

(Every character depicted in the story below is a consenting legal adult over the age of 18)

A/N: Tarkin lives... for now.

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Padme, of course, gives nothing away as she sits on the other side of the desk. Despite her physically small stature, she sits in Sidious' previous seat like she was made for it, managing to fill not just the chair but the entire room with her presence, just like her predecessor could. And she was all the more impressive for it, given her lack of Force Sensitivity.

"You may rest assured that I do indeed agree things need to change, Admiral Tarkin. I'm curious in which ways you believe they *should* change, however."

Tarkin shifts at that. His back was already ramrod straight but becomes a fraction of an inch straighter at Padme's inquiry. He meets the new Empress' gaze evenly from across the desk, not out of disrespect necessarily, but rather pride.

That said, he does sweep his eyes over to Vader before he answers, taking in the 'Jedi Presence' for a moment. It becomes clear why a moment later.

"First and foremost, I believe you should immediately remove the Jedi Order from the chain of command."

Vader resists the urge to smile at that. This, he knew, had long been a sticking point for Tarkin. The man didn't feel like the Jedi Order had any place administering a war, let alone leading troops into battle. He was right, of course.

In the end, the only reason that the Jedi Order was in command of the Clone Army and effectively leading the war effort was because the Sith had wanted it that way. It allowed them to remove the Jedi from their places of power, comfort, and safety. It allowed them to end a thousand years of reverence and belief in the Jedi as an untouchable force for good in the galaxy.

Ultimately, it allowed the Sith to set the Jedi up to bring about their own destruction... something that had succeeded in the other timeline and would have succeeded here as well if not for Vader's actions.

Here and now, Padme smiles softly... and inclines her head.

"We agree on this as well, Admiral. However, it will not be as simple as that, as I'm sure the Supreme Chancellor told you back when he was still among us."

Tarkin's jaw clenches and his nostrils flare.

"Chancellor Palpatine was a capable man and a stalwart leader. However, I have always felt that his refusal to push for the Jedi Order to divest themselves from the Grand Army was a mistake. It was a mistake when he was the one making it, and it would be a mistake now... Your Majesty."

Heh. Tarkin toes the line carefully, but he does toe it. His words are sharp; his tone is strong... but he's simply speaking his mind. He's not talking down to Padme or trying to belittle her in any way. And he's lucky that he's not, because Vader is still weighing whether Tarkin deserves to live or not.

See, here's the thing about Wilhuff Tarkin... he could go far if given the resources and half a chance. But he could be so... narrowminded at times. Especially when it came to his belief in the power of fear. Don't get Vader wrong, there were times when fear was indeed a useful motivator. However, it was not the 'be all, end all' that Tarkin wanted it to be.

It all went back to his earliest successes as a military officer. A young lieutenant with the Outland Regions Security Force, Wilhuff Tarkin had found himself opposing a self-styled Pirate Queen named 'Q'anah'. The near-human woman formed an alliance of pirate groups for the purposes of preying upon Eriadu's lommite shipments.

For a time, she had been unstoppable... unbeatable, even. Q'anah had been so successful that Eriadu Mining, the company that owned the lommite, had

eventually accepted that giving up the shipments was cheaper than trying to defend them, leaving the pirate consortium to do as they wished.

Until Wilhuff Tarkin came along, of course. Lieutenant Tarkin had refused to give up, spending months studying all of the previous raids until he eventually worked out the seemingly indecipherable pattern behind the attacks. At which point, they'd baited a trap for the so-called Pirate Queen and captured her and her supporters in one fell swoop.

But that was not the end of the story. The end of the story came in what Lieutenant Tarkin did with Q'anah once he had his hands on her. See, in his eyes it wasn't enough to simply capture and execute the pirates. There would just be more pirates down the line. To them, death was just a part of life... until it wasn't.

