

Alike in More Ways Than One

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Alike in More Ways Than One

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Summary

Darth Vader, Wilhuff Tarkin: the two faces of the Empire, the right and left hand of the Emperor himself. While these men have their own responsibilities, they find common ground in the philosophy of the Empire...and in each other.

Chapter 1

The man exudes power with every hiss of the respirator, the single noise the only dropped stitch in an otherwise seamless projection of immovable strength. Tarkin knows power. Knows the details of control, and coercion, and simple raw force. Yet even with all his knowledge, the figure of Darth Vader remains a fathomless crevasse, the potential energy disguised by the breathing regulator, the gloves, and the mask.

Tarkin finds it entertaining to watch Vader interact with other Imperial staff—no one would dare think of Vader as a grunt or officer, but all of them in the room answer to the same master. As Palpatine has pulled away from public appearances, Vader has only made more, and Tarkin knows that Vader's forte is impressing a group of Imperial troops. Most of them remember the Clone Wars, but Tarkin knows the next generation is rising soon. They will have no memory of Jedi, of soft-spoken generals speaking over military men with ideals instead of practicalities. Vader will be the only one to wield a lightsaber in this galaxy, the Empire's galaxy. But even with that, there are times—rare, but still present—when a moff or admiral believes their input more important than Vader's. And that is when Vader truly shines.

"Negotiation is a waste of your time, Admiral Rinnet." The voice echoes through the respirator, adding a dangerous edge to an already-menacing bass. "It is a waste of everyone's time. Remember, Admiral, when you stand before a requisitions board, you stand not merely as a petitioner of your own ship, but as a member of the Imperial Navy—and as an extension of the Emperor himself."

The woman, gray at her temples and the folds of wrinkles around her eyes, nods shortly. "Of course, Lord Vader, but enforcing a materials contract by force only fosters anger and resentment. A quick resolution now may mean rebellion or revolt in the future."

"With the strength of the Empire's power, such revolt will be fruitless."

"That doesn't change the fact that revolt could prove a dangerous interruption in the Empire's flow of supplies. Any aberration, any change—"

"This is still a hypothetical revolt." Tarkin speaks up for the first time in this meeting, setting an arm on the table to lean closer to the admiral. "And while your attention to such hypotheticals is encouraging, Rinnet, it distracts us from the issue at hand. The Empire needs access to mines and shipyards, and prolonged negotiations are merely a further distraction. Vader is right. Exercise the power that has been given to you."

Or it shall be given to someone else. The unspoken current resonates between both Vader and Tarkin. To Rinnet's credit, her only external response is a nervous swallow, but her eyes are bright and focused. Tarkin cannot predict her next actions because she hasn't planned them herself. As the focus of attention moves to another report, a moff from the Core with some update on environment-shaping programs, Tarkin allows a portion of his attention to remain on Rinnet, determining how she reacts to her public curtailing.

Tarkin knows it was something of a reach for him to conclude Rinnet's report that way. Although he is close to the Emperor in both position and personality, he is only a grand moff himself, and still beholden to Imperial hierarchy. Vader could have said more, with no fear of recrimination, but Tarkin is confident that Vader agrees with his conclusion. It would not surprise him to learn of Vader's attention, his silent observation as the moffs conclude on the direction of a proposal regarding allocation of resources—pending the Emperor's approval, of course.

In Rinnet's position, Tarkin knows the options are clear. Were it his duty, he would allow a display of force to emphasize the Empire's intentions, then install a group of agents within the mining corporations themselves. While external Imperial presences would be withdrawn, internal agents would ultimately determine the direction of the corporations and gauge their continued loyalty. It would be a delicate balancing act, requiring people with the utmost loyalty to the Empire—and Tarkin knows well how such staff are in short supply. It is not his place to micro-manage Rinnet's options, however, and it would be her response to this challenge that would determine her future in the Empire.

The rest of the meeting has similar overtones—moffs angling for position, those on the decline clinging to remnants of power or prestige, the desire for approval hanging like blood in the water. Even without the Emperor physically present, his presence dominates the room, and Tarkin can feel it fade the moment Vader turns his attention away and leaves the room first once the meeting is concluded. Tarkin stands wordlessly, refusing the banal pleasantries some of the others still perpetuate, and moves quickly to follow behind Vader as the taller man moves through the decks.

Even without the atmosphere of a planet or the wind of an open plain, Vader's cape snaps behind him, a testament to the speed of his stride. Tarkin is not accustomed to *hurrying* after someone, but as always, Vader is the exception. When Vader comes to a lift, Tarkin slips through the doors to stand beside him, sensing Vader's attention as they are left alone in the capsule.

To his eternal surprise—a sensation fortunately rare for him, and treasured in this instance—Vader speaks first, his hands folded behind his back. “Your observation was well-put. Rinnet is loyal, but her utility is the true question.”

“She may prove herself capable. Still, there are others to take her place, should she fail.” Tarkin nods, allowing the bloom of pride to trickle through his extremities. The temporary elation of praise, success, or victory is not something to which one should become addicted, but a quiet contentment allows for a clearer mind, and Tarkin accepts the emotion while balancing it with reason.

“The Empire has a great asset in you, Governor Tarkin.” Vader says. Tarkin cannot sense the inflection: the words themselves have the stamp of Palpatine's official praise, but even Palpatine allows himself genuine congratulations for men like Tarkin or Vader. Vader, too, must give genuine praise from time to time, but there is something else beneath the words. Tarkin makes a note of this uncertainty, then sets it aside to ponder later.

“I serve the Empire, and its Emperor. I am fortunate to have that service rewarded.”

“It isn't mere servitude. You have skill. Intelligence. Perhaps a measure of luck, if you believe in it.”

“I find that one makes their own luck, Lord Vader.”

Vader raises a hand, waving it in a motion Tarkin doesn't recognize. “Would you ever move out of a military capacity, Governor Tarkin? Your title now implies an administrative position, which suits you, but the Empire will always require a strong military presence.”

“Of course.” Tarkin nods, accepting the weight of Vader's discussion with his full consideration. “It would be as fruitful to ask whether you would ever consider leaving military service. Your aims most often align with the military, or with the navy. Would Emperor Palpatine ever retract you from that position, perhaps to serve more closely with him?”

“The Emperor requires no one to help him lead.” There is bite in Vader's response, and Tarkin allows himself a grin. “I am useful now as an individual agent, one of intimidation, of control, allowed my own freedom while swearing loyalty to the Empire. The Empire's aims are my aims.

The Emperor's goals are my goals."

"Of course, Lord Vader." The lift doors open, and Tarkin takes the lead this time to continue through the brightly lit halls and corridors. "Should the Empire require my talents in an administrative setting, I would be happy to comply. But the Empire will always need its military, whether we resist attacks from without or within. I feel my abilities are more useful in that setting."

Vader is silent for a moment, the tap of his boots on the steel plates muted by the space of the hallway. "Do you believe yourself to be a selfless man, Governor?"

Tarkin stops fully, perplexed by the question. "No one is selfless, Lord Vader. The Jedi claimed it, and failed to see their own selfishness in the process. Politicians claim it, and are either consumed by the machine or converted. As far as my own goals, I would admit that my first priority is survival. But beyond that, above that, I serve the Empire. It has served me well in return. I serve the people who serve the Empire. In that sense, perhaps I am selfless. But do not fear for a moment that I would give up my position meekly, or allow another moff to presume my position, without at least attempting to prove my worth. The Emperor values...specific qualities. As long as I continue to retain those qualities, my position will not change. I trust the Emperor—and my fellow moffs—to sense any weakness and act upon it. The system perfects itself."

Vader has had to stop, listening to Tarkin's monologue, and finally the helmeted figure sets its hands upon its hips in an oddly casual posture. "Power ensures survival. The strong are destined to rule, and the weak destined to serve."

"Precisely." Tarkin nods, exhaling slowly. He hadn't realized he was holding his breath, but as they walk again and enter a large hub center, Vader nods back to him.

"I value your insight on these things, Governor Tarkin. Should you ever contact my ship, please know that your communications will take priority."

"I—" For the first time in a long while, Tarkin is left feeling speechless, watching Vader's form disappear into another hallway to return to his own ship. Of course they'd all arrived on their own ships—even if they were mostly uniform in shape and color, no moff would dare arrive without his ship at the ready—but he hadn't realized Vader had come with his own ship also. The *Executor*. A wonder of shipbuilding, a true titan of the Dreadnought class.

But this time, Tarkin is less concerned with the ship itself—and more interested in its commander.

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It is several standard months before Tarkin's ship is near enough to hail Vader's on what might be considered a "non-business" call. Usually, Tarkin only makes the perfunctory checks when entering a system, and even less if his business is time-sensitive, but upon being informed of Vader's presence in the system, Tarkin hesitates fractionally. Time has passed, time filled with the demands of in-system troubles and out-of-system jealousies, and Tarkin is...

In honesty, he's *tired*.

It's not enough to trip him up, or hamper his duties, but one can look out of a Star Destroyer's awesome bay windows only so many times. The blur of hyperspace mixes with the emptiness of stars. Tarkin has enjoyed his minor triumphs, but the monotony of bureaucracy has begun to take hold of the Empire. Tarkin has meetings with corporation managers and minor ceremonial officials just as often as he has an audience with other moffs of his caliber, or the Emperor himself.

Or Vader, for that matter.

When he gets the notification, Tarkin nods to the technician and informs them to open a channel to the *Executor* from his office. (It's mostly his quarters, but 'office' sounds better most of the time. Another symptom of bureaucracy.) For a heart-stopping moment, the transmission doesn't go through, and Tarkin is about to demand a technician's explanation, but then the hologram is resolving and clicks into place, displaying the head and shoulders of Darth Vader in prominent focus.

"Governor Tarkin."

"Lord Vader." Tarkin nods. "I was surprised to find you in-system. Permission for the *Executrix* to approach your position?"

"Permission granted." Vader adjusts something, moving in the scope's focus. "You didn't have a deck officer make this request."

"I thought I'd take you up on an earlier offer. Come to the *Executrix*, clarify any points of confusion. Discuss our Emperor's plans for the future of the Empire."

Vader pauses, and Tarkin is surprised to note how well he can read the expressionless mask. The hesitation speaks volumes, but finally—

"Come the *Executor*, Governor. It is time you reacquainted yourself with the capacity of a full-fledged Dreadnought."

"Of course, Lord Vader." Tarkin nods (it is not a bow, whatever the officers may think) and watches the holo snap into non-existence. It is a familiar practice by now to tamp down any rush of excitement, the usual thrill of change, but he can taste the appeal of Darth Vader—the man behind thick layers of fabric and steel, the keen mind and temper forged by fire—like a honeyed mead on his lips. He makes the arrangements for his absence in a slight daze, handing out assignments to subordinates almost at random, and as the *Executrix* makes its final slight adjustments to send out the docking tubes, Tarkin finally sees a reflection of himself in the neatly-polished airlock panel.

He is not a young man anymore. The color in his hair has dulled, matching his pressed and fitted uniform. He is still physically healthy, of course, and Vader has seen him in action, but in the darkness of space it is his mind, not his body, that the Emperor prizes. As the docking tubes thud together, Tarkin allows himself the hypothetical thought: what is it that Vader prizes? Tarkin feels the question too vain, too prideful for a man who takes the responsibility of an entire sector on his own shoulders, but the value of any predator is its knowledge of its own abilities. He must assess the way Vader values him, if he is to maintain any kind of rapport with the Sith Lord.

As Tarkin dismisses his escort, then makes the long walk across the connected tubes, he allows himself to admit that this is a disgustingly facile pretense, and Vader will see through him in an instant.

And yet, when Vader meets him at the airlock entrance, the escort of stormtroopers standing ready, he says nothing to question Tarkin's preoccupation. Their greetings are again, perfunctory, and Tarkin is swept into Vader's entourage as they ascend the decks towards the main command center of the battleship. The encounter, so far, has been sterile. Tarkin usually prefers it this way, but just once, he'd like to have something to complain about, something to notice or even something to *fight*, just to stop the incessant flow of thoughts in his head.

"I've never spoken with you about the Hutts." Vader says, seemingly at random, and Tarkin jerks to attention as he notices they've stopped in front of the command center windows. The same view as

always, although the staff on Vader's ship are slightly more docile than on Tarkin's. Only slightly.

"I'm sorry?" Tarkin says, feeling off-kilter in this conversation.

"The Hutts. Positioned as you are on the Outer Rim, I would imagine you have a great deal of feeling toward the relative proximity of Hutt space."

Tarkin wrinkles his nose, but says nothing contradictory as he shifts his attention to the issue of the galactic crime lords. "They are an irritant, yes. But more like a disease, something subtle and evolving, not a straightforward enemy. And they can, at times, be turned to our purposes."

"They are inefficient. Clumsy. Weak, bloated things, who maintain their presence by fear and credits than by any true power."

"Power takes many forms, Lord Vader. Though I am loath to defend the Hutts, the fact that they remain a formidable presence despite the collapse of the Senate is a testament to their virility. They avoided the politics of Coruscant, and trusted their own networks. It isn't so different from the Empire."

"Perhaps." Though Vader's tone is light, a movement of air seemed to drain the oxygen from the bridge, and Tarkin glances aside to see the deck crew cowering in their pit. After a long moment, Vader turns to walk past the bridge again, leaving Tarkin to catch his breath and hurry after him. They ascend a whole deck before Tarkin notices that the stormtrooper escort has disappeared, and Vader disappears into a smaller command module before permitting Tarkin to enter. Tarkin pauses as he steps inside, watching how the dimensions of the place seem to compress Vader somehow, reducing the man to a more comfortable, accessible size.

"Why here, Vader?" Tarkin steps inside, glancing at the technical displays before returning his attention to Vader. The other man stands silent, then finally sits in one of the command chairs, gesturing to another chair for Tarkin to follow.

"The discussions we have...could take us to dangerous places. I thought it preferable that we avoided having such discussions on the bridge of one of the Empire's largest flagships."

Tarkin allows himself a genuine smile, losing the predatory edge he usually maintains in such expressions. "So you anticipate the direction of our discussions."

"I know you to be an intelligent and insightful man. I know you to have weighed your own opinions, to have judged yourself by the trials of the worlds you've visited. You are a predator, and when predators bare their teeth, their prey are easily cowed."

Tarkin blinks, but slowly settles into a seat facing Vader more evenly. "Your staff—my staff—are not all prey, Lord Vader."

"No. But I would not have their loyalty tested by our hypothetical discussions."

"Very dangerous, those hypotheticals." Tarkin muses, lifting a hand to his chin to rub his jawbone. "And you approved my visit here for hypotheticals."

"I approved your visit because I value your insight. Your philosophy is foundational to the Empire. Any chance to probe that philosophy is beneficial to all of us."

Tarkin nods, leaning back. The door to the command center opens, admitting a lone officer with a tray from the staff canteen. Tarkin starts in surprise, but accepts the tray without a word, waiting until the officer exits again and the door closes with a whoosh. There is more than a mere protein pack on

the tray—a full slice of meat, with a thick sauce pooling around it. Tarkin wasn't aware that the staff canteens could provide full portions of unprocessed meat, but accepts the fork to prod at the meat all the same.

“Your doing?”

“The least I could do.” Vader extends an apparently generous hand, a gesture Tarkin has never seen from the man, and Tarkin takes a bite of the meat to chew thoughtfully.

“You perplex many, Lord Vader.”

Vader sits up in surprise, and Tarkin has the feeling that if they were different men, Vader would be laughing aloud. “I would hope that you don't consider yourself one of that number, Governor.”

Tarkin shrugs as he chews. “There is value in maintaining distance. You use it to your advantage.”

“If it affects my ability to serve the Empire, then that advantage is lost.”

“You speak of your position as the Emperor's right hand. Please understand—” Tarkin waves with his fork as pointer, swallowing. “The Emperor values you for your ability to ‘perplex’. People fear what they cannot understand. I do not have your advantages, granted, but the difference there is that people *learn* to fear me with time.”

“Only if they have reason to fear.” Vader nods again, and Tarkin taps his fork on the tray before setting it on the console.

“I've learned that I may not have as much reason to fear as others.” Tarkin feels his own side-stepping, the unnecessary obfuscation of his perspective. “You are dangerous, yes. But only to those who oppose us. The Empire, I mean. To those who do not hold our ideals. You *are* the Empire, to some, and for those of us...like me...who support the Empire, you embody the pinnacle of our goals.”

“Goals. Ideals. This is all fine, Governor. But you are just as much an image as I am.”

Tarkin shakes his head. “I disagree. You have a presence. Your very image has meaning. I am content to serve where I am, supporting that image, existing as the fist inside the glove. I need no public adulation.”

“The Empire can still appreciate your efforts. More than appreciate: congratulate.” Vader stands, prompting Tarkin to do the same. In an odd moment of connection, Vader sets a heavy hand on Tarkin's shoulder, leaving Tarkin to stand in silence until Vader removes his hand. “I appreciate your efforts, Governor Tarkin.”

“Wilhuff.” Tarkin says in surprise, blinking. “My name's Wilhuff.”

“I know.” Vader nods, turning back to the command center door to have it whoosh open again. Tarkin trails behind, pausing outside of the door as Vader strides off down the hallway. Left alone with nothing but his thoughts, Tarkin attempts to remember the path back to the docking tubes, and sets off at a slow, thoughtful pace.

Perhaps there is reason to remain in-system just a little longer.

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Just as Tarkin reaches the level of the docking tube, he stops short. His thoughts have not resolved

fully, but leaving the *Executor* too quickly is a mistake, he knows this. Turning with military precision on one heel, Tarkin marches back along the deck level, stopping to confirm his direction with an officer before descending into the barrack levels. There are fewer people at this level, less action and movement, but a mouse droid nonetheless bumps into Tarkin's boot as he stands in front of a singular set of doors, alone in the wall.

He has found Darth Vader's personal quarters.

He keys in an access code, amazed to hear the doors open in front of him. As he steps inside, the utter blackness of the room envelops him, the doors closing to complete the totality. The only light comes from the jagged opening of an orb at the center of the room, raised slightly on a dais. Tarkin approaches, hearing his boots click against the floor, and comes to stand on the same level as the orb while the upper half rises ever-so-slowly.

Darth Vader sits inside, the orb moving around his seat as various portions of his suit are removed. The seat itself rotates to allow Vader to face Tarkin, and for a long moment there is no sound from either man. Finally, Vader raises a hand, and Tarkin steps into the orb itself as the upper half lifts up to take Vader's helmet with it.

Tarkin has always known that there was a man inside the armor—someone with the Force, and more than likely a former Jedi. Tarkin has had his suspicions about the identity of Vader's former self, but even with his half-formed theories, he finds Vader's true appearance something of a shock. The man might have once been handsome, with his prominent nose and intense eyes, but the skin has been through some great trauma. Scars pucker and ripple across the skin, rising over the hairless scalp as though mapping an unexplored planet. Tarkin hears himself gasp, and hates himself for it—Vader must know of his appearance, and allowed Tarkin inside regardless.

“Governor Tarkin.” Vader's voice is soft, unchanged by the respirator or the acoustics of the mask. Tarkin steps in front of Vader's seat, constrained by the dimensions of the orb, and in an impulsive move, he reaches out to touch Vader's chin. Vader inhales sharply, almost like Tarkin's gasp earlier, but does nothing to prevent the contact as Tarkin runs his hand back to where the high collar meets Vader's ear.

“As I said: it's Wilhuff.”

“Of course.” Vader nods, letting Tarkin pull his hand away, and Tarkin finally stands upright to try and settle his confused thoughts. Vader isn't *stopping* him, not in any measure, but Tarkin isn't sure how much the armor would prevent him from exploring further. Perhaps it's enough that he's come here, into the center of Vader's meditation chamber, and spoken to Vader maskless.

“I should go. Return to the *Executrix*.”

“As you think right, Governor—”

“I'm not leaving because—I would be honored to return. Soon.”

“You don't need to make excuses.” Vader tilts his head, but remains seated. “As our schedules allow, Wilhuff. I would enjoy your company again.”

“Yes. Thank you.” Tarkin feels himself tensing, but backs away to exit the orb and turn towards the door. His departure is carried out with traditional efficiency, but as soon as he's out of the barrack decks, he has to pause and catch his breath.

Next time, he won't let his own apprehensions stop him.

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It is several cycles later when Tarkin is recalled back to Coruscant, and the shuttle that arrives at the *Executrix* to take him down to the planet is top of the line. As Tarkin relaxes into the cushions of his seat, he allows himself to appreciate the rare luxury. He has deserved this, after all. And when the guards arrive at the landing platform, Tarkin knows exactly where they intend to take him, and chooses to lead the way himself.

The Emperor does not meet him in the main audience chamber, but instead welcomes him in the private quarters of the Emperor, the elegant art and sculpture on full display for Tarkin to appreciate as he takes a seat. Palpatine dismisses his hangers-on, the various remnants from true Senate days, and finally two glasses of Corellian whisky are poured for both men to sample.

“You never fail to impress, my Emperor.”

“For such a pupil as you, Governor Tarkin, the Empire can afford such luxuries.”

“Such as the *Executrix*.” Tarkin notes, swirling the liquid in his glass to watch it catch the light.

“Don’t think I haven’t noticed its similarity to the *Executor*. They’re different classes, you could have afforded to give them the same name.”

“My own little joke, Governor.” Palpatine laughs, the rough, hacking sound he’d developed after his attack from the Jedi. “As my strongest enforcers of Imperial will, it is only right that you and Vader be united in identification as well as purpose.”

“Of course.” Tarkin opens his mouth to speak further, but finds little use in his complaints. Is he going to argue against Palpatine’s obvious favoritism? Or claim that he and Vader have *not* found some common ground in their many conversations?

Would he say anything to endanger his chances of being assigned with Vader at all in the future?

“You could have made it less obvious.”

“You and Vader are too circumspect. You have no need to worry about the opinions of minor underlings. You are *my* agents, enforcing *my* will on the galaxy. I trust your actions will align with my hopes for our united future.”

Tarkin is still unsure of how to respond. Still, if his less-than-official meetings with Vader have official, Imperial, *Senate* approval...then there is no harm in pursuing them further.

“You have given me much to think over, my Emperor.”

“As always, Governor Tarkin. The security board will want to hear your reports on other matters, but I am content with your efforts so far. You never fail to impress.”

Tarkin nods, a precursor to a bow that never takes shape, and he finds his own way out of the Imperial audience chamber to emerge into the hall. He has several other meetings to address today, not least the matter with the security board—but he has his other matters to consider. Life is never slow for an ascendant grand moff, and there are many things to coordinate.

Meeting with Vader, for all of the coordination required, will be a first priority.

Give and Take

Screams. Always, *always* the screams. The species could change, but the sound was always the same, whether on Coruscant, or Tatooine, or Utapau. The sound of fear holds an energy all its own, and Darth Vader can feel it wash over him as the sound echoes around him.

“Dissidents located in the upper quadrant, sir.” The static of a stormtrooper’s comm rings in Vader’s helmet, and he turns his attention only briefly to the update.

“Do what you must. Contain runaways and corral them if you can.”

“Sir, there is a meeting—”

“Do what you must, Captain.” Vader ignores the next comm beep, turning back to the city center as a shock bursts from an upper floor. Stormtroopers flow around Vader like water around a rock, and he can feel their trepidation and tension. He cannot fault them for it, not with their surroundings. But he can sense those who respond to their tension with strength, and those who respond with fear.

“The people here have ignored the warnings of the Empire.” Vader says to no one in particular, letting the pickup transfer the speech to the planetary datasphere and the *Executor* high above. “This is the consequence of ignoring true power.”

“This is not power!” screams a man from a side door, falling forward as a stormtrooper kicks him in the back. “Power protects! Power restores, power strengthens—”

“Power *is* strength.” Vader stares down at the man, watching him writhe as the trooper plants a foot between his shoulder blades. “Once you taste true power, you can lecture me about what it looks like.” He lifts his chin, and under the helmet, Vader’s eyes close as he tastes the man’s surges of emotion. There is not fear here. There is defiance, hot and bitter, but underneath that is *anger*. If Vader had more time, he would torture the man, savoring this anger like the hot fire it is, but he is a busy man. He nods once to the trooper, and turns away as a blaster bolt ends the man’s short life.

“Lord Vader, we have captured one of the dissident leaders. He seems to know more about the rebels on this planet, and may talk.”

“Good. Take him to the *Executor*, and wait for us there. We must ensure the pacification of this city before moving to others.”

“Lord Vader—” The voice on the comm hesitates, and Vader turns just as another stormtrooper runs up to him. “Lord Vader, the leadership of the city has fled. There are some minor mining officials, some agricultural experts, but no Imperial officer fit for command.”

“Are all officers on the *Executor* unavailable?”

“The ship is tightly staffed as it is, sir, and on such short notice—”

“Very well. Lead me to the governmental offices, and then we will determine who is fit to rule this traitorous dung heap.” Vader looks around him, the city already heavily marred by orbital bombardment and his troopers’ movements. “As we move, tell the *Executor* to open communication with Governor Tarkin’s ship. I have a feeling he will want to know about this.”

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Aboard the *Executor*, the huge hologram of Emperor Palpatine fills empty space, dominating the darkness of Darth Vader's personal quarters. Though bowing in the traditional posture of subservience, Vader has had to keep a tight rein on his own temper, resisting the urge to justify himself to his Master.

"This is Governor Tarkin's specialty, my Emperor. There is reason to include him."

"You ask forgiveness, Lord Vader, not permission. Tarkin has already entered hyperdrive on your orders, pulling him away from the concerns on Seswenna and my own tasks for him near Geonosis. This is a minor infraction on an Outer Rim world. You *dally*."

"I did not order him to come, my Master." Vader bows his head even lower, shuddering as the dark presence of Palpatine presses down on him. The hologram can hardly do the man justice—the weight of his attention is almost too much to bear.

"Yes. Yes, this is true. You *asked* him." Palpatine hums to himself, echoing earlier Senate days. Vader remembers other conversations, without the interference of his mask or the hologram, when he sat in Palpatine's personal quarters and discussed more casual matters. Life. Death. The direction of the universe. Galactic philosophy. Anakin Skywalker had been unable to find anyone among the Jedi willing to have such conversations—even Obi-Wan had reverted to platitudes and angry dismissals if Anakin asked too many questions—and Darth Vader now finds the moments rare indeed when he can engage others in earnest.

"I have approved Tarkin's visit to Telos, Lord Vader." Palpatine's voice rings out again, startling Vader from his reverie. "You were wise to admit his proficiency in this area. Given his presence on Seswenna, matters on Telos may interest him. And if there is a shortage of Imperial presence, then the *Executrix* will bolster your own military strength."

"I am grateful, my Master." Vader looks up at last to find Palpatine staring beyond the hologram's receiver, a faint smile visible beneath the cowl.

"As you should be." With that, the transmission ceases, and Vader stands again to find himself alone with his thoughts. The darkness around him crawls close, bordering at the edges of his meditation orb, and he turns quickly to escape his quarters and emerge back into the brightness of his ship. Stormtroopers stand at attention, but do not follow, and Vader directs himself by instinct as he considers Tarkin's arrival.

He hasn't missed the naming of the *Executrix*. Once the other Star Destroyer arrives in orbit above Telos, the two ships will match speed and position. There is little elegance in the triangular gray ships, but their relays and station numbers are so close—their transmissions will be integrated almost seamlessly. Tarkin runs his ship much as Vader runs his, so even the transfer of personnel will make little difference. The *Executor* bearing the swift justice of Imperial retribution, and the *Executrix* bearing the leadership to rebuild. It follows an elegant poetry.

And, Vader notes, it reeks of Palpatine's meddling.

He does not *need* Palpatine to encourage close relations with Governor Wilhuff Tarkin. Vader and Tarkin have ascended to their ranks by virtue of their abilities. Like recognizes like. Or, in Tarkin's preferred analogies, predators recognize other predators. It has taken time for Vader to adopt the philosophy Tarkin has understood since birth, but they work together without difficulty. Palpatine's nudges and encouragement merely has the air of a Senator arranging business deals between underlings, rather than the cooperative assistance of an interested master.

Still, Vader muses as he strides through the detention deck, the Emperor could have disapproved of

his association with Tarkin. There would be little need or reason, but the Emperor could have recalled Tarkin from this minor diversion. Palpatine's explicit approval is a small boon, even for men who rarely accept gifts.

"Sir. The prisoner has given up the locations of other communication cells, but—" The interrogation officer standing in front of the cell door fidgets, avoiding Vader's eyeless gaze. "He asked to see you."

"How providential that I should appear, then." Vader says without jocularly, stepping forward to have the cell door open. Inside the small room, two troopers stand beside the table currently holding their prisoner, and Vader watches the old man catch his breath. He is clearly a native of the planet, marked on his hands with tattoos of the local religion, and Vader waits as the man studies him. The man is cloudy when viewed through the Force, though not by any intention of his own, and Vader nods once as he makes his own assessment.

"You gave yourself up. Yet you resist interrogation."

"I give information on my own terms." The man nods, still breathless. Vader makes a note to check on the exact regimen of interrogation used and to reprimand the officer in charge. A man of this age would only be able to sustain a mild round of physical or chemical interrogation, and the risk of cardiac failure is great.

"You are speaking with the Empire now. Your terms are meaningless."

"We mean you no harm." The man attempts a gentle smile, but sags in his restraints. "Telos is a fractured world, strained to bursting by its own tensions. My people...my own group, those of us who follow the teachings of Sliken, have fellow groups across the main continent, but—"

"You engaged in terrorist activity. You participated in active resistance."

"Only because my younger members are hot-headed and impulsive! They act out against government, but only when their wishes are unrepresented. We are not impractical people, Lord Vader, we simply wish for Telos to follow the most prudent course."

Vader waits another moment, processing the man's claims. There is reason to suspect political instability on Telos—the absence of any real leadership speaks to this—but as a member of a religion, this prisoner is hardly the ideal choice for a leader. He may have connections which may be useful in negotiation, but negotiation is not the Imperial way.

Abandoning Telos, and murdering this man, would not advance Imperial aims, either.

"Release him." Vader commands, watching the restraints fall away as the troopers scramble to their consoles. The man slides partway down the angled table, smiling, but Vader steps forward to place a gloved hand around the man's skinny throat. "Why did you ask for me?"

"I knew you were here." The man gasps, eyes suddenly wide. "I thought—you might understand, you might see the danger in trampling my people—"

"Such pleas could have been made to my officers. Why ask for me?" Vader increases the pressure, watching the man scramble for air. There is a subtle process tumbling through the man's mind, but the fear is most prominent. Still, the man is aware enough to formulate a reasonable answer.

"You would have known the truth of my words." A new fervor burns in the man's eyes, and he manages a smile even now. "You do not merely follow orders, my Lord, you give them, and understand them. I needed to confirm that there is not merely a mindless machine, but that the Empire

has a face, has a *soul*.”

“I am not the soul you seek.” Vader drops the man at last, turning away as the harsh wheezing echoes behind him. A tinny beep in his helmet informs him of an incoming transmission, and he subvocalizes the go-ahead as he exits the cell and begins his return to the bridge.

“Lord Vader.” The smooth tones of Governor Tarkin ring in Vader’s ear, and Vader allows himself a smile behind the mask as the governor proceeds. “I’ve entered orbit around Telos, as you requested. You mentioned there might be prisoners?”

“Have your intelligence staff prepare a report. The situation is more complicated than it appears on the surface. I wish to know your thoughts unaffected by my own observations. Once you feel ready, you may meet me on the planet’s surface.”

“How enigmatic of you, Lord Vader.” There is tease in Tarkin’s tone, and Vader finds himself surprised. The governor is not one for idle small talk. “Is there a reason for such secrecy?”

“I asked you to come due to your experience in these complicated matters. I feel it more prudent that you evaluate the situation with your own understanding, rather than with mine. You have spent longer, devoted more effort to these kinds of incidents. I trust your personal judgement.”

“Consider me flattered, Lord Vader.” With this, Tarkin ends the transmission, and Vader steps out onto the bridge of the *Executor* to watch the *Executrix* fall into position on the starboard side. Officers bow as Vader passes, and he comes to the very front of the bridge’s conical nose to place a hand on the sill of the bay windows.

How is it that such a simple transmission can change him so much? The sensors indicate no change in heartrate, no spikes in adrenaline or hormonal alterations, not even the thrum of increased sensation in his remaining flesh. Vader is not on alert, not intimidated or perturbed by Tarkin’s speech. He’s merely...interested. Engaged.

Vader chooses to ignore how the sight of the *Executrix*, and the implication of Tarkin’s presence on that ship, brings him a measure of anticipation that he hasn’t felt in some time.

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When Vader first spies Tarkin, the governor is busy, flanked by two officers conferring with their datapads. Tarkin has a datapad of his own, but glances up every few minutes to scan his surroundings. When he sees Vader, Tarkin smiles, and they both step down from their speeder transports to confer on the ground in the second of Telos’s great cities.

“Lord Vader. You’ve prepared quite a welcome.”

“The local administrators have run off. There is reason to suspect they have fled off-world, but no ships have left this area since the *Executor* has been in orbit.”

“A shame. A flynet with no fly to catch.” Tarkin muses, turning to look down the long street now empty of people and vehicles. “And you haven’t managed to establish order?”

“None of the local governments have been capable—or staffed fully enough—to enact true order. I’ve had to leave troops in Celdon, and have plans to leave another battalion here.”

“No. I see the impossibility. That isn’t a long term solution.” Tarkin shakes his head, putting a finger to his lips as he cradles his chin in thought. Vader knows the man is intelligent—both during and after the Clone Wars, Tarkin has more than proved that his promotions are not mere nepotism—but

to watch him think is art itself. Vader is suddenly reminded of the sculptures Palpatine maintains on Coruscant, sharp angles and harsh lines evoking a subtle beauty the Empire often tries to recreate. It is a noble goal. But only Tarkin has executed it so effortlessly.

“My staff tell me you have a single prisoner in custody. Why haven’t you mentioned him to me?”

“He is not a criminal, nor an administrator of any value. He led a small sect of religious fanatics in Celdon. He has provided information on other such sects in other cities, attempting to bargain for their safety.”

“Yet my reports indicate that the uprising was not of a religious nature.” Tarkin nods again, glancing to Vader. “I have a shuttle from the *Executrix*, capable of atmospheric travel. Could I ask you to join me on a short tour of the continent?”

Vader hesitates, surprised again by the nature of the question and Tarkin’s choice of words. “Matters here are still unsettled. My officers—”

“Are capable enough to follow your orders. And if not, well...” Tarkin smirks, shrugging once. “I have a few candidates I could recommend for promotion from the *Executrix*.”

Brutal. That’s the word Vader’s thinking of. Brutalist architecture, brutalist design, and brutal in execution. Despite his reservations, he nods once, following Tarkin onto his speeder before accepting a seat.

“Eleh. Update Lord Vader on your findings.” Tarkin commands, nodding for the trooper in the pilot’s seat to take them away from the city center. To Vader’s left, a woman in a pressed gray officer’s uniform sits up, eager to follow Tarkin’s request. As she begins to speak, Vader notes the three yellow pips on her uniform, the beginning of Imperial authority and the first steps on the executive ladder. Tarkin has selected this escort with care.

“Of course, Governor Tarkin. Lord Vader, as you may know, there are religious groups on Telos—several, really, since some claim different prophets for their sources—but they are united around some tenets of philosophy. Despite the recent upheavals, there remains a strong religious presence in most of Telos’s cities, providing one of the few major links between the cities and the agricultural outlands.” Eleh pauses, blinking as she looks up into Vader’s mask. “I’m—sorry, Lord Vader, it’s ___”

“Eleh. He is a senior officer. Report to him as such.” Tarkin’s reprimand is sharp, but Vader notes how Eleh accepts it with a nod. The discussion takes less than a second, but Vader is struck by the shifts in such a small window: Eleh is tense and nervous, not afraid of dying or provoking Vader’s wrath, but of disappointing Tarkin. She does not have the metallic stench of sweat (a data point provided by Vader’s sensory systems, rather than his own sense of smell), but fits the template of an ideal Imperial officer: neat, clean, unstained, not a hair out of place. Once the tension has passed, Eleh is in charge of herself once more. Her gaze meets Vader’s once, but flicks down to her datapad not out of fear, but of a need to reacquaint herself with her data.

Tarkin has not reprimanded her by threatening punishment, but by reminding her of her duties.

This is why Vader wanted Tarkin here. Tarkin knows when to take away, and when to give. He has governed Eriadu, and then the whole of the Seswenna sector, not by bolstering his Imperial fleets but by balancing his governorship with the interests of the sector. Eleh has attached herself to Tarkin not necessarily from greed or a desire to cling to the moff’s exhaust trails, but because she values his leadership and he values her utility in turn.

“Should we choose to utilize these religious networks—” Eleh is continuing, picking up from her dropped sentence. “—there is no explicit value that would conflict with Imperial dicta. Their value system prioritizes hard work and quiet lives, as well the freedom to study. Our propagandists have already begun formulating presentations to distribute among these religious groups, should you order it.”

“You already engaged the propagandists?” Vader asks, clearly speaking to Tarkin. Tarkin, seated in front of Vader, merely shrugs.

“I thought it useful to at least hear their input. If this is an experiment—a trial run, as you might intend—then we need to use all of our resources, not merely our military and administrative abilities.”

“Interesting.” Vader notes. The speeder falls quiet momentarily, and Tarkin finally turns back to nod to his other officer.

“Ritan. Explain the countryside in further detail. Imports, exports, et cetera.” Tarkin gestures with one hand, leaving the other officer to lean forward. Vader notes in some surprise that the man is non-human. Close enough to pass a quick inspection, a colored stippling on the man’s nose and cheeks reveal his non-human origin. Still, he is near enough for the Empire to overlook his aberrations, and Tarkin must have some reason to keep him aboard.

“Yes, sir. In short, Telos is a diverse enough world to promise much to the Imperial economy.” Ritan clears his throat, scratching at the place where his cap meets his scalp. “The countryside is mostly agricultural. Their productions are limited, but the soil promises enough to promote some diversity of standard crops, and a tighter regulation of production would ensure large enough harvests to move to other planets. Fishing and some lumber activity provide sustenance for locals, but not enough to move off-world, and the cities are natural sites of economic activity and some tourism.”

“Not every planet can be Coruscant—” interrupts Tarkin. “—but this planet follows the standard for average food-producing worlds. Telos has not often been an exporter of foodstuffs, mainly due to inconsistencies in production, transport, and off-world shipping contracts, but the Empire will simplify all of this. The population enjoys a relatively standard education, meaning that the introduction of Imperial academies or recruitment offices will cause no undue alarm.”

“You’ve given this much thought, Governor.” Vader stands as the speeder comes to a halt, depositing them in front of a small Imperial shuttle. Tarkin comes to stand beside Vader as they exit the speeder, and turns briefly to dismiss his officers before nodding.

“Shall we?”

“By all means.” Vader allows Tarkin to lead him inside, and accepts the co-pilot’s chair as Tarkin preps the shuttle for take-off. The intricacy of the procedure forces silence in the cockpit, but finally they reach a comfortable cruising altitude, allowing Tarkin to give the ship over to autopilot and turn back to Vader.

“I hope you don’t feel I’ve overstepped my bounds.” Tarkin begins, causing a ripple of uncertainty in Vader’s usually clear objectives. Tarkin could be referring to his research of Telos—other moffs might assume that Tarkin would want to take control, and Vader would be well placed to prevent such power grabs. But in their last interaction, Tarkin had been...forward. And Vader had allowed him to be forward. Tarkin had entered Vader’s meditation orb, had touched Vader’s unmasked face. And Vader had done nothing.

“You’ve done as I’ve expected.” Vader nods, looking out the viewport to watch the continent flash

by beneath them. “I’m surprised you chose to research the religions here.”

“Eleh has an aptitude for local customs. Insofar as they serve the Empire’s purpose, I find them interesting.” Tarkin gestures with one hand, following Vader’s gaze. “I have reason to suspect that Telos is ripe for Imperial authority. But it cannot be enforced at the end of a blaster.”

“Or the blade of my lightsaber.” Vader smiles beneath the mask as Tarkin stares at him. The subject is usually ignored by the moffs and admirals; Vader suspects it embarrasses most military crew to be in the presence of a lightsaber user. “This is why I summoned—why I asked you to come.”

“I’m glad you did. Though I’m not sure the Emperor is pleased by this...’distraction’.” Tarkin shrugs easily, assuring Vader that whatever Palpatine’s feelings may be, Tarkin has deemed Vader the more important factor. “I will leave it to you to chase the former leaders of this planet. But our final stop should explain my hopes for the next few months here.”

Vader finds the statement perplexing, but chooses to trust Tarkin’s judgement as they come in for a landing in an empty field. There is no landing party to greet them, no escort to watch them, and Vader feels the emptiness of the true countryside as he steps onto the stalks flattened by their entry. Tarkin stands beside him at ease, hands clasped behind his back while Vader studies the landscape.

“Eriadu has places like this. Few remain, but they are there. Farms stretch out this far—” Tarkin points to buildings on the horizon, small dots in the noonday sun. “—but they lack the resources to utilize all this land.”

“Most of the Outer Rim is like this.” Vader notes. “Telos has the advantage of accessible water and soil, but its political leadership has proved uncooperative.”

“No fault of the populace, I assure you. Our job here is simple—if the Empire can provide the necessary technology to these outland farmers, Telos will be happy to return the favor. The tension between city and country is common across the galaxy, but the tensions here have been unnoticed by the Senate for centuries. I wouldn’t be surprised if you found the local governors dead in their speeders, shot as they fled across some farmer’s unused tract of land. *This* is where the Empire makes its claim. We offer resources, allow them to farm their own land. Eleh is ready and willing to integrate Imperial messages of compliance and duty with their religious teachings. Telos will gladly support the Empire if we allow it to support them.”

Vader is silent for a long moment, considering Tarkin carefully. He wasn’t aware that the governor could be so enthused about mere food supply, but it is an Outer Rim territory. Tarkin probably has many similar cases in the Seswenna sector, whether the planets offer mining resources or luxury goods. The Empire does have much to promise for these worlds.

The lack of human presence makes the plain seem empty and cold to Vader, and the Force is hard to sense. The dark side dislikes it, since there is no anger or fear here. Instead, in an old symbiotic dance, Vader finds his thoughts turning to Tatooine, and the scorched, barren sands. In an instant, the old anger rages.

“My place is not here, then.” Vader concludes. “You will want to oversee this yourself.”

“We would be grateful for your continued presence—” Tarkin bows, ceding ground. “But this no longer needs to be a military operation.”

“Make Eleh the planetary governor.” Vader says suddenly, surprising himself. “You have your duties in the Seswenna sector, and it is not right to pull you away for this. Let this be her proving ground.”

Tarkin stands up in surprise, but to his credit, makes no movement to disagree. “This is...a rather simple exercise, given her abilities.”

“Then consider her lucky.” Vader nods once, turning back to return to the shuttle. Tarkin is left to follow behind, but begins the take-off sequence as soon as he enters the cockpit and takes them back into the cloud layers once more. A tense silence surrounds the pair as the shuttle reverts back to autopilot, and Tarkin finally steeples his fingers to face Vader.

“Did I do something wrong?”

Vader is surprised for the second time that day, glancing at Tarkin before looking back out the viewport. “You have proved hard to pin down, Governor.”

“I didn’t mean to imply that the military has no place here—merely that the less aggressive solution is more useful, in this instance.”

“I am not strictly military. I have no stake in whether our presence is needed or not.”

“Then why—” Tarkin stops himself, turning back to the control console. “Was it from the *Executor*? Our last encounter was—I didn’t mean to intrude, if that was....”

“I was the one who allowed you inside my quarters, Governor. That should have indicated my intentions.” Vader knows that it is unfair to allow his anger with Tatooine—the private anger he usually saves for those clandestine visits—to cloud his interactions with Tarkin. But Tarkin is more perceptive than Vader has given him credit for. “I wanted you there.”

“Then—”

“I am not *angry* with you, Wilhuff. I allowed...other thoughts to influence my experience on the plain. You presented your points eloquently, and with suitable justification. This is why I asked you to come.”

“And...about the *Executor*?”

Wilhuff Tarkin, avoiding a topic. The thought is preposterous, if Vader were not witnessing it himself.

“You are welcome aboard the *Executor*—in any capacity—whenever you find the opportunity.”

Tarkin exhales, nodding to himself, and Vader is amused to feel the faint ripples in the Force of Tarkin’s resolution. It cannot be easy for Tarkin to navigate his feelings of loyalty to the Empire, his commitment to the philosophy they both espouse, while balancing this *attraction* to Vader. Vader has seen many power-hungry sycophants, those who leech from his own presence, but Tarkin is not like them. Tarkin is entranced by Vader the way Anakin Skywalker was entranced by the Emperor, with interest plunging past sexual interest and to deeper needs of support, confirmation, and affirmation.

Though, should Tarkin ever *ask* for satisfaction in a more basic sense, Vader sees no reason to refuse him.

“You should come to Eriadu. After we install Eleh here, that is.” Tarkin nods again, tapping the console. “I don’t believe you’ve ever been.”

“A testament to your leadership, Governor Tarkin. My presence on a planet usually indicates a breakdown in command.”

A quicksilver smile blinks across Tarkin's expression, though he quickly resolves it. Vader can appreciate how Tarkin sits a little taller even with these few words. "All the same. You'd asked about the *Carrion Spike*, and now you're making house calls around the Outer Rim. Perhaps an example of what the Outer Rim can deliver might restore your confidence in the Empire's capabilities."

"I have no doubt of the Empire's capabilities." Vader assents, but turns to check his own co-pilot console as the shutter prepares again for landing. "But I would be grateful to witness your methods applied first-hand."

"Then it's settled." Tarkin braces against the control column as a buffet of turbulence rocks the shuttle, then releases it to allow the ship to settle gently on the ground. "I'll make arrangements this afternoon."

"Inform your officers of our intentions with Telos." Considering the speed with which Tarkin's staff had assembled the necessary information, Vader had few concerns.

"One last request:" Tarkin holds up a hand, thinking momentarily. "May we take the prisoner you captured? The information from your reports is likely useful enough, but—"

"Take what you need." Vader stands, brushing himself of the planet both literally and figuratively. "The *Executor* will remain in orbit until the new governor is installed, but the Emperor will likely want you to return to your post quickly. I will give him my report today—do not dally."

"Of course." Tarkin stands to follow Vader to the door, waiting as the Sith Lord descends the entry stairs and returns to the speeder. "And remember—you've committed to Eriadu. I expect your presence there soon after I return."

"It shall be done." Vader nods—no need for salutes, he realizes, since Tarkin has never saluted him anyway—and watches as Tarkin's two officer escorts scamper into the shuttle once more. The trooper in the speeder prepares to reenter the city, but Vader raises a hand to stop him. As the engines of the shuttle glow, then flare to life, Vader watches, waiting until the shuttle is a tiny speck in the darkening twilight sky of Telos.

This planet may no longer require Vader—and may soon be done with Tarkin—but Vader has every confidence that their new mutual partnership will resume soon enough.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Governor Wilhuff Tarkin is not a *nervous* man. He does not fret. He does not worry. He does not preoccupy himself with basic housekeeping duties, especially when maintaining a residence on his homeworld of Eriadu. It is hardly his place to worry about such things.

Yet even as he stands, looking out over the capital, there is the irritating thought that something might not be *right*, that something might be *off*, that something might *go wrong*.

“Sir. The *Executor* is maintaining orbit as indicated in its flight plan. Are we meant to be expecting a larger contingent? We haven’t provided—”

“There is no need for excessive preparations.” Tarkin snaps, closing his eyes to exhale slowly.
“Captain Thett. Is the pad at the spaceport cleared?”

“Yes, sir.” Behind Tarkin, the adjutant nods and glances down at his datapad, confirming a message with the tap of a button. When Tarkin returns to Eriadu, this captain dogs his heels like the secretary he is. Tarkin can’t complain—Thett is more suited to the secretarial work than Tarkin ever could be—but the man unsettles him at times. “Sir, I still feel...”

“Your *feelings* are inconsequential, Captain Thett.” Tarkin turns, his hands still folded behind his back as he faces the officer. “This is a minor call, a short stop in a larger tour of the sector. My status as a former citizen of Eriadu should mean little.” Tarkin wrinkles his nose, straightening in irritation. “That the capital mayor decided a formal reception was in order is completely out of line.”

“Apologies, Governor—” For just a moment, Thett cowers, but Tarkin respects how the man refuses to stammer further apologies. “—But I had little influence in that decision. Your arrival was sudden—the mayor approved the reception before I had any opportunity to say otherwise.”

“At least there aren’t any *parades*.” Tarkin shakes his head, pacing in front of the wide windows as his nervous tension increases. He does not usually pace, but in the luxury of his Governor’s apartments (so graciously donated by the citizens of Eriadu) he permits himself the back and forth of deep thought. The one saving grace afforded by Thett is that the adjutant knows how to be *quiet*; Thett feels no need to fill empty silence with meaningless noise, and it is instead the sounds of the city below that filter through the window, muffled and distorted. In the quiet, the soft ping of Thett’s datapad is clearly audible, and Tarkin stops in his pacing to resume his stance before the windows as Thett scans the message.

“Sir, a shuttle has landed at the pad you requested. The spaceport coordinators report that there have been no communications, beyond the necessary confirmation codes, but—” Thett gasps softly, prompting Tarkin to turn. “Sir, there’s reports—it seems Vader himself has—”

“Quiet, Captain.” Tarkin approaches, taking the datapad from the officer’s hands before glancing at the message. “Vader is here, yes. But he is here on my invitation, and for *no other reason*. His presence here is not a military matter, and should not concern the meddling officers of Eriadu’s political scheming or the spaceport administrators. Do I make myself clear?”

Thett blinks, and this time, there is no cowering in his stance. “Crystalline, sir. In fairness, if you had notified me of this *before* Vader’s arrival, I could have made alterative preparations.”

Tarkin hands the datapad back, glaring at his adjutant. “You have the influence of a fly on a veermok’s backside when it comes to the mayors and managers here, Captain.”

“Captain Thett, sir. And when you aren’t here, I act as your planetary representative. Even the mayors can’t contradict the order of a Grand Moff. Requests made by me come with your signature.” Thett thumbs off his datapad’s display, meeting Tarkin’s gaze. “I could have made alternative preparations.”

Tarkin draws breath to respond, but decides against it, moving back to the window to resume his pacing. To know Vader is on-planet, by *Tarkin’s* request, fills him with a new kind of tension, and the minutes while Vader’s shuttle lands and transport is arranged seem to stretch into an eternity. Finally, noises echo from the lift, and Tarkin feels a rush of adrenaline as the doors hiss open and the noise of Vader’s respirator fills the room.

“Governor Tarkin.”

“Lord Vader.” Tarkin turns, proud to have the skyline of Eriadu’s capital at his back, and offers a genuine smile to see Vader standing in his—in *his*—chambers. Two stormtroopers flank the Sith Lord, and Thett’s concern is visible, but Tarkin can only sense the rush of excitement Vader’s presence brings. “I hope your arrival was uneventful.”

“Subverting Eriadu’s air traffic was simpler than expected. There is a clean efficiency.” Vader nods approval, and Tarkin weighs the assessment.

“Pleasantries aside, I must tell you that I already have an atmosphere corvette prepared. Since you aren’t here for diplomacy, I figured a quick exit would be more reasonable.”

Vader studies Tarkin for a long moment, and Tarkin is unsure what the pause means—but finally, Vader nods and turns to his escort. “You will remain here, in the administrative quarters of Governor Tarkin, until I return. If the *Executor* attempts to reach me, forward the message through your communicators.”

“Understood, Lord Vader.” The troopers click their heels and salute, and Tarkin watches as Thett looks to him in quiet alarm.

“...Governor Tarkin, I—”

“You do the same, Captain Thett.” Tarkin raises a hand to wave away Thett’s concerns, quietly amused to watch Thett scramble for understanding. “Use the capital’s excellent catering to supply these troopers, and monitor my messages as you do normally. Should there be anything requiring my immediate, and I mean *only* my immediate, attention, I will retain my personal communicator.”

“Yes, sir.” Thett nods, visibly relieved to have something to do in Tarkin’s absence. Tarkin waits a moment longer, expecting further trouble, but when neither the troopers nor Thett make any further complaints, Tarkin nods resolutely.

“Then it’s settled. Come, Lord Vader.” Tarkin moves with purpose now, heading to the lift to have Vader follow. The ride is short, and Tarkin only slows down when he reaches the corvette waiting them at ground level. To his surprise, Vader is rushing to follow, and Tarkin realizes how much his tension has pushed him to recklessness.

“This is Eriadu.” Vader says as he reaches the corvette, its elegantly polished hull irising open to extend a set of stairs. Tarkin nods, turning sharply to ascend the staircase and make his way to the cockpit. He can feel as Vader settles in beside him, their crash webbing morphing into place as the

ship prepares to lift off. As Governor of the sector, Tarkin has spared no expense in acquiring this ship, and it rises up without a hitch before darting away from Eriadu's city center. As they put more distance between themselves and the city, Tarkin can feel his tension changing, shifting into something different as he grips the control column.

"Are you proud of your planet, Tarkin?" Vader asks, breaking Tarkin from his own thoughts as he looks out of the viewport.

"My planet?" Tarkin is taken aback, but monitors the altitude of the corvette as they race over pockets of machinery, mines digging into the land to spit out ores and raw materials. In the distance, wide expanses of forest cover low hills, and flatlands extend with patches of green and yellow. As the autopilot slips the corvette through the air currents and thermals, Tarkin tries to formulate a proper response, keenly aware of Vader's attention.

"Eriadu is an impressive example of what the Empire promises. It is diverse, rich, provocative—"

"I did not ask about how Eriadu fits into the Empire. I asked about what it means to *you*."

Tarkin tries not to let his annoyance show, but his hands tighten on the console. "Eriadu is where I was born. Where I was shaped. I could have accomplished what I have on any number of planets, but here...here is where the Carrion Spike rises. Had I been on Corellia, it would probably be a different local landmark, some local gang. Had I been on Ord Cantrell, it would probably have been some loop arch, some acrobatic feat of piloting."

"Yet you invited me here."

Tarkin inhales sharply, and he feels a sudden pressure against his hand as Vader leans forward. Glancing down, Tarkin finds Vader's thick glove covering his hand on the console, and he pauses before pulling his hand away.

"My intention was not to offend."

"No. No, it's—" Tarkin blinks, forcing himself to breathe. "I'm not offended. Eriadu is my home. It forms a beneficial hub from which I could enter local politics. I learned my most important lessons here. By some measure, then, yes, I am proud of it. It is part of me. But I would hope that there is something of me that would be constant, no matter what planet I might have been born on."

"This is true. But you are a unique person thanks to your experiences, and this planet provided them. Had you been born somewhere else, those experiences might have been lost. The Force saw to it that you were born here. Your own ability saw to your success."

Tarkin nods slowly, finally looking up to meet Vader's gaze. "I hope you don't find me sentimental, Lord Vader."

"On the contrary, Governor Tarkin. Your sentiment to your origins does you credit." Vader trails off, apparently finished, but as he leans back, another thought seems to come to mind. "Every being has a core to them, something safe and secure. Humans tend to identify it with their home planets. Races with a more space-faring attitude apply it to their ships. The Empire has little room for these cores in its formal dogma, but the Emperor is not insensitive to their power. You have proven this to him, Governor Tarkin. You have had more influence than you might know."

"I did not bring you here to talk about the Empire." Tarkin finds himself *complaining*, but shakes off the nagging concern.

"Why did you bring me here, then?"

“To show you Eriadu.”

“Then perhaps you are more proud than you might think.” Vader nods. “This is not chastisement, Willhuff. I *enjoy* listening to your explanations. For the Emperor, and for myself, the Force tells us all we need to know about ourselves. You have seen my meditation chamber—the Emperor has something like it. We have spent plenty of time uncovering the things that give us our power. But you...you are *not* Force sensitive. The Force works in you only passively, as it works with all beings, yet you seize your destiny. Your core self gives you a strength I rarely encounter.”

“I’ve never known you to offer compliments, Lord Vader.”

“I rarely find instances where they are appropriate, Governor Tarkin.” Vader concludes, and the cockpit falls back into silence as Tarkin prepares for landing. Instead of a wide-open meadow, this time Tarkin lands the ship in the clutter of a forest, a lumber operation already at work far to the starboard side. The ground is uneven, but the ship’s landing gear adapts easily to the task, and at last the two men exit the ship to stand on Eriadu’s soil, the sun hidden behind the crowns of trees. Tarkin reaches down to adjust the place where his uniform tucks into his boot, and with the rush of wind bringing a shiver of cold, Tarkin faces the forest.

“Accompany me. Please.” Tarkin turns to accommodate Vader’s presence, watching the taller man move forward.

“Do we have a destination?”

“Not exactly.” Tarkin blinks, stepping forward to feel the trees close about him. Vader moves beside him, the harsh noise of his boots and respirator standing out against the press of natural noise. Though uneven, the ground does not prevent them from making some progress as they walk, and Tarkin feels his own instincts picking up the changes and shifts in noise. Finally, he leads them into an area where the trees thin slightly, and a stream runs through the forest to expose the rocks and boulders.

“You chose not to go the Carrion Spike.”

“It seems...sacrilegious.” Tarkin regrets the word as soon as it leaves his mouth, and he sighs as he watches the water flow. “It remains in Tarkin land. My uncle still patrols there. Even if I skirted his watchfulness, there would be nothing to gain there that you couldn’t gain here.”

“Your uncle.” Vader nods slowly, straightening as he stands on the edge of the stream. “You still have family here.”

“Do not assume that I’d favor Eriadu simply due to his presence. Jova would understand my decisions.”

“Jova helped make you who you are.”

“Yes.” Tarkin nods. “He is part of the reason why so many Tarkins have succeeded in politics.”

“Yet he does not leave the planet himself?”

“More sentimental than me, it seems.” Tarkin is unsure of why he’s explaining all this, especially when Vader most likely has access to all this information anyway. Tarkin has never hidden anything from the Empire, and his personnel files are open to someone of Vader’s clearance.

“It is not worthless sentiment. What you have is passion. Passion brings strength.” Vader pauses, and Tarkin turns slightly to see Vader shudder visibly. It can’t be the temperature—Vader’s entire armor

is designed to prevent him from feeling much discomfort—and Tarkin is suddenly concerned.

“Lord Vader.”

“Wilhuff Tarkin.” Vader’s voice is low and raspy, and with a sudden movement, he reaches up to grasp Tarkin’s chin in one gloved hand. Tarkin makes no movement, finding himself forced to stare at Vader’s smooth, curved helmet, until Vader finally moves his hand back to the joint where Tarkin’s jawbone meets his throat. Tarkin can feel the power beneath the glove, even without Vader’s Force abilities, and the threat of danger coupled with Vader’s proximity brings Tarkin to breathlessness.

The silence surrounds them, the sound of the stream a quiet background to the unspoken interplay between them both. Finally, Vader drops his hand once more, turning away. Tarkin is forced to catch his breath, his tension having changed forms into an eager, uncertain *wanting*.

This is not why he brought Vader here.

But he can hardly complain, can he?

“The Force is...perplexing, here. There is life, and the desire for life, and in the places where strength fails, the light struggles through.”

Tarkin cannot pretend to understand. Even during the Clone Wars, the Jedi discussions of Force and light were too impractical, too *outlandish* for serious consideration. Yet Vader is brought to some strange place thanks to this Force, and Tarkin—

“Why did you say my name, then?”

