

### **Chapter 3** **Coffee Grounds**

Darth Vader was having a terrible day. It started early, when that stupid breathing apparatus the workers installed in his sleeping enclosure cut him on the forehead. He knew it would. His dreams had been getting more violent since coming here, and he knew the suspension arm would be a problem. The foreman said it was to specification.

Vader almost choked the asshole. Damn the specification, he thought. He had told the designers time and time again he needed something that did not inhibit his movement. That mask was too difficult to sleep in. Nobody understood.

After that, Vader had to put out fires with the building crews all morning. The wrong bolts were used to install wings to a small-load freighter, and a crate of the wrong bore cannon barrels was shipped to the tie-fighter line.

At least the workers were catching most of this stuff themselves. Some idiot had modified the fuel canisters on Vader's personal craft by using the wrong grade of transmission line. Vader noticed it just before the fool started up the vehicle and almost destroyed the entire hangar as well as everyone inside. Vader did choke that guy.

Then there was the paperwork. Every one of the problems first had to be reported to the Grand Moff and then the issues had to be resolved with the vendors. This meant

Vader had to go down to the administration office and deal with that infernal fax machine. It failed on the first four tries to connect, and on the fifth try, a paper jam mangled the supply orders, and Vader had to fill out new ones.

He also had to report the choking and explain himself. The Grand Moff instituted this rule within a few days of Vader's joining the oversight committee, and since then, he had worked on his restraint.

While printing his report, the printer ran out of toner, and Vader had to find someone to replace it. THAT was something he vowed never to do.

Someday, Vader knew, he would be back in the print room with his light saber, and then by golly he'd have some fun.

It was almost 11AM before Vader even got to the kitchen to get his coffee. He placed his cup in the slot for Dark Roast, and a trickle of yellowish water leaked out. Vader screamed, crushing the cup. He slammed through the drawers where the replacement bags were kept. They were empty.

Vader was NOT about to drink that decaffeinated pond water the rest of the committee members liked, nor would he be caught dead tea-bagging a packet of Chamomile.

The kitchen was out of coffee. Again. The supply firm that serviced the coffee machine obviously had the Empire over a barrel. What a great racket, Vader thought.

This had to be escalated. The Emperor was on his way back from a trip, and he would not be happy about this.

Next, Vader's voice mail beeped inside his helmet. Why, he wondered, did it never ring until after someone had called? He walked around the building until he got a stronger signal. It turned out that somebody had failed to tie up a load of hydraulic pistons securely, and Vader was needed down in the assembly warehouse to help lift the debris.

Vader wished he had never showed off his skill at lifting heavy objects using the force. He had become the de facto forklift for the entire facility.

"Does Darth Vader have to choke a bitch?" Vader yelled, walking into the warehouse. The guys were already lifting the piston rods onto another pallet, and Vader shooed them away and lifted the pile into neat rows on the shelf where they belonged. The workers had learned a long time before never to clap when Vader did this.

"Which of you is the moron?" Vader bellowed to the group. One man stepped forward, but he did not have to. Vader had already read all of their minds. Weak fools.

Vader held up a heavy hand, index finger extended, and issued a stern warning to the worker. "If I was not already up to my nips in paperwork, you'd be dragged through the streets by your Johnson. Then I'd pull out your fingernails one by one, bleed you with a thousand razors, crush your skull until your eyes popped out, tear off your limbs, and finally--"

"Ahem," said a voice behind Vader. He turned around.

All the men suddenly dropped to the floor, faces to the ground. The Emperor stood in the entrance to the room,

looking at Vader with an almost pleasant smile. Vader dropped to his knees, face down.

"Master," he said. "You've returned."

"You forgot about inserting needles into his eyeballs, severing his toes, and peeling the skin from his fingers up to his shoulders," clucked the Emperor.

"Apologies, Master," Vader said without looking up.

"But you're getting better," the Emperor said. "You're still more forgiving than I am." He then knelt before the worker, who cowered ever tighter, shaking on the floor.

"You'll get away with your life just this once," the Emperor whispered, as the man felt his nuts shrivel to the size of peas. From that moment, he would never father children.

The Emperor straightened himself up and yelled, "Everyone, back to work!"

Immediately, the workers went back to their business.

"Vader, come with me," he said.

"Yes, Master." Darth Vader stood, and followed the Emperor through the door.

"Do you know what today is?" The Emperor asked Vader.

"No, my Master," Vader answered.

"I was hoping you would. You have come a long way in your first year, haven't you?"

Vader understood what the Emperor was getting at.

"Master, that is not until Thursday, is it not?"

Noticing the disappointed expression on the Emperor's face, Vader suddenly realized he had said the wrong thing. The anniversary he thought of was the day he learned that his pregnant wife Padme was dead. The day he took this new form as a half-human, half-machine. The Emperor meant the day he received his name, Darth Vader, one year before.

"Master, I am eternally grateful for my name," he said.

"Yes, I know," said the Emperor. "It is my greatest gift to you, to anyone who will be my apprentice, your name."

"Apologies, Master."

"I could have given you any name. Darth Villian, Darth Tagonist, Darth Bad Guy, but I chose your name because I wanted it to strike fear into the hearts of your enemies, not have them rolling on the floor laughing at you."

"Yes, Master,"

"I mean, I wasn't even up to V. I skipped a letter to give you your name."

"Yes, Master," Vader said, trying not to betray his annoyance.

"Are you unhappy with your name?"

"No, Master."

"Good. Know that as a Dark Lord of the Sith, your reputation will always precede you. It is among your greatest weapons."

"Thank you, Master."

They entered the Emperor's chamber. Even in this remote starship assembly outpost, the chamber was massive.

Vader had not seen it until now, but like the few Emperor's chambers he had seen, it was sparsely decorated. He started to wonder if the Emperor simply liked it that way, or had just lost his sense of Feng Shui. As senator from Naboo, he knew the Emperor enjoyed wearing colorful robes and dressing his office with bright tapestries and exotic items.

"I want to show you something," said the Emperor. He opened a cabinet that was full of interesting items. Vader saw mugs, brochures and trinkets from faraway planets such as Tatooine and Alderaan. The Emperor had become quite a traveler while ruling the nascent Empire. He said it was his duty as a leader to survey his realm, but Vader knew these locales were powerless or strategically unimportant. The Emperor was vacationing.

The Emperor pulled a shard of gold-plated metal from a drawer. It was partially round and badly tarnished, but Vader recognized its hue. Unseen behind the mask, his jaw dropped. The shard was part of his golden droid, maybe a finger.

"Where did you find this? Uh, my Master?"

The Emperor suddenly paused, holding his hand up. He had done this a lot, and it supposedly meant the force had just spoken to him. Vader suspected that it was just a way of keeping an incontinence problem under wraps.

"Something needs my immediate attention," the Emperor said to Vader, and he hastily left the room.

This was the first time this had happened while Vader was in the Emperor's inner sanctum. Maybe this was a test of

his loyalty. Vader looked down at the still-open drawer. Surely if he simply looked, and did not rummage through the items, the Emperor would never know.

He saw a few more travel items such as bumper stickers, keychains, and brown fuzzy dice from a place called Endor. There were several broken watches and cell phones. Little smooth wooden sticks. The guy was a friggin' pack rat.

Vader also noticed photographs taken at a theme park somewhere. Many were of a young boy eating a bright pink substance and posing with various giant furry cartoon characters. There was also a freakish-looking man in a black cloak. He had pure white skin and flattened snakelike nostrils. His eerie smile made Vader's skin crawl. The image of him with his arm around the boy seemed extremely creepy.

The boy looked very familiar. Could it be?

The door burst open, and the Emperor marched in, followed by a couple of Generals. He headed directly for his desk. Vader straightened up and acted as if he had stood frozen in this spot the whole time. The Emperor waved his hand, and the drawer and cabinet doors slammed shut.

"I have to leave. Sorry, Vader. Something has come up." The Emperor grabbed his travel cloak, which had been draped over his chair, and spun around as he put it on. He walked back to the door, and gestured to Vader to leave.

They stepped into the corridor, and the doors swept shut behind them. "I know about the coffee," said the Emperor. "Please see to it." And then he and the Generals were off.