skinned, with tufts of light hair on his cheeks and chin. He wore an old-fashioned but serviceable flight suit that left the clawed digits of his sensitive hands exposed.

“It will fly itself, but we’re going to tell it where to go,” Dr. Artoz told him.

The Mon Cal wore a flight suit whose neck had been altered to accommodate the amphibious humanoid’s high-domed, salmon-colored head, and whose sleeves ended mid-forearm to allow passage for his large webbed hands. Pacing the length of the instruments console, Artoz was pointing out individual controls, his huge eyes swiveling independently of each other to focus simultaneously on Salikk and the ops specialist, Cala.

Teller had known all three of them for years, but what with Salikk’s sweaty scent and the saline smell Artoz emitted, he was grateful for the spaciousness of the *Carrion Spike*’s command cabin. Then again, from what he’d been told by his nonhuman friends, humans weren’t exactly a picnic when it came to body odor.

“Computer-assisted fire control for the lateral lasers and in-close weapons,” Artoz was saying, indicating one set of instruments after the next. “Full-authority navicomp, stealth system initiator, sublight ions, hyperdrive.”

“State-of-the-art Imperial technology,” Cala said. Jutting from a headcloth that fell past the Koorivar’s shoulders, his spiraling cranial horn was twice the height of Salikk’s conical projections and thicker than both of them combined. He wore pouch-pocketed pants not unlike Teller’s under a roomy tunic that reached his thick thighs. “This corvette will easily exceed a Star Destroyer.”

“Nothing less than what I promised,” Artoz said, though without a hint of self-importance. He gestured to the auxiliary controls. “Sensor suite, rectenna controls, alluvial dampers, reverse triggering acceleration compensator—”

“Which one empties the toilets?” a second human asked as she

stepped through the scarred cockpit hatch. Fit and scrappy looking, she had a narrow frame and skin the color of a tropical hardwood. Her short curly hair was naturally black but had been lightened to a mishmash of brown and blond. She wore a white utility suit and ankle-length ship-tread boots. The Zygerrian female who followed her into the command cabin was also slender, though somewhat taller, and distinctly feline in appearance. Pointed, fur-covered ears sprang straight up from the sides of a narrow-nosed, triangular face. Her innate exoticism was enhanced by reddish coloring.

Teller turned to them. "Everything locked down back there?"

The woman, Anora, nodded. "The outer hatch is fully sealed. The air lock, not so much." She gestured with her pointed chin to the Zygerrian. "Hask's going to keep working on it—since it was her blaster that did the damage."

Hask snorted. "When she slammed into me." She spoke Basic flawlessly, but with a thick accent.

Anora showed her a long-suffering look. "You were supposed to keep the safety on."

"For the last time," she said, "I'm not a soldier, and I'll never be one."

"Plenty of blame to go around," Teller said, cutting them off. "The holocams survive?"

Enthusiasm informed Hask's nod. Her head bore a symmetrical pattern of small spurs. "They're in the main cabin. I'll get started slaving them to the HoloNet comm board—"

"As soon as she's repaired the air lock," Anora said, blue-gray eyes bright over her smile.

Hask ignored her. "Nice of Tarkin's stormtroopers to carry some of the storeroom components aboard. I thought we were going to have to sacrifice them."

"We have Tarkin to thank for a lot of things," Teller said. He swung forward in time to catch the end of Artoz's instrument rundown.

"Air lock overrides, blast-tinting for the viewports . . . What else?"

"Do all the Emperor's Moff's rate one of these?" Anora asked, running a hand over the console in appreciation.

"Only Tarkin," Artoz said, "as far as we know."

"A testament to his friendship with Sienar," Teller said.

"Sienar Fleet Systems wasn't the only contributor," Artoz amended. "The company's design sense is all over the corvette, but every ship-builder from Theed Engineering to Cygnus Spaceworks played a part in outfitting it."

"Not to mention Tarkin himself," Teller said. "The Moff was designing ships for Eriadu's Outland Security Force when he was nineteen."

Hask made a sour face. "More Prefsbelt Academy legends."

Anora shook her head negatively. "True by all accounts."

Teller perched on the arm of one of the secondary acceleration chairs. "The way I heard it, Eriadu was losing a lot of its lommite shipments to a pirate group that had fortified the bow of one of their ships to use as a rostrum—a kind of battering ram—after destroying too much cargo with their lasers."

"The pirates weren't acquainted with ion cannons?" Salikk said from the pilot's seat.

Teller glanced at the Gotal. "Seswenna's ships were too well ray-shielded for that—another Tarkin innovation, I might add. Anyway, he designed a narrow-profile ship with cannons that could swivel on pintles to direct all firepower forward. Confronted the rammer bow-on."

"Damn the particle beams, full speed ahead," Hask said, still refusing to buy into the legend.

Teller nodded. "Burned through the pirates' armor like a knife through butter and blew the ship apart." He turned to point to toggles on the control console. "Same system here."

Cala grinned. "Should come in handy."

"We can hope," Artoz said, giving the console a final appraisal with his right eye while his left remained fixed on Salikk. "Proximity alarms, hypercomm unit, Imperial HoloNet encryptor . . ."

"Why is it called the *Carrion Spike*?" Anora said.

Teller drew his lips in and shook his head. "Not a clue."

Everyone fell silent for a moment, gazing through the viewports at the Murkhana system's small outermost planet and the vast starfield beyond.

"I still can't get over Vader being there," Hask said finally. "I mean, why would the Emperor send him to escort Tarkin?"

"Vader paid Murkhana a visit just after the war ended," Cala said. "Executed a Black Sun Twi'lek racketeer, among other acts."

"Still," Hask said. "Vader . . ."

"Stop calling him by name," Anora said harshly; then softened her tone to add: "He's a machine. A terrorist." She looked at Teller. "You took a real risk having him and Tarkin walk right into that sliding door ambush."

Teller shrugged it off. "We had to make the scenario ring true. Besides, their getting themselves blown up wouldn't have affected our plans one way or another."

"The Emperor wouldn't have been happy losing two of his top henchmen," Cala pointed out.

"He's not going to be happy either way," Teller said.

The console issued a loud tone, and Cala lifted his eyes to the display. "Uh, Teller, we've got a starship on our tail."

Teller's dark eyebrows quirked together. "Can't be. You certain you have the stealth system enabled?"

The Koorivar nodded. "Status indicators say so. We should be invisible to scanners."

Everyone crowded around the sensor suite. "Put the ship on screen," Teller said.

Cala's stubby-fingered hands raced across the keypad, and a black ship with forward fangs resolved on the display. "Waiting for a transponder signature . . ."

"Don't bother," Salikk said. "That's Faazah's ship. The *Parsec Predator*."

Teller nodded. "The Sugi arms dealer."

"Murkhana's most wanted," Salikk said.

Cala ran his gaze over the sensor indicators. "Matching our every move."

Teller stared at the screen and scratched his head in bafflement. "I'm willing to entertain explanations."

Artoz spoke first. "Perhaps this Sugi is simply heading for the same jump point we are."

Teller nodded to Salikk. "Put this thing through some maneuvers, and let's see what happens."

The corvette changed vectors, slewing to port, then to starboard before rocketing through an abrupt, twisting climb that delivered them swiftly to the dark side of the impact-cratered planet.

Everyone fell silent again, waiting for the Koorivar's update. "The *Predator's* still with us, just emerging from the transitor." Cala swiveled to Teller. "And here's something strange: We're not being scanned."

Teller and Artoz looked perplexed. "You stated that it is matching our every maneuver," the Mon Cal said.

"It is," Cala emphasized. "And I repeat, we're not being scanned. No sensor lock, no indication that we're being observed."

Teller traded glances with Artoz. "A homing beacon?" he suggested.

The Mon Cal's confusion didn't abate.

Teller looked at Hask. "It was your job to check for trackers."

"I did," the Zygerrian all but snarled. "There weren't any."

"Or you didn't find any," Teller said.

"Why would this Faazah attach a locator to Tarkin's ship?" Anora said. "Or is that just a Sugi thing to do?"

"Offhand, I can't imagine a reason," Artoz said. "But we can certainly outrace the *Predator* if we have to."

Teller considered it. "That doesn't make me feel a whole lot better, Doc. Not if we've got a faulty stealth system."

"Teller, we are *not* being scanned," Cala repeated. "The stealth system is operating impeccably. Check the status displays for yourself if you don't trust me."

Teller made a placating gesture. "Of course I trust you. I just don't get it."

"Should we contact our ally?" Salikk said.

"No, not yet," Teller said. "We'll be updated soon enough, in any case."

"Unless . . .," Hask began.

Anora aimed a faint smile at the Zygerrian. "I'll bet I know what you're going to say, and yes, that occurred to me, too."

Teller and the others looked at the two of them. "What am I missing?" Teller asked.

"Vader," Hask said, exhaling. "Vader and Tarkin."

Teller continued to regard them. "What, the Sugi is giving them a ride?"

Anora rocked her head from side to side. "Or they appropriated his ship."

"They could have." Teller plucked at his lower lip. "Still doesn't make sense, though—not if we're invisible to the *Predator's* sensors. Or are you saying that Tarkin's got some secret way of locking onto us?"

Cala spoke to it. "We disabled the slave circuit when we silenced the stormtroopers' comlinks and the ship's comm."

"Maybe Tarkin is a telepath, along with being a ship designer," Salikk said.

"Vader," Hask rasped. "*Va-der.*"

Teller locked eyes with her. "Vader has a way of neutralizing stealth technology?"

Hask spread her slim, furry hands. "Who knows what's inside that helmet of his? Besides, what other explanation is there?"

"We should have launched sooner," Cala said. "We'd be out of the system by now."

Teller shot him a gimlet look. "A couple of jumps from here, I'm going to remind you that you said that." He glanced at Salikk. "How soon until we can go to lightspeed?"

The Gotal studied the navicomputer display. "As soon as you give the word."

Teller took a breath and let it out. "Let's see them try to track us through hyperspace."

"Is this ship fast enough to close the distance?"

Darth Vader pulled the yoke toward him. "It is faster than most, Governor, but unfortunately not as fast as yours. We need to disable the corvette before it can elude us."

Tarkin despaired. As disturbingly well armed as the late crime

lord's ship was, disabling the *Carrion Spike* was easier said than done. If the ship was, in some sense, a measure of his standing in the Imperial hegemony, then his vaunted reputation just might go down with her.

They were at the edge of the Murkhana system, the eponymous world well behind them, already a memory, and a bitter one. He and Vader were sharing the controls, Vader wedged into an acceleration chair made for a much smaller being, Tarkin strapped into the copilot's chair. Crest and the other stormtroopers were amidships, manning the ship's quad laser cannons.

Never having shared a cockpit with Vader, Tarkin was astonished by the Dark Lord's piloting skills. Though perhaps he shouldn't have been.

The sound of Vader's slow, rhythmic breathing overwhelmed the cockpit as he indicated an area dead ahead and slightly to port. "There."

Tarkin saw nothing but star-studded blackness. Nor did the ship's instruments register the *Carrion Spike*, which was obviously running in stealth mode. He couldn't imagine how Vader was managing to track the ship, but was for the moment content to be mystified.

"Why are they still in system?" he said. "They can't have shipjacked it for a joyride."

Vader glanced at him across a center console. "They were convinced we couldn't follow them. They are merely taking time to familiarize themselves with the instruments."

"Then they must know that we're tracking them."

"Indeed they do."

