

Chapter 8

Released

Darth Vader took in every detail of the oncoming battle; every pebble on the street, the strange hissing and squealing of the enemy's attacks, the stupid music from the Cantina, and the thick smoke rising above the city. He saw the white being's black cloak, his flattened face, his thin, white feet, and his bony arms holding a thin stick. He saw all of this while running at top speed across the dusty plaza, with his cape flapping through the air behind him.

This was going to be easy, he thought. Vader hurled himself through the last dozen yards of air toward the being, his light saber wound up like a snake about to strike.

"Vader! No!" screamed the Emperor.

Vader suddenly felt a force overwhelm him, like an invisible wall as impenetrable as the side of a starship. It threw him backwards across the dirt street, and Vader felt his bones ring as he fell crumpled on the ground. The enemy had thrown up a protection charm at the last possible second, and went back to deflect the Emperor's bolts of energy.

Vader rose immediately and holstered his light saber. He reached out with his death grip as he walked toward the white being, and he saw the demon seize. The being curled his hand toward his throat and tried to scream. Vader moved in closer and tightened his fist.

Voldemort flailed his arms, trying to cast off Vader's grip. The Emperor saw his chance. He gritted his teeth tightly and released the most powerful bolt of energy he could muster.

Voldemort disappeared. The bolts of energy scorched a building just beyond where he was. Vader ran toward the Emperor, who was looking around at the rooftops nearby.

"My Master, what is—"

"Avada Kedavra!" yelled a voice from behind them. Vader swept his light saber upward and deflected Voldemort's Killing Curse. The white wizard ran toward them as Palpatine lifted his hands and fired his energy bolts again. Voldemort deflected them toward Darth Vader, who jumped to the top of a nearby building and threw his light saber at Voldemort.

Voldemort ducked out of the way as the light saber spun overhead and cut through a corner of his cape. He aimed his wand and threw flames at Vader, who held up a hand to absorb the fire. The Emperor lifted the remains of a small vehicle and threw it toward Voldemort. The wizard raised his wand again and pushed it back toward the Emperor, pinning him against a wall. "Heavio!" Voldemort yelled, casting a spell that multiplied the weight of the vehicle a hundredfold.

The light saber flew back into Vader's hand. He held it out like a wand and the same fire Voldemort had cast flew from the end of the light saber. Behind his mask, Vader's eyes widened in surprise. The wizard evaded him, flying to the top of the same building as he cast out with his wand. His other

hand curled as if to grip and squeeze the life out of a small animal. Vader felt his mask suddenly start to crush inward.

Vader clutched at his helmet as his mechanical breathing became gravelly and weak. Voldemort flicked his wand and Vader's light saber sailed into his hand.

"You disappoint me, Emperor!" Voldemort yelled from atop the building. "I am barely breaking a sweat."

Vader kneeled on the roof, ready to collapse. The little ship against the wall lurched as the Emperor tried to lift it.

"This is a tragic turnabout, Palpie, my boy!" Voldemort laughed loudly. "You came here to relieve me of my life, as you did before, didn't you?"

Vader reached up to his helmet and released the two locks on his neck. Voldemort powered up the light saber and its hum brought a smile to his face. He felt its mild vibration, and he realized he had no idea what it would be like. It was a truly impressive weapon just to hold.

"I will now return the favor," Voldemort sneered as he walked toward the Sith Lord. "Your apprentice is half machine, like a half-blood. We have that in common." He lifted the light saber above his head and got ready to strike.

"Unfortunately, he'll soon be dead, while I will still be very much alive!" the Dark Lord yelled.

Vader removed his helmet, and it fell to the street below. Voldemort froze with the light saber held above him.

"Good Lord, you are far uglier than Lucas realized," he said. Vader suddenly reached up and Force-pushed Voldemort

into the air. The Emperor finally lifted the small craft and threw a volley of electricity into the sky, and caught the dark wizard as he began to fall back to the ground. Vader's push held him in suspension as the Emperor's bolts seared his flesh. Voldemort screamed, dropping the light saber to the street.

"You are correct, Voldemort. I brought you back to destroy you," the Emperor yelled. "You should thank me. I could have let you rot forever as a horcrux."

Voldemort could not cast a spell and could not disappear. It was all he could do just to hold on to his wand. The bolts of energy enveloped him as he writhed and screamed in midair. Vader had not taken a breath, but stood up and jumped to the ground. He kept Voldemort in the air above him.

"When I learned that my contacts discovered the key to bringing you back, I did not hesitate," Palpatine said, strengthening the bolts of energy. "I had to see you again. Last time, I missed my chance to watch you die."

Vader looked at the Emperor curiously. Voldemort kept screaming, unable to respond.

"I read your mind," Palpatine said. "I saw your plan long ago. I saw your memories. You were beaten by a kid every time. That's how I knew you could be beaten by an eight-year-old."

Voldemort writhed in pain, understanding what it must be like to endure the Cruciatus curse. He tried to gather his mind, hoping he could get out of this if he concentrated.

Palpatine nodded to Vader to grab his light saber. Vader understood. He was about to release Voldemort from the electricity, and Vader was to strike as soon as the pathetic snakelike being dropped to the ground.

Suddenly, Palpatine began to feel his energy sucked from his fingertips. He could not handle the draw of electricity as Voldemort pulled it in; absorbing everything he could take from the Emperor. It was unbelievably painful, but Voldemort kept attracting the bolts until the Emperor fell to his knees, unable to withstand the energy coursing through his hands.

Vader could not keep up his death grip any longer. He was out of breath, and he needed to put his helmet back on. The Emperor fell onto his face, releasing Voldemort.

The wizard immediately raised his wand toward Vader. “Crucio!” he yelled. Vader fell to his knees and hollered in pain, but Voldemort felt something wrong. The curse was not nearly powerful enough. The energy bolts had taken most of his strength. He saw the Emperor trying to pull himself up, and realized he could not go on if Palpatine challenged him again.

“Avada Kedavra!” Voldemort yelled, as a thin green strand emitted from the end of his wand and streamed toward Darth Vader. The curse hit Vader’s mechanical chest plate and enveloped it like a green electrical overload. Vader watched the curse fizzle, and then defiantly looked up at the dark wizard. He tightened his grip on his light saber.

Voldemort lifted his wand toward Palpatine. “Stupefy!” he yelled, and the Emperor suddenly went limp on the street.

Voldemort kneeled and put a hand on his shoulder, and they both disappeared.

Darth Vader picked up his helmet and put it back on, taking a deep breath that sounded like rattling tin cans. He tried to stand, but could not, and he pulled up into a kneel instead.

Vader kept his eyes trained on the buildings around him. The dust and smoke was beginning to clear, and he could see the collapsed walls and burnt machinery. It looked like a demolition crew had come through. Flames still flickered around the edges of the square. Vader realized he could again hear the music coming from the Cantina, and he frowned.

At that moment, Voldemort stood outside the city, watching the smoke rise as he had so many years before. He used a blocking spell to keep anybody from seeing him or the Emperor, who lay prone at his feet.

“When I turned that crashing ship into a horcrux, I realized it was foolish,” Voldemort said to the unconscious Emperor. He gazed at the forlorn remains of the starship that dominated the city. “Nobody in this galaxy could ever release me if you were not told how to do it.”

“But I told you, didn’t I? Because I knew you would come for me,” Voldemort said as he kicked at Palpatine’s body. “And you were right. You should have let me rot.”

Voldemort knew his chance was now. The Emperor had done well, exactly as he imagined. Palpatine’s power was impressive, and Vader’s was perhaps even greater. Just being in battle with them was exhilarating. Nothing on Earth had

even come close. One thing Voldemort had learned about fighting the Force was that it was... fun.

The Dark Lord looked at the sleek black starship sitting nearby. He recognized it; an X-wing fighter prototype, though a little longer. It was obviously Vader's. Voldemort figured it would be an excellent transport back to the core of the Empire. The Emperor had double-crossed him many years before. It was time for payback.

Voldemort figured there was no point in subverting the Empire now. It controlled most of the galaxy, and he could simply rule by proxy. He would cast his Imperius curse on Palpatine, as he had done so many decades before, and direct everything the Emperor did.

He could not do it yet, however. His strength had been sapped by his battle with the two Siths. The Killing Curse had not worked on Vader, and Voldemort knew that using anything but the simplest spell, such as the Stupeficus Curse, was too dangerous. Suppressing the power of the Force would require his greatest effort.

Voldemort lifted the Emperor into the starship and got in. He fired up the four plasma engines and grinned. This was a powerful machine. As he lifted off and flew low over the planet's surface, he realized there was another stop to make on Tatooine if he truly wanted to secure the future of the Empire. But in his weakened state, that would have to wait. For now, Vader remained his greatest obstacle.