



The Force Unleashed (Star Wars)

By Sean Williams

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“The Sith always betray one another. . . . I’m sure you’ll learn that soon enough.”

The overthrow of the Republic is complete. The Separatist forces have been smashed, the Jedi Council nearly decimated, and the rest of the Order all but destroyed. Now absolute power rests in the iron fist of Darth Sidious—the cunning Sith lord better known as the former Senator, now Emperor, Palpatine. But more remains to be done. Pockets of resistance in the galaxy must still be defeated and missing Jedi accounted for . . . and dealt with. These crucial tasks fall to the Emperor’s ruthless enforcer, Darth Vader. In turn, the Dark Lord has groomed a lethal apprentice entrusted with a top-secret mission: to comb the galaxy and dispatch the last of his masters’ enemies, thereby punctuating the dark side’s victory with the Jedi’s doom.

Since childhood, Vader’s nameless agent has known only the cold, mercenary creed of the Sith. His past is a void; his present, the carrying out of his deadly orders. But his future beckons like a glistening black jewel with the ultimate promise: to stand beside the only father he has ever known, with the galaxy at their feet. It is a destiny he can realize only by rising to the greatest challenge of his discipleship: destroying Emperor Palpatine.

The apprentice’s journeys will take him across the far reaches of the galaxy, from the Wookiee homeworld of Kashyyyk to the junkyard planet of Raxus Prime. On these missions, the young Sith acolyte will forge an unlikely alliance with a ruined Jedi Master seeking redemption and wrestle with forbidden feelings for his beautiful comrade, Juno Eclipse. And he will be tested as never before—by shattering revelations that strike at the very heart of all he believes and stir within him long-forgotten hopes of reclaiming his name . . . and changing his destiny.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Sean Williams is the New York Times bestselling and award-winning author of more than sixty short stories and eighteen novels, including (co-written with Shane Dix) the Star Wars New Jedi Order Force Heretic novels: *Remnant*, *Refugee*, and *Reunion*. Williams lives with writer Kirsty Brooks in Adelaide, South Australia.

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Chapter 1

The life of Darth Vader's secret student took a strange and deadly turn the day his Master first spoke of General Rahm Kota.

He'd had no warning that a moment of such significance was approaching. During his nightly meditations, kneeling on the metal floor of his chamber while construction droids built the Executor, unaware of his existence, he had seen no visions in the pure, angry red of the lightsaber that he held like a burning brand in front of his eyes. Although he had stared until the world vanished and the dark side flowed through him in a bloody tide, the future had remained closed.

Nothing, therefore, prepared him for the sudden deviation from the day's punishing and unpredictable exercises. His Master was not a patient teacher; neither was he a talkative one. He preferred action to debate, just as he preferred recrimination to reward. Never once in all the days they had sparred together, with lightsaber, telekinesis, or suggestion, had the Dark Lord offered a single word of encouragement. And that was as it should be, he knew. A teacher's job was not to drag a student along a single, well-worn path. Rather it was to let the student forge his or her own way through the forest, intervening only when the student was hopelessly lost and needed to be corrected.

Even on the wrong paths, he knew, lay some wisdom. What didn't kill him only made him more powerful in the dark side.

And there had been many, many times he had thought he might die . . .

Breathing heavily after a punishing round of blows, lightsaber lowered in submission, he knelt before his Master and prepared for the killing strike. He could feel the wrath radiating from the Dark Lord like heat—a visceral, angry heat that brought out his skin in gooseflesh. For a moment that seemed to stretch for years, all he could hear was the regular, implacable respiration that kept the man inside the mask alive.

“You were weak when I found you.” The voice seemed to come from the far end of a long, deep tunnel.
“You should never have survived my training.”

He closed his eyes. He had heard these words before. They were the closest thing to a bedtime story he'd had as a child. The moral he had taken from them was burned into his mind: Learn . . . or die.

Behind his eyelids he pictured again the clean, cleansing heat of the lightsaber. He had brushed his skin

against it many times, defying the pain, and taken numerous small wounds while dueling with his Master. He imagined that he knew what the blade would feel like when it struck him down. Part of him longed for it.

The lightsaber drifted so close to his neck that he could smell his hair burning.

“But now, your hatred has become your strength.”

The lightsaber retreated. With a hiss it deactivated.

“At last, the dark side is your ally.”

He didn’t dare nod or look up. What was this? Some new ruse to lure him into overconfidence and failure?

His Master’s next words made his heart trip a beat.

“Rise, my apprentice.”

Apprentice. So he had always thought himself, but never before had it been said aloud! And that strange motion with the lightsaber . . . Could he possibly have just been knighted?

His lightsaber retracted. It was all he could do to balance on knees that felt suddenly made of rubber. The black shape looming over him was unreadable, limned with crimson from the light of the star shining through the wide viewport to their right. Metal, angular, and functional, the space around them was as familiar to him as the scars on the back of his hand, but suddenly, disconcertingly, everything seemed different.

The apprentice kept his eyes up and his voice level.

“What is your will, my Master?”

“You have defeated many of my rivals. Your training is nearly complete. It is time now to face your first true test.”

A roll call of past missions sped through the apprentice’s mind. Lord Vader had instructed him to dispatch numerous enemies within the Empire down the years: spies and thieves, mainly, with the occasional high-ranking traitor as well. He felt only satisfaction at having fulfilled his duty. His victims had brought their fates upon themselves, these vermin that gnawed at the footings of the Empire’s magnificent edifice.

But this was different. He could sense it in more than his Master’s words. Darth Vader wasn’t talking about some low-life smuggler with no awareness at all of the Force. There could be only one foe he was worthy to fight now.

“Your spies have located a Jedi?”

“Yes. General Rahm Kota.” The name meant nothing to the apprentice: just one of many in an archive of unconfirmed Jedi kills. “He is attacking a critical shipyard above Nar Shaddaa. You will destroy him and bring me his lightsaber.”

Excitement filled the apprentice. He had trained and hoped for this moment as long as he could remember.

At last it had come. He could never truly call himself a Sith until he had taken the life of one of his Master's traditional enemies.

"I'll leave at once, Master."

He had taken barely a step toward the door when Darth Vader's irresistible voice stopped him. "The Emperor cannot discover you."

"As you wish, my Master."

"Leave no witnesses. Kill everyone aboard, Imperials and insurgents alike."

The apprentice nodded, keeping his sudden uncertainty carefully clouded.

"Do not fail in this."

The lightsaber hanging back at his hip was a comforting, reassuring weight. "No, my lord," he said, back straight and voice firm.

Darth Vader turned away and gripped his hands behind his back. The red sun painted his helmet with lava highlights.

Thus dismissed, his secret apprentice hurried about his latest, darkest duty.

General Rahm Kota.

The name ran through his mind as he hurried through the warren connecting his Master's secret chambers. They were sparse, functional spaces, consisting of a meditation chamber, a droid workshop, sleeping quarters large enough for one, and a hangar deck. All were on a concealed level of Darth Vader's flagship, a space long since written out of the floor plans; it would go unnoticed by the future crew.

The Emperor cannