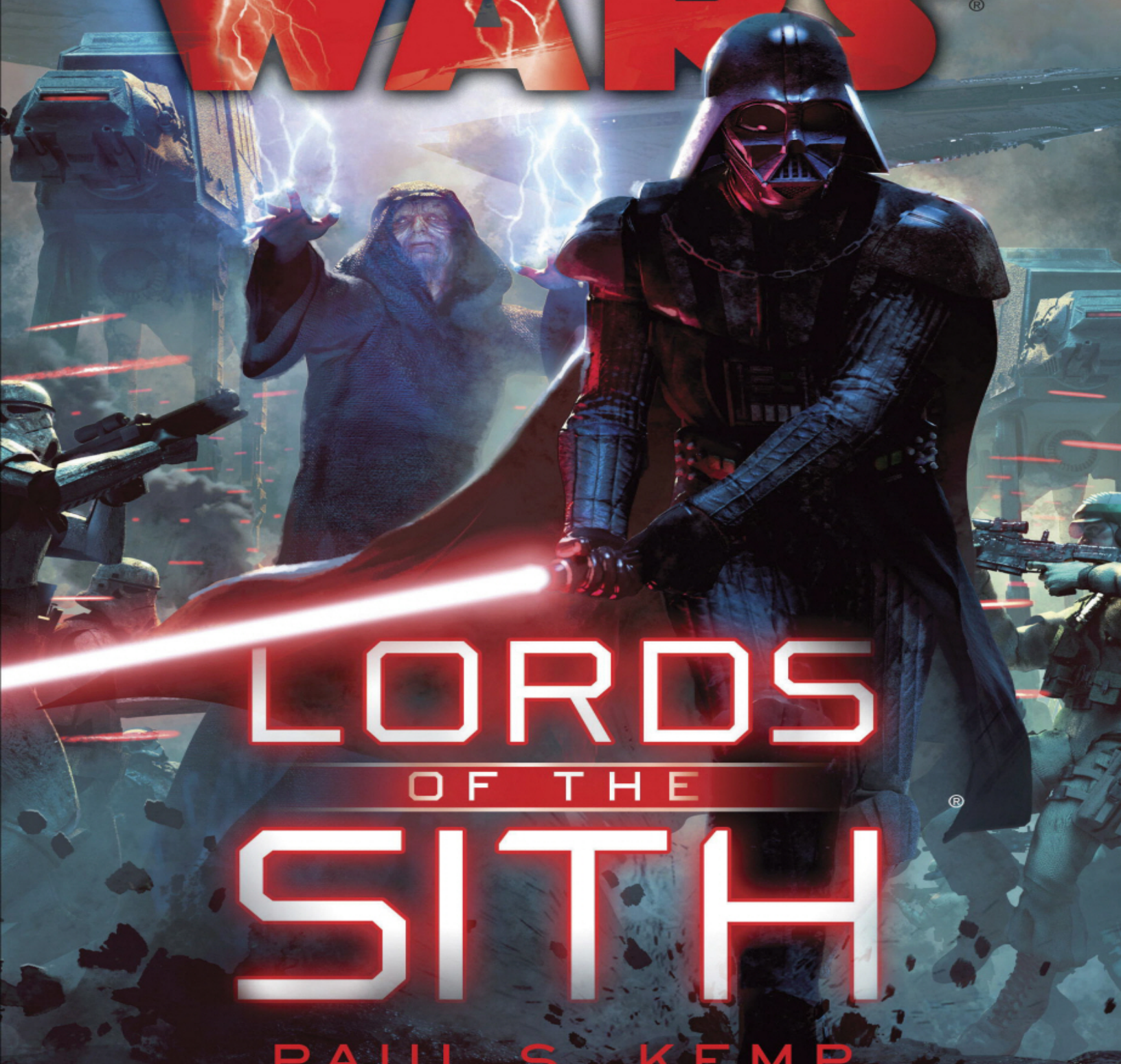


A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away

STAR WARS®



LORDS OF THE SITH®

PAUL S. KEMP

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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

ABOUT THE BOOK

Eight years after the Clone Wars ravaged the galaxy, the Republic is no more and the Empire is ascendant. The man who rules as Emperor is secretly a Sith Lord, and with his powerful apprentice, Darth Vader, and all the resources of his vast Imperial war machine, he has placed the galaxy solidly under his heel.

Dissent has been crushed, and freedom is a memory, all in the name of peace and order. But here and there pockets of resistance are beginning to kindle and burn, none hotter than the Free Ryloth movement led by Cham Syndulla.

Now, after many small-scale strikes against the Imperial forces controlling their world, Cham and his fellow freedom fighters take their chance to strike a fatal blow against the Empire and plunge it into chaos by targeting its very heart: Emperor Palpatine and Darth Vader....

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PAUL S. KEMP is the author of the New York Times bestselling novels *Star Wars: Crosscurrent*, *Star Wars: The Old Republic: Deceived*, and *Star Wars: Riptide*, as well as nine Forgotten Realms fantasy novels and many short stories. Paul S. Kemp lives and works in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, with his wife, children, and a couple of cats.

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By Paul S. Kemp

Star Wars

Star Wars: Crosscurrent

Star Wars: Riptide

Star Wars: The Old Republic: Deceived

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The Hammer and the Blade

A Discourse in Steel



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WARS™**

LORDS

OF THE

SITH

PAUL S. KEMP



For Jen, Riordan, Roarke, Lady D, and Sloane. Love you all.

THE STORY OF
**STAR
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BATTLEFRONT
- V** THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK
- VI** RETURN OF THE JEDI
AFTERMATH
- VII** THE FORCE AWAKENS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wrote this book during the most trying period of my adult life. It wouldn't have been possible without Shelly Shapiro. Shelly, my thanks for your patience.



CHAPTER ONE

VADER COMPLETED HIS MEDITATION AND OPENED HIS EYES. His pale, flame-savaged face stared back at him from out of the reflective black transparisteel of his pressurized meditation chamber. Without the neural connection to his armor, he was conscious of the stumps of his legs, the ruin of his arms, the perpetual pain in his flesh. He welcomed it. Pain fed his hate, and hate fed his strength. Once, as a Jedi, he had meditated to find peace. Now he meditated to sharpen the edges of his anger.

He stared at his reflection a long time. His injuries had deformed his body, left it broken, but they'd perfected his spirit, strengthening his connection to the Force. Suffering had birthed insight.

An automated metal arm held the armor's helmet and faceplate over his head, a doom soon to descend. The eyes of the faceplate, which intimidated so many, were no peer to his unmasked eyes. From within a sea of scars, his gaze simmered with controlled, harnessed fury. The secondary respirator, still attached to him, always attached to him, masked the ruins of his mouth, and the sound of his breathing echoed off the walls.

Drawing on the Force, he activated the automated arm. It descended and the helmet and faceplate wrapped his head in metal and plasteel, the shell in which he existed. He welcomed the spikes of pain when the helmet's neural needles stabbed into the flesh of his skull and the base of his spine, unifying his body, mind, and armor to form an interconnected unit.

When man and machine were one, he no longer felt the absence of his legs or arms, the pain of his flesh, but the

hate remained, and the rage still burned. Those, he never relinquished, and he never felt more connected to the Force than when his fury burned.

With an effort of will, he commanded the onboard computer to link the primary respirator to the secondary, and to seal the helmet at the neck, encasing him fully. He was home.

Once, he'd found the armor hateful, foreign, but now he knew better. He realized that he'd always been fated to wear it, just as the Jedi had always been fated to betray their principles. He'd always been fated to face Obi-Wan and fail on Mustafar—and in failing, learn.

The armor separated him from the galaxy, from everyone, made him singular, freed him from the needs of the flesh, the concerns of the body that once had plagued him, and allowed him to focus solely on his relationship to the Force.

It terrified others, he knew, and that pleased him. Their terror was a tool he used to accomplish his ends. Yoda once had told him that fear led to hate and hate to suffering. But Yoda had been wrong. Fear was a tool used by the strong to cow the weak. Hate was the font of true strength. Suffering was not the result of the rule of the strong over the weak, order was. By its very existence, the Force mandated the rule of the strong over the weak; the Force mandated order. The Jedi had never seen that, and so they'd misunderstood the Force and been destroyed. But Vader's Master saw it. Vader saw it. And so they were strong. And so they ruled.

He rose, his breathing loud in his ears, loud in the chamber, his image huge and dark on the reflective wall.