Tarkin had sent Q'anah and her crew in a cargo container that was then programmed to fly into Eriadu's sun. He then had the audio and video feeds from the container broadcast across the entire star system so that both the security forces and the rest of Q'anah's pirates could witness their demise.

The fear, the terror, the pain that Q'anah and her crew experienced as they were cooked alive by the heat of the sun... all of that was Tarkin's message to the rest of the pirates. Death was not all that awaited them. They would suffer first, and then they would die when Tarkin permitted it.

In the aftermath, Eriadu had not suffered similar pirate attacks in all the years since Lieutenant Tarkin's gambit paid off. Tarkin himself had moved on, eventually becoming the Admiral he was today, but his lesson remained etched upon the minds of those criminal elements back in his home system.

He'd brought that way of thinking with him though, and even if this was not the Grand Moff Tarkin that Vader had known in another timeline, he could see the telltale signs of the man already at this point in time.

"It was a Jedi that commissioned the Clone Army, Admiral Tarkin. It was for the Jedi that the Kaminoans toiled day and night for ten long years to create the

Grand Army of the Republic. I do not blame the Jedi for feeling a certain responsibility for what one of their own did. They are accountable for the clones, at the end of the day. They must answer for what happens to them, so I understand why they took command of them.”

Tarkin grimaces in frustration at Padme’s reasoned argument. But she’s not done quite yet.

“Still... it won’t be an issue for much longer.”

The Admiral blinks, his brow furrowing in confusion.

“Excuse me?”

Smiling lightly, Padme sits back in her chair, looking all too rightly like an Empress upon her throne. Though admittedly, Vader is a bit biased.

“The Clone Army is a blight upon our Empire and I intend to disband it sooner rather than later.”

Tarkin looks... conflicted by this. In this, he’s very far from the Grand Moff that Vader remembered. Even if he’s not at all young now, he’s still young enough to not have full control over his facial expressions it would seem, because his features contort between elation and concern in equal measure.

That makes sense though. Vader knows full well that Tarkin did not approve of either the Clones or the Jedi. The Jedi were a far greater concern for him obviously, but he also didn’t fully trust the use of clone soldiers either. Especially when, as Padme had rightly pointed out, they were technically commissioned by an Order outside of the command structure of the Republic.

“That... I fear that might be too hasty, Empress. Why it would be better if your new Empire’s military did not rely on... quick and easy solutions such as cloning, I worry that we might be weakening ourselves if you disband the Grand Army in its entirety now.”

Padme tilts her head to the side, allowing the smallest traces of amusement to leak through as she regards Tarkin.

“Oh? You were just telling me that we needed to do away with the Jedi, were we not? You would have me remove the officers that make up the leadership of the Grand Army, would you not?”

Tarkin’s eyes flick to Vader again before returning to Padme.

“... I would, yes. There are more than enough individuals such as myself that could slip into those roles, Your Majesty. Furthermore, the Jedi Order labors under a code that does not allow them to make the decisions that need to be made, decisions that will end this war all the faster. That, I believe, is something we should all be able to agree with.”

Finally, Vader steps forward and breaks his silence, entering the conversation.

“Tell me Admiral, what would you have us do that the Jedi would not? If you were given full control over all the Empire’s military assets, how would you end the war the quickest?”

This time it's Padme that Tarkin glances at, but when she just smiles slightly, making it clear Vader is speaking for the both of them, he turns his gaze back to Vader and after a moment, speaks.

“I would stop playing games for one. I would stop relying on holding actions. And I would cease restraining ourselves to the Jedi and the Clones. The Republic... now the Empire, spans tens of thousands of star systems. Our so-called ‘Grand Army’ is barely large enough to protect our most valuable trade routes.”

He pauses briefly before continuing on, his voice only getting more impassioned.

“All across the galaxy, sentients are being forced to muster up what little defenses they can of their own merit to defend their home worlds... but if we were to bring them all into the fold and unify everyone under one banner? Then,

the Separatist Movement wouldn't hold a candle to our strength, even with all the battle droids in the galaxy."