Vader looks up, as if caught by surprise, and turns to face Tarkin more fully. “You brought me here. You explained this world to me, you presented it to me. You have helped me understand you. It’s the only thing I could have sought here.”

“But the Force—”

“The Force moves in its own whims. But *you*, Wilhuff, move of your own accord. You have set your own course. And for that...” Vader trails off, shaking his head as he recovers. “I’m sorry. For surprising you.”

“Don’t mention it.” Tarkin says softly, head still swimming from Vader’s exposition. He finally steps forward to reclaim Vader’s hand, lifting it in front of him to consider the fabric. “You have your own intrigues too, you realize. The Force does not shape you. It seems—given my limited knowledge, of course—that you shape it. That is your role in the Empire. And you have more, *are* more, than simply the movements of the Force. Understand that.”

“I do.” Vader nods, breath rasping as he pulls his hand away. “I do. And I thank you for...this.”

“It wasn’t my intention to distress you.” Tarkin attempts to explain, somewhat belatedly. “I thought you wanted to see...this. Eriadu. Me.”

“The opportunity to see you is never distressing.” Vader says simply, having apparently recovered. “Was there more to see? More to show, rather.”

“If you want to see it. This is merely...part of Eriadu. I can explain more. Show more. If that’s what you wanted.”

“Governor Tarkin, the *Executor* is not expecting my return for at least a full planetary day. I fully intend to appreciate whatever it is you wish to show me.”

Tarkin blinks in surprise, his tension having rushed away as his adrenaline spike resolves, and finally he offers a full grin. “Well then, Lord Vader—let me introduce you to Eriadu.”

Chapter End Notes

This story is quickly escaping me, and dips dangerously close to mere crack rather than actual development. Still, having Vader and Tarkin monologue at each other occupies me--someday they might actually hold hands or something equally sappy. No promises.

Chapter 4

As the shuttle lifts off the floor of the docking bay, then slips past the atmospheric barrier of its Imperial dreadnought mothership, Vader can feel a combination of feelings he hasn't felt in some time. Beside him, tense but silent in the copilot seat, is Governor Wilhuff Tarkin, and though Tarkin hasn't asked any questions about their destination, Vader knows the man's brain must be working overtime to try and contextualize this request. Vader had been willing to go to Eriadu for Tarkin—now Tarkin must follow Vader on this more mysterious excursion.

Part of the confusion is the choice of ship. Vader maintains the usual roster of fighters aboard the *Executor*, but he'd purchased this one specifically, going through the average markets to find a used, battered corvette barely big enough for hyperdrive. He's had only minor repairs made, enough to get them in and out of system, and it really only needs to serve their purposes for a single trip.

Given his reception on Eriadu, however, Vader can imagine how Tarkin might react to the image of this clunky, secondhand ship.

Their conversation up to this point has been limited to the necessary details of the Empire, with nothing that might hint at their deeper philosophies. Aboard the *Executor*, there would be little to fear from talking less guardedly, but Vader has too much on his mind right now. Trying to accommodate Tarkin, while resolving the various eddies and whirls in the Force that pull at Vader personally, prevents him from trying to play the management game with his officers and crew.

But now they're free. Out of the confines of the *Executor*, moving through the emptiness of space, Vader can feel his mind clearing. The clutter of the people on board his ship is rarely a dangerous distraction, but the Force senses them nonetheless. And if he opens himself to it, it can easily become overwhelming. Their fear, their tension, their anger or pain—it fuels him, yes, but it not *his*, and the sensation is somehow wrong. He might have mentioned it to Sidious, but his Master is dismissive of those concerns. As long as Vader takes his own steps to negotiate the Force, Sidious is happy to let him wander untethered. Most apprentices would kill for this type of freedom, and probably have.

It is this freedom that has given him Tarkin. Even as the ship processes the jump coordinates, Tarkin is still silent, and Vader tries to determine the best way to introduce this excursion. Not until they exit hyperspace does someone finally break the silence, and contrary to expectation, it is Tarkin that sits up to study the planet below.

"We're still in the Outer Rim. Jakku, Raxus Prime—Tatooine?"

"Tatooine." Vader confirms, watching the planet move beneath them as the shuttle begins the long descent. From above, there is no reflection of the scars and chasms that mar Tatooine's surface, only dark oily stains where cities perch on the sand. Tatooine is a dead thing, baking beneath its binary suns, and the yawning chasm pulls at Vader like no other planet in the galaxy. They hit the atmosphere and the ship begins to rattle, its poor handling and unmaintained compensators unprepared for the task. Vader grips the control column with the experience of decades, and though he cannot feel the wind tearing at them, their speed is enough to bring him some excitement. Tarkin is an afterthought, barely remembered in this old routine, and their plunge to the desert allows Vader to drop the ship into a slow spiral, burning off speed as the ship angles for landing.

The ship has barely landed properly before Vader is overriding the safety mechanisms, moving through the cockpit to open the entry door and step into the Tatooine sun. When he comes to the sand, it shifts beneath his boots, and the heat pulses through him as he reaches out to the world around him.

“Vader.” The voice breaks his attention, snapping him back to his immediate surroundings. Vader feels like an impetuous child, reined back by a slower companion, but recognizes that his need to be *here* has made him ignore Tarkin’s presence. He turns, restraining himself, and waits for a moment before stepping forward to offer a hand.

Tarkin seems surprised—and Vader is unsure why. They’re alone now, as alone as people can be in the galaxy, and there is no reason for them to avoid physical contact. Then again, Vader knows that Tarkin can overthink these most basic impulses. With that in mind, Vader steps back onto the boarding staircase, reaching forward to take Tarkin’s forearm and lead him forward.

“Vader—” Tarkin begins again, but breaks off. Vader looks to the desert around them, oppressive in its blank emptiness, then nods back to the shuttle.

“There’s a weapons locker on the starboard wall. Choose something with which you are comfortable—it pays to be prepared on Tatooine.”

Tarkin studies him for a long moment, but follows the command, disappearing back into the darkness of the shuttle before returning with a short plasma rifle. It does not have the elegance of the pistol—Vader admits to a selfish desire to see Tarkin wielding a pistol one handed—but it is a capable weapon, and Tarkin holds it with ease. Once they both stand on the sand, Vader turns back to the mass of craggy rocks and boulders a few hundred meters away.

“I was born here.” He says shortly, trying to contextualize this visit. Tarkin’s surprise is palpable, but he says little as he stands beside Vader.

“This was your crucible.”

“No.” *Yes.* “It gave me life. But it was not a life defined by pain or sacrifice. Not until the Jedi came to Tatooine was I forced to change my understanding of life here.”

“This isn’t your Carrion Spike, then.” There is regret in Tarkin’s tone—no, disappointment. Vader is surprised at how Tarkin invests himself in this, in *Vader himself*, and in recognition, he makes a concession.

“It’s close enough. This is where the Force revealed to me the nature of the world. Of all worlds.”

Tarkin opens his mouth to speak, but waits until they begin walking. “The Empire hasn’t come here. Not yet.”

“No. The Hutts keep their grasp on this planet tight, and the other underworld inhabitants avoid detection. It has little to offer, and little to gain.”

“Yet—”

“The situation of my birth leads to no preferential treatment here. You acknowledged as much when we were on Eriadu. To liberate Tatooine would mean dismantling the Hutt empire. And the Emperor is unwilling to undertake such a task while the Empire itself remains fractured by politics.”

“Of course.” Tarkin falls back into silence, matching Vader’s speed as they come into the shadows of the rocks, then move into the spindly walkways between the crags. Vader looks up to where the rocks stand out against the sky, and he resumes his earlier Force explorations, mirroring their descent into the crags.

“There are many of these formations on Tatooine. It isn’t entirely a desert planet.” Vader continues to explain, feeling the sensation of leaving himself as the Force welcomes him. The lack of life and

desolation of the planet are familiar now, and Vader's pain rises up to fill the void until he locates other movements in the Force.

"Of course. A mono-biome like this is abnormal." Tarkin acknowledges, watching as Vader comes to a stop and inhales deeply.

"There are beings here. Sand People—Tusken Raiders. I will leave you to wait here, safely, while I face them."

"That's unnecessary." Tarkin shakes his head. "If it's a fight they want, I can cover you better—"

"No." Vader emphasizes, and the echo of the canyon surrounds them with the Dark Side. Vader had assumed that Tarkin couldn't feel it—but there is a flash of fear in Tarkin's eyes, and Vader knows that the movements of the Force will not go ignored for long. "I face them alone."

"Lord Vader—"

"Tarkin. Wilhuff. I brought you here because you did the same for me. You took me to Eriadu. You presented the fullness of what you think of as 'yourself'. You sought me out and responded to me, engaging with me. If you wish to understand, then you will remain here."

Tarkin blinks up at the mask facing him, but this time there is no fear or hesitation in the governor's eyes. "No."

"You would risk yourself—"

"If I am to *understand*—" Tarkin says, adding sneer to the word Vader hadn't expected. "Then I need to *see*. Let me climb to the rocks above. If you don't want me to fight, then let me watch."

Vader pauses, then realizes the importance of Tarkin's argument. It would make little sense to bring Tarkin here, merely to shut him out of the single most important event of the visit. Still, Vader feels a reticence born of fear, the knowledge that *someone else* will see the events of Tatooine, breaking apart his solitude and injecting a new factor.

"Very well." Vader finds himself agreeing, waiting as Tarkin holsters the rifle then turns to climb the rocks, finding handholds with an ease born of practice. Rarely are the high commanders of the Empire required to do physical labor or exert themselves, but it is evident in Tarkin's movements that he hasn't neglected regular exercise. The stiff lines of the uniform conceal muscle and sinew, and Tarkin moves with a grace Vader had not expected.

Vader realizes that he is getting distracted, and the knowledge provokes a flurry of emotion he doesn't usually associate with Tatooine.

Around them, the movement of the Sand People is ever more traceable, their vague impressions in the Force gathering strength as they are alerted to Vader's presence. Drawing his lightsaber, Vader brings the beam to life, the sound of the blade loud in his ears as he steps into the midst of the Tusken Raider camp.

The Force rises up to meet Vader's call, and as the first call of alarm rings out, he *bathes* in the terror of a world that knows only fear.

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The entire excursion is brief. Before long, Tarkin and Vader are returning to the shuttle, tracking their path over the sand while the suns beat down on them. Tarkin has left his rifle holstered, but his

uniform and boots show the signs of wear from his climb. Vader is unscathed, though motes of dust cling to his cape. Behind the mask, however, he is uncertain of himself. Unsure. Tatooine is the place that reminds him of himself, but Tarkin's presence has complicated things.

"The Force told you where they were." Tarkin notes, refusing to frame the observation as a question. Vader nods quietly, but does not offer further explanation. "You are an emblem of fear here, too. The Emperor has shaped you that way. Fear, terror—"

"Anger, and hate. Fury. These are the things on which the Dark Side feeds." Vader acknowledges.

"And you sense that in them. In all beings."

"The Force works most potently on those of weak will. I may sense beings, but I cannot read their minds." Vader remembers the Jedi, their work with the Force, their 'extraction' of information from subjects. And they claimed to be peacemakers. "Reading a mind takes concentration on a specific individual. It is rarely useful in situations outside of interrogation."

"Can you sense me?" Tarkin says, prompting Vader to stop short. Though they are only a few meters from the ship, neither man moves forward as Vader thinks, and finally he offers a short nod.

"I can sense you if I allow it. You are *alive*, which means the Force flows around you."

"What do I feel like?"

Vader is taken aback, a sensation he only now experiences with Wilhuff Tarkin. Tarkin isn't shocked, or horrified, or even perturbed by Vader's actions. He's merely *curious*.

"I haven't..." Vader tries to find the words to explain, realizing that he hasn't ever had to explain the Force to someone who isn't Force sensitive. "I haven't reached out in that way. I haven't focused on you."

"Then do it now." Tarkin is facing Vader, the gleam of excitement in his eyes, and Vader is frankly shocked. No one, *no one*, sees the power of the Dark Side as closely as Tarkin has and then actively seeks it out.

It seems Tarkin is determined to prove all of Vader's assumptions wrong.

Closing his eyes, Vader takes a deep breath and opens himself again to the Force, his own surges of emotion clouding his vision before the image of Tarkin resolves before him. "You are human. You experience yourself, you know yourself—you are defined by resolution. You are too determined, too sure of yourself, for me to probe too deeply." Vader shakes himself back to reality, facing Tarkin once more. "You are a blue fire, burning hot and cold. You are the steel forged in your own flame."

"The Dark Lord of the Sith, a poet as well as a leader." Tarkin smiles, considering Vader, then turns to open the door to the shuttle and duck inside. Vader is at a loss: he can feel the pull to Tarkin, the itch in his skin that calls him forward, but none of this is from the Force. His attraction is quickly becoming overwhelming, and yet even here on Tatooine, Tarkin is still receptive to that attraction. More than that—Tarkin *shares* that attraction.

Vader steps up the boarding ramp to enter the ship, Tarkin already settled into the copilot seat to check the ship's responses and awaken her from slumber.

"Tarkin."

"Lord Vader. I'd assumed we were headed back."

“I—” Vader hesitates, keying the command for the door to close behind him while he tries to resolve his own confusion.

He remembers stumbling back into a Tatooine farm hut, years ago, after a day like this.

He remembers the feeling of his mother’s hand on his cheek, even as her own strength failed.

He remembers the look of shock, of fear, as the one he loved recoiled from his confession.

Before he knows what he is doing, Vader reaches back to unlatch the clasps that connect his helmet to his suit. Tarkin watches, his gaze bright, and Vader finally removes his helmet entirely to take a breath of unfiltered air. The mouthpiece hangs in front of his face, but he pushes it away to look at Tarkin fully.

“Vader.” Tarkin is standing, coming closer, and Vader can see the trace of concern in Tarkin’s expression. That small emotion, that single expression of empathy, is enough to rob Vader of breath. Inhaling sharply, Vader reaches forward, capturing Tarkin’s chin with one gloved hand before pulling him forward and kissing him harshly on the lips.

Tarkin’s surprise is evident in his tension, but Vader is gratified to note how quickly Tarkin responds in kind. More than responds, in fact: Tarkin reaches to grasp Vader by his upper arms, pressing himself against the bulk of Vader’s suit to deepen the kiss. Vader knows that his suit was not built for this, that his body in its current configuration is not the ideal body to respond to amorous advances, but the rush of adrenaline comes all the same, making the exposed skin of his head even more sensitive. At long last, Vader’s lungs begin to scream for air, denied a breath for too long, and Vader pries himself away to recover in the darkness of the ship.

Tarkin says nothing; even while Vader recovers his helmet and tries to settle his heartrate, Tarkin is watching him with a cool interest. Finally, having reached a conclusion, Vader steps forward to accept the pilot’s seat, waiting until Tarkin sits again.

“Thank you for coming.”

“I wouldn’t have missed it for all the life on Coruscant.” Tarkin says simply, returning to his pre-flight checks.

“You had no obligation to come.”

“I have attached myself to you, Lord Vader. I wanted to come.”

“Even with everything you’ve seen.”

“Even with that. As I said on Eriadu, you are more than merely an instrument of the Force. You are a being, with your own centered-ness and resolve. It is no accident that we are men in positions of power, and it is no accident that we experience some mutual interest.”

Vader is quiet, waiting as the ship finally responds to their commands and begins to lift up from the ground. “It is not traditional for a lord of the Sith to treasure such emotions as satisfaction and pleasure.”

“And yet?”

“And yet you, Wilhuff Tarkin, have made me happier than I could have thought possible.”

Tarkin says nothing, but smiles broadly as the ship rockets into the atmosphere. Vader’s smile is not

evident through the mask, but it is just as broad as Tarkin's. Tatooine is not a planet of peace, tranquility, or happiness. Most residents of the galaxy would not identify Tatooine as a place of particularly wonderful memories.

But no one would consider Darth Vader—or even Wilhuff Tarkin—an average resident of the galaxy.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Though this has mainly been an outlet to write about Vader/Tarkin, this is a section that has them interacting the least. A bit different than usual, but hopefully interesting nonetheless.

Time passes slowly in an Empire that spans light years. The coordination of troop movements, the production of new ships or the mining of materials—none of this is quick or easy, and with the administration necessary to coordinate the hundreds of billions of lifeforms, the Empire seems to move at the pace the cosmos it inhabits. Timeless, true, but with movement invisible to the untrained eye, planets and stars whirling at fantastic speeds while seemingly motionless to their inhabitants.

Tarkin gently stirs the mixture he's been given as a drink and watches the night sky above him, the movement of ships only faint streaks of light in the darkness. Though there is movement behind him, Tarkin does not turn, and it is only when a single figure moves forward to join him at the massive domed windows that Tarkin looks away from the expanse above them.

"Ah. Governor. You've done well." Tarkin offers his moderate praise, watching his former protégé smile. Eleh had had a tendency of grinning ferociously, frightening others, but her year as governor has tamed that ferocity. No, not tamed—she's merely learned how to better hide her fangs, and only use them when necessary.

"The first year is hardly indicative of future years, Governor." Eleh looks down modestly, but the modesty only lasts a moment before she leans against the railing in front of them. "Or should I call you Grand Moff? That part of protocol was never made clear in any of the handbooks."

"You still read those? Really, Governor, there are better things on which to waste your time."

Eleh laughs aloud, lifting her glass to her lips before taking a sip of the Telosian drink. Tarkin isn't quite sure what it *is*, exactly—alcoholic, most likely, but with cream and a warm chocolatey smell that borders on bitterness—but in the interest of new experiences, he mirrors her movement to sample the taste.

"I hope you don't mind that we've decided to follow Seswenna's pattern of insignia plaques." Eleh taps her own plaque, patterned with the red and blue squares of her position. "It seemed easier."

"Of all the things in which the Empire chooses to be lax, organizing the requirements for insignia plaques seems..." Tarkin frowns, raising a hand to gesture helplessly in midair.

"A simple enough task, but one corrupted by the Republic *just* enough to make it impossible." Eleh offers, watching Tarkin process.

"Not precisely, but close enough." Tarkin glances to Eleh again, watching how she meets his gaze. Her pride had never given her to recklessness while under his command, but as governor, she could

easily overreach herself. Perhaps with time. “You did not live through the Clone Wars. You wouldn’t have seen the worst of the Republic’s excesses.”

“I know enough. My parents had rather strong opinions on the movement of politics.”

Tarkin raises an eyebrow, taking another sip of his drink. “Are they disappointed by your position here, then?”

“My mother isn’t—” Eleh begins, then corrects herself and stands straighter. “My father knows of my appointment. He’s proud that he could offer me the opportunity.”

“Hm.” Tarkin responds noncommittally, finishing the drink in his hands before handing it to a passing waiter. On board the *Executrix*, discussion of one’s private life or personal family is limited to off-duty hours, and Tarkin rarely had hours to share with his lieutenants or captains, even those he’d chosen personally.

“Is it traditional for Imperial administrators to form families, Governor Tarkin?” Eleh says suddenly, startling Tarkin. He turns back to her in some amusement, clasping his hands behind his back in near-parade rest, and offers a thin smile.

“We’ve only existed as ‘Imperial administrators’ for a few years, Governor Eleh. We haven’t had time to establish traditions.”

“The handbooks are unclear on this too. I would hardly presume to trouble the Emperor with such...*banal* concerns, but...” Eleh trails off, shrugging. “I thought I would take advantage of your presence here to at least ask the question.”

“There is nothing in Imperial policy to prevent administrators from entering marriage contracts, pair bonds, or family agreements, provided that those bonds do not hamper the administrator’s ability to serve the Empire effectively.” Tarkin says shortly, turning to lean against the railing beside Eleh to watch the interior of the ballroom before them. Technically, the entire affair had been a celebration of the anniversary of Eleh’s appointment as governor, but Eleh has wisely kept away from too many public appearances. Grinosh, one of the city’s religious leaders, had made the most speeches over the course of the past week, and Tarkin had watched them aboard the *Executrix* upon receiving Eleh’s invitation. By framing the celebration as a glorification of the Empire’s arrival and reconstruction of Telos, Eleh has promoted local interests above her own self-image. Just like her first few actions as planetary governor, it is a deft political move that cements Telos’s place in the Empire, while maintaining Eleh as an indispensable representative that appreciates Telos’s needs.

Tarkin is *proud* of her, more than he could have expected, and considers Eleh’s question more closely. She should be allowed that, if nothing else.

“Those entering the academy are required to sign contracts stipulating their full service for a period of standard years, during which they are prohibited from entering into formal relationships, but the Empire is not ignorant of the freedoms that should be offered to its most successful pupils.” Tarkin tries to scrub the harsh edge from his voice, though Eleh shows no indication that his harshness is out of place. “You are a planetary governor, Eleh. You are still—if I may be frank—quite young. New to this game. You have the resources and the ability to manage a private residence populated by whatever partners you choose, but you cannot suffer distractions. Wait a few standard years at least, even if to avoid giving the other governors opportunities to undermine you.”

“Oh, I wasn’t—” Eleh laughs again, smiling as she watches a waiter fumble with his tray. “I was just curious. As I said, it wasn’t clear in the handbooks, and I don’t recall ever discussing it beyond the prohibitions given at the academy.”

“You are allowed to find happiness, Governor. As you have served the Empire, the Empire will serve you.”

“Is that why you haven’t established a household, Governor Tarkin? Because you sense that it could be ‘distracting’?” Eleh turns to him, a sudden gleam in her eye, and Tarkin is reminded uncomfortably of previous discussions with Eleh and other captains.

“I have many reasons. One of them being that my true residence is on the *Executrix*, not on a planet. Even if I did find a suitable partner, I would hardly ask the crew of the *Executrix* to suffer their presence for months on end. There would need to be provisions made for them, a role for them to play...that kind of coordination is more than I would ask of my crew.”

Eleh opens her mouth to respond, but turns away instead to watch the people before them again. Tarkin waits, watching her process the information, but decides not to continue unless Eleh so chooses it. He has, of course, established *informal* relationships with others during his time in the Emperor’s service, even if those relationships were little more than hurried liaisons in a Coruscanti hotel during planetary leave. Finding true companionship is a different beast entirely, one with which Tarkin has had less experience.

And considering the idea that *Darth Vader* might be the man whom Tarkin has most recently felt kinship with, that is a topic which will remain permanently undiscussed.

“Does it get lonely as Grand Moff?” Eleh asks more softly, and Tarkin is surprised by the shift. Eleh is not sentimental or emotional. Like Tarkin himself, she shows little attachment to her home planet, her family, or her own personal concerns. But perhaps the year on Telos has been more trying than he first realized.

“It can. I rose to my position because I believed that everyone appointed as my equal was a test. Either I would succeed, or I would fail, and my superiors would rank me accordingly. I am honored to be the Empire’s first and only Grand Moff, and I am honored to accept the responsibilities the Emperor asks of me. But yes. Without true equals against which to test myself, I am...” Tarkin finds himself at a loss for words, and finally ends with a mere shrug. Eleh glances at him, offering a flicker-quick smile, then settles against the railing.

“Is that why Darth Vader requested you here? When we first came to Telos, he was the one overseeing the military occupation. I’m grateful for his efforts, but did he truly think you were the only man capable of ‘taking care’ of Telos?”

“Vader could have addressed the situation of Telos in a number of ways. He believed I had the expertise in administrative matters that he lacked. It is not weakness to seek support, provided that support is trustworthy.”

“Did you ask him to have me appointed as governor?” Eleh asks more bluntly, and Tarkin is caught somewhat by surprise. Eleh has never been the most *tactful* of his crew members, but he could laugh aloud at her assumption.

“Really, Eleh. You think I would engage in that kind of petty nepotism?”

“You and Vader left in a shuttle for an hour. By the time you came back, you were declaring me governor, having me pack my things, and Vader was handing over command of military operations to *me*. With all due respect, Governor Tarkin, I had barely managed crew supplies up to that point—why on earth would Vader nominate me as governor unless you were—”

“Maybe Vader simply recognized in you the same qualities I did.” Tarkin interrupts, nodding to her.

“Has he been proven wrong?”

“You aren’t answering my question.”

“No. I can assure you of this, Planetary Governor Kinna Eleh: I did not recommend you as a candidate to Darth Vader. He informed me of his decision on short notice while we were shuttling back, and commanded me to return to the Seswenna sector as soon as feasibly possible. He offered no justification for his choice, and personally, I saw no reason to request any. You were, and are, loyal to the Emperor.

“Other moffs might have accused me of playing favorites, or the Emperor of favoring my chosen crew members for promotion, but the fact that you were chosen to accompany me to Telos in the first place was a testament to your ability. Vader knew that. He knows my methods, my preferences, my values in assessing those under my command. So no, I did not say the words, ‘Please make Eleh governor of Telos and get her out of my ship’. But I didn’t have to. Vader was in charge of the situation on Telos until it became untenable for him to remain. I had my own duties. You were a reasonable—and have proven a sustainable—replacement.”

Eleh watches quietly, her eyes betraying her intense interest. Finally, as Tarkin lapses back into silence, Eleh offers a mild shrug. “Sounds like Vader knows you pretty well.”

“Vader is a formidable opponent, but only to those who truly oppose him. Take note of how he treats the other moffs and admirals, if you ever get the chance to attend a meeting. He knows his own ability and makes no attempt to hide it. We can recognize that in each other.”

“You always warned me to holster my weapon until it was prudent to use it.”

“Yes, well, you are a planetary governor, Eleh, not the Emperor’s right hand. Vader has just a bit more freedom than you in making grand displays of power. I’ve also said that a preemptive show of power can save both time and energy in a tedious campaign; Vader simply chooses to cut off insurrection at its source when he encounters it.”

Eleh simply grins in reply, then stands straight again to stretch her shoulders. “Thank you for coming tonight, Governor Tarkin. It was truly an honor to have you accept the invitation.”

“I’m glad I could be of service.” Tarkin says honestly, following as Eleh begins to approach the groups of other partygoers. He is not in the habit of giving advice, or providing reassurance, but Eleh has apparently found what she needed. Whether it had anything to do with Tarkin’s actual words, or merely his presence, he cannot tell—but it is gratifying all the same.

“I hope Vader knows how lucky he is to have found an equal in you.” Eleh says, turning back briefly to meet Tarkin’s eyes. Tarkin pauses in surprise, unable to form a proper response, and as he begins to furrow his brows in an abortive reprimand, Eleh ducks into another group of visitors, greeting them with the ease of a young politician. Tarkin can do little but shake his head, dodging the other partygoers to escape out onto the Telosian streets where his trooper escort awaits.

Time passes slowly in an Empire encumbered by the demands of so many different groups and species. Life on the *Executrix*, distanced from the planetary movements of the galaxy’s more ordinary citizens, has given Tarkin a degree of separation from ‘normality’. He hasn’t taken a marriage partner, nor chosen to adopt or request children. Yet Vader has sought him out. Sheev Palpatine, the man they call ‘Emperor’, has given Tarkin the edge necessary to succeed in galactic politics. And now Kinna Eleh rules Telos on behalf of the Empire, proving that Tarkin’s administrative methods—“philosophy”, at a stretch—aren’t only for Tarkin alone. The other moffs could have reason to complain about nepotism, or collusion, or even some grand conspiracy to aid

Tarkin. But Tarkin knows better.

The people he has drawn into his network are there by choice. And though it might have taken him time to recognize their value, he will not allow them to leave easily. It can get lonely as Grand Moff of the Empire. But since his title has brought him to Palpatine, and Eleh, and *Vader*...

No, Tarkin can hardly find a reason to complain.

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While in hyperspace, the *Executor* enters a kind of soporific lull that forms the only time the huge ship is truly quiet. In real space, there is constantly a changing of shifts, the reporting of security updates and monitoring stations, and the movement of crew and garrisons to fill the halls with the stamping of booted feet. When the ship jumps to hyperspace, however, these normal movements are put on hold, and it is only the engineers that are left to monitor their stations for any aberrations in the coils that pull them through the blue-hued dimension. Stormtrooper Commander TK-6038 usually takes this opportunity to relax slightly in his post, especially since Vader tends to spend hyperspace in his personal quarters, and so it is that TK-6038 is just considering if he can lean back against the wall to catch a moment or two of sleep when the door beside him whooshes open to allow Vader to stride forward with his usual speed.

Startled, TK-6038 scrambles to attention, following behind Vader to provide escort as Vader ascends the decks between the barracks and the bridge. Though it is rarely TK-6038's place to question his commanding officer, Vader's movement and sudden appearance indicates something of concern or urgency. And so, with the security of the ship in mind, TK-6038 clears his throat, catching up to Vader to make himself heard.

"My lord, the ship is still in hyperspace—should I inform the pilots to pull us out early?"

"No, Commander."

"Then is there some other update I should pass along? I can prepare a larger escort, if necessary—"

"That is unnecessary." Despite Vader's curtness, he does slow his pace slightly to let TK-6038 relax, the two men ascending the decks slowly until they finally reach the bridge proper. The staff there are just as surprised to see Vader as 6038 evidently was, and he smirks under his helmet to see the officers jerk to attention.

"Lord Vader—"

"At ease, Lieutenant. Maintain hyperspace direction and keep the ship on standby until we revert to real space."

The lieutenant in question is left behind as Vader moves to the very front of the bridge, and 6038 is the only one in earshot as Vader assumes his preferred position above the pit crew.

"My lord, is everything...acceptable? It isn't usual for you to patrol the ship while in hyperspace."

"Your attention does you credit, Commander. Normally I would be in my meditation chamber, but meditation has proved...less useful than usual."

6038 maintains a respectful silence, though the revelation is somewhat unusual. He doesn't know the details of Darth Vader's "meditation". It's unlikely that anyone beside Vader truly knows what happens inside the obsidian orb perched in Vader's quarters. Yet 6038 knows that something is *off*, if only in Vader's mind.

6038 can't pretend to be an expert on what it is Vader thinks. But 6038 has been a commander of men for several years—his entire adult life, in fact. And he knows that when a man is distracted, or distraught, it stretches him thin. The minor irritations of a personal squabble can push a man to the edge more thoroughly than the stresses of battle.

“Does it have anything to do with Governor Tarkin's visit recently?”

Vader looks to 6038 with something approximating alarm, and 6038 resists the urge to back away. If anything, Vader's response has only confirmed that 6038's hunch is correct.

“Governor Tarkin's visit was an unofficial visit to accompany me on an undocumented excursion.”

“Which is exactly why you might not have reason to explain it in a report.” 6038 nods. “When I file a report, it helps to clarify events. If it was a battle, I can categorize patterns, visualize responses. Even the deaths of my men—I can give those their proper place. I just wonder if you might find it useful for this instance.”

“There is nothing that needs categorizing.” Vader responds quickly, turning back to the bay windows. TK-6038 nods again to himself, tapping a finger against the grip of his blaster, then tries a different tack.

“If it makes a difference, I appreciate when Governor Tarkin accepts your requests to visit us here on the *Executor*. It makes the men feel more comfortable sometimes to be acknowledged by another Imperial officer.”

“The men?” Vader considers this for a moment, then accepts it with a nod. “I assume they know of Governor Tarkin's service record.”

“Inspirational, if I may say so, sir.” 6038 notes. “And to be acknowledged by the Emperor as he has been—I think it's fair to call him a role model for some of our younger recruits.”

“Tarkin is incredibly capable. It's only a pity his abilities have been wasted in politics these past few years.”

“Not everyone can serve the Empire on the front lines as we do, sir.” 6038 bows his head deferentially, but watches Vader closely as the Dark Lord considers the formidable Grand Moff. 6038 hasn't had to exaggerate much—he does like seeing Tarkin come to the *Executor*, and there is much to admire in the man's service record. But 6038 also appreciates the way Vader and Tarkin confer on Imperial matters: as the two highest ranks in the Empire (at least beneath the Emperor himself), their discussions are always grand in scope, and 6038 is amazed by their ability to navigate the grandiose while referencing incredibly specific details. It's not work that 6038 himself is suited for, which makes Tarkin's ability that much more impressive.

“Administrative work is...distracting. A necessary distraction.”

“If it's necessary, I wouldn't call it a distraction.” 6038 regrets his flippancy, but continues on regardless. “Does Governor Tarkin feel the same way?”

“Tarkin knows he is suited to things greater than bureaucracy. His skills in combat and tactics are ruthlessly efficient.”

The tone of Vader's praise is new to 6038's ears, and he studies Vader in interest before speaking. “Do you admire him?”

As expected, Vader's responsive glare is immediate, and this time 6038 does take a step back under

the pressure of Vader's gaze. However, the usual pressure of Vader's attention isn't followed by the constriction of the Force around 6038's throat, and Vader finally looks away to let 6038 recover.

"Yes. I do admire him. He's a man who has proven his utility to the Empire. He wields power like a scalpel, carving out that which is unnecessary or ineffective. He complements our efforts here as effortlessly as the dragon's jaw complements its talons. Of course I admire him."

6038 nods to himself, surprised by Vader's eloquence. The helmeted Sith rarely has reason to speak more than a few words in an order—this kind of talkativeness is new.

"Has he done anything to change that admiration? On your mission, for example—"

"It was an undocumented excursion."

"Excursion. Yes. I don't know Governor Tarkin as well as you do, sir, but did something change?"

"No. Governor Tarkin behaved just as he always has." Vader doesn't look to 6038 this time, and 6038 finds himself slightly relieved.

"Then there shouldn't be reason for concern. Governor Tarkin is as resolute and effective as you believed him to be. There is no fault in learning that someone's character is false, but it should come as a great benefit to learn that they're exactly who they seem to be."

Vader nods slowly, clasping his hands behind his back. "I forget you have your own experience in such matters, Commander. Even in military matters, there is the handling of crew and soldiers that requires a certain dexterity."

"I only do my best, sir, as I was commissioned." 6038 bows his head all the same at the praise, exhaling a held breath.

"Perhaps I surprised myself, then." Vader says, apparently forgetting 6038's presence altogether. 6038 keeps quiet, watching Vader as the streaks of hyperspace reflect off both their helmets. "Tarkin has a single point which he claims defines him. I have merely a planet, a place. The Emperor has done more to define me than have the actions of a confused young Jedi."

"We are a product of many things, Lord Vader." 6038 cannot help himself—though he knows he oversteps his bounds. "Just because Governor Tarkin may claim a single defining point does not mean it is the only thing that shapes him. And it doesn't mean you can learn everything about Governor Tarkin from that single point. People are a multitude of experiences spread out on the timeline of their lives. Trying to find meaning in a single experience is like trying to understand an entire battle from the position of a single foot soldier."

Vader is silent for a long moment, long enough for the respirator to kick in with surprising volume in the nearly-silent bridge. Finally, Vader turns back to walk along the length of the bridge, with 6038 rushing to fall into step behind him. As they leave the bridge, Vader makes no motion to stop, but instead ushers 6038 to follow. "Stay close, Commander. I will be interested to see how this ship feels when in the lull of hyperspace. Inform me when we are preparing to revert."

"Of course, Lord Vader." Opening his communicator band to the bridge, 6038 keeps himself on full alert, dogging Vader's heels as they rise through the decks. Though this is slightly more exhausting than 6038 would usually expect in a hyperspace trip, he finds that the physical exhaustion isn't so bad. Watching Vader make his rounds of the decks, probing weaknesses and admiring strengths, is inspirational in its own way.

And knowing that Vader's vision is clear, or at least clearer than it had been, is a great boon to 6038.

He may not be a grand leader, or a ruler of the Empire, but he has no need to be. He is a faithful soldier, assisting his commanding officer in any area required of him.

Just because Vader's musings were informal, non-Imperial business doesn't make them any less important.

Fractures/Repairs

In the darkness of space, sound is an afterthought. The wind rustling, the hum of insects, the calls of birds—these are all lost when one takes a position on a Star Destroyer. Every crew member, from the lowest stormtrooper to the highest commander, faces the silence of the void at one point or another, replacing the stability of a planet with the movement of a ship and the beeps and hums of electronic maintenance.

In the early days, Tarkin knows, they had to screen crew members more carefully. Taking provincial farm boys and sticking them in starships backfired when captains lost their heads after six months. His introduction to starship life had been gentler, since they operated out of planetary bases, but the life of the *Executrix* affords no such luxuries. He is not so picky as to evaluate every single one of his captains on board, but he knows that there is always a risk. He can only hope that damages are contained and limited, the system of hierarchy cauterizing wounds before infection can spread.

Standing in front of the bridge deck windows tends to make him contemplative, especially when the ship is running smoothly. Tarkin nods to himself as he considers the items on his docket, the roster of maintenance and observation required of a sector overseer, and turns back to mention a note to his escort when a sudden thud makes the deck shudder, and the lights flick from white to red in an instant.

Tarkin stumbles, but does not fall (small mercies, Wilhuff, small mercies) and turns back to support himself on the hull beneath the windows, scanning the viewports for any signs of disturbance. As he straightens, the alarm klaxons begin to scream out, filling the bridge with added panic. Tarkin does not shout, or scream, or look to his officers for answers. He simply waits, drawing himself up to his full height, and only looks back when a deck officer finally makes the call.

“A single ship just reverted from hyperspace, Governor! Mid-size, probably a shipping class—”

“Hyperspace reversion doesn’t affect other ships.” Tarkin cuts in, watching the windows to see if the other ship will rise above the bow of the Star Destroyer. With no visual indication of the ship, Tarkin furrows his brow and listens for further updates.

“They reverted with a window of only a few kilometers, Governor, outside of a normal lane.” The deck officer stands, catching the attention of Tarkin’s adjutant before the lieutenant runs forward.

“There’s reason to assume this is a hostile attack, Governor.”

“A single, tiny ship, against an Imperial Star Destroyer?” Tarkin does not keep the derision from his voice, and turns back to watch his crew watch their monitors. “Have the tractor beams prepare for extraction. Has the ship moved?”

“She’s moving quickly, sir, tracing under our bow.” Another officer calls. “She’s firing potshots, but nothing with enough firepower to hurt the shields.”

“Keep track of her.” Tarkin processes the risks of this maneuver, glancing again at the bay windows, then nods sharply to his adjutant. “Lieutenant Anarak. Would you recommend a course of action?”

The lieutenant jerks to attention almost by reflex, then seems to understand the full import of Tarkin’s question. “Sir?”

“You’ve taken basic tactics, I hope?” Tarkin raises a hand, gesturing for Anarak to continue. “Think tactically.”

“With a ship of this size, sir—” The man swallows compulsively, but glances at the deck pit and seems to gather resolve. “If they are deliberately provoking us, they have nothing to gain and everything to lose. Is it possible that they mistook us for something else? Smugglers often use asteroids to conceal their reversion spots—maybe they assumed they reverted too closely and panicked.”

“Deck Officer Morrel. What is the status of the ship?”

A dark-haired woman in the pit glances up, meeting Tarkin’s eyes before looking to his lieutenant. “They’re continuing to fire, sir.”

“That doesn’t sound like a group of smugglers panicking.” Tarkin notes, walking back down the deck to have Anarak follow. “They’re drawing our attention.”

“But—they can’t think we’d *follow*, can they? They’re nothing more than a mid-size freighter, there’s nothing of value.”

“They don’t know how we’ll respond. It’s possible that other moffs would pursue.” Tarkin pauses as they reach the tactical display at the rear of the bridge, and calls up a report of the *Executrix*’s ship roster. “If they want us to follow, perhaps we should accept the invitation.”

“You want us to pursue?” Anarak’s shock is evident, but he schools his features into a resolved acceptance as he watches Tarkin read. “This is nothing more than a minor distraction.”

“Minor distractions may provide the most useful information. And, if left unchecked, minor concerns quickly develop into larger ones.” Tarkin nods, confirming his data before closing the data screen. “Prepare the *Executrix* for pursuit. Have the Fifth TIE Squadron suit up and prepare for battle, but refrain from deploying. They may make another hyperspace jump.”

“Yes, sir.” Anarak hurries to relay the orders, even as the alarm klaxons are finally silenced and the bridge returns to a tense silence. From the pit, another officer climbs to the deck level and salutes to Tarkin, watching as the other pit crew send out assignments.

“Governor Tarkin, this is likely a trap.”

“Any hunter can set a trap. Few hunters know how to respond when an animal steps into their trap willingly.” Tarkin says. He can see the confusion on the deck officer’s face, but there is no further argument, and the *Executrix* begins to make a sweeping turn as the smaller freighter darts out from beneath her.

Tarkin was never a particularly good pilot, nor did he enjoy the thrill of piloting alone. As such, he does not miss the rush of the chase, muted as it is with the *Executrix*’s size. The Star Destroyer is closer to a force of nature than a ship, compared to their quarry, and though it takes them longer to come up to speed, the *Executrix* proves capable of tracking and pursuing the freighter deeper into the system as it makes perfunctory attempts at evasion.

“Sir. We’re approaching a planet.”

Tarkin curls his lip in distaste, glancing again to the tactical readouts before nodding to the officer. “Prepare to enter orbit.”

“If we need to undertake an on-ground operation, perhaps it’s wise to prepare—”

“We will not engage them on-ground until they force our hand. Our place is here, above the planet.” Tarkin nods, narrowing his eyes as he glances again at the readout. “There’s other Imperial ships in

the system—why would they bring us here?”

“They may not know of the other Imperials. Sir.” Anarak is back, his cap slightly askew as he returns to Tarkin’s side. Tarkin nods disinterestedly, bringing a hand to his chin as the freighter makes her approach to the planet and dives into its atmosphere.

“Lieutenant, what is one of the major failings, in your view, of the current class of Star Destroyers?”

“The failing?” Anarak blinks, but to Tarkin’s relief, he does not hesitate. “We lack any serious contingent of space-faring corvettes, sir. Our only combat ships are the TIE fighters, and they lack the firepower—”

“Good.” Tarkin cuts him off sharply, pointing to the planet. “So why bring us here if we cannot pursue by ship?”

“They might not know—”

“Don’t be a *fool*, Lieutenant. *Think*.” Tarkin’s harshness is born of annoyance at his own stupidity, at the solution that seems so close. “They brought us to the planet.”

“They wanted us to follow, but they’re familiar enough with the actions of Star Destroyers and their captains to predict our movements.” With surprising speed, Anarak turns to face the deck pit, pacing along one edge. “Pull us out of orbit!”

“Sir—” The nearest officer hesitates, looking to Tarkin questioningly. Tarkin curses himself for the delay and nods quickly, copying Anarak’s turn to face the rest of the crew.

“Do as he says, Captain. Bring us back up and out, give us distance—”

Even as he speaks, a heavier thud rocks the ship, and Tarkin falls to his knees as the bridge lights flicker. The klaxons resume, bringing a new urgency to the flurry of the deck pit, and Tarkin balls a fist in irritation as Anarak hurries to his side.

“Sir, I don’t have the report yet, but I think they’ve—”

“They’ve trained an ion cannon on our position.” Tarkin grunts, getting to his feet again. After all his preparation—

“They planned to come out close enough to us to pull us to the planet, and the ion cannon must’ve been warmed already—”

“Put it in your report, Lieutenant.” Tarkin draws in a breath through his teeth, glancing to the pit. “Damages?”

“The starboard third bay was hit—a full roster isn’t certain, but much of the squadron in the hangar was lost.”

“Ship capacity?”

“Our engines are still at full capacity, but another hit would seriously threaten us. Shields are recovering.”

“They won’t be fast enough.” Tarkin bites his tongue, walking back to the tactical display to pull up a map of their surroundings. The ship is emerging from orbit, and they’ve changed position enough to require any cannon on the ground to have to reorient, but the range on the cannon is long enough

to pose a significant threat. “Anarak. Open channels to the other Imperial ships in the system, inform them of our situation. Preparation of this kind requires significant planning.”

“Right away, sir.” Anarak responds quickly, disappearing into the communication module outside of the bridge, and Tarkin shakes his head in dismay as another impact makes the bridge shudder.

The *Executrix* will survive, he has no doubt of that. But panic is unbecoming of a Grand Moff of the Empire, or even simple mistakes.

He will have to crush this ion cannon and its wielder, and remind them that the Empire is not something to be toyed with.

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Tarkin is not in the main bridge, but has taken up a position in the forward observation decks, when the communication comes through. He has dismissed Anarak (the man will earn his praise later, but Tarkin cannot afford the mental energy for compliments just now) and stands alone in the darkened deck, watching the repair crews cluster around the hole in the hull of his ship.

He does not look at the information that comes through with the hologram, but calls it up distractedly, his eyes on the damage being repaired. A hum of static comes through, then the image resolves and the audio clears.

“Governor Tarkin.”

“Darth Vader.” Tarkin jumps in surprise, turning to grab at the display readout and study the miniature figure more closely. “I didn’t realize the *Executor* was in the system.”

“Our presence was intended to be unobtrusive.” Vader avoids the greater issue—that Tarkin had not been informed of Vader’s presence in his sector—but Tarkin is not concerned about that at the moment. His mind is too full, too crowded, and now *Vader* is here.

Vader’s probably already seen the damage reports. If Anarak’s as efficient as always, an official report is nearly complete, and then Tarkin will have to make an explanation for himself.

“We followed a hostile ship.” Tarkin restrains the urge to babble, to over-explain, but the temptation is near. “We were hit with an ion cannon, which required us to fall back.”

“As expected.” Vader nods, bringing a hand to his helmeted chin, and Tarkin stares at him in some irritation.

“As ‘expected’? You were aware of the presence of hostile groups on the planet?”

“The *Executor* came to this system on the reports of a system spy. The motive of these insurrectionists is unclear, but their attempt to defy Imperial authority has been made evident.”

“And I wasn’t informed?” Tarkin does not admire possessiveness in others, and hates to see it in himself, but his anger overwhelms the usually strict expectations he sets for his personal conduct. “You had Imperial informants in place and I wasn’t made aware?”

“Our activities were intended to be discreet.” Vader nods, unapologetic.

“If I had been informed, I wouldn’t have engaged in pursuit! My ship wouldn’t be running at partial capacity!”

“That is not our concern now. The fact is that they have been alerted to our presence, and may well be preparing an evacuation. We cannot allow them to escape.”

“You think these are rebels.”

“I think this is a case of resistance. They may not be committed to full rebellion yet.” Vader brings his hand into a fist, standing tall. “I will ensure that they never do.”

Tarkin nods, his head spinning. “The *Executrix* is at your disposal, of course, but another attempt to hit the cannon will certainly do more damage to us than to the cannon.”

“Hitting the cannon from orbit will be fruitless. I have already prepared my squadrons for an on-ground assault.”

“Without orbital support?”

“Governor, you have already made your case for why orbital attack would be pointless. Must I make your own arguments back to you?” Vader’s question maintains its even tone, and most moffs would already be gathering their apologies, but Tarkin has no such concerns. He studies the blue figure for a moment longer, bowing his head in deference, then reaches forward to the cutoff switch.

“Send us the plan of attack and I will ensure that my squadrons are prepared.” Without even a formal sign-off, Tarkin flicks off the transmitter, waiting for the deck to return to silence and his heartbeat to settle.

For any other moff to see his momentary weakness would be one thing. Tarkin could recover in due time, and stamp out this problem with nothing more than a conclusion report. This is a Seswenna sector problem—it is his duty to solve it. But Vader’s presence complicates things, for more than one reason, and Tarkin can feel the pressure of a headache beginning at the base of his skull.

He can only hope that this will be over quickly. Once he regains control of the situation, things will resolve.

They have to.

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Vader has given the pilots a course for the opposite side of the planet, a course which makes sense after Tarkin has time to consider it. The two Star Destroyers take complementary paths, their twin wedges facing in opposite directions, and the Lambda shuttles take a contingent of officers and pilots down to the planet’s surface. Tarkin remains hands-off for the majority of the shuttling—the arrangement of TIE squadrons is simple enough, especially for a man like Vader—and so it isn’t until he reaches the mobile command center that he begins to seriously consider the plan of attack.

“Vader believes they won’t see us coming.” He muses, partially to himself. Anarak has accompanied him on this venture and glances up at the sound of Tarkin’s voice, switching off his datapad.

“I don’t think that’s the presumption. They know we’re here. Vader’s simply having to work around the ion cannon.”

“Otherwise orbital bombardment would be successful.” Tarkin nods, watching as the shuttle speeds over the water separating them from the continent. The shuttle itself has taken a lower altitude than the TIE squadrons, mainly because the value of the TIEs will be their ability to drop down and strike quickly, but for now, the sky is simply a collage of shapes and colors. “Orbital bombardment would be effective, at least.”

“Bombardment would leave us with no prisoners.” Vader says, surprising Tarkin for the second time as he enters the forward deck. Anarak tenses, watching the Sith Lord, and Tarkin finally motions him away to let Vader approach.

“You want prisoners from this excursion.”

“I came here on the reports of individuals. I need more individuals to determine if these threads run deeper.”

Tarkin nods slowly, his mind clearing. The time it took to shuttle to the planet’s surface certainly helped, but the pressure of the upcoming battle is not inconsequential. “You intend to land and enter with the troops, then.”

“Yes. The TIEs will form an effective distraction.”

“Will you need me here?” Tarkin asks, glancing behind him at the tactical desks. “You’ve coordinated operations like this before. It should be routine.”

“You know your captains better than I do. I want you here to relay my orders to them.” Vader nods. “I need someone outside the battle to monitor our status. We will not be caught unawares.”

“Yes. Of course.” Tarkin exhales slowly, drawing himself up. “Well. If it’s all the same to you, I’ll take up my position. I have no doubt you’ll accomplish great things today.”

“Your confidence is reassuring, Governor.” Vader stands aside as Tarkin walks back to the readouts and displays, the simulated operation plans playing and replaying on the screens. As the shuttle reaches land, then bumps over an updraft, Vader descends to the belly of the ship and takes his position with his stormtroopers, clearing his mind in anticipation of the battle ahead.

From Tarkin’s point of view, the initial surge is promising. The TIEs rain down like insects, nipping and darting around a huge industrial complex. Bombers clear paths through masses of metal and machinery, and Tarkin watches as people begin to scatter in panic. Vader was right—many of the officers are Tarkin’s own, and he is able to communicate his orders more clearly in their familiar shorthand. Stormtrooper divisions rush forth from shuttle bays, and Tarkin tries not to seem too interested in the movements of a red flash of light, but it is hard to ignore the movement of Darth Vader. Men and women scream in silence on the display screens, and Tarkin listens as Vader orders the divisions in a canvassing move across the facility.

Early reports had confirmed the worst: this group of rebels, or “resistance”, had holed up in an old speeder plant, giving them a great wealth of material and parts to cobble together weapons. The ion cannon sits like a Sarlacc in the center of the facility, and Vader must fight his way towards it. The TIEs do what they can, but a hardy shield protects the cannon from most bombardments, and occasionally a skilled sniper will take down a TIE to plunge it into the ground. The rate of attrition is good, for an Imperial exercise, and Tarkin watches the feeds from the helmets of various troopers as the honeycombed facility is contained and corralled towards the center.

Suddenly, movement is visible around the barrel of the cannon, and Tarkin watches TIEs diving in for closer looks. The shield isn’t weakening, but the movement is concerning, and Tarkin opens the comms to have the TIE pilots pull back in the instant before the pulse goes out.

It is rare for hostiles to use electromagnetic pulses, rather than raw firepower, but reconfiguring the ion cannon has a devastating effect on its immediate surroundings. The TIEs begin to drop instantly, their lights and engines winking out, and Tarkin tries to call up a response as his own shuttle wavers dangerously in the air. Some TIEs did escape the radius quickly enough, and manage to race away

from the facility to regroup, but Tarkin is more concerned with the wreckage plunging into the ground, littering the facility with flaming ships and pilots burning in their cockpits.

The pulse only knocks out comms for a few seconds, and Tarkin directs Anarak to try and recover the TIEs available as Tarkin himself works to reestablish contact with the ground forces. The stormtroopers continue to move with direction and purpose, a testament to Vader's leadership, and Vader finally reports back to indicate his capture of a prominent leader of this resistance stronghold. Somewhat mollified, Tarkin begins to relax, turning to Anarak to determine the status of their TIEs when the lieutenant's face pales.

"They're all dead, aren't they, sir."

"Lieutenant?"

"The pilots. We sent six whole squadrons in there and they're all *dead*."

"Not all of them. Inform our remaining TIEs to hold back with the shuttles and prepare to return to their Star Destroyers. Lord Vader will want to—"

"They're still screaming on the comms." Anarak reaches up, plucking out his in-ear communicator to hold it carefully in his hand. "Sir?"

Tarkin watches Anarak closely, deciding reluctantly that discretion is the better part of valor. "Go to the forward decks and watch the ground troops. Once Vader gives the go-ahead, the bombers can make a second run."

Anarak nods mutely, wandering in a haze to the larger viewports at the front of the ship, and Tarkin furrows his brow in concentration before returning his attention to Vader's movements.

Vader's personal battalion has a respectable contingent of prisoners, though one marches at the front without a hint of resignation. Tarkin knows that Vader is skilled at interrogations, aided by the strategies of the Imperial interrogation units but also by his own abilities, and Tarkin cannot help a grim smile at the fate that awaits this abortive leader.

The shuttle pilots are waiting for the ground troops to return, and their movement is coordinated more finely than a dancer's ballet. As the shuttles rise, the last remaining bombers straggle forward, and Vader gives the command for a final bombardment run now that the shield has finally fallen. With the facility in flames, the shuttles and TIEs group up and prepare to return to the Star Destroyers, allowing the commanders and captains to finally relax as Tarkin gives the order to stand down.

The front viewports are shuttered as the ship makes its preparations to leave the atmosphere, and Tarkin watches while the displays and readouts are reconfigured into battle reports. This time, Vader's entrance is not nearly as surprising, and Tarkin takes his place beside Vader at the head of the tactical display table as the command center staff turn their attention to the Governor.

"Despite everything that has happened, this was a success." Tarkin begins. "Every Imperial officer acted to their fullest capacity in the service of the Empire, and in full coordination with their fellow officers. This is not the end of our work here—if Lord Vader's prisoners are any indication, there is still resistance to Imperial rule—but our actions here will stifle further rebellion and open the path towards reconciliation with the Empire. This was a success, ladies and gentlemen. I congratulate you."

At the end of the group, farthest from Tarkin, a strange noise draws the attention of the group, and Tarkin watches as Lieutenant Anarak takes a shaky step forward.

“They *died*, Governor Tarkin, we lost entire squadrons, and—” It is difficult for Anarak to speak, his breaths coming short and fast as he stares at the tactical table. “They didn’t—in the sims, you don’t hear them screaming, because the impact of plasma means that the engines implode instantly, but there wasn’t plasma here, Governor, it was just—they just *fell*, and their own ships fell apart around them, and—”

The other officers are afraid to move, petrified by Anarak’s deviation from Imperial norms, and it isn’t until the lieutenant lets out a stifled cry and backs out of the room at full tilt that Tarkin nods a confirmation. “Lieutenant Atien, please find and restrain my adjutant. He won’t have far to run on a ship this size, but I don’t want him to cause any more damage.” Tarkin shakes his head, watching the other officers look at each other in trepidation as the second lieutenant disappears into the hallways of the shuttle.

The surprised silence is broken when Vader dismisses the meeting, and Tarkin moves away from the table to give the officers time to process. Vader follows behind, coming to stand beside Tarkin as they reach the shuttered windows, and Tarkin folds his arms in contemplation.

“I agree with your assessment, Governor Tarkin. This was a success.”

Tarkin merely nods, waving away Vader’s praise nonchalantly. The shuttle vibrates slightly as it speeds into the upper layers of the atmosphere, and Tarkin cannot think of anything appropriate to say as they punch through to empty space.

“I assure you, Governor Tarkin, you are the commanding officer of this excursion. You are the moff of this sector. All reports from my interrogations will be given over to your staff.”

Tarkin nods again, clenching his hand to feel the tension there. He knows now he should say *something*, even just an acknowledgement of Vader’s deference. There are few men—probably no other men in the Empire—to whom Vader would show this consideration. But Tarkin says nothing.

Fortunately, Vader does not press the issue, and their return to the Star Destroyers is mostly quiet. Vader finally leaves to escort his prisoners to their holding cells, and on impulse, Tarkin disembarks onto the *Executor* instead of waiting for an escort back to the *Executrix*. He cannot explain himself entirely—he has felt this disassociation in various measures before, though never so close on the heels of a battle—but he feels that the *Executor* is the place to be right now. None of the officers question his presence here, and Tarkin maneuvers the ship as easily as his own. The layout is practically the same as the *Executrix*, and finding the bridge is easy enough. Here, however, he does not have the same responsibilities as he would on his own ship. He is lost, untethered. Still, the atmosphere of a Star Destroyer is as natural to Tarkin as any other, and he is content to stand in a corner and simply watch the activity of the bridge.

“Do you have a plan for your unruly lieutenant?” Vader’s voice comes from beside him, and out of all these times, Tarkin is least surprised now. He considers the question and offers a small shrug, watching a captain rush across the deck to update a report.

“He hasn’t displayed any tendencies like this before. This was an unusual exercise. I cannot fault him for being *human*. If he responds well in a day or two, I won’t consider it a mark on his record.”

“His pain, at least, is real.” Vader has lowered his voice slightly, and Tarkin curses the shiver that runs down his spine. Now is *not* the time to fixate on Vader’s voice.

“Acknowledging the pain is vital. But if it breaks him, then...” Tarkin sighs. “It would be a waste of training, at the least.”

“Your consideration does you credit.” Vader pauses, then turns to face Tarkin more fully. “You are allowed to acknowledge your own pain as well, Governor.”

“I’ve seen battle before. There isn’t pain for me.”

“You may not have felt pain, or trepidation, about this battle. But your anguish was evident from the first communication we had. You were on the defensive, running from an ill-advised pursuit. This is not a *fault*, Governor Tarkin, and my presence here was not an admonition of your abilities. You are allowed to fail.”

“*No.*” Tarkin surprises himself with the vehemence of his statement, and he takes a breath before continuing. “If the Empire is predicated on strength, then failure is a sign of my weakness.”

“Consider this, then: if you had not engaged in pursuit, we wouldn’t have known about the ion cannon. The *Executrix* will be repaired, and restored to full capacity. I have prisoners in custody that will lead us to further cells of resistance. Accept your own statements of success, Governor, and learn from this instance.”

Tarkin is silent, staring at the polished floor of the bridge. Finally, he straightens his shoulders and turns, mapping the Star Destroyer in his head. “I should find a shuttle back to the *Executrix*. The repair crews will be moving on to their next stages, and they’ll need to confirm our repair location.”

“No.” Vader’s tone is firm, but not commanding, and Tarkin hesitates despite himself.

“Lord Vader.”

“Come with me.” Vader moves past Tarkin, moving at a speed that presumes Tarkin’s accompaniment, and Tarkin does his best to keep up as they exit the bridge. Officers and captains are still busy confirming details, running between communications arrays and observation decks, but Vader is impervious to this hustle and bustle. Tarkin can feel his head swimming with activity, much like the ship is, but Vader’s purpose is enough to compel him onwards despite the pull of his other duties.

“We succeeded here because of your presence. My own actions were foolhardy, ill-advised.” Tarkin tries to interject, led around corners and down through the decks at Vader’s heel. Vader does not respond, but brings Tarkin to a simple door set into the wall and keys the code to have it open, Tarkin entering behind Vader before stopping short.

He’d been blind, all the way down here. Vader hasn’t taken him up to an observation deck, or even an auxiliary bridge, but *down*, to the barracks. He’s wandered into Vader’s private quarters, for the second time ever, and now—

Vader is wrestling with his helmet, nearly ignoring the clasps in his efforts to remove it. Though the mouthpiece remains in place, Tarkin is left breathless as Vader turns back to meet Tarkin’s eyes, the light blue a shocking burst of color against the man’s pale skin. Stuck by the door, Tarkin feels himself frozen in place, and belatedly thinks of his officers reacting to Anarak’s outburst.

“Dwelling on your shortcomings helps no one, Governor Tarkin.” With the removal of the helmet, Vader’s entreaties are more compelling, and Tarkin forces himself to focus on the content of this visit.

“Lord Vader, ignoring my shortcomings is merely a presumption of arrogance.” Tarkin feels himself hedging, avoiding the reality and *closeness* of Vader in the flesh, and as Vader steps closer, Tarkin takes a step back.

As Vader reaches forward, his respirator begins to echo with an odd noise, and it takes Tarkin a moment to realize that Vader is *laughing* at him.

“You like to use big words when you’re nervous.” Vader notes, cupping Tarkin’s head with both hands. Tarkin pushes away his instinctive response, the flare and flush of attraction only a distraction in this instance, and instead tries to concentrate his irritation and anger into a single facial expression.

“I should be focusing on the areas in which I failed, so that I might perform more effectively in future.”

“Have I not made it clear, Governor Tarkin, that my concern right now is not with your performance in a military sense?” The Sith Lord reaches up to pull down his mouthpiece, allowing Tarkin to see the light smile he adopts in its place, and Tarkin finally gives in to the pull tugging at every part of him.

“Stop calling me ‘Governor Tarkin’.” He frames the phrase as a complaint, grabbing at Vader’s arms to clench the fabric in his hands. As Vader tilts Tarkin’s chin further up, Tarkin rises onto the balls of his feet to follow the movement, closing his eyes to savor the sensation.

“Wilhuff, then.” Without the respirator, Vader’s voice is quiet and soft, and Tarkin just about resists the urge to sigh aloud by gripping Vader more tightly.

“You have prisoners to interrogate.”

“The prisoners will stay exactly where I left them. I’ve already made my decision here.” Vader emphasizes his words by kissing the ridge of Tarkin’s cheek, one hand still cupping Tarkin’s chin to hold him in place. When Vader reaches Tarkin’s hairline, his hand reaches back to hold the back of Tarkin’s head, and Tarkin braces himself against the wall to press into Vader’s embrace.

With a brief pause to inhale through the respirator, Vader ducks forward to pull Tarkin into a rough kiss, his earlier softness and gentleness scrubbed away in the harshness of this movement. Tarkin lifts himself into the kiss, all thoughts of tactics and strategy and governance and *failure* fading in the strength of Vader’s grip, and as Vader’s hands begin to explore the various seams of Tarkin’s uniform, the governor allows himself to give in to the overwhelming rush in his blood.

Even Grand Moffs must have moments of privacy after a battle. If Tarkin chooses to spend his with Darth Vader...well, the galaxy will hardly be worse off for it.

Diversion

Chapter Summary

This is not an especially happy chapter, and it has more focus on the Sith and the Force than may have been seen in other chapters.

Diversion: a distraction from business, an amusement, recreation, or pastime; the act of turning from one course to another, or separating from a larger mass; military, an attack intended to draw attention or energy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Being in the presence of Darth Sidious is like standing next to a cliff in the darkness. You cannot see it. You cannot hear it moving, for it is essentially lifeless. You cannot feel it, you cannot locate its exact position, nor determine its precise structure. But it is *there*, huge and looming, massive enough to crush you in an instant without ever pausing in its path.

For those without a sensitivity to the Force, Sidious's presence is likely nothing more than trepidation, an undercurrent of fear one would expect to feel in the presence of command. But Darth Vader has never been able to close himself off from the Force as completely as others, and so his time in Sidious's chambers is characterized by this sensation of power, real and tangible and oppressive. Vader has never allowed it to cause fear in him, not even when he first recognized it. But taking orders from Sidious, as petty as it can often feel, is always enforced with the full weight of Sidious's strength.

"You realize the importance of this mission, my apprentice." Sidious breathes sibilantly, his fingers steeped in his lap.

"I understand, my master." Vader has been told to kneel before Sidious, adopting the pose of masters and apprentices from generations past. One knee touches the ground, while his other is propped in front of him, allowing him to rest both hands in Sidious's view.

"Orto Plutonia is a world defined by difficulty, but it stands in opposition to your current definition of 'difficult'." Sidious laughs to himself, leaning back in his throne. (It is a throne, truly. Vader is unsure if he ever calls it such, but no one would deny the nomenclature.) "This is a learning experience for you, Vader. You are the closest of my subordinates, the only being with whom I trust these secrets of the Force. You are the only one who will know the full importance of this mission, and the details of your assignment."

"I have not failed you before, my master." Vader bows his head, damping down the thread of irritation that rises up at Sidious's repeated instructions. It is clear that Sidious expects him to fail sometime, though Vader is unclear as to the impulse that makes Sidious doubt him so. Sidious has been his teacher, his master, his *mentor*, and even now it is only Sidious that holds the secrets of the Force. Vader has no intention of betraying Sidious's trust. But it is clear that his trust is not reciprocated.

"There will be no 'accomplices' on this mission." Sidious hisses, his eyes focused not on Vader but

on some invisible, unseen figure. “No one is to be taken into your confidence, or to be entrusted with sensitive information. You and I are alone in this galaxy, Lord Vader. The moment you forget this, you forget your place.”

“I hear and obey, my master.” Vader can only bow lower, bringing his helmet nearly to his knee. In the silence of Sidious’s declaration, Vader’s respirator echoes to fill the silence, and Sidious seems to bathe in the sound before motioning Vader to stand.

“You’ve been to Orto Plutonia before. Do not assume this visit will be enough to make you familiar with the planet’s tendencies. I would be disappointed were I to learn you had been lost to a mere natural disaster.”

Vader can say little now, brought to the end of his own responses. Still, Sidious expects a response, and so Vader feels the words dragged out of him piece by piece.

“I can assure you, my master, that there will be no failure on this mission. I have always been your faithful servant.”

“Good, good.” Sidious nods, grinning beneath his hood. “Now go. You have preparations to make.”

Vader offers a half-bow, turning to leave the audience chamber, and emerges into the partially-lit hallway outside to glance at the guards standing by. Their helmets cover their faces entirely, much like his own, and Vader can sense the faintest stirring of the Force around them as he passes between them, then continues down the hallway. They are nothing like Sidious, not nearly as forceful or powerful, but Vader knows their purpose. If he *was* to fail, at any point—or even show signs of rebellion—Sidious would have his pick of warriors already trained in lightsaber combat and passive Force abilities, primed to slaughter Vader and take his place.

Vader does not know how he knows this. Sidious has never told him these plans. But it comes at odd moments, these flashes when Vader can sense a greater world swirling around him. It’s as if he can never see the thing fully, if he looks at it head on, but it can only be glimpsed when one *isn’t* looking at it. There are patterns in the movement, directions to the flow, but Vader cannot change them.

As he moves through the Imperial infrastructure on Coruscant, he focuses on the edges of his perception and reels them in, binding them tightly to him. He can sense Sidious whenever Sidious wishes to make himself felt, and Vader knows now that he can only sense Sidious now because the Sith Master has undone the focused Sith sorcery that concealed him from the Jedi for decades. Here, in the very heart of Coruscant, and the Jedi were *blind* to the power lurking only a few kilometers away.

Vader has been told of this sorcery (though he still lacks the information or source material to verify its existence, much less replicate it himself) but it takes him conscious effort to find the limits of his own presence. Meditation in any discipline requires a knowledge of one’s self, but Vader has always defined himself by his presence in the world, by enforcing or imposing or existing in the constraints of others. Sidious gives him the freedom to define himself merely by his own status as a Sith Lord, yet Vader still chafes at these boundaries, uncertain of his own dimensions.

This is probably a reason for the Orto Plutonian expedition, then.

He cannot be certain—he will never be certain, when it comes to Sidious—but it gives him a topic upon which to meditate during the journey.

He does not particularly *like* Sidious’s tests, even when they are explicitly labeled as such. But he has consigned himself to service in Sidious’s name. He has a responsibility, a duty to obey his master.

And he is still—as always—merely an apprentice.

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The transportation to Orto Plutonia is seamless, the transitions between hyperspace and real space mere blips in the sensation of travel. Vader has obeyed Sidious's directive not to take anyone into his confidence, and the *Executor's* officers have prepared Vader's shuttle without any inkling of his final destination. Shuttling to the surface of Orto Plutonia was easy enough, though Vader had to rely upon his own piloting skills to navigate the windstorms of the icy planet, and the final mission was mundane.

Mundane.

Petty.

Meaningless.

Vader cannot stop himself from thinking the rebellious thoughts, even as he watches Sidious's droid burrow into the ice and send out its sonar pings. As per Sidious's request, Vader does not return to the ship or shuttle back to the *Executor* immediately, but remains near the droid's location, waiting for some insight, some flash of inspiration that will reveal to him the purpose of Sidious's mission.

It is tiring, excruciating work. He peels himself apart to find something new, but the lifeless surface of Orto Plutonia is harsh and merciless. It is not heat. Sidious was right about this. Vader has moved past the needs of "comfort", but the chill of the Plutonian storms pierces the heart of his armor, challenging his remaining biological processes. Though he does not eat much anymore, he cuts off the nutrient supply to attempt to feel real hunger again, and in the Plutonian darkness, he reaches out.

No insight comes. Nothing lives. The void produces in him the familiar pain, and the accompanying rage, but he burns those away as quickly as possible. After that, he can feel nothing. Sense nothing. He again catches brief glimpses of something bigger, something just beyond his reach, but the size of it terrifies him. It's *larger* than Sidious, but devoid of his Master's driving hunger.

Just as it seems that this thing, this power, this presence is just about to turn its gaze on him (and likely swallow him entirely), a flash pierces Vader's partial vision and makes him gasp sharply, the respirator kicking in belatedly to try and supply clean air. The feedbacks slowly come back to life, having hibernated in response to his decreased life functions during meditation, but Vader is already standing and moving, driven by instinct rather than direction.

The shuttle is not well-equipped for atmospheric flights, and it certainly wasn't built to handle Orto Plutonia's ice storms, but Vader finds it practically instinctual to guide the shuttle through the winds. It isn't the speed of a space battle, nor the tricky canyons and turns of Tatooine, but he adapts all the same, dropping the shuttle into a rocky ravine before spotting the few lights of a party on the ice's surface.

He lands quickly, exiting the shuttle to head into the biting wind. The lights of a vehicle stick out, blinking as the snow swirls across them, but the sounds are more pressing: shouts of men and the snap of plasma shots come through muffled and distorted by the storm. Vader watches through infra-red, drawing closer, but with the cold of the planet, the only signatures are cloudy blobs that barely give any indication of species or identity.

Still, a mere crash landing wouldn't have alerted him this way. Now curiosity drives Vader forward, and he listens as the roar of an animal screeches across the layers of sound.

Suddenly, a movement to Vader's left makes him stop: a huge gray mound leaps forward, a whiplike tail snaking through the snow. The burbling sound of snarling communication is just about audible, and as Vader draws closer, plasma bolts are finally visible, striking to either side of the beast nearest him while someone shouts orders.

A huge furry bipedal lunges towards the downed ship, snarling something into the wind, and two shots miss before it leaps atop the ship's hull. Vader moves forward, identifying the ship itself as a Lambda-class like his own shuttle, but pauses as a single figure moves out from beneath the ship, takes aim, and fires once.

The bipedal falls, prompting another round of snarling from the combatants to Vader's left, and he watches a group of creatures press closer only to be driven back by further shots. Finally, reaching out to the Force for the first time since taking flight, Vader moves forward. The animals are the first to run, their riders faltering and trying to regain control, but Vader needs only to add another tone of fear to his mental "encouragement" to watch the figures take off running. Beside him, the figures beneath the shuttle try to recover their composure, and the single figure from before marches forward before coming to stand in front of Vader.

Vader looks down to find black goggles covering his new companion's eyes, and it takes him a brief moment to recognize Grand Moff Tarkin, arms folded and face hidden in the hood of a thick outer coat.

"Vader!" The moff shouts into the wind, startling Vader from his concentration, and he looks up to find a squad of stormtroopers and their commander still huddled beneath the shuttle's cover. Nodding once in reply, Vader moves to bring Tarkin closer to the shuttle, and they enter the loading bay to let the doors close. The noise of the wind is muted instantly, though it still presses at every seam, and Tarkin folds down his hood and removes his goggles before grinning at Vader.

"Well, that proves it, Commander. He is here." Tarkin has not taken his eyes from Vader's helmet, and Vader finds himself surprised by the attention. Behind Tarkin, the stormtrooper commander removes his own helmet, running a hand through his reddish hair before nodding.

"Sirs. Lord Vader. We were told by the *Executor* that you had made planetfall near here—"

"—And they had been prohibited from accompanying you. Once I pointed out that I had not been given such restrictions, they graciously allowed me to prepare a shuttle of my own and attempt to find you myself."

Vader merely watches Tarkin, the heat returning to his nose and cheeks to produce a flush across his skin. After a moment, Vader offers another long nod, thinking over his response.

"I was not gone very long."

"No, of course not. But it is *Orto Plutonia*." Tarkin nods to the doors, his arms still folded. "The risk of a crash landing was great."

"I did not crash." Vader says evenly. Even with the chill from outside, the atmosphere seems to condense, and the stormtroopers shift uncomfortably in their places as Tarkin watches Vader's helmet.

"Are you saying that I shouldn't have come?" Tarkin matches Vader's tone, his smile gone. Vader, in contrast to the earlier absence of thought and feeling, is acutely conscious of how *many* thoughts are now in his brain, and he tries to probe Tarkin's expression for meaning before responding.

“I did not need you to come.”

“I wanted to come.”

Vader does not, *can* not respond, and he instead looks to the stormtrooper commander. “Is your ship still functional?”

“We struck the side of a mountain in the storm. It’s not major, but I don’t know if we have the resources to recover it, especially if we have to extract it from the surface.” The commander glances at the entrance to the upper decks, then looks back to Vader. “With time, we could repair it ourselves. We got caught by a band of the locals, it seems, and...well, you saw how that ended. If this is a route of theirs, we would have to post guards while we do repairs, which means we’d have to take more shifts...”

Vader nods, considering the situation. “Let me bring my ship closer to cover you. It will provide cover from the wind, and allow us to construct a rough camp. I’ll take responsibility for guarding the men while repairs are effected.”

“You—” The commander wisely keeps quiet, offering a quick salute before looking to his troopers. “You hear him, men. Get the kits out, and we’ll set up shop. That is—” Suddenly realizing his position, the commander hesitates. “Governor?”

“Do as you will, Commander.” Tarkin waves a bored hand, barely looking to the commander before returning his attention to Vader. Vader merely turns to leave, opening the outdoor opening to the shuttle before exiting back into the harsh environment. As he returns to his ship and prepares for the delicate maneuver, he briefly recalls the look on Tarkin’s face and is surprised to feel the pang of regret.

Orto Plutonia is not the place for gentle conversations. Orto Plutonia is not the place for *Tarkin*, no matter how much he wants to be here. And yet here Tarkin is, making himself known in Vader’s life. Vader should not begrudge him this, should not be irritated or upset. But Tarkin’s appearance is not *right*, somehow.

And Vader cannot stop himself from disapproving of Tarkin’s actions here.

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The rotation of Orto Plutonia and their position high above the equator means that night is the majority of their time on the planet’s surface, and Vader stands in the darkness while a few feeble ship lights provide halos of illumination. The shuttle behind him has its engine compartment opened, two troopers audible inside as they reconfigure the engine components, and Vader merely watches the darkness. Watches, and waits.

Though he isn’t meditating, he is still sensitive to the movements of the Force, and he can feel the ripple of tension behind him as Tarkin approaches. He does not turn or move until Tarkin stops, only a step behind Vader’s right shoulder, and he can feel the pull that prompts him to turn partially and face Tarkin again.

Some hours have passed—the majority of a local day—and Tarkin hasn’t approached him in all that time. Now Tarkin is standing here, his boots sinking into the snow, and he simply watches Vader through the flurry of snow.

“I may have acted rashly.” Tarkin says, his voice just loud enough to carry to Vader. Vader is torn—his duty is to keep watch, as he promised the commander—but he turns more fully to face Tarkin and

consider the statement.

“You acted as you saw fit. You had no information that informed you to act otherwise.”

“It’s clear you didn’t want me here. I’m sorry.”

Vader is struck, and he hates himself for it: Tarkin can probably count the number of apologies he’s offered on one hand, and Vader’s response had apparently prompted one. Vader closes his eyes for a long moment, pushing away the rush of emotion, and exhales slowly.

“You shouldn’t have come here. But your impulse to come was predicated merely on your concern...for me.” Vader reaches out to take Tarkin’s chin in one hand, tilting his head up slightly. “I can’t find anything wrong in that.”

Tarkin doesn’t respond, and Vader tries to determine what this non-response means; Tarkin has reclaimed a pair of snow goggles, and Vader is struck by how little he can tell without a view of Tarkin’s eyes. And yet Tarkin has been talking with him, engaging with him, devoting time to him without that advantage, all this time.

“I don’t want you to be alone.” Tarkin’s voice has lost some of its power, hoarse either from the effort of speaking through the snow or from some other process. Vader does not let go, but Tarkin reaches up to pull Vader’s hand away from his face and stare down into the glove.

“You’re shaking.” Vader notes in some surprise, turning his hand to squeeze Tarkin’s. Tarkin merely exhales roughly, pulling his hand back before folding his arms.

“I wanted—” Tarkin stops himself, turning to look out at the darkness. “I wanted to see you. So much so that I commandeered a shuttle and endangered my crew to come down here.”

“The risk of danger wasn’t *so* great.”

“But there was no need—” Tarkin hesitates as a shudder rocks the ground beneath them, and Vader turns to look out at the darkness as a roar echoes across the plain. The helmeted heads of stormtroopers appear at the shuttle doors, and Vader suddenly senses a huge pressure of movement as he turns to face the expanse of the wilderness before them.

“Get back to the shuttle.”

“Lord Vader—” Tarkin braces himself as another shudder rolls through the ridge, and Vader pulls his lightsaber from his belt and ignites the blade, scanning the darkness on as many levels as possible before moving forward.

“You need cover!”

“No.” Vader refuses. He can feel the hot attention of animal need, the untamed wildness of a world unexplored by Republic or Imperial missions, and he realizes why the natives of this planet had been crossing this point.

They weren’t merely traveling. They were *hunting*.

With a roar strikingly similar to that of a krayt dragon, an enormous reptilian creature claws its way atop the ice, only visible as it is illuminated by flashes of light from the ships. Vader crouches slightly, preparing himself for quick movement, and darts to his right as the animal lunges forward. He can sense its attention, fleeting and distracted, but the light of his saber proves an effective lure. The *thing* turns to follow him, skittering across the ice more quickly than any human, and Vader

braces as it slams against him and knocks him to the ground. Shots ring out above his head, striking the creature's flanks, and it roars again in pain as it whips around to face the ships.

Vader tries to reach out, to put his meditation into practice as he extends his perception with the Force. The creature is simply too large, too *massive* for him to hold its attention for long, and as it slams a clawed paw on his legs, Vader begins to realize some of what his small glimpses have meant.

The *thing* holding him is an animal, through and through. Vader can feel the shallow base of its thoughts, the impulse and instinct pulling at it. Yet as it flails its head back and forth, screeching, it opens its eyes and lunges down at Vader's helmet, unblinking as it screams.

The attention is an exact replica of that which he felt before. The pressure of something huge *watching* him, with nothing he can do to move or change it—this is more dynamic and powerful than anything Sidious has shown him. This is what he was sent to find.

Vader reaches up, grabbing at a claw perched on his chest in order to pry it up and away. His adrenaline amplifies his natural strength, and the Force simply bolsters him further; he extracts himself with a few moments of struggling before leaping to his feet and facing the beast. It is clearly distracted, torn between two targets, but Vader touches its mind with another suggestion and notes that he is the smaller of the two, and thus clearly the more attractive prey.

The creature roars, potentially in triumph, and Vader whirls to the side as it lunges again. The long, articulated arms claw at the ice, reaching for him, but he avoids the wild movements with ease. In the darkness, he must rely on his sensitivity to inform him of the creature's movements, and he lunges back before leaping forward to swipe at the creature's forelegs. They dive into an intricate dance, advancing and retreating in careful sync, and finally Vader's blade makes contact with the creature's slippery hide to bite into the skin, prompting another ear-splitting screech.

With his sensitivity open to the world, Vader feels the force of the creature's pain as intensely as a physical push, and the Dark Side clamors to consume it. His master's voice echoes in his ear as he feels the creature cycling through the patterns of Sith teaching, from passion to strength to *power*. He does not know if the creature is intentionally reaching out through the Force, if it knows the full power it wields, but it throws the full weight of its will against his as it cries out against the world.

He pushes through as if he's fighting a dust storm, wandering blind towards the creature, and grabs at it wildly with the Force before managing to overpower it. The struggle does not cease, but he is able to contain it, matching the creature's roar with a low keening of his own. It is mostly born of exertion—the creature is strong, and continues to flail—but expressing his own struggle builds the power in him to impress it on the creature. He draws nearer, hearing the hum of his blade, and as the creature rears back, he sees what he must do.

With both hands, he pushes his lightsaber into the creature's chest cavity, feeling the resistance of skin and muscle as the struggling intensifies. Vader's strength is immeasurable now, feeding on the creature's pain to support his own abilities, and he closes his eyes as thick, viscous blood spurts from the wound and flows over his hands.

The death takes an eternity. The wailing, the struggle, then Vader's containment of the struggle—he and the beast are locked in this dance as he draws every last mote of pain from its neurons. Its attention is malevolent, nearly demonic, but it is not a sentient being. It simply *exists*, and in existing, compels the Force to move.

The Jedi acknowledged that the Force was a natural phenomenon. It composed itself of the movements of living beings, large and small. But the Jedi presumed that the Force was inherently benevolent, that it worked for the good of living beings. This creature, this dragon, this ice *demon*

birthed of pain and suffering, knows only pain and anger.

This is the reality of the Force.

As the creature breathes its death rattle, Vader pulls out his blade with a grunt and stumbles back, reeling from the exertion. His breathing is labored, his respirator rushing to compensate, but his physical pain is barely noticeable. Instead, he simply waits, feeling the rush of invisible movement around him until the ship's lights are turned on his position.

Again, Tarkin is marching forward. Again, Tarkin leads the pack, ignoring the movements of the stormtroopers to rush to Vader's position. Vader can feel his adrenaline fading, the pulse of battle giving way to the disappointment of the aftermath, but Tarkin is reaching out to touch Vader's arm as he studies the Sith Lord.

"You did it."

Vader brushes Tarkin's hand away, but immediately regrets the movement and reaches forward to put his hand on Tarkin's shoulder. His blade deactivated, Vader holsters the lightsaber once more, and exhales before nodding.

"This is why I came to Orto Plutonia."

Tarkin's confusion is evident, but his goggles hide the question in his eyes. Vader merely waits, still recovering, and he finally reaches up to touch Tarkin's chin again before straightening.

"I need to return to the *Executor*."

"Good. Good!" Tarkin is unsure of what Vader's impulses are, but he is willing to assist, and as they return to the two ships, the stormtrooper commander moves forward to nod.

"There's progress on the ship—turns out the systems hit were mostly redundant processes anyway, and if we get her back up to her hangar, the techs there can get her back up to speed. We should be okay to take off and leave the atmosphere, though I'd feel safer if the *Executrix* used tractors to get us in rather than letting her come in on her own power."

Vader nods distractedly, glancing between the ships. He is in no mood to make decisions right now, and his mind is still reeling with the movements of the Force. Still, he is required to command. And so command he must.

"Commander, I will take Governor Tarkin and four of your troopers back to the *Executor* in my shuttle. Since Governor Tarkin has made the journey out this far, it would be useful to compare information about dealings on the Outer Rim." Another note occurs to Vader, and he glances to Tarkin. "We may also consider sending a team to the cities on the moon, if only to gauge their responses to Imperial control. Pantora retains a Senate seat, but they are isolated. Your presence may be effective."

Tarkin nods, finally more comfortable with the topics at hand. "Understood, Lord Vader."

"Commander, you will take this shuttle and your remaining troopers back to the *Executrix* to begin repairs immediately. I thank you for your quick action here, and for your diligence in protecting the governor."

"I-Yes, Lord Vader, of course." The commander nods quickly, rushing into a salute. "I understand we won't see you for some time—Governor Tarkin. Lord Vader." The salute is transformed into a formal bow, and Vader nods in approval. Finally, with formalities concluded, Vader turns on one

heel to march back to his original shuttle, not watching to see if Tarkin and the troopers follow.

This return flight will be much more interesting than his landing flight was.

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The shuttling itself is uneventful. Vader takes the role of pilot, though he must pause to wipe the dragon blood from his gloves, and one of the troopers occupies the co-pilot seat before Tarkin makes up his mind. There is no discussion, no comparison of experiences, and though the lift-off is bumpy, their return to the *Executor* is accomplished without a hitch. The hangar officers respond to Vader's arrival in a flurry, tense and uncertain, but the stormtroopers file off on their own impetus without needing Vader's direction. Vader, for his part, does not respond to his subordinates' inquiries, and simply makes his way deeper into the *Executor's* heart.

Tarkin, again, has accompanied him. Neither man has spoken, neither man has said anything since leaving the surface of the planet, and Vader cannot determine why this unsettles him. He knows Tarkin must be upset, or angry, or *something*, but he cannot read the man. Tarkin has schooled his expression into a neutral non-expression, and Vader is in no place to try and examine him through the Force. Learning more about the Dark Side should have strengthened him, should have made him more confident his abilities, but Vader simply feels confused.

Tarkin joins him in the lift as they ascend the main column of the bridge spike, and Vader cannot bring himself to speak. Is there anything to say? He's attempted his apologies, extended some reconciliation. Tarkin cannot be so implacable as to ignore Vader's entreaties, can he? Is there something Vader's missed, some component that makes this more uncertain?

He tries to focus, stopping the lift and walking out through the empty hallways of the barracks level. Tarkin's footsteps are lighter, snappier, a soft click behind Vader's footfalls. When they reach Vader's quarters, Vader opens the door and leaves it open, wandering inside as if he's in a daze while Tarkin closes the door behind them.

"You came back here." Tarkin notes. There is no inflection in his voice, no change. This tears at Vader more thoroughly than tears or earnest pleading might do, and he turns to watch Tarkin over his shoulder before trying to formulate a response.

"My role on Orto Plutonia was—"

You are to have no 'accomplices'. Take no one into your confidence.

"The Emperor informed you of my mission here."

"He told me you were on the planet. He encouraged me to come." Tarkin clasps his hands behind his back at parade rest, but there is a gleam of interest in his eyes. "Should he have advised me differently?"

"Yes." Vader cannot explain, he cannot go against a direct order—but Tarkin is wounded, and like a wounded animal, Tarkin will never show his pain. "He—I have fulfilled many missions without assistance."

"Yet the Emperor sent me anyway."

"He should not have."

"You've made *that* perfectly clear."

“I am not trying to—” Vader turns, studying Tarkin more fully, and as Tarkin raises his eyes to meet Vader’s masked gaze, Vader feels another impulse pulling at him. “I care about you.”

“And I care about you. It’s why I gathered a landing party and shuttled to the surface of an ice-bitten, uncivilized planet.”

“I can’t tell you why I was there.”

“I see.” Tarkin nods, exhaling slowly. “You could have said that from the start.”

“You still should not have come.”

“I have the Emperor’s endorsement, Lord Vader—Vader. He wanted me to come. He apparently thought my presence would be beneficial.”

Vader draws breath to respond, still fighting the confusion of Force impulses that tug at his consciousness, and he suddenly feels himself falling fully into the embrace of Darkness.

He had drawn close to *something*, had plunged himself into a creature formed and born of the Dark Side. As a Sith, he could find no other experience more fulfilling—

But to appreciate the experience, he cannot be thinking of Tarkin.

Tarkin is....

...a *distraction*.

His Master has arranged this carefully, without Vader’s slightest suspicion. His Master has been aware of Vader’s growing confusion, Vader’s attraction, Vader’s *deviation* from his training, and has taken steps to correct it. If Vader is to be a Sith Lord—if he is to claim the totality of his title—he cannot allow anything to pull him from his path.

Without his conscious decision, Vader begins taking short, shallow breaths, his suit regulators beginning to whine as they are pressed into overdrive. Tarkin has not moved, has barely even changed expression, and Vader looks at him for only a moment before the pulse rushes in.

There are patterns here, patterns forming, patterns lived and repeated over and over again, and Vader is left breathless as Tarkin’s face disappears behind another. Padme Amidala, her eyes dark and filled with tears; her mouth opening and closing as she gasps for breath, as she pleads with Vader—the man Vader had been, the man she thought she loved—her eyes bright and content as she informs him of her pregnancy—

Vader sees her death more clearly than he ever has, the rending in the Force where her life simply... slipped away.

He sees a human male, in armor much like his own, plunging a red lightsaber blade into the chest of a blue-skinned Twi’lek, tears tracking over the respirator mouthpiece.

He sees a dark-haired man igniting his lightsaber into his father’s stomach, steeling himself as the lifeless body plunges into the abyss below.

He watches a blonde girl look on as her Master severs the hand of another child, the boy screaming as he flees into an underground cavern.

A gray-haired man, already past his prime, uncorks a vial and empties it into a cup, smiling sadly as

he hands it to his mother.

Again, and again, the cycle repeats, the pain cutting deeper, the loss growing stronger, and Vader knows that he cannot stand this much longer. It pulls at him too strongly, pressing and compressing him into the tightest point of himself like a star about to go supernova, and he reaches out a hand before clenching it into a fist. His chest has already compressed, driving the air from his lungs, and his body is little more than a conduit for the cycles of the Force thrumming through him.