A wave of his gauntleted hand and a mental command rendered the walls of his ovate meditation chamber transparent instead of reflective. The chamber sat in the center of his private quarters aboard the *Perilous*. He looked out and up through the large viewport that opened out onto the galaxy and its numberless worlds and stars.

It was his duty to rule them all. He saw that now. It was the manifest will of the Force. Existence without proper rule was chaos, disorder, suboptimal. The Force—invisible but ubiquitous—bent toward order and was the tool through which order could and must be imposed, but not through harmony, not through peaceful coexistence. That had been the approach of the Jedi, a foolish, failed approach that only fomented more disorder. Vader and his Master imposed order the only way it could be imposed, the way the Force required that it be imposed, through conquest, by forcing the disorder to submit to the order, by bending the weak to the will of the strong.

The history of Jedi influence in the galaxy was a history of disorder and the sporadic wars disorder bred. The history of the Empire would be one of enforced peace, of imposed order.

A pending transmission caused the intercom to chime. He activated it and a hologram of the aquiline-faced, gray-haired commander of the *Perilous*, Captain Luitt, formed before him.

“Lord Vader, there’s been an incident at the Yaga Minor shipyards.”

“What kind of incident, Captain?”

The lights from the bridge computers blinked or didn’t as dictated by the pulse of the ship and the gestures of the ragtag skeleton crew of freedom fighters who staffed the stations. Cham stood behind the helm and looked alternately from the viewscreen to the scanner as he mentally recited the words he’d long ago etched on the stone of his mind so that he could, as needed, read them and be reminded:

Not a terrorist, but a freedom fighter. Not a terrorist, but a freedom fighter.

Cham had fought for his people and Ryloth for almost a standard decade. He’d fought for a free Ryloth when the

Republic had tried to annex it, and he fought now for a free Ryloth against the Empire that was trying to strip it bare.

A free Ryloth.

The phrase, the concept, was the polestar around which his existence would forever turn.

Because Ryloth was not free.

As Cham had feared back during the Clone Wars, one well-intentioned occupier of Ryloth had given way to another, less well-intentioned occupier, and a Republic had, through the alchemy of ambition, been transformed into an Empire.

An Imperial protectorate, they called Ryloth. On Imperial star charts Cham's homeworld was listed as "free and independent," but the words could only be used that way with irony, else meaning was turned on its head.

Because Ryloth was not free.

Orn Free Taa, Ryloth's obese representative to the lickspittle, ceremonial Imperial Senate, validated the otherwise absurd Imperial claims through his treasonous acquiescence to them. But then Ryloth had no shortage of Imperial collaborators, or those willing to lay supine before stormtroopers.

And so ... Ryloth was not free.

But it would be one day. Cham would see to it. Over the years, he'd recruited and trained hundreds of like-minded people, most but not all of them Twi'leks. He'd cultivated friendly contacts and informants across Ryloth's system, established hidden bases, hoarded matériel. Over the years, he'd planned and executed raid after raid against the Imperials, cautious and precise raids, true, but effective, nevertheless. Dozens of dead Imperials gave mute testimony to the growing effectiveness of the Free Ryloth movement.

Not a terrorist, but a freedom fighter.

He put a reassuring hand on the shoulder of the helm, felt the tension in the clenched muscles of her shoulder.

Like most of the crew, like Cham, she was a Twi'lek, and Cham doubted she'd ever flown anything larger than a little gorge hopper, certainly nothing like the armed freighter she steered now.

"Just hold her steady, helm," Cham said. "We won't need anything fancy out of you."

Standing behind Cham, Isval added, "We hope."

The helm exhaled and nodded. Her lekku, the twin head-tails that extended down from the back of her head to her shoulders, relaxed slightly to signify relief. "Aye, sir. Nothing fancy."

Isval stepped beside Cham, her eyes on the viewscreen.

"Where are they?" she grumbled, the darkening blue of her skin and the agitated squirm of her lekku a reflection of her irritation. "It's been days and no word."

Isval always grumbled. She was perpetually restless, a wanderer trapped in a cage only she could see, pacing the confines over and over, forever testing the strength of the bars. She reminded him of his daughter, Hera, whom he missed deeply when he allowed himself such moments. Cham valued Isval's need for constant motion, for constant action. They were the perfect counterpoints to each other: her rash, him deliberate; her practical, him principled.

"Peace, Isval," he said softly. He'd often said the same thing to Hera.