Tarkin found himself actually warming to Vader, especially after what had happened in the Sugi's headquarters. No sooner had word arrived that Sergeant Crest and his stormtroopers were in possession of the *Parsec Predator* and the codes necessary to launch her than Vader exacted his revenge on the crime lord for having been kept waiting. Tarkin knew merely by the gasping sounds that began to erupt from the Sugi that Vader was performing that thumb-and-forefinger dark magic of his to crush the crime lord's windpipe. By

then, too, the ambassador's stormtroopers had rushed into the headquarters, unleashing flash grenades and blaster bolts that had caught the Sugi's underlings by surprise. At one point Vader had asked them whether they actually wanted to die for their leader, and it was when they replied with weapons that Vader drew his crimson-bladed lightsaber from beneath his cape. Tarkin had witnessed numerous Jedi wield lightsabers during the Clone Wars, but he had never seen anyone put an energy blade to such determined purpose or achieve such rapid and lethal results. Two stormtroopers had died in the exchange, but all the Sugi had paid with their lives; Vader's blade had even reduced the repurposed battle droids to useless parts.

"*The ambassador owes you a big favor,*" Tarkin had told Vader at the time.

Now he said: "Surely we weren't lured all the way to Murkhana just so the *Carrion Spike* could be shipjacked."

"And why not?" Vader said. "Stealth, firepower, alacrity." He paused as if he were about to ask a follow-up question, but said nothing further.

"Granted it's one of a kind, but what is their plan? To strip and sell it for parts? To have it dissected and replicated?" Tarkin heard the words tumbling from his mouth in a rush and got control of himself.

"A flotilla of *Carrion Spikes*," Vader said, clearly dubious.

Tarkin gestured in dismissal. "Not without the help of the top engineering conglomerates in the galaxy. More to the point, whoever they are, they now have the corvette, as well as a capital ship."

"You are convinced that the piracy was carried out by the same beings who attacked Sentinel."

"I am. Anyone with skill enough to create counterfeit holovids of ships and beings and to interrupt Imperial HoloNet signals would also have the skill to wrap the *Carrion Spike* in a mantle of silence, disabling not only the ship's slave system but also her various communications systems, including comlinks and helmet radios." He paused briefly. "Vice Admirals Rancit and Screed were correct about the cache being part of a more far-reaching plan. If the cache was merely the lure, then the plot is still unfolding."

"Then tell me how to disable your ship, Governor."



Tarkin firmed his lips. "There is a weakness. If the thieves can be persuaded to lower the shields, concentrated fire on the spine where the main fuselage meets the aft flare should do the trick. We were never able to resolve the problem of properly safeguarding the hyperdrive generator while the power plant is supplying the ion drives, the deflector shields, and the weapons. It's not so much a design flaw as an accommodation to the ship's size in relation to her armament. Even Sienar Fleet was at a loss."

"I will bear that in mind," Vader said, though mostly to himself.

"Frankly, Lord Vader, I'm more concerned about what the *Carrion Spike*'s weapons can do to us while we're attempting to line up what has to be a very precise laser blast."

"Leave that to me, Governor."

"Do I have a choice?"

Abruptly Vader poured on all speed, accelerating away from the system's outmost planet and taking the crime lord's ship into the starry space he had indicated earlier. But then only to loose a guttural sound of anger and frustration.

"They've jumped to lightspeed!"

Tarkin ground his teeth. The situation was growing worse by the moment. In star systems lacking nearby hyperspace relay stations, a ship's pilot had to navigate by beacon or buoy, unless the ship was equipped with a sophisticated navicomputer of the sort the *Carrion Spike* boasted, which could plot jumps well beyond the next beacon, all the way to the Core if necessary. According to the *Predator*'s inferior device, the Murkhana system had no fewer than a dozen jump egresses, and most of those were into other Outer Rim systems where beacons were still more plentiful than hyperspace relay stations.

Vader broke his protracted silence to say, "They have jumped, but not far." He stretched out his left hand to enter data into the ship's navicomputer.

Tarkin was nonplussed. Then it dawned on him: Vader wasn't tracking the ship; he was tracking the mysterious black sphere he had had transferred to the *Carrion Spike*!

Even so, his optimism was short-lived, undermined by a memory

of something Jova used to say when they had turned the tables on a predator, making it the hunted rather than the hunter.

*“Think first when you’re in pursuit: Is your prey trying to escape, or is it going for reinforcements? Is it perhaps looking for a temporary hiding place from which to spring at you, or—still driven by hunger—has it decided to search out a more vulnerable target?”*