“You need to go.” The words come out strangled, distorted, but Tarkin takes a step back all the same.

“I see no reason to—”

“*Leave me.*” Vader does not need to do much to emphasize the point this time—an unseen hand throws the few loose pieces of equipment in the room to the floor, clattering loudly. Vader cannot hear them past the tumult in his head, but Tarkin evidently notices the change. He finds his way to the door, watching as Vader falls to his knees. The orb behind him begins to shake in its moorings, evidently beset by forces stronger than it usually sees, and Tarkin disappears through the square of light before the door closes once more and Vader is returned to darkness.

Metal rends and shears, screaming as it drags across itself and is folded over and over, but Vader pays it no attention. There is a louder noise, something raw and harsh that scrapes across his nerves, and the patterns press themselves into his brain as he finally realizes the origin of the sound.

He is *screaming*, and unless the Force releases its grip on him soon...

He may very well continue screaming into eternity.

Chapter End Notes

Feel free to comment/contact me with anything that seems confusing, and I'll do my best to explain.

Concurrence

Chapter Summary

Tarkin is a practical man. The Sith can have their mysticism and their powers, their visions and their meditations. But Tarkin is not the kind to accept the word of anyone, even a Sith, without a few questions.

Concurrence: to have an accordance in opinion, agreement; a coincidence or simultaneous occurrence; cooperation, as of agents or causes, part of a combined effort; in law, a power equally held or shared; archaic, a competition or contest between powers.

It is later. Much later. Late enough that Tarkin could have ordered the *Executrix* to leave the system without fear of recrimination and never see Vader again. Well, perhaps not ‘never’—the Emperor would likely assign him and Vader to the same mission again at some point in the future, and he’d have to deal with at least some form of communication with the helmeted Sith Lord at some point. On top of which, Tarkin has never been one to run from his problems, even when given a personal starship and dominion of an entire sector of space. And so the *Executrix* has remained in orbit above Orto Plutonia, the gentle blue and white of the planet below disguising its true harsh nature.

Tarkin can still feel the prick of chill against his nose and cheeks, the spots most exposed to the winds as he stood on the planet’s surface. The sensation is mostly memory, but he attempts to preserve it as long as possible, considering the ramifications of his actions. And Vader’s responses.

He meant what he’d said: he *had* acted rashly. He had no right to charge after Vader like a lancer on a mount, rescuing his beloved from danger. It would be more accurate to claim that Tarkin had noticed an *opportunity*, a moment when Vader would be alone, and moved in to monopolize the chance. He hadn’t realized the full scope of Palpatine’s orders, nor the apparent importance they held for Vader.

And then on the *Executor*...

Tarkin isn’t sure what exactly this emotion should be called. There was something to be said for the fact that Vader couldn’t tell him the details of his mission based on Palpatine’s orders—Tarkin could understand that. Vader took on a number of secretive missions, and Tarkin wouldn’t presume that he had access to all the explicit details. Vader was trying to bring Tarkin in without compromising the specifics of his orders. Yet those last few seconds, the moments when Vader began to collapse—

This is a type of fear. Dark, and slimy, coagulating in the depths of his chest like an infection; whether it is fear for himself or fear for Vader, he cannot say. Perhaps both. Tarkin was never brought into the confidences of the Jedi, never subject to the true majesty of Force-driven maneuvers or insights. But even he can recognize the hand of something *greater* in Vader’s command for Tarkin to leave, and try as he might, Tarkin cannot get the image of Vader’s faltering form out of his head.

He has taken refuge in his office, pacing before the spotless desk to try and resolve the tension in his shoulders. Thus, when the communication beep comes through, he is already close enough to press the button, summoning up the data burst before allowing the transmission to proceed.

So close to the *Executor*, the communication comes through crystal clear, no static or waver distorting the holographic image. Tarkin watches as Darth Vader appears in miniature atop his desk, the impressive form diminished by its presentation and its position. Instead of standing, as Vader usually does for Imperial reports, he is seated, almost *collapsed* in a chair. Tarkin belatedly realizes that this must be the seat inside the meditation orb, and pulls up his own seat to watch the hologram more closely.

“Wilhuff.” Again, that voice—Vader is quiet, intimately so, and Tarkin cannot help but to lean forward. “You’re still here.”

“We’re still plotting a course, Lord Vader.” Tarkin bows his head in deference, folding his arms atop the desk. As he watches, Vader jerks back as if stung, and the helmet turns away from the hologram transmitter before Vader continues.

“I could have hurt you. *Would* have hurt you. If you had stayed.”

“You are not normally a man prone to reckless extremes, Lord Vader.” Tarkin keeps his voice even, and is surprised to find how easily it comes. He has been tempered by Vader’s mercurial responses, it seems.

“Then you know less about me than you think, Governor Tarkin.” The reversion to formal titles comes like a slap in the face, and Tarkin begins to understand how his stiffness must seem to Vader. The accusation is the same one he’s heard before—he’s ‘unfeeling’, or ‘cold’, or ‘stand-offish’—but Vader does not even need to say the words to offer condemnation. And yet Tarkin can’t quite grasp the edges of what Vader’s trying to say.

“What happened on Orto Plutonia?” Tarkin cannot stop himself from asking, though Vader’s even gaze informs him of the answer in advance.

“I cannot tell you that.”

“I was there. I saw the...thing, whatever it was. You faced it single-handedly and came out alive, came out *victorious*.” Were the circumstances different, Tarkin would confess to how intensely *primal* the encounter had been, bringing him memories of the Spike and his own adolescent attempts at brutality. (Coupled with that confession would come the careful description of compliments, an effort to capture Tarkin’s attraction in words.) “It was incredible.”

“I was not there to—“ Vader shakes his head, raising a hand to the ridge of his helmet. Tarkin says nothing, merely waiting, and Vader slowly lowers his hand again to continue. “Wilhuff.”

“Vader.”

The hiss of the respirator echoes over the comm. “I had a wife. Once.”

Tarkin blinks, but manages to avoid any dramatic gasps or cries of shock. (The melodrama of such confessions is confusing to him—why problematize such a delicate moment with needless exclamation?) “I was not aware the Jedi were permitted to marry.”

Vader does sit up at that, and Tarkin realizes that he’s played his hand. Vader has never *confirmed* that he is a former Jedi, though for a man like Tarkin, the signs are evident. And now they’ve put that suspicion into words. “They aren’t.”

Tarkin absorbs this knowledge, nodding. “And you loved her?”

“Love-“ Vader cuts himself off, a clicking noise indicating a change in the respirator tempo. Tarkin

can do little but watch as Vader turns away, then stands, the hologram transmitter only belatedly following to show him descending a dais.

“Lord Vader.”

“I shouldn’t have called.” Vader says. Tarkin gets the distinct impression that he wasn’t meant to hear that comment.

“Can you tell me what happened to her?” As alien as it might be to imagine Vader—or would it be Vader? Would Vader still point to his former life, his *Jedi* life, and confirm that he is truly Anakin Skywalker? Regardless, Tarkin can recall the image of Skywalker easily enough, and though there is an animalistic part of him that regrets the loss of the fine hair and thin robes of the Jedi Master, he can only attach his emotion to the man who now calls himself Vader.

“She died.” Vader clenches a fist, turning back again to return to his seat. “I killed her.”

Now is the time for gasps of shock, the horror of revelation. And Tarkin does inhale sharply, sitting back from his desk in the light of this information. He can recognize the danger of prying too closely, of provoking the wrath of a man who clearly has difficulty facing this truth head-on, and yet Tarkin begins to understand why Vader has opened this communication.

“As you would have killed me.”

“I see no other alternative.” Vader does not face the transmitter, and Tarkin knows that he must be avoiding Tarkin’s holographic vision, his azure replica hovering in air before Vader’s seat. “I would not have become a Sith if I had not killed her.”

“You are a Sith *now*. Do you require regular sacrifice?” Tarkin snaps, feeling an edge running up his spine and into his words. He has never been a religious man, even with Jova’s training and indoctrination into the roughhewn doctrine of the plains. Religion is Eleh’s prerogative now, managing minor problems down on Telos, and Tarkin has no patience for this half-deciphered Sith orthodoxy.

“You were on Tatooine.” Vader is recovering, sitting up more fully, and Tarkin considers the statement. He *was* on Tatooine, subjected to the impulse of Vader’s temper and witness to the sheer brutality of the Dark Side. It takes him a moment to realize that Vader is answering his question, and he blinks in surprise.

“It’s that formal, then? There is an unsustainable bloodlust in you that needs to be glutted, lest you damage the Empire?”

“No. No, I—” Vader studies the transmitter closely, leaning forward. “The Dark Side feeds on pain. On suffering. In suffering, I find my strength.”

“That doesn’t require you to suffer personally. I doubt the Emperor ever suffers.” Tarkin raises a hand to brush away the concerns, as if it would be so simple.

“Have you ever seen the Emperor take a consort? Has he drawn anyone into his confidences, the way—” Vader’s pauses are becoming irritating, but Tarkin forces himself to wait. “Even before he took his title, my master had no one. You and I are an aberration.”

Tarkin takes a deep breath, closing his eyes before drawing himself up straight and staring directly into the transmitter. “You are loyal to the Empire.”

“I am loyal to my Emperor.”

"I am loyal to the Empire. And its Emperor."

"And?"

"There is no conflict here, Vader, nothing to be resolved or managed. What you and I do when not on duty is—"

"I do not have the luxury of dividing my private life from my public image, Governor Tarkin. You know this yourself—I have no other name you can call me. Vader is the entirety of my being, and *Vader* is entirely loyal to his master. Loyalty to my master requires that I grow stronger in the Dark Side, that I—"

"That isn't loyalty, Vader. That's *conspiracy*."

"As if you would serve the Empire without constantly bolstering your own power?" Vader leans further forward, gripping the armrests of his seat. "Power is what makes us useful. Makes us *valuable* in the eyes of the Emperor. Were we to lose our power, fail in our duty—"

"*You* were the one lecturing me about failure, Lord Vader." Tarkin stands, a charged tension shimmering between him and his desk. "You assured me that failure does not indicate my lack of suitability for command. Failure is how we learn and grow."

"This failure is only teaching me one lesson." Vader says, sitting back again. Tarkin finds himself out of breath, waiting for the next statement, and when Vader says nothing, Tarkin slams a hand against the desk.

"And what would that be?"

"I cannot tell you."

"You can't? Or you won't?"

"The path of a Sith is not one where lovers are invited alongside. If love is a weakness—"

"*Emotion* is a weakness, Lord Vader, but it can be turned to good purposes. I would rather have a battalion of troopers prepared to die for an Empire they love than an entire army of droids with no passion besides a chip in their cores."

"Governor—"

"You expect me to believe that you feel nothing for the Emperor, either? For the men on your ship? For the troopers that serve under you, for the prisoners you interrogate? Whether positive or negative, you experience emotion in its own turn, and the Emperor hasn't seen it necessary to 'curb' those tendencies, has he?" Tarkin is breathing heavily, his focus pinpointed on Vader's helmet. "The Emperor himself is a man defined by power, not only the power he has, but the power he *wants*. The creation of our—of the ultimate weapon is simply a reflection of that. You are not only a Sith Lord, you are a key component of an Empire that has fulfilled its Emperor's every desire. If Palpatine is so blind as to miss that, then..."

Tarkin finds himself trailing off, catching his breath again as he slowly unclenches his fist. Vader watches, implacable in the mask, and finally offers a short nod.

"You are fortunate I'm a reasonable man. You wander close to treason."

"If the Emperor sees fit to bring me before tribunal for my statements here, I'd be only too glad to

present them myself.”

“You don’t take issue with my priorities? With the Emperor’s position in my life?”

Tarkin makes a dismissive noise, standing straight to wave away the concern. “I realized from the first moment we spoke, Lord Vader, that you would always put the concerns of the Emperor before your own. This is admirable. This is *commendable*. It is one of the many things I find so incredibly attractive about you.”

Vader is silent, finally relaxing slightly as he studies Tarkin. “You are an unconventional lover, Wilhuff Tarkin.”

“We are unconventional men, Lord Vader.” Tarkin nods, feeling his heartbeat settle. Vader hasn’t specifically indicated that he’s at ease, but there is none of the tension or brittle sharpness in his posture. Tarkin thinks a moment longer, tapping a finger against his desk, then nods.

“Perhaps I should speak to Palpatine. If only to present my own position.”

“You should do as you see best.”

“How singularly unhelpful, Lord Vader.” Tarkin shakes his head. “No matter. This isn’t over—whatever you consider ‘this’ to be—but I should make it clear that I intend to see you again. Soon, if possible. In person. Not through a hologram.”

Vader glances at his surroundings, studying something outside the hologram’s pickup. “I may need some warning.”

“*This* is your warning.” Tarkin grins, feeling the spike of adrenaline that comes from identifying the movement of prey, and clicks his heels together to stand straight. “Next time we speak, Lord Vader, I will not sustain any more of this prevarication. Until then.”

Vader barely has time to respond as the transmission is terminated, and Tarkin lets his smile fade as he considers his next move. He *will* see Vader again, this is certain, but his promise to speak to Palpatine is no false oath. Palpatine will learn of their interactions regardless of whether Tarkin tells him or not (if not Vader, then another Imperial agent would be able to gather enough information to report back) and Tarkin has no intention of letting this subterfuge go unaddressed. Tarkin respects Palpatine, admires him almost as much as he admires Vader.

But Palpatine will need to learn that Tarkin will never allow himself to be a mere pawn in some needless, pointless game.

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For this transmission, Tarkin has not remained in his quarters, moving instead to one of the tactical ready-rooms capable of holographic transmission. His officers have coordinated the message transmissions, and he is as ready as he will ever be. As the channel opens, Tarkin takes a breath, sitting up in his seat as the hologram warps into view.

There, somehow larger than life even with a to-scale hologram, Emperor Palpatine smiles beneath his cowl, his attention palpable despite the cowl hiding his eyes.

“Ah. Governor Tarkin. How rare to enjoy the surprise of your communications.”

“Emperor Palpatine.” Tarkin inclines his head, bolstering his resolve with the pressure of Imperial formality. “I wish I could wait until I have the honor of revisiting Coruscant, but I’m afraid this

matter is more delicate than time might allow.”

“Go on, Governor. Something important enough to arrest your attention must be major indeed.” Palpatine raises a hand to his chin, and Tarkin remembers conversations past, when they were both younger, more spry, hungrier for dynamics of true power.

Tarkin has muted his hunger, hidden it beneath his icy brutality. Palpatine is just as eager as always, his hunger an equal part of his grip on power, and it is this which frightens so many of his subjects.

“You sent me to find Vader. Rather, you informed me of his position.”

“Ah, that.” Palpatine nods, his grin growing. “And you went in pursuit.”

“You sent him to Orto Plutonia for a very specific reason. He made it clear to me that I wasn’t to know what reason.”

“Ah! So he spoke to you.”

“We met. I went to the planet’s surface and found him. The records are all available, should you need them.” Tarkin sits back, relaxing into his seat. “I do not appreciate being maneuvered, my Emperor, as if I were a rear admiral posted to the Mid-Rim shipping lanes. I do not need to be *conned* into serving the interests of the Empire.”

“I would hardly give Vader a mission, compelling him to secrecy, and then break his trust by explaining his mission to another.” Palpatine’s smile belies his sincerity, and Tarkin watches in silence before exhaling softly.

“But you would give him a mission that endangers me? Or, failing that, endangers *him*?”

Palpatine’s smile is not so sincere this time, and Tarkin watches the other man think over the possibilities. “I trust Vader’s restraint.”

“You gave us matching ships.” Tarkin scoffs, folding his arms to watch Palpatine through the hologram’s fuzz. Palpatine waves a dismissive hand, chuckling again to himself.

“I enjoy pushing the both of you. You are my closest confidants, my most effective servants. To watch you dance together...amuses me.”

“Yet you would sabotage our relationship, *endanger* it by pushing Vader to the brink, just to make him prove his loyalty to you? What does this serve?”

“Vader is my apprentice. Our relationship—its details are not of importance to you. The intricacies of our teachings, the foundation of our bond, none of this is your concern. I test Vader more thoroughly because of the trust I invest in him, and the power he wields. Surely you can understand the need for vigilance.”

“You think drawing closer to me would tempt Vader to treason?” Tarkin exhales harshly, the closest he’s come to a laugh in a conversation with the Emperor. “*Me*. The Grand Moff you appointed.”

“Wilhuff—”

Tarkin sits up sharply, surprised at the anger the single word produces. *Wilhuff*. He’s become so accustomed to hearing Vader say it, to have *only* Vader say it, that he’s forgotten how Palpatine used to call him that.

“Sheev.” Tarkin counters, placing a hand on the table beside him. “If there is anything in me to draw someone away from the Empire, then I might as well resign my commission now. I value your judgement—if my presence is a precursor to treason, better that I be removed from my station.” On impulse, with the same confidence he uses in sending troops into battle, Tarkin reaches up to unpin his insignia plaque, squeezing it in his fingers before setting it on the table. “Vader is your tool. I am your faithful servant. No servant wishes to remain in a position he does not deserve or did not earn. If you *truly* think that I have some seed of rebellion in me, enough to distract Vader from his service to you, then crush that seed now and reclaim your apprentice. I accept any restraint, any demotion, you wish to impose.”

For the first time, Palpatine is silent, and Tarkin can see the small, piercing eyes as they watch from beneath the cowl. Strangely, despite everything, Tarkin has lost his fear. The anxiety has been sloughed off like flaking mud, leaving him scrubbed clean, and though this is certainly a risky move—one of the riskiest in his career—Tarkin is filled with a heady rush of excitement.

“You’re quite serious about this.” Palpatine’s voice is light, almost mocking, but Tarkin can see the intensity of his gaze.

“I went to him, Sheev. I saw him. And yes, I *watched* as...something, as some Force *thing* consumed him, and you know what I saw?” Tarkin leans forward, hearing the hum of the hologram echo around him. “I saw a man so devoted to his mentor that he would rather hurt himself, or kill his lover, rather than disappoint you.”

“You *have* seen much.” Palpatine murmurs, though Tarkin feels he has barely seen anything. A few snatched glimpses of private agony, and Vader’s skill in battle—this is nothing, he knows.

“We are *both* loyal to you, Sheev, and to the Empire you’ve created. You know me, you know my character—do you believe I would ever allow a connection to Vader to interfere with my duties? Vader is just as dedicated, if not more so. This is what we—” Tarkin feels a tug of reluctance and pauses, considering his next words carefully. “We are your servants, but we are not equals. I will be the first to recognize this. We are different, shaped by different worlds and different places, but we are still complementary portions of the clockwork you manage. Our external components may differ slightly, but every planet in a system is bound by the gravity of its star, no matter its mass or geological components. You bind us more closely together than any other single factor, and—”

“Wilhuff, please.” Palpatine has regained his smile, raising his hand to cut off Tarkin’s monologue. “You may reclaim your plaque—that is, if you intend to retain your commission.”

“Of course.” Tarkin reaches out to pick up his insignia plaque again, pinning it smoothly to his tunic as he leans back in his seat. “I am not a sentimental man, my Emperor. Your Empire is always first in our priorities.”

“And you see no harm in entertaining a minor diversion in your...’off-duty’ hours?” Palpatine chuckles again, his head tilting back. “Presumptuous of you, to speak for Vader. Still—you persist, Wilhuff, in being the one man determined to teach me something new about the galaxy, regardless of whether I already know it or not.” Palpatine moves to stand, the hologram jerking to keep track of his motion, and Palpatine nods once before preparing to conclude the call. “I hope Vader is aware of what an eloquent defense you’ve made.”

“He may give an account for himself, if he wishes. But I hope you’ll consider my arguments thoroughly.” Tarkin has resumed a posture of deference, though he’s had to stand as the Emperor stands. Palpatine simply hums in response, still thinking over Tarkin’s words, and finally, the hologram snaps into darkness to leave Tarkin alone in the room once more. Exhaling a held breath, Tarkin stares at the empty space for a long moment, finally turning on a heel to march back out into

the well-lit hallway. The activity of the ship still moves around him, officers and lieutenants and commanders and captains filing their reports, checking their rosters, as if nothing has changed. Tarkin can feel the now-familiar pressure, the rush of preoccupation that comes with thinking too closely about Vader, and he plots out the route back to his quarters when a ‘thud’ knocks against his boot.

Glancing down, Tarkin watches a mouse droid scuttle back in surprise, edging around his boot before zipping off again down the hallway. Somehow this tiny movement, reminiscent of the mammal of the droid’s namesake, prompts Tarkin to laugh softly and turn instead to make his way to the ascending lift. He has no need to run and hide, holing up like a prey animal. He has faced a predator, *the* predator, and has emerged without a scratch. He remains Wilhuff Tarkin, governor of Eriadu, overseer of the Seswenna sector, and first Grand Moff of the Empire.

With the support of the Emperor and the companionship of Darth Vader, there is *nothing* that can stop him.

Accord

Chapter Summary

Accord: to settle, reconcile. Also used to mean an international agreement, or a settlement of questions. As an idiom, to do something voluntarily, without being asked.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The world turns. The sun of the system doesn't change, its light far too bright without the barrier of an atmosphere, and the shielding of the shuttles is only partially sufficient to stop the pilots from being blinded by the rays. While the shuttles have their use, Tarkin has not chosen to stand near the viewports this time, and is instead ensconced in the tactical bay to compose yet another report.

This one is less infuriating than normal. The tedium of local politics occupy most of his reports, but either Tarkin is learning to appreciate the tedium, or this instance was less tedious than most. The Pantoran population was rather average for isolated Outer Rim outposts, though Tarkin was surprised to find that the Pantorans hadn't indulged in the rampant overpopulation common to human settlements. It isn't important enough to put in a report, but he's assigned a member of staff to research Pantoran biological and social patterns. If their self-restraint is a result of biological impulses, then their low population is not so notable. But if their biological makeup is similar enough to humans, and their lack of children is a result of psychological resilience, perhaps there is a lesson to be learned. The Empire will always need ways to discourage procreation among its upper staff, even if it requires human colonists to produce the cadets and pilots in its schools.

His reception among the Pantoran assembly was cool, even chilly, but it wasn't overly hostile. The Pantorans may have philosophical reasons to oppose the Empire, but given their location, the Empire has neither performed military maneuvers in their system nor offered grand movements of commerce or income. Pantora remains much as it was during the Republic: ignored, forgotten, freezing on the opposite side of the Outer Rim from any of the major lanes of travel. The senator that greeted him was probably the same being assigned years ago, and her eyes seemed tired and weary. Despite this, Tarkin is satisfied with what he saw. Pantora will not foster rebellion, if only because they have no reason to. They are not strategically advantageous, they lack the excess resources to support any significant military effort, and if rebels choose to hide here, the population is resilient enough to ignore the pleas of outsiders. Tarkin cannot say that they are the ideal Imperial settlement, but they are far from the worst.

Signing off on his report with his personal clearance, Tarkin turns away from the terminal and glances at the viewports, waiting as the *Executor* draws into view. While the *Executrix* had moved into orbit around Pantora itself, the *Executor* has remained here, perched above Orto Plutonia. Tarkin cannot say why, though he has his suspicions—the crew of both ships must certainly be perplexed by their long stopover. Tarkin, at least, has been assigning his staff their reports, and his adjutant on rotation will be required to review his most recent report, but outside the Seswenna sector, there is little for them to do. The troopers will drill, most likely. The pilots might argue with the engineers about their ship maintenance logs. But otherwise, they will simply wait.

Some of this is his fault, Tarkin knows. He has refused to leave the system simply because Vader has

not yet left. But given the tumult of the last few days, Tarkin cannot find a compelling enough reason to leave completely, and so he has returned to the *Executor* to determine their next step.

As the shuttle lands in the hangar bay, Tarkin stands and finds his stormtrooper escort. The men must be tired, having accompanied him all over the Pantoran capital, but their salutes are still snappy and sharp. Pleased, Tarkin exits the shuttle door as it opens, his boots clicking against the deck as he makes his way through the *Executor*.

He never knows how to feel about the stormtroopers. His lieutenants are hand-picked, selected from the roster to accompany him, and he prides himself on knowing their strengths and weaknesses. Eleh, Ritan, Anarak, Tinosh, Leat—their names and faces are familiar to him, and he takes pride in watching them work. But these stormtroopers have no names and faces, part of the machinery of war, and Tarkin cannot express his private thoughts and feelings to them. They are removed from him, made distant simply by their sheer numbers and their constant rotations.

As Tarkin ascends to the barrack levels, he muses on how this apparent distance hasn't prevented him from growing closer to Darth Vader, and the dichotomy makes him smile to himself.

His approach to the door is slow, thoughtful, and he hesitates at the keypad before tapping in a code. The troopers behind him stand straight, eyes forward, but as the door remains closed, Tarkin furrows his brows.

Keying another button, Tarkin reenters his code, and when nothing happens, Tarkin exhales slowly. His mind considers the possibilities, his options now that he's actually stepped onboard the *Executor*, but just as he decides that the command bridge might be his next stop, the door opens with a whoosh to show Darth Vader standing before them.

Tarkin has forgotten just how tall Vader is, with his helmet in place and the full force of his Imperial will behind him. The troopers, to their credit, do not react, but Vader glances at them before turning his attention to Tarkin.

"Governor Tarkin."

"Lord Vader." Tarkin bows his head, dampening his nervous worry. He should be proud, exultant, flying high on the adrenaline of previous encounters. Yet he isn't. "May I come in?"

Vader's attention goes back to the troopers, his evaluation long and serious. Tarkin knows this is unconventional, that he doesn't usually have a trooper escort when he makes these... 'social' calls, but he trusts Vader can navigate this without too much effort.

As Vader turns, Tarkin is taken aback by both the Sith Lord's lack of response and the lack of cape fluttering behind him. Tarkin looks to his right before turning fully, nodding to one of the troopers.

"Stay here. I plan to return to the *Executrix* shortly."

The troopers nod together, moving to stand on either side of the door as Tarkin turns back to enter. The entrance is dark, as he's come to expect, but as the door closes and his eyes adjust, he realizes that there are more lights than usual along the interior of the room, the meditation orb itself closed while lights along the runners give the room a hazy glow.

To Tarkin's right, a cylindrical mass sits on the floor, a hatch open along the back to spill wires and components onto the floor. Vader is standing over the machinery, his attention divided, and Tarkin reverts back to parade rest as he watches quietly.

"You seem distracted." He finally says, glancing again at the floor. To his surprise, Vader moves to

kneel, finally sitting on the floor to pick up a mechanical component and reinsert it into the cylinder.

“I’ve spoken with the Emperor.” Vader’s voice is flat, toneless, and Tarkin hates himself for how it makes him tense. If Vader is angry with him—or worse, if Vader is still distraught—then Tarkin will make no headway here. And he needs to leave the system soon.

“As have I.” Tarkin shifts, unsure of what Vader’s doing. “I hope we were told the same thing.”

Vader nods absently, using both hands to maneuver a delicate piece of wiring. “I don’t believe he is purposely misleading you. You made quite the impression.”

“I am flattered by his respect and consideration.” In fairness, it’s the least Tarkin could ask, given his long association with the former Chancellor. “I didn’t speak to him only for my own benefit. I went to him for your sake. I said—”

“He told me what you said.” Vader’s tonelessness has shifted, gaining a dangerous edge. Tarkin is taken aback, his face contorting into a frown, and he takes a deep breath before stepping forward.

“Will you countermand me here, too? Is there something I *shouldn’t* have done, or something I shouldn’t have said? I told you I was going to speak with him. This shouldn’t have come as a surprise.”

Vader says nothing, his attention still on the mechanism before him. Tarkin hates how it is so simple, so easy to make him feel pointless. He hates being ignored. And Vader is refusing to take him seriously, to *face* him like a real human being.

“I made it clear to him how I felt about you.” Tarkin is no longer at rest, his hands moving to his hips as he steps forward. “More clearly than you’ve ever made clear to me.”

Vader twitches, but his attention is not removed from the machine in front of him. Tarkin takes a breath, unsure of what exactly he’s doing, but fortunately it’s Vader that moves first and prevents Tarkin from embarrassing himself. The component in Vader’s hand shatters as Vader tightens his hand into a fist, and Tarkin hesitates as Vader’s breathing increases in tempo.

“I don’t disapprove of your meeting with him.” Vader says, his evenness marred by the part glittering in pieces in his glove. “You did what I could not.”

“Nonsense. I simply said what we’d already acknowledged as fact, without ever going through some formal routine.” Tarkin gestures vaguely, gathering his strength. “The evidence of our connection was clear enough to me, and to Palpatine. Are you saying we were both misled by your confusion?”

“I am not confused about you.” Vader opens his hand to let the components fall to the ground, disappearing in the shadow of the cylinder.

“Then *what* exactly is so foreign about me claiming you as my object of affection? As my—” Tarkin can feel how foreign the words are, how clunky and awkward they feel. “As my confidant? As a friend, as a—as someone to who I am intensely, *deeply* attracted? None of this should come as a surprise, Lord Vader!”

Vader is still, dangerously lifeless in the face of Tarkin’s newfound energy. In the place of speech, Vader’s respirator hitches, and a strangled sound that could have been a word echoes from Vader’s mouthpiece as he reaches up to grab at his chestpiece. Tarkin’s anger segues into worry, his irritation easily dispelled, and he moves forward to do *something* (what he could truly do in the face of Vader’s strength, he does not know) as Vader struggles to breathe.

“I can’t stop seeing her.” As Tarkin crouches, boots nudging away scattered piece of machinery, he reaches first for Vader’s hand and pulls, feeling the tension beneath the glove as Vader shudders. Tarkin is reminded of his own earlier hesitations, Vader’s quick attention and masterful movement, and begins to realize what he must do.

“Lord Vader.”

“If she had lived—” Tarkin is grabbing for Vader’s other hand too, bringing them both between them to grab hold of Vader. “She would have hated me. She hated Vader. She would never have gone to Sidious, she would never have *understood*, she was—”

“Vader.” Tarkin is kneeling now, moving to find the edges of Vader’s helmet. The angles are too wide, too unnatural, and Tarkin is struck by how little the mask reveals Vader’s true feelings. The helmet inspires fear, the featureless stare only a reflection of Imperial power, but Tarkin realizes how the helmet isn’t only to strike fear into the hearts of Imperial traitors. The mask is just as effective at protecting Vader himself from the prying eyes of the galaxy.

“The greatest risk she took was to follow me, and only for the sake of her child, when *everything*—everything I did was for her, to *save her*—” Vader reaches out, placing a palm against the dark metal of the floor, and Tarkin sits back to let Vader lean forward. He knows Vader isn’t entirely himself, that Vader’s movements aren’t necessarily born of a desire to get closer to Tarkin, but Tarkin does not leave. He cannot leave. He brings his hands to the point of Vader’s helmet, finding the seam between respirator and mask, and prepares to cup Vader’s head in both hands.

“Anakin.”

“I am *not Anakin!*” Vader’s hand is a fist now, slamming against the floor to send machine parts flying and driving the air from Tarkin’s lungs. He can feel the *weight* pressing against him, as if he’s been plunged underwater, but the pressure is so much more than that. The flurry of anger, of grief, of helpless rage surrounds Tarkin entirely, and he closes his eyes to push away the panic as Vader’s presence pulses around him.

Tarkin does not move—whether because he is incapable of movement, or simply because he is patient, he cannot tell. With his eyes closed, he cannot see Vader’s movement, but the pressure subsides slowly until Tarkin is confident enough to move forward again. As he opens his eyes, he sits forward once more, kneeling in order to place his hands on Vader’s helmet again.

“You will *never* call me...*that*.” Vader’s voice is dripping with anger now, a wild contrast to his earlier lack of emotion. Tarkin sighs to himself, pushing against Vader to encourage him upright, and Tarkin finally manages to locate the latches along the seam in order to lift Vader’s helmet up and off of his skull.

Tarkin is not a sentimental man. He is not prone to excesses of emotion. Even when he is, he knows that emotion is a dangerous factor, a wild unpredictability. But as he sets the helmet aside, watching Vader’s features contort in pain, Tarkin admits that ignoring something as basic as emotion might be a dangerous mistake.

“I’m not her, am I.” Tarkin keeps his voice soft, moving as if taming a wild animal, and he places a hand against Vader’s cheek to feel the dampness of tears. As Vader leans forward, Tarkin uses his other hand to help pull away the respirator, hearing Vader’s heavy breathing now unhampered by the mouthpiece.

Vader says nothing, but now, Tarkin is realizing the reason behind Vader’s silence. Vader does not keep his silence because he feels *nothing*; no, Vader remains quiet because he is feeling too much.

Tarkin cannot argue this, cannot find anything in this to foster annoyance, and he simply waits as Vader leans against him.

“You never know when to run.” Vader bows his head, reaching up to grab Tarkin by the upper arms. Tarkin runs a finger back against Vader’s scalp, feeling the ridge of scar tissue.

“I am not a man who runs away.”

“Some would call that foolishness. Arrogance, even. Ignorance.”

“I call it dedication. Resolution.”

Vader inhales shakily, and Tarkin is amazed by how this simple sound makes him tense. “You have had ample opportunity to leave.”

“I left last time because you *insisted*. You were right to make me leave, given your state, but I do not appreciate being told to *go*. I am a Grand Moff, remember. There are few people who give me orders.”

Vader shakes his head, and as he finally straightens to face Tarkin fully, Tarkin is struck by how Vader’s smile still retains so much sadness. “I’m not Anakin Skywalker. Not anymore.”

Tarkin doesn’t understand, not fully. But if the name is painful for Vader, then it’s clearly more effort than it’s worth to use it. He cannot be angry with Vader for feeling some attachment to a former lover, even if that lover is dead. Tarkin’s sting of resentment at the comparison is clearly nothing in light of Vader’s conflict.

“You don’t have to explain everything. Your pain is your own, and it isn’t my place to—”

“You wouldn’t have loved Anakin Skywalker.” Vader interrupts, eyes glittering in the light. “You might have admired him. You might have even preferred his company. But he was too weak to hold your interest for long.”

Tarkin is taken aback, surprised by Vader’s presumed familiarity with Tarkin’s tendencies. Vader *is* presuming here, assuming far too much than he could ever guess, and Tarkin is irritated by the apparent breach of privacy. But this is what he likes about Vader, his surprising emotional dexterity and his powerful insight.

“As you say I love Vader now.”

“You went to the Emperor—my master, the most powerful being in the galaxy—and *argued* with him. No one does that for a man about whom they are ambivalent.” Vader exhales slowly, pulling away to escape Tarkin’s grip. “No one has done that for *me* since I was a child.”

Tarkin blinks, and before he can stop himself, the words escape him. “Not even your wife?”

“My wife learned to fear me after she grew to love me. Her fear weakened her.” Vader reaches up, touching Tarkin’s chin with a single finger. “Your fear sharpens you. I loved her. I loved her with the entirety of my being. But she fled when she learned what I was becoming.”

“And you killed her.” Tarkin knows this is dangerous, knows this is *painful*, but he cannot avoid it. He needs to know. The smile on Vader’s face fades, and he drops his hand, but he does not furrow his brow in anger—he simply nods.

“I will not excuse my actions. I killed a defenseless woman, after calling her my wife.”

Tarkin nods slowly, pleased that they can have this conversation without needless shouting matches. “You’ve killed many more, Lord Vader. Were it not your place to strike down those who oppose the Empire, your actions might seem more suspect. But we are men of war. I’ve killed, or had others kill for me. There is no need to excuse yourself to me.”

Vader watches Tarkin, his expression unreadable. “I love you, Wilhuff Tarkin.”

Despite himself—despite the push and pull of this conversation, despite the rapid movement of emotion, despite the fact that a normal, rational man would be horrified and shocked by Vader’s actions—Tarkin treasures the flicker of excitement that sparks in his cerebellum, the words prompting a rush of tingly thrill.

“As I love you, Vader.”

Vader looks away, his posture tense, but he seems to resolve his own uncertainty soon enough. “You now know that this will not be enough to save you, should we ever come into true conflict.”

“If I become a man who stands at odds to your purposes, or to the goals of the Empire, I would rather have you cut me down than let me poison everything for which I stand.” Tarkin pushes forward, following Vader back, and he finally grabs at Vader’s shoulder before tugging at him. “I need to return to Seswenna. There is much I’ve ignored since coming here.”

“You enjoy taking risks.” Vader notes, studying Tarkin. “I’m sure the Emperor will find a reason for us to associate again soon enough.”

“That he may. But don’t think I’ll always be so patient as to wait for Palpatine’s permission.” Moving his hand from Vader’s shoulder to Vader’s chin, Tarkin pulls Vader forward, finally meeting Vader’s lips with his own to press into a soft kiss. The movement is slow, almost cautious, but Vader does not pull away, and Tarkin feels his entire nervous system sparking with excitement as Vader reaches to touch Tarkin’s shoulders. Just before Vader’s hands tighten, Tarkin pulls away, smiling as he stands.

“The Empire requires our attention, Lord Vader.”

Vader’s gaze is disappointed, almost offended by Tarkin’s departure, but he recovers quickly enough to mirror Tarkin’s grin. “Far be it from me to interfere with your duties, Governor.”

“I’m sure you’ll find a way, soon enough.” Tarkin says, lacing the words with promise, and he tugs his uniform back into neatness before turning to go. His emergence from the imposing room is almost casual, nonchalant as the troopers standing guard salute at his arrival. He glances between them, nodding in confirmation, then allows himself a pleased smile as he directs them to return to the shuttle. Yes, he is disappointed that he has to leave. He’s upset that he simply cannot abandon everything and remain here, watching Vader work and listening to him think. But there will be time enough for that later.

And the simple admission of love should be more than enough to sustain him through the time they spend apart.

Chapter End Notes

I have no self-restraint and felt that there needed to be another chapter to finish this 'arc'.

This should tie off some of these loose ends, and I promise that anything further will be a little more light-hearted in tone.

Also, blame Starbroken for my energy in this. Their enthusiasm is infectious.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Vader isn't the only one who's had other loves in the past.

Though Tarkin's place is in the Outer Rim, in the ebb and flow of local politics and the security measures of the most distant reaches of the Empire, he remains an important figure in the main functioning of the Empire. The ISB requires his constant oversight, the various development teams all need his curation, and the Joint Chiefs require his presence to confirm any military movements. It is an honor, to be *needed* so deeply by the Empire, but it does pull him away from Eriadu and Seswenna. Still, Coruscant has its own appeal, and Tarkin has punctuated his meetings with visits to the upper floors of the Senate offices, gazing out at the Coruscant skyline from the enormous windows.

Since the creation of the Empire, Coruscant has changed little. The traffic is still oppressive, omnipresent, and the streets and buildings form hills and valleys with a near-organic rhythm. The InterGalactic Banking Clan always has construction on some part of its buildings, the scaffolding practically part of the architecture for how long it has been in place. High above, invisible to the naked eye, satellites continue the massive coordination necessary for Coruscant to function, forming a web both physical and metaphysical around the planet. The *Executrix* has had to station herself in the orbit of a neighboring planet, so great is the congestion around Coruscant, and Tarkin can feel the tick of concern that his ship is so far away. He is not *worried*; he does not need a ship to feel comfortable, no physical token to bring him relief. He simply knows the *Executrix* better than any other ship, and would rather have her close by in case of emergency. Still, Coruscant is one of the safest planets in the Empire, insulated from rebellion merely by its size.

Though he has had an audience with the Emperor—a private audience, nonetheless—Palpatine has made no mention of Tarkin's recent demands, complaints, or threats in connection with Darth Vader. Palpatine is apparently content to smooth over his indiscretions, or finds it more profitable not to mention it, and so Tarkin avoids the issue. Their conversations focus on weaponry, on the machinations of Orson Krennic, of General Motti, of Tagge and Jerjerrod and Thrawn. On every member of the Imperial high command *except* Darth Vader. And so it is that Tarkin emerges from the meeting somehow refreshed, despite the Emperor's side-stepping and deflection, and sets out on the schedule of the day.

As the day nears evening, Tarkin descends the buildings, moving from the Emperor's audience chambers in the very highest reaches down through the various administrations, ending closer to street level for his final checks of the day. Lights begin to dot the buildings, lending a different kind of glow to the streets, and as Tarkin emerges from his final meetings, he exhales a sigh of relief to find the building emptying of staff, quiet as the shifts change and administrators leave for the night.

Though the *Executrix* is his ship, there is some excitement in being free of his crew and staff. It was more expedient for him to come alone, and with the day's work at an end, Tarkin is left without a place to be or a duty to fulfill. He is on shore leave, untethered to any group—and not only that, but he is on leave *on Coruscant*.

It takes him a long minute to decide on his course of action, and it is the flash of a yacht in the street

below that convinces him of a plan. Thus, instead of finding a shuttle and taking a quiet ride back to the staff quarters, Tarkin steps out into the rush of Coruscanti traffic, catching an open-air speeder to dive into the stream of traffic.

Though his ‘pilot’ is little more than an embellished droid, it navigate the tangle of traffic with ease, allowing Tarkin to lean forward and study the movement around him. As an Outer Rim cadet, Coruscant had been terrifying, and it is no less overwhelming now. It is decadent and depraved, filled to bursting with beings and power and money. Having to carry out judicial investigations had been nightmarish at best, even with the profusion of security cameras and police droids, but there is still a magic to the lights and sounds and rush of Coruscant. As the speeder whirls through the arts district, then settles to a gentle landing, Tarkin nods in approval, letting the credit chip process payment before he steps onto the walkway.

Another advantage of Coruscant: no one recognizes him as quickly. The thought reminds him to remove his insignia plaque and tuck into his breast pocket, unfastening the top fasteners of his military tunic to expose the undershirt beneath. Suitably ‘out of uniform’, Tarkin squares his shoulders, stepping into the flow of walkers before ducking out and entering a discreet, quietly marked entryway.

Immediately, he feels his tension easing, the comparative quiet of the bar allowing him to gain his bearings. Rather than going straight to the bartop itself, Tarkin edges along the side of the room, studying the other patrons before concluding that he is unlikely to be dragged into any petty rivalries, turf wars, or power grabs. This is not a place for politics, even if it is frequented by Imperial officers. Now and again, they can all recognize the need to simply *relax*.

The noise of conversation and laughter forms an adequate backdrop as Tarkin makes his way to a lone table, checking the digitized menu available before tapping one of the options and inputting his access code. (There are some advantages, even in civilian circles, for having an Imperial military identity, and this bar has recognized it more fully than most.) As he waits, tapping a finger against the table, he watches the movement of the other officers and Imperial staff, amused at how they mimic the flow of traffic outside. Here, a newcomer enters a group—there, a pair of officers pulls away to talk in privacy. It is unclear whether they are fighting or flirting, and Tarkin decides that the difference is inconsequential.

“Well! It’s not every day we get the pleasure of seeing you back in the Core.” A voice interrupts his thoughts, and Tarkin leans back as another man leans against his table. For a moment, Tarkin merely frowns, studying the man’s high forehead, casual smile, and perfectly styled hair, then finally stands straight as he offers a smile of his own.

“Reel! I almost didn’t recognize you. It’s been *years*, hasn’t it, since Piell’s ship? You can’t tell me you’ve been trapped planet-side all that time.”

“Not all of us can be as decorated as you, *Grand Moff*.” The other man raises his eyebrows with meaningful intent, glancing at Tarkin’s chest to find the plaque missing before nodding in greeting. “Don’t think I haven’t paid attention. It’s hard to ignore your name in the news, you know.”

“Yes, well—” Tarkin pauses as a waitress arrives, darting close to deposit a cup on the table before disappearing back into the shadows of the bar. Tarkin thinks for a moment, taking his seat, then nods to the space across from him. “Join me.”

The other officer makes no complaint, setting his own glass on the table to follow Tarkin’s lead. The two men are quiet as they sip at their drinks, the noise cocooning them, and finally Tarkin nods across the table.

“So, what must I call you now? I would think I would have run into you before now, if you made admiral—”

“This isn’t the place for ‘ranks’ and medals, is it, Wilhuff? You always spent too much time on these things.”

Tarkin pauses, surprised both by the use of his first name and by his companion’s deflection. “So this is to be one of *those* conversations, is it, Eobahn?”

The man smiles, leaning back with ease despite Tarkin’s newfound intensity. “There it is. Look around you, Wilhuff! No one here is concerned by ranks or last names. I’ve approached you with a drink in my hand and my mind on anything but the duties of the Empire. The last thing either of us need is a detailed discussion of our work roster and rotations.”

Tarkin does not respond immediately, processing Eobahn’s statements, and finally he smiles broadly to cup his drink in both hands. “Always flippant, aren’t you. Is there nothing you take seriously?”

“You know as well as I that there are some things I take *very* seriously.” As Eobahn lifts his glass to take a sip, he offers a wink over its rim, prompting Tarkin to look away as a twinge of interest tugs at his brain.

Eobahn Reel had been a fellow captain, a dedicated officer in the early days of the Clone Wars. He is older than Tarkin, but only by a standard year or two, meaning that their shared experiences in the fleet assigned to Jedi Even Piell had given them plenty of common ground to develop a sense of camaraderie. Beyond that, however, Tarkin and Reel had shared conversations like this outside of the ship, time outside of normal Republic duties where they simply *talked*, and both of them had confessed to a mutual attraction. For Tarkin, it had been easy: Reel was tall, and broad, with the clever smile of a confident man and the consideration to move slowly when Tarkin requested it. No longer were liaisons confined to furtive, hurried fumbling; as captains, they could coordinate their off-rotations, and had the capacity to find appropriate chambers for more involved encounters.

“Is Coruscant still exhausting for you, too?” Tarkin asks, brushing away his recollections in order to lean forward.

“Not if you know where to look. And as long as you stay to the higher levels. The Empire has done that well, at least: so many processes have been *streamlined*, simplified. I keep to my quarters, my spheres of influence.” Reel shrugs. “And places like these. The senators still hold galas, if you’d believe it. It’s amazing what you can learn in a single night that you wouldn’t find out in months of espionage.”

Tarkin watches Reel with interest, nodding slowly. “Don’t tell me you’ve moved into *politics*.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“*You*. The man who firmly believed that war itself was the highest form of politics, and that anything else was merely words without action? I at least have an excuse—the governorship of Eriadu was mine as soon as I asked for it. But you?”

“Listen, I said we didn’t need to talk about ranks or duties.” Reel tries to wave away the topic, but his smile betrays his interest. “But it is possible that my middle age has mellowed me some.”

“Oh, please.” Tarkin shakes his head. “For some, that would imply a negative. A weakening, or deterioration. From my first impression, Eobahn, that doesn’t seem to be the case.”

“You always knew how to give the best compliments, Wilhuff.” Reel grins, setting his glass aside,

and watches as Tarkin slowly follows suit to put his own glass back on the table. “I’d be glad to hear more.”

“You are still an insufferable tease.” Tarkin shakes his head, standing again to confirm that his tab is clear, then moves toward the outer balcony perched at the bar’s rear. He is pleased to note that Reel follows, drawn along by Tarkin’s promise, and they both emerge into the Coruscanti night in tandem. The noise is different, out here, but there are fewer patrons milling around, and Tarkin moves to the railing of the balcony before turning to face Reel again.

“You must not get out much.” Reel says, coming to the railing to close the distance between himself and Tarkin. “Then again, you must not get to Coruscant much. There’s a lot to do here, when you aren’t busy.”

“The pressures of my position mean I am *always* busy.” Tarkin is unsure why he’s using this sarcasm, this biting tone he saves for disobedient crew members, but Reel does not move away.

“You aren’t busy right now.” Reel turns slightly, facing Tarkin more fully. “You aren’t busy tonight.”

Tarkin can feel the shift in Reel’s tone, the low volume that forces Tarkin to pay more attention to Reel’s words. “No. I suppose I’m not.”

“I may have moved into politics, but it comes with its own privileges, Wilhuff. I have my own quarters now. *Real* quarters.” Reel is reaching up, touching the side of Tarkin’s cheek. “With a real bed. And real sheets. And an actual ablution room, not merely a refresher cubicle, and I can even order food delivered. *Delivered*. No more of the mess halls. This is Coruscant: anything you want, I can find.”

“Stop.” Tarkin shifts his weight from one foot to another, trying to ignore the rush of interest that is climbing up his spine. It is easy, and quick. It comes upon him faster than he would have expected, given the time that’s passed. But Reel is as convincing as always, leaning close with all his natural charm.

“Make me.” Reel touches Tarkin’s chin, prompting him to turn his head, and with mutual movement, their lips are touching.

Tarkin hates how quick this is—how easy it is for him to appreciate the contact, how desperately he wants to mimic Reel’s easy affection. Reel does not *care* if he is a Grand Moff now, or even if their careers have deviated widely from their early endeavors. Reel only wants him, even if only for a night.

Yet Tarkin pulls himself away, clinging to the railing as he places a hand on Reel’s chest. “I can’t.”

“You can’t?” Reel’s disappointment is obvious, but he does not approach Tarkin as the man takes a step back. “I assure you, if it’s an issue of scheduling—”

“It’s not that. I have...” Tarkin pauses, unsure of what he’s going to say. He has another commitment? He has another lover? He happens to be engaged with, involved with, *interested* in Darth Vader, even if he doesn’t know where Vader is at the moment?

Even if Vader cannot remove his armor as easily as Reel might shed his uniform?

Tarkin takes a breath, unsure of what this new tension means. To his credit, Reel does not move, merely watching in silence as Tarkin processes his next statement.

“I have someone.”

“I see.” Reel nods, leaning back. “I’m glad.”

“I would—otherwise. Of course. You’re still—” Tarkin stands straight, avoiding Reel’s eyes as the other man nods.

“You don’t have to explain.” Even in this, Reel’s tone is still soft and gentle, totally understanding in its calmness. “Does he make you happy?”

“Yes.” At least that answer comes quickly. Tarkin allows himself a small smile, looking up to study Reel’s expression. “It isn’t always *easy*. But he makes me happy.”

“Good.” Reel mirrors Tarkin’s smile, reaching out before stopping himself and simply nodding in response. “You have to remember to take time for the things that matter to you, Wilhuff. You were so strict, so *rigid*, back in the day, and—you know. I worried.”

“It’s flattering to know you think of me.” Tarkin nods, turning. “I hope...I mean, I don’t know what you do, but I hope—”

“You don’t have to try and escape, Wilhuff. You can go.” Reel shrugs, turning to lean against the railing. “I’m sorry. If I made you uncomfortable.”

Tarkin is quiet, watching Reel in the evening lights. “I’m glad I got to see you again.”

“As am I.” Reel nods deeply, folding his arms, and Tarkin pulls himself away from the sight in order to make his way back into the building. His taste for the calm atmosphere and conversation is gone now, and he ignores the empty tables in order to make his way back outside and towards the speeder platforms. A taxi arrives almost as easily as it had landed earlier, and Tarkin is whisked back to the staff quarters to consider the decisions he’s made.

He *is*—just as he was—attracted to Reel. Reel has aged exceptionally well, unlike some Imperial generals and admirals. But Tarkin has never addressed this with Vader: the concept seems absurd. Their relationship has been one of careful progression, of incremental steps, and even if Tarkin has been allowed into Vader’s personal quarters—even if Vader has removed his helmet, exposed his vulnerabilities, brought Tarkin into this most unique of positions—there is almost nothing in common with Tarkin’s previous relationships. At the end of the day, Tarkin isn’t even sure if they’ve really had sex.

Is Vader even capable—

Can he *survive* without the armor? Without the chestpiece, the insulated suit, the gloves and boots and mask and padding? The man’s body has clearly been through some trauma, something great enough for him to hide his face away and require constant maintenance, and Tarkin feels the twist of confusion as he considers the possible ramifications.

He’d thought himself mostly past the issues of physical attraction. His attraction to Vader is born equally from Vader’s appreciation, of Vader’s interest and dedication, and of Vader’s physical qualities. Now that he’s allowed himself to pursue this line of thought, Tarkin is caught up in the full spectrum of things he wants to *do* to Vader, and simultaneously struck by the potential impossibility of most of them.

He is fortunate that the taxis are driven by droids. The droid doesn’t notice his silence, his tension, and only chimes when he forgets to pay. He does so, making his way into the honeycombed building of staff quarters, and steps into the lift to ascend to his floor. As is his due, he’s been given space near

the top of the building, and he steps into the empty space of a relatively large apartment to simply stand in silence.

He's surprised by how much he wants to call Vader. This is another tendency he had assumed was tempered with age, but the tug of need still makes him feel listless and unsettled.

Was it a mistake, to refuse Reel? His time with Vader is so sporadic, so *short*, and he rarely has free time like this.

But Vader has given him everything.

He has faced the Emperor himself, for Vader's sake.

Isn't this really the most trivial aspect on which to linger, considering the scope of his relationship with Vader?

The itch, the need for movement, lingers under his skin, and Tarkin refuses to indulge it any further. This is Coruscant—the nightlife may be active, but there is nothing that says he needs to find any comfort in its bright lights and dynamic movement. Instead, he cues the lights to rise, letting the window darken to shut out the city outside. As is common to officer's quarters, he's been provided with a desk, and he drops his insignia plaque on the polished surface before sending down a request for caf. At the same time, he pulls up a list of the reports from the day, reminding himself of the variety of meetings in which he'd participated.

If he's going to be kept up, he might as well get something done.

Chapter 10.5

Chapter Summary

Too short for a true chapter but too long for a mere snippet. Let this hold you over until I write something for real.

Despite his work over the night, Tarkin knows that his mind is still uneasy. His mind may be clear and free from guilt, but his body rebels. The promise of free time and the introduction of Reel—something, whether mental or physical, continues to remind him that he is a human male with *needs*. He knows this is useless, that these are primitive, *adolescent* concerns, and yet the tension is there. His schedule is lighter, his duties less demanding, but he finds himself distracted as he reviews the submissions and reports from the other meetings from other committees on Coruscant. It is not often that he feels lonely in this way, shut out from conversation simply because of his own concerns, caught up in his own head. But he sincerely doubts that there is anyone, even on Coruscant, who is caught in the same situation he is. He is a superior officer of the Empire. Superior officers do not gossip with their subordinates about how likely it might be that they'll ever have sex with Darth Vader.

He could message Vader. He could request a private comm, establish the hologram transmission, demand Vader's location code, and interrupt Vader's duties just to hold a conversation. But this is excessive, even for him, and Tarkin runs a fingernail against his desk to stave off his irritation.

Instead, it is a shorter message that Tarkin passes along to a private channel, continuing in his private responsibilities until he receives a response. As soon as the time comes, he leaves his empty office and ascends, rising through the levels of Coruscant before emerging into a wide, sumptuous room. The guards and attendants are gone, meaning that there is only the figure in the seat before the windows waiting for Tarkin to approach. As Tarkin walks forward, he can see the smile on the other man's face, the quiet assurance of power displayed without even saying a word.

"Governor. *Wilhuff*." The Emperor nods deeply, gesturing towards another chair. Tarkin moves forward to claim his seat, surprised that the Emperor would allow him to be seated in these private chambers, but he finds the chair comfortable enough for him to relax slightly. "A shame that we haven't had more conversations. Too much to do, in such little time."

"You are never one to delay, Sheev." Tarkin takes the risk, using Palpatine's first name, and he can see the shift as Palpatine grins widely. Palpatine, Sheev, Emperor, Chancellor: the man moves between so many different names, Tarkin is amazed he hasn't insisted on more formal proceedings even among intimate friends.

For Tarkin is an intimate friend, even if he and Palpatine have never quite used those terms. They recognize something in each other, something sharp and eager and hungry. The look in Palpatine's eyes has frightened Tarkin at times, but it has never paralyzed him—Jova taught him that early. Animals do not have the luxury of hesitation or rational assessment. Tarkin has always evaluated his peers by their instincts. Palpatine may not have the quickness of a young man, or the physical appeal of a handsome one, but he gathers power about him like storm clouds. He has an instinct for maneuvering events without ever showing his hand, a talent Tarkin can appreciate with more than a touch of envy. And yet Tarkin has still sought him out, finding him here in the very center of his

chambers to consult on a...*deeply* personal matter.

“You wished to speak again? After all the commotion yesterday?” Palpatine waves a hand dismissively, watching the traffic outside. It holds little interest for Tarkin, but he knows that Palpatine sees much in these meaningless movements, and probably senses even more than can be seen.

“Certain events have—” Tarkin pauses, reconsidering. “I have had time to think. About certain things.”

“Your thoughts linger on my apprentice. Darth Vader.”

“Perceptive as always, my Emperor.” Tarkin does not face Palpatine, but he can sense the changing attention.

“Please, Wilhuff. If you have a question, you have only to ask.”

“You’ve approved of my interactions with him. With my closeness to him. With our mutual reliance.”

“I have allowed it.”

“And he remains your apprentice.” Yes, the game of politics: remind Palpatine of his power, his authority in this, and he will be incrementally more likely to listen to Tarkin’s questions. “You witnessed his...change, his transformation.”

“His *becoming*.” Palpatine inhales, almost trembling with the breath. Tarkin is surprised, shocked by the apparent intensity of the statement, but says nothing to contradict.

“Yes. In his...becoming, then you had a hand. You organized his helmet, his mask, the chestpiece he now wears. Is he really so destroyed, so entirely *gone*, that the entire armor is vital to his survival? How much of him is the machinery, and how much is still...”

“Human? Oh, Wilhuff.” Palpatine’s voice never loses its teasing edge, its sarcastic bite. Wilhuff can feel the fracture where respect might slip away, this admission of weakness an opportunity for Palpatine to ridicule him. “I trust you have some awareness of Vader’s former attributes. Before the armor, and his education.”

“I have had my suspicions.”

Palpatine nods, apparently pleased. “You and Anakin Skywalker were close, in the Clone Wars. The small matter of a rescue mission, I believe. You may have recognized the seeds of Vader in him, even then.”

Tarkin curls his lip, displeased by the distraction of days gone by. “This does not answer my question.”

“You think you’re asking about simple mechanics. What do the machines regulate, and how much can be removed? For Vader, the distinction between his mechanisms and his being does not exist. There would be no Vader without the mask, without the armor.”

“Yet you claim there were seeds of Vader before Skywalker...changed.”

“Skywalker sought to be a good man. This is what Padme Amidala saw in him, but what she failed to realize was that Vader’s true nature was not one of ‘goodness’. The nature of the galaxy is not one

of ‘goodness’. By enforcing this standard, she only encouraged Vader to question it further; by imposing it on the galaxy, she only provoked the behavior she sought to destroy. Greed, and hatred, and desire cannot be muted by kind smiles or warm laughter. They can be turned to good purposes, with careful handling. They can be destructive, in the wrong places, but they need not be discouraged entirely.”

Tarkin sits up, gripping the arms of his chair as he tries to keep up with Palpatine’s leaps in conversation. “Amidala? The senator from Naboo?”

“Yes. She was Skywalker’s wife, before he killed her.” Palpatine glances to Tarkin for the first time, his smile sharp. “I’m sorry. I assumed you knew.”

“I barely knew the woman, I—” Amidala? The one who precipitated the crisis, who intensified the early movements of the Trade Federation with her stubbornness? Skywalker had found himself married to *her*?

“Her presence was useful, for a time. But Vader recognized that her aims were contrary to ours.”

“They had a child.” Tarkin breathes, his pulse thrumming in his wrists. “Skywalker—”

“Oh, he loved her deeply. The child died when she did. It should not concern you.”

Tarkin grips the chair, trying in vain to relax his tension. “Sheev.”