Staring Vader in the eye, Tarkin doesn't quite smirk... but he does have this satisfied look on his face, like he knows he's right and he's pleased to be saying it out loud.

"That is what I would have us do. The Republic could never have done it, corrupt and bloated as it became. But you have already begun the process of purging the Senate of the more worthless wastes of space. This Galactic Empire... it could be so much stronger than what came before it. It will be... if we move as one."

Of course, what Tarkin didn't know was that the war was already over. Truthfully, they weren't planning to keep officers of his rank in the dark for much longer. It simply came down to whether they would be wasting their time bringing him into the fold just to kill him after the fact.

But... in the end, Vader doesn't think Wilhuff Tarkin is dying today. The man has not disrespected his new Empress, has not made an utter fool of himself, and has ultimately managed to stay calm in the face of dissent. He's spoken his mind and that's all... and neither Vader nor his wife are going to go around executing people simply for speaking their mind.

No, it will be Tarkin's future actions that will decide if he needs to be 'taken care of' down the line. They'll be watching him closely to see which way the coin falls, but for now... for now, Tarkin gets to live.

"You are correct, Admiral. That is exactly what we will do."

Padme's voice brings Tarkin's attention back to her, but she's just getting started.

"Do not fret over the dangers of such a transitional period, however. Removing the Jedi Order and the Clones from our military forces will not create the problems you think they will... because the Separatists are already defeated."

Tarkin blinks, looking struck dumb for the first time in all the years and both lifetimes that Vader has known him. He's not just confused, but rather completely and utterly baffled.

"... What?"

Vader smiles then, showing plenty of teeth.

"Your Empress speaks true, Admiral. Count Dooku died the same day as Supreme Chancellor Palpatine. And the Separatist Council, those who financed and empowered the so-called Confederacy with endless droids and credits... have also been dealt with, removed from the board... every last one of them."

Tarkin's mouth opens and closes as he processes these revelations. Finally, his brow furrows and he asks the question Vader knew he was going to ask.

"What... what about General Grievous? So long as he still lives, the Separatist Armies continue to be a threat."

Padme chuckles then, drawing Tarkin's attention back to her.

"You are not wrong. However... it was General Grievous who slaughtered the Separatist Council. According to our latest reports, he has absconded with the Separatist Droid Armies, taking control of them and stripping the Separatist Systems of their defenses. He has consolidated their fleets into one great force... pointed not at us, but at another polity altogether."

Tarkin's curiosity gets the better of him, leaning forward and staring with burning intrigue in his eyes.

"What polity?"

Vader fields that answer, not even bothering to keep the satisfaction out of his voice.

“The Hutts.”

When Tarkin rears back, gobsmacked, Vader chuckles.

“It would seem that General Grievous reached his limits with his previous Masters... and has chosen to turn his formidable military might onto the greatest slaving culture in this galaxy.”

They have Tarkin right where they want him not. The news has left him off-balance and confused. That’s perfect, it means he doesn’t have time to scheme at the moment... and by the time he finally is ready to scheme and plan again, it will be entirely to their benefit.

“Do not fret, Admiral. You are one of our more capable commanders... and the Empire is not going to be nearly the toothless, fangless entity that the Republic was. It is not my intention to ever need to rely upon the Jedi Order nor an army of clones for our protection. Not ever again.”

Leaning forward, Padme clasps her hands on the desk in front of her as she looks Tarkin in the eye.

“Your place in the new order is secured. Together, we will ensure peace, prosperity, and stability in the galaxy.”

They’re the words Tarkin wants to hear. The words he needs to hear, really. And as he straightens back up, pride burning in his eyes, Vader knows they have the other man right where they want him.

For now, at least. There might be one day where Tarkin outlived his usefulness and had to be put down... but that day was not today.

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A/N: Remember to Vote, leave a Like, and let me know what you think!