He held his hands, sweaty with stress despite his calm tone, clasped behind his back. He eyed the bridge data display. Almost time. "They're not late, not yet. And if they'd failed, we'd have had word by now."

Her retort came fast. "If they'd succeeded, we'd have had word by now, too. Wouldn't we?"

Cham shook his head, his lekku swaying. "No, not necessarily. They'd run silent. Pok knows better than to risk comm chatter. He'd need to skim a gas giant to refuel, too. And he might have needed to shake pursuit. They had a lot of space to cover."

“He would’ve sent word, though, something,” she insisted. “They could have blown up the ship during the hijack attempt. They could all be dead. Or worse.”

She said the words too loudly, and the heads of several of the crew came up from their work, looks of concern on their faces.

“They could, but they’re not.” He put his hand on her shoulder. “Peace, Isval. Peace.”

She grimaced and swallowed hard, as if trying to rid herself of a bad taste. She pulled away from him and started to pace anew. “Peace. There’s peace only for the dead.”

Cham smiled. “Then let’s stick with war for at least a bit longer, eh?”

His words stopped her in her pacing and elicited one of her half smiles, and a half smile was as close as Isval ever got to the real thing. He had only a vague idea of what had been done to her when she’d been enslaved, but he had a firm sense that it must have been awful. She’d come a long way.

“Back to it, people,” he ordered. “Stay sharp.”

Silence soon filled all the empty space on the bridge. Hope hung suspended in the quiet—fragile, brittle, ready to be shattered with the wrong word. The relentless gravity of waiting drew eyes constantly to the data display that showed the time. But still nothing.

Cham had stashed the freighter in the rings of one of the system’s gas giants. Metal ore in the rock chunks that made up the rings would hide the ship from any scans.

“Helm, take us above the plane of the rings,” Cham said.

Even in an off-the-chart system, it was a risk to put the freighter outside the shelter of the planet’s rings. The ship’s credentials wouldn’t hold up to a full Imperial query, and Imperial probes and scouts were everywhere, as the Emperor tried to firm up his grip on the galaxy and quell any hot spots. If they were noticed they’d have to run.

“Magnify screen when we’re clear.”

Even magnified, the screen would show far less than long-range sensors, but Cham needed to see for himself, not stare at readouts.

Isval paced beside him.

The ship shifted up, out of the bands of ice and rock, and the magnified image on the screen showed the outer system, where a single, distant planetoid of uninhabited rock orbited the system’s dim star, and countless stars beyond blinked in the dark. A nebula light-years away to starboard painted a slice of space the color of blood.

Cham stared at the screen as if he could pull his comrades through hyperspace by sheer force of will. Assuming they’d even been able to jump. The whole operation had been a huge risk, but Cham had thought it worthwhile to secure more heavy weapons and force the Empire to divert some resources away from Ryloth. Too, he’d wanted to make a stronger statement, send an unmistakable message that at least some of the Twi’leks of Ryloth would not quietly accept Imperial rule. He’d wanted to be the spark that started a fire across the galaxy.

“Come on, Pok,” he whispered, the involuntary twitch of his lekku betraying his stress. He’d known Pok for years and called him friend.

Isval muttered under her breath, a steady flood of Twi’lek expletives.

Cham watched the data display as the appointed time arrived and passed, taking the hopes of the crew with it. Heavy sighs and slack lekku all around.

“Patience, people,” Cham said softly. “We wait. We keep waiting until we know.”

“We wait,” Isval affirmed with a nod. She paced the deck, staring at the viewscreen as if daring it to keep showing her something she didn’t want to see.

The moments stretched. The crew shifted in their seats, shared surreptitious looks of disappointment. Cham had to

work to unclench his jaw.

The engineer on scan duty broke the spell.

"I've got something!" she said.

Cham and Isval fairly sprinted over to the scanner. All eyes watched them.

"It's a ship," the engineer said.

A satisfied, relieved rustle moved through the bridge crew. Cham could almost hear the smiles. He eyed the readout.

"That's an Imperial transport," he said.

"That's our Imperial transport," Isval said.

A few members of the bridge crew gave a muted cheer.

"Stay on station, people," Cham said, but he could not shake his grin.

"Coming through now," the engineer said. "It's them, sir. It's them! They're hailing us."

"On speaker," Cham said. "Meanwhile, alert the off-load team. We'll want to get those weapons aboard and destroy that ship as soon as—"

A crackle of static and then Pok's strained voice. "Get clear of here right now! Just go!"

"Pok?" Cham said, as the crew's elation shifted to concern. "Pok, what is it?"

"It's Vader, Cham. Get out of here now! We thought we'd lost the pursuit. We've been jumping through systems to throw them off. I'd thought we'd lost them, but they're still on us! Go, Cham!"

The engineer looked up at Cham, her lavender skin flushing to dark blue at the cheeks. "There are more ships coming out of hyperspace, sir. More than a dozen, all small." Her voice tightened as she said, "V-wings probably. Maybe interceptors."

Cham and Isval cursed as one.

"Get on station, people!" Cham ordered.

Vader's customized Eta-interceptor led the starfighter squadron as the star-lined tunnel of hyperspace gave way to the black of ordinary space. A quick scan allowed him to locate the hijacked weapons transport, which they'd been pursuing through several systems as it tried to work its way out to the Rim. The squadron disengaged from their hyperspace rings.

The heavily armed transport showed slight blaster damage along the aft hull near the three engines, behind the bloated center of the cargo bay.

"Attack formation," Vader ordered, and the pilots in the rest of the squad acknowledged the command and fell into formation.

Concerned that the hijackers might have dropped out of hyperspace to lure the squadron into an ambush, he ran a quick scan of the entire system. The interceptor's sensor array was not the most sensitive, but it showed only a pair of huge, ringed gas giants, each with a score or more of moons, an asteroid belt between the planets and the system's star, and a few planetoids at the outside of the system. Otherwise, the system was an uninhabited backwater.

"Scans show no other ships in the system," Vader said.

"Confirmed," the squadron commander replied.

The voice of one of the pilots carried over the comm: "They're powering up for another jump, Lord Vader."

"Follow my lead," Vader ordered, and accelerated to attack speed. "Do not allow them to jump again."

The V-wings and Vader's interceptor were far faster and more maneuverable than the transport and closed on it rapidly, devouring the space between. Vader did not bother consulting his instrumentation. He fell into the Force, flying by feel, as he always did.

Even before the interceptor and the V-wings closed to within blaster range, one of the freighter's engines burped

a gout of blue flame and burned out. The hijackers had overtaxed the transport in their escape attempt.

"I want the shields down and the remaining two engines disabled," Vader said. Disabling the engines would prevent another hyperspace jump. "Do not destroy that ship."

The heavier armaments of the transport had a longer range than the interceptor and V-wings' blasters and opened up before the starfighters got within blaster range.

"Weapons are hot, go evasive," said the squadron leader as the transport's automated gun turrets filled the space between the ships with green lines. The starfighter squadron veered apart, twisting and diving.

Vader felt as much as saw the transport's blasters. He cut left, then hard right, then dived a few degrees down, still closing on the transport. One of the V-wings to his left caught a green line. Its wing fragmented and it went spinning and flaming off into the system.

The larger, crewed, swivel-mounted gun bubbles on either side of the transport's midline swung around and opened fire, fat pulses of red plasma.

"Widen your spacing," the squadron commander said over the comm. "Spacing!"

A burst of red plasma caught one of the V-wings squarely and vaporized it.

"Focus your fire on the aft shields," Vader said, his interceptor wheeling and spinning, sliding between the red and the green, until he was within range. He fired and his blasters sent twin beams of plasma into the aft shields. He angled the shot to maximize deflection. He did not want to pierce them and damage the ship, just drain them and bring them down.

The rest of the squadron did the same, hitting the transport from multiple angles. The transport bucked under the onslaught, the shields flaring under the energy load and visibly weakening with each shot. The entire squad

overtook and passed the freighter, the green and red shots of its weapons chasing them along.

“Maintain spacing, stay evasive, and swing around for another pass,” the squadron commander ordered. “Split squadron and come underneath.”

The squadron’s ships peeled right and left, circling back and down, and set themselves on another intercept vector. Vader decelerated enough to fall back to the rear.

“Bring the shields down on this pass, Commander,” he said. “I have something in mind.”

Pok had left the channel open so Cham and his crew could hear the activity aboard the hijacked freighter’s bridge—Pok barking orders, someone calling the attack vectors of the V-wings, the boom of blasterfire on shields.

“Pok!” Cham said. “We can help!”

“No!” Pok said. “We’re already down one engine. We can’t power up yet, and there’s a Star Destroyer somewhere behind these V-wings. There’s nothing you can do for us, Cham.” To one of his crew, Pok shouted, “Get the hyperdrive back online!”

An explosion sent a crackle of static and a scream of feedback along the channel.

“Shields at ten percent,” someone on Pok’s bridge called out.

“Hyperdrive still nonoperational,” said someone else.

Isval grabbed Cham by the arm, hard enough for it to hurt. She spoke in a low, harsh voice. “We have to help them.”

But Cham didn’t see how they could. If he left the shelter of the rings, the V-wings or interceptors or whatever they were would pick them up on scan, and Cham had no illusions about the ability of his helm or his ship should they be discovered.

“No,” Cham said to the helm. “Stay put.”

Vader watched the transport go hard to port, taking an angle that would allow both of the midline weapons bubbles to fire on the approaching starfighters. As soon as they entered the transport's range, the automated turrets and gun bubbles opened fire, filling space with beams of superheated plasma. The V-wings swooped and twisted and dodged, spiraling through the net of green and red energy.

Vader, lingering behind, piloted his ship between the bolts, above them, below them. A third V-wing caught a shot from a gun turret and exploded, debris peppering Vader's cockpit canopy as he flew through the flames.

When the V-wings got within range, they opened fire and the freighter's shields fell almost immediately.

"Shields down, Lord Vader," the squadron leader reported.

"I'll take the engines," Vader said. "Destroy the turrets and the starboard-side midline gun bubble."

The pilots of his squadron, selected for their piloting excellence and a demonstrated record of kills, did exactly as he'd ordered. Small explosions lit up the hull, and the gun emplacements disappeared in flowers of fire. The transport shook from the impact as the V-wings swooped past it, up, and started to circle back around.

Meanwhile Vader veered to his left and down, locked onto the engines, and fired, once, twice. Explosions rocked the transport aft, and chunks of both engines spun off into space. Secondary explosions rocked the vessel, but it otherwise remained intact. Vader slowed still more, trailing the transport.

"She's running on inertia now, sir," said the squadron commander. "When the Perilous arrives, she can tractor the transport into one of her bays."

"I have no intention of leaving the hijackers aboard the ship that long," Vader said. He knew the hijackers would try to blow the ship, and there were enough weapons in the cargo bay to do just that. "I'm going to board her."

“Sir, the docking clamp on that ship is too damaged, and there’s no landing bay,” said the squadron commander.

“I am aware of that, Commander,” Vader said.

The sole remaining gun bubble—operated by one of the hijackers—swung around and opened fire on Vader’s ship. Still using the Force to guide him, Vader slung his ship side to side, up and down, staying just ahead of the blasterfire as he headed straight for the bubble. He could see the gunner inside the transparent canopy, feel his presence, insignificant and small, through the web of the Force.

“Sir ...,” the commander said as the V-wing squadron circled back around, but Vader did not acknowledge him.

Vader hit a switch and depressurized the interceptor’s cockpit, his armor shielding him from the vacuum. Then, as he neared the transport’s midline, still swinging his ship left and right to dodge the incoming fire, he selected a spot on the transport adjacent to the gun bubble and, using the Force, took a firm mental hold on it.

His interceptor streaked toward the gun bubble, aimed directly at it. Content with the trajectory, he unstrapped himself, overrode the interceptor’s safeties, threw open the cockpit hatch, and ejected into space.

Immediately he was spinning in the zero-g, the ship and stars alternating positions with rapidity. Yet he kept his mental hold on the air-lock handle, and his armor, sealed and pressurized, sustained him in the vacuum. The respirator was loud in his ears.

His ship slammed into the gun bubble and the transport, the inability of the vacuum to transmit sound causing the collision to occur in eerie silence. Fire flared for a moment, but only a moment before the vacuum extinguished it. Chunks of debris exploded outward into space and the transport lurched.

A great boom sounded through the connection. Alarms wailed, and Pok’s bridge exploded in a cacophony of

competing conversations.

"Pok, what just happened?" Cham asked. "Are you all right?"

"We had a collision. We're all right. Get me status on the damage," Pok said to someone on his bridge. "Get someone over there now."

"Sir! Sir!" the squadron commander called, his voice frantic in Vader's helmet comm. "Lord Vader! What's happening, sir?"

Vader's voice was calm. "I'm docking with the transport, Commander."

Using the Force, Vader stopped his rotation and reeled himself in toward the large, jagged, smoking hole his interceptor had torn in the transport's hull. Loose hoses and electrical lines dangled from the edges of the opening, leaking gases and shooting sparks into space. A portion of his ship's wing had survived the impact and was lodged in the bulkhead. The rest had been vaporized on impact.

Vader pulled himself through the destruction until he stood in the remains of a depressurized corridor. Chunks of metal and electronics littered the torn deck, the whole of it smoking from the heat of impact. The V-wings buzzed past the transport, visible through the hole in the bulkhead.

"Sir?" said the squadron commander.

"All is under control, Commander," Vader said.

Several members of the fighter squadron whispered awed oaths into their comms.

"Maintain comm discipline," the squadron leader barked, though Vader could hear the disbelief in his tone, too. "My lord ... there are dozens of hijackers aboard that transport."

"Not for much longer, Commander," Vader said. "You are on escort duty now. I will notify you if anything else is required."

A pause, then, "Of course, sir."

The transport's automatic safeties had sealed off the corridor with a blast door, but he knew the codes to override them. He strode through the ruin and entered the code. The huge door slid open, and pressurized air from the hall beyond poured out with a hiss. He stepped through and resealed the door behind him. A few more taps on a wall comp and he'd repressurized the hall. The shrill sound of the transport's hull-breach alarm wailed from wall speakers.

A hatch on the far side of the hall slid open to reveal a purple-skinned Twi'lek man in makeshift armor. Seeing Vader, the Twi'lek's head-tails twitched, his eyes widened in surprise, and he grabbed for the blaster at his belt. By the time the Twi'lek had the blaster drawn and the trigger pulled, Vader had his lightsaber in hand and ignited. He deflected the blaster shot into the wall, raised his off hand, and with it reached out with the Force. He made a pincer motion with his two fingers, using the Force to squeeze closed the Twi'lek's trachea.

The Twi'lek pawed frantically at his throat as Vader's power lifted him off the deck, but to his credit he held on to his weapon, and gagging, dying, he managed to aim and fire his blaster at Vader again and again. Vader simply held his grip on the alien's throat while casually deflecting the blasts into the bulkhead with his lightsaber. Then, not wanting to waste time, he moved his raised hand left and then right, using the Force to smash the Twi'lek into the bulkhead. The impacts shattered bone, and Vader let the body fall to the deck. A voice carried over a comlink on the Twi'lek's belt.

"Tymo! Tymo! What is going on there? Do you copy? Can you hear me?"

Vader deactivated his lightsaber, picked up the comlink, opened the channel, and let the sound of his respirator carry over the connection.

"Who is that?"

Vader answered only with his breathing.

"Tymo, is that you? Are you all right?"

"I'm coming for you now," Vader said.

He crushed the communicator in his fist, reignited his lightsaber, stepped over the dead Twi'lek, and strode into the corridor beyond.



CHAPTER TWO

CHAM AND ISVAL SHARED A LOOK OF ALARM. THEY'D HEARD THE communication through the open channel. They knew the sound of the respirator.

"Was that ...?" Isval asked.

"Vader," Cham said. "Had to be. Pok?"

"I agree," Pok said. "That had to be Vader."

They knew Vader by reputation.

Silence weighed heavy on the bridge.

"What do we know?" Cham asked Isval in a whisper.

She shook her head, her lekku squirming in agitation.

"Not much. Second- and third-hand stories. I've heard that the regular officers hate him, but the Stormtrooper Corps almost worships him."

"How did he get aboard Pok's ship?"

Isval shrugged. She wasn't pacing. A bad sign. "They say he can do things no being should be able to do. Everyone is terrified of him. This is bad, Cham."

"I know." Cham's eyes followed hers to the viewscreen. They couldn't see the hijacked freighter, of course, but Cham could imagine it in his mind's eye. And now he imagined Vader aboard it.

"Situation, Pok."

For a moment, Pok didn't answer. Perhaps his attention was on something else, then, "Engines are dead, Cham. Weapons are destroyed. We're ... boarded somehow. You heard."

"How'd he board?" Cham asked. "Is he alone?"

"I don't know," Pok said, then to someone on the bridge, he added, "I need that information now," then, "Cham,