“Wilhuff. I will confess to some private maneuvering. We had discussed your interests in depth by that time, you must remember. You’d mentioned some preferences for men on the taller side? Lighter hair, clear eyes, quick wits? I was honored—and remain honored—that you had chosen to share such information with me.”

“You wanted me to meet with Skywalker.” Tarkin nods, forcing himself to breathe. “You knew I would find something in him, something attractive.”

“If you were not to see him enough to nurture those first hints of Vader, then at least you could enjoy his company. He would learn to enjoy yours.”

“Vader is not Skywalker, Sheev.”

“He retains parts of Skywalker’s body.” Palpatine pauses, tilting his head. “The important parts.”

Tarkin blinks, feeling a rush of heat climbing up the back of his neck. “How can you—”

“When Vader faced his greatest threat, I was the one who rescued him. I oversaw the medical procedures, the design of his maintenance mechanisms and armor. Remember too, Wilhuff, that I was already his master. His private concerns, his deep turmoil—this was already clear to me.”

“What are you trying to tell me?”

“If you seek to seduce Vader, there is nothing to stand in your way. His attraction to Amidala was equivalent to—or perhaps even less than—his current attraction to *you*. You are both of an age where actual appearance means little, yes? Surely his appearance isn’t so repulsive to you that you’re concerned for your own reaction, when the time comes.”

“Vader has...spoken to you of this.”

“With the same reluctance you have. Wilhuff, if you seek to unarmor the man, then *do so*. I will

leave it to him to explain the explicit details, but from a purely mechanical standpoint, Vader is still capable of experiencing the same desires he did when he was Skywalker. It will be difficult, to an extent. It will not be as easy as your other interactions. However, you may find some measure of comfort in the fact that Skywalker may have been married—but he had also been a Jedi. They are not known for their sexual exploits, unlike some of the Republic’s military branches.”

Tarkin shakes his head, unable to prevent himself from smiling. “I didn’t know you paid attention when I rambled on about the other captains.”

“I’d heard far worse. I was a senator, remember.” The robed figure visibly shudders, sitting up. “You, at least, had the decency to *allude* to your little romantic escapades without the gory details. You learned to find your way without my interference. Vader has not found it so easy, but that never diminished his willingness to learn.”

Tarkin moves to stand at last, retreating behind the Emperor’s desk in order to begin pacing. “The Empire is busy. It makes many demands on our time.”

“Permissive I may be, Wilhuff, but I cannot grant you the time or coordination to explore your whims.”

“Oh, I wasn’t suggesting it, Sheev.” Tarkin nods. “Where would the fun be in *scheduling* these conversations? No, you can allow me my own freedom in this. I simply needed your confirmation. Reassurance of...my doubts.”

“You are allowed to doubt yourself in these matters, Wilhuff.” Palpatine laughs to himself, leaning back. “As long as your determination and loyalty never wavers.”

“Never, my Emperor.” Tarkin brings himself to a stop, standing tall in the center of the room. “Your wisdom is a boon to us all.”

“No need to speak on behalf of my citizens, Governor Tarkin. Your continued vigilance is gift enough for this Emperor.”

With a deep breath, Tarkin brings his heels together. “Thank you. Sheev.”

Palpatine raises a single hand, his dismissal the merest turn of the palm. “You must never fear to come to me, Wilhuff. Even on such matters as this. I am grateful to have you—as both my Grand Moff, and as my friend.”

Tarkin is thoughtful, quiet for a long moment as he studies the back of Palpatine’s seat. Finally, he can do little but offer a final bow, turning to leave the office before exiting back into the dark, monochrome hallways. As he maneuvers through the halls, stepping into lifts and taking the back corridors through various offices, he keeps his thoughts to himself as he considers his next possibilities.

Sheev is, if nothing else, perceptive. He has known of Tarkin’s tendencies, of Tarkin’s *preferences* in a partner, since the early days of their interaction. Palpatine has certainly known of Vader’s tendencies in romance, if his explanation is to be believed, and Tarkin has no reason to doubt him. Palpatine had encouraged Tarkin, even when Tarkin himself doubted the value of romance—and he has encouraged him now. He has tested Tarkin’s relationship with Vader, though without any malice towards Tarkin personally, and he has not found it wanting.

And now, with Palpatine’s information...

Tarkin is going to have to prepare *extensively* for the next time he and Vader meet.

Birds and Bees

Chapter Summary

This probably isn't the chapter you were expecting, but it's too long for me to discard it now. Besides, there's enough discussion to merit some interest--and lots and lots of innuendo.

On the ground, distant rumbling makes the pebbles shake. There is the hint of movement, almost as gentle as the harsh winds that drive across the empty plains. There are habitations here, yes, small round huts just poking above the dirt. In the distance, there are larger structures, windmills and storage warehouses blending into the skyline of a city.

And in the city, dust plumes every time a building falls.

Vader does not care about the screaming, or the noise, or even the huge weights of stone and brick falling around him. They do not pose a danger, and thus are inconsequential. The resistance here is strong, surprising in a community so small, but Vader has already lost men. Good men. He steps over the white body of a stormtrooper with as much concern as he would take stepping over a mound of rubble, and watches as another denotation charge goes off.

“Lord Vader, there are tunnels below the storage buildings—there’s reason to believe—”

“Move in *pursuit*, Commander, I want these rebels found.” Vader does not need to add emphasis to his voice to have his orders followed. The commander nods, running back to his squad, and Vader tries to determine the best route. He has the advantage of the Force, yes, but his attention is divided. There are rebels underground, children. The tunnels are unlikely to go far. On speeder bikes and skyhoppers, older children race across the empty fields, but it’s possible they’ve been told to do so only as a distraction. The parents, the mothers and fathers and *leaders* here, are still fighting. And he has yet to find one who will surrender.

“Lord Vader—” Again, the crackle of comms. The routine is practically comforting by now, consistent in its regularity. Vader sighs to himself, turning his attention aside, and allows the comm to go through. “We’ve found a group of men, and we’ve managed to stun some. They may give up information, but I don’t know how quickly we can get to work.”

“Inform me of their location. Let me impress upon them the scope of Imperial might.” Vader clenches a fist, listening to a string of coordinates before marching across the ruined city. Bodies are strewn beneath him, most crushed by the falling rubble rather than shot by blasterfire. In the distance, there is screaming, the yells of fighters, but Vader has yet to hear weeping. Weeping has accompanied war for eons, the families of the dead or dying crying out for succor, but there is no weeping here. The people continue to fight.

As Vader reaches a small courtyard, he spies the line of “prisoners”. No formalities of Imperial custody here: the men have been bound with rope, not the links they use on ship, and they are kneeling in a line rather than standing. Vader could find reason to argue with this protocol, but his emotion overrules Imperial standards right now. These rebels have stood against him, and refuse to understand their position.

“There are other rebels on this planet.” Vader says, moving down the line of men as they shake themselves awake. Some struggle, but the butt of a rifle to the back of the head quickly reminds them of their place, and their wriggling ceases. “You will give up their locations to me.”

One man spits on the ground by Vader’s feet, glaring up at him. “You don’t know a rebel from a nerf’s hind leg.”

Vader pauses, watching the man face him. There is grim determination there, just as it has been on the faces of dozens of would-be revolutionaries before him. This man is not special. He is barely creative enough to plead for his own life.

“The planet will suffer for what you’ve done here today.” Vader says calmly, sensing the attention of the other rebels. Some are weaker, yes. Some will talk. But he needs to cut off their fleeing tendrils, determine if any information has gotten free. Even children can talk.

“The *galaxy* suffers for what you do! You, and your troopers, and your Emperor, ignoring the simple desires of simple people to live in peace—” The man lurches as he chokes suddenly, his tongue caught in his mouth. Vader watches in silence as the man begins to writhe, arching backward as the pressure constricts around him, and when he lunges back, the men next to him are pulled backwards in his wake. There is no sound but the man’s labored attempts at breathing, spittle foaming around his mouth as his lips contort soundlessly.

“The Empire recognizes your desire to choose your fates. I give you the option: there can be swift mercy now, if you give me the information I want, or there can be pain. Your spokesman here has advocated for pain; I await the response of one who chooses otherwise.”

Again, there is silence. Vader strides to the end of the line, his irritation growing, and finally he selects another target.

“What was the next target? Your spies had the codes prepared, your agents in place—I want names. Ships.”

Another man begins to shift in discomfort; the troopers back away slightly, perplexed as their neat line of prisoners begins to fall out of order. Vader raises a hand, balling it into a fist as the Force drains the second man of breath—then a new noise echoes through his comms and the transmitters of his troopers.

The moment Vader hears the voice, he reaches for the hologram transmitter on his belt, keying it to the communication frequency. It is only a bust, no full-scale figure, but it is enough to capture the sharp nose and fierce gaze of Grand Moff Wilhuff Tarkin. The rebels react visibly, preparing to scoff, but Tarkin is already speaking as they rear back.

“To the rebels in place at Khariti: I am Grand Moff Tarkin, overseer of the Seswenna sector and governor of Eriadu. Your outpost is in ruins. You lack the ships to get off-planet. And now—” With the theatrics of a practiced politician, Tarkin shifts to let the holo show another cityscape, this one larger and more industrial. “—There will be no assistance from Theovere. Even as we speak, my men are stationed throughout the city, and the outlying towns are being sacked. The city burns for your actions today, rebels. This is what rebellion means.”

“He’s lying!” A man shouts, lurching forward to throw the line even further out of joint. Vader turns to him, switching off the holo as it begins to loop, then glances behind him at the horizon.

“Even now, the smoke rises from Theovere. The ships, your messengers—there will be no succor.”

“You would kill this? Kill all of them, just for a tiny band of freedom fighters—”

“Grand Moff Tarkin has made the position of the Empire clear.” And far more dramatically than Vader would have expected. “Tell us the name of your contacts, and an arrangement can be made.”

A low keening is audible, behind the noise of the explosions and blaster shots, and Vader resists the urge to inhale deeply. *There* is the weeping. With that single noise, he knows these rebels are broken.

“I’ll talk.” Another man, a touch older than his neighbors, nods to Vader. Vader finds himself impressed by the strength in the man’s posture, the nobility in his bearing, but does not allow his respect to translate into mercy. Even those with good intentions are easily led astray. “Tell Tarkin to leave Theovere, or at least—don’t bomb it. Khariti would have sustained it, we know how to flee, but the city—”

“You have the information I need?” Vader interrupts, bringing the man back to his point.

“Yes.” There is a beat of hesitation, and the man looks up at Vader’s expressionless helmet. “I will not ask for my freedom. We are yours. But I have access to the lists and datalogs of our communications.”

“You spineless scum, you weak-brained lizard-breath—” A man, one of the dissidents from earlier, lunges towards Vader’s confessee, and Vader has only to reach out with a hand to stop the man from moving any further. Caught, paralyzed in mid-air, the rebel writhes, his back arching as he begins to gasp.

“Free this man. Take the others to my ship.” Vader continues to manipulate the body of his current victim, watching it twist against the ground. “Leave this one for me.”

The troopers move with wordless efficiency, moving around Vader and his captive to lift some men to their feet. Those still recovering are slung over the shoulders of other troopers, and the tramp of feet marches into the distance as Vader maintains his hold on his last individual victim. The pain is sweet, untinged by anger any longer, and Vader lets his mind flick to Tarkin as he tastes the raw anguish of his companion.

This is Tarkin’s victory, even if he will not recognize it as such. This rebellious shoot has been ripped from the ground—not merely cut close, but *destroyed*. There is not hope here. There is only despair, trickling through this last victim’s brain in dark streaks. The man will die in pain, knowing not only that he failed, but that his entire enterprise meant nothing.

The sensation robs Vader of breath for nearly a full minute, his body hyper-responsive to the echoes of the Force, and the chime of a comm only serves to remind him of Tarkin.

Tarkin.

The man has come here.

The man has sought him out, it seems, but not to rescue him. This was a purely military exercise, performed with minimal coordination and maximum effect. There is nothing personal about Tarkin’s presence here, nothing specifically meaningful for Vader.

And yet Vader’s thoughts linger not on the man dying before him, nor on the promise of this extinguished rebellion, but on Tarkin—and the potential of their meeting later today.

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Despite the rigor of Imperial procedure, Grand Moff Tarkin has thrown much of the protocol to the wind. Vader is overwhelmed by the reports coming in as he returns to the shuttles, but none of them bear Tarkin's signature. There is instead the stamp of lieutenants, the signatures of captains and commanders, and Vader is...

He's *disappointed*.

The sensation shocks him. Vader is not in the habit of being denied the things he wants. But he looks for Tarkin's name and does not find it, and the feeling of loss makes him pause.

He is, of course, grateful for Tarkin's presence here. His return to the *Executor* is marked with the triumphant reports of his own commanders, the interrogations having proved profitable. It will be a simple matter for the ISB to find the weak links in the Imperial chain and snip them closed. Vader can leave these petty rebellious concerns, return to his real duties in the Inner Core, make his rounds through the Imperial administrators and their projects to trace the needs of the Empire. His duties are never clear or straightforward, never condensed to a simple roster or a worksheet. But he will be glad to have the change.

Vader chooses not to initiate an after-encounter report: most of his commanders have no need for debriefing, and Tarkin will likely handle his own personnel. Still, this means that Vader is left with little to do, and so he moves not to the main bridge, but to an auxiliary tactical station, a stormtrooper patrol pausing to salute as he ducks inside. He does not have the time or patience to meditate at the moment, but he does need his space. Perhaps Palpatine will call—he can always be ready.

When the comm comes, Vader sits up in attention. But it isn't Palpatine, to his surprise. No, instead, there is the proud smile of Governor Tarkin, present in a full-body holo instead of the bust from earlier. Vader says nothing as the transmission stabilizes, trying to solidify his own approach as Tarkin nods.

"Lord Vader. This is a time of celebration."

"I leave the details of such celebration to you, Governor Tarkin."

"What a prosaically resolute approach." Tarkin leans forward, lending a casual air to the small image, and Vader finds himself amused at the display.

"You disapprove."

"That you keep yourself separate from menial celebrations? No. That you might refuse to accept *any* sort of leisure activity? That I would contest more firmly."

"I don't have the patience for word games today, Governor."

"Is that so? Even with your victory? Very well." Tarkin straightens to nod once, tapping a foot against the floor. "Come to the *Executrix*."

"There's no reason to—"

"I want to see you." Tarkin tilts his head forward, lending a weight to his declaration that surprises Vader. Not that it should—Tarkin is always direct, refusing to equivocate. This should be no different.

"Governor."

"I want to *see* you, Vader." Tarkin tenses, visible even in the holo, and Vader finds that the decision

is easy to make. As he stands, he composes the comm-ping in his head, watching Tarkin before nodding in response.

“I’ll be there shortly.”

Tarkin relaxes again, leaving them both to sign off in silence, and Vader lets the order to his shuttle process as he begins the descent to the hangar. Fortunately, there is no need for him to take an escort, and Vader uses his clearance to override the usual protocols. The communication between the *Executor* and the *Executrix* is incredibly simple when one is the personal apprentice of the Emperor, and Vader’s requests are automatically granted as the ship computers recognize his access.

The transit is quiet, almost seamless, and Vader stands instead of sitting as the shuttle moves between Star Destroyers. Unfortunately, there is no access in here to the computer systems, and Vader is left with only his own thoughts as the shuttle makes its landing and he exits out onto the *Executrix*. His autopilot takes him to the lift and up through the levels, but before he makes it halfway up the command column, a ping in his comm redirects him to a different level. It takes some changing, but finally Vader is nearing Tarkin’s apparent location, and Vader finds the door opening to admit him as he nears Tarkin’s position.

Vader is not prepared for what he finds: Tarkin is alone, standing in front of a terminal with a datapad atop it, and he’s holding a glass with some sort of liquid inside. Belatedly, Vader realizes that he’s standing inside the commander’s personal quarters, the captain’s station aboard the *Executrix*, and he stares in some consternation as Tarkin faces him with a nod.

“You made it.”

“Your order was unforgiving.”

Tarkin raises his free hand, waving away the statement. “It wasn’t an order. A...request.”

“You were standing on the bridge of your ship. I wasn’t aware you made requests when in front of your crew.”

Tarkin shrugs casually, his attitude at odds with his neat and pressed uniform. As he leaves the terminal, he steps closer to Vader, reaching out to touch the chin of Vader’s helmet.

“My *crew* don’t need to concern themselves with what I say to you, Lord Vader.”

“Some discretion *might* be advisable. At times.” Vader is confused, unsettled for the second time that day. Reaching out, he takes Tarkin’s hand and pulls it away, watching Tarkin adjust to the movement.

“Always so discreet. We are captains, aren’t we, commanders of men and ships. So little room for real conversation.”

“We are having a real conversation now.” Vader points out, earning another nod from Tarkin. Tarkin says nothing, drifting into deep thought, and he finally pulls away to set down his glass on his desk before turning back to Vader.

“I have questions. For you.”

“Questions.” Vader repeats, perplexed by Tarkin’s approach. That Tarkin would request a visit with Vader is not so unusual: Vader had been happy to accept the request. But this bluntness is different.

“We’ve been intimate. You’ve taken it upon yourself to seduce me.” Tarkin’s eyes flick to the

ground, his hand coming up to gesture between them both. “In the language of the canteen, you’ve ‘handled me quite unprofessionally’. But we haven’t had sex.”

Vader considers the statement for a long moment, letting Tarkin lean back against his desk, then exhales slowly. “I don’t see why that’s important.”

“I want to consider it, to open it as an option, but—there’s some difficulty there, because I don’t know *how*.” Tarkin shrugs again, tapping his fingers against his arm, and Vader steps forward to try and locate the latches on his helmet. After a moment of searching, he beckons to Tarkin, nodding once.

“Help.”

Tarkin responds well enough, reaching up to follow Vader’s fingers to the latches holding the upper half of the helmet in place, and with a few economical movements, Vader is finally free. The helmet is set aside, placed on the desk beside Tarkin, and Vader is able to consider Tarkin more fully without the interference of the feedbacks.

“See, you’re—” Tarkin reaches up, but stops himself, furrowing his brow as he thinks. “Plainly put, Lord Vader, you aren’t *like* the other boys.”

Vader is struck by the turn of phrase in Tarkin’s unconventional repertoire, unsure of the flippant tone and uncertain meaning. “Yes, well. You chose to pursue me anyway.”

“And—forgive me, Lord Vader, but—”

“Vader.” Vader corrects, earning a look from Tarkin. “You’re allowed to call me Vader. You know that.”

“Yes. Vader.” Tarkin shakes his head, then finally stabilizes himself by grasping onto Vader’s shoulders. “I wouldn’t change that decision. I would still pursue you, still seek out our conversations, still ask for you like this. But we haven’t had sex, not in the way I think of it. I’ve never seen you without your armor. I’m grateful for what I have—what we have done, and I’m flattered that you’d allow me to see that much, but—I need to know. What’s possible, that is.”

Vader is quiet still, sensing the concern underlying Tarkin’s rambling. It is nebulous and unformed, still reluctant to emerge, but Vader knows its dimensions well enough. He’s given it thought, even if those thoughts wander closer to Padmé than to Tarkin. The contrasts come almost uninvited, and Vader can feel the seam where the accusation of disloyalty lies.

Perhaps it’s just as well Tarkin’s asking now, rather than later.

“You want to know if we’ll ever be more intimate than this. Me in my armor and you in your uniform.” Vader tilts his head in interest.

“It’s not a conversation I’ve *had*, Vader. Not with you, not with anyone.” Tarkin protests. “But. Yes.”

“You enjoyed our little respites before.” Vader illustrates his meaning by bringing his hands to Tarkin’s hips. With only a moment of hesitation, Tarkin moves backward to seat himself on the desk, letting Vader slide forward to adjust his grip. “That was a start.”

“I.” Tarkin purses his lips, setting his shoulders. “I’m not saying I didn’t enjoy them. They were… nice.”

“Based on your reaction, they were more than ‘nice’.” Vader smiles as Tarkin glares at him, the tension shifting into a more comfortable atmosphere. “The armor isn’t easy. You know better than most. The helmet itself is not the simplest mechanism, and the rest are so interwoven—”

“But can I do it?” Tarkin interrupts. “With enough time, certainly I could learn. I could help you disassemble it, arrange it as you needed.”

“Possibly.” Vader glances down at himself, at the clean lines and sharp corners of his chestpiece. The weight is practically invisible to him now, simply part of his everyday functioning, and he can’t tell how he might react if Tarkin was to remove it. Outside of his sanctuary...

“We won’t be doing that yet.” Vader concludes, his voice harsher than he intends. Tarkin is quiet, the quarters falling into silence, and finally Tarkin resumes.

“Do you experience arousal at all?”

“I can. I do.” Vader pauses. “I have.”

“What do you do? If all the mechanisms are interwoven—”

“I *wait*, Wilhuff.” Again, the harshness. Vader forces himself to breathe, then nods. “It is usually fleeting. On rare, rare occasions, I indulge the biological processes involved.” Shrugging, Vader releases Tarkin, moving back to let the other man adjust.

“But it can be done.” Tarkin nods, studying Vader’s body in full as he thinks. Vader is unsure why this line of questioning provokes such tension in him, the deeper corners of unexplored anger, and he closes his eyes to smooth his own uncertainty. “What about your gloves?”

“What about them?” Vader opens his eyes again, watching Tarkin nod.

“Can they be removed? Is there some greater machinery I can’t see behind them, too?”

Vader raises a hand, flexing the fabric experimentally. “No. My left hand is prosthetic, a droid hand, but the skin is there.”

Tarkin nods knowingly, reaching out to take Vader’s hand in both of his. “That might be a place to start, then.”

“After all this? You’d be happy to simply take off my gloves and consider that enough?”

“I didn’t say it would be ‘enough’. I said it was a place to start.” Tarkin’s irritation is echoed in his voice and his glare, but he doesn’t release Vader as he stands. “I’m not asking to bring you pain, Vader. If you can’t do it, then I won’t ask for it. If it’s a pleasant sensation, and it’s reasonably accomplished, I wondered if it was feasible. I was simply...curious.”

“I haven’t done anything like this since. Since the armor.” Vader nods, gripping Tarkin’s hands. “I only know what I’ve tried myself.”

Tarkin moves his thumbs in small circles, massaging the back of Vader’s hand as he returns the nod. “You’ve thought about it.”

Vader opens his mouth to speak, but is unsure of what he means to say. He *has* thought about it, both consciously and unconsciously. He enjoys seeing Tarkin made vulnerable, and wants to make Tarkin happy. But to remove the armor means bringing Tarkin not only into the orb, but onto Mustafar, and even once the armor is no longer a barrier, what then? Hands, Vader can understand.

Mouths, and lips, though his are now twisted with scars, still bring him a modicum of pleasure. But without the armor, he is barely a man, barely even *human*, and Tarkin—

Tarkin clearly has more experience, *much* more experience. Tarkin is the one asking these questions now, when Vader should have had answers years ago. Tarkin has seen other bodies, *complete* bodies, unmarred and smooth and clean, and Vader barely knows what his own skin might seem in comparison. Once he removes the armor, will it even be him left beneath? So many nerve endings are stunted, so many processes left incomplete. Tarkin says he has no regrets, but he can't know, not until he's forced to wait as each layer is removed piece by piece and Vader is left defenseless.

Vader is strong. But he cannot predict how he will face this, if it comes.

“Vader.” Tarkin's voice is softer, his eyes gentler as he holds Vader. Vader tightens his grip further, forcing Tarkin to release his hand, and Tarkin stands straighter to touch the sides of Vader's unmasked head. “Move the mouthpiece.”

Vader moves unconsciously, his hand yanking at the angular device, and he can only tense as Tarkin lunges forward to pull them into a kiss. The contact is rough, but Tarkin's hands are cool against Vader's skin, and Vader relaxes bit by bit as Tarkin holds him there. Yes, mouths are pleasant enough. And tongues, when Tarkin introduces his. Tarkin pulls Vader through, their breaths syncing as Tarkin pushes close, then begins to pull away, and it is really a series of kisses before Tarkin pulls away completely to nod in affirmation.

“If you haven't thought about it, that's not a bad thing. You don't have to do anything for my sake, if you don't want to do it.”

“I want to, Wilhuff, I want—” Vader has to breathe quickly, caught up in his own rush, and reaches for the mouthpiece to ground himself. “You. It's one thing when it's just you. That I can understand. But even if I wasn't in the armor, if I was—different, I still wouldn't know what to do. My body, such as it is, presents its own challenges. Yours is an altogether unknown entity.”

Tarkin is quiet, a smile on his lips, and he finally takes a step back as he begins to laugh. The sound is so rare, almost alien, that Vader tenses in uncertainty. Tarkin shakes his head, stepping forward again, and raises both arms to cradle Vader's head, tracing patterns on Vader's skull with both pointer fingers. Vader shivers at the contact, flustered by his own responsiveness and still on edge with confusion, but Tarkin's pleased smile goes a long way in soothing his nerves.

“You haven't even seen me out of uniform, have you.” Tarkin says, his voice thick with interest. “That's why you said it. You, your armor; me, my uniform. *That*, at least, is simple enough to solve.”

“But—” Vader shakes his head, surprised as Tarkin presses close. “I wouldn't be able to reciprocate, not now, and you wouldn't—”

“Shush. I may be interested in your physicality, Vader, such as it is, but I am not unreasonable. I can be patient.” Tarkin nods slowly, running a finger down to Vader's jaw. “And you handle yourself perfectly well. You handle *me* perfectly well, and you're using gloves. That takes skill.”

“That's merely—” Vader shrugs, glancing down. “You may be a biased assessor.”

“Ah. Right. My *bias*.” Tarkin rests his hand on Vader's shoulder, tilting his head up to study Vader's expression. “How dare I compliment the way you make me *come* with little more than nice words and a soft grip, hm?”

“Yes, that—anything more, I wouldn't know—”

“Then you *ask*, Lord Vader, and the things you ask for, I am usually willing to provide.” Tarkin nods firmly, watching Vader process the information. “You haven’t asked, all this time. You’ve invited me, and catered to me, and brought me in and held me close, but you’ve never *asked* for my help with your own needs. That’s all I want, Vader. I want to make you as happy as you make me. I will not ask you to do things beyond your ability, but I won’t allow you to avoid something if you fear my response. I think I can sustain a few uncertain questions if it will make you more comfortable.”

Vader exhales slowly, watching Tarkin closely. “That’s why you asked about the armor.”

“I confess to *some* selfish greed on my part, yes, but I want to ensure that I’m not the only one benefitting from our...arrangement. If you’d rather I took more responsibility for initiating our encounters, I accept that. If you’d prefer that I didn’t remove the armor, then tell me. If you’re incapable of experiencing physical pleasure and would rather listen to classical art arrangements while I recited poetry, then I would *do that*. But I have reason to believe that there’s more I can do for you. And I want to do it.”

Vader is quiet, and it takes him a moment to realize that his hands have found their way to the small of Tarkin’s back without his noticing. The movement is so natural, their positioning so easy, that Vader has to remind himself that with his armor, he probably weighs twice what Tarkin does. And yet Tarkin takes no notice.

“You wouldn’t object if I asked you to strip, here and now, just to satisfy my curiosity?”

Tarkin’s smile sharpens into a grin. “I’d be practically offended if you didn’t, Lord Vader.”

“And—the things you like, the movements or positions—”

“I will draw up a catalogue with *images* if you say the word.” Tarkin nods his head, taking a step back to release Vader and return to his desk. “As long as you move slowly enough—a feature you’ve displayed brilliantly, I might say—there isn’t much you can’t do. Even with your limitations. I would be honored to explain, or to show, anything unclear. Am I understood?”

“Perfectly clear.” Vader nods crisply, feeling the tension in his shoulders ease, and as Tarkin reaches up to begin unfastening his tunic, Vader blinks. “What are you doing?”

“You wanted to see more.” Tarkin nods, glancing down at himself. “I’m going to show you...more.”

“*Now?*” Vader steps forward, only for Tarkin to edge back as he tugs at a fastener.

“Both our ships are on leave. The crews are still celebrating. Can you see a better time?”

Vader pauses, considering Tarkin’s argument, then concedes the point. “No. I don’t.”

“Then take advantage of your opportunity and *watch*, Vader.” Tarkin turns with a flourish, shrugging to loosen the tunic around his shoulders. Vader stands, uncertain, but as Tarkin turns back to peel the Imperial uniform from his arms, Vader moves forward to claim the officer’s seat and begin removing his gloves.

“You don’t have to do that.” Tarkin chides, though the statement is half-hearted. Vader ignores him, slowly removing one glove, and then the other, setting them on the desk beside his helmet as Tarkin draws closer.

“I’m sorry. That I can’t do more.”

Now in his undershirt, Tarkin shakes his head, reaching down to grasp both Vader's hands. "I may be disappointed for a time, yes. But I'm finding that a distraction proves effective at banishing such disappointment."

Vader can only nod mutely, allowing Tarkin to pull his hands towards Tarkin's chest to grasp the fabric there. Tarkin is careful to move slowly, waiting for Vader to explore the lines and seams running along Tarkin's chest, and it is only once Vader grasps the sides of the shirt that Tarkin leans forward to initiate another kiss. As he pulls away, already tugging at the next layer of clothing, he can hear Vader's whispered praises, the faintest sound of congratulation as Vader finds Tarkin's bare skin.

No, Vader is not like his other companions. It is unlikely that they'll ever be able to have the kind of reciprocal, spontaneous liaisons Tarkin had enjoyed with other men. But the possibility is not entirely absent, and Vader is willing to learn. Tarkin will have to take a different approach—his usual methods of seduction will not work if Vader is so hesitant to consider his own needs. But there is a balance that can be achieved.

And even if their encounters are never perfect—if Vader can only use his hands, and nothing more—Tarkin is quickly learning that the simple reality of having Vader hold him is more than enough to satisfy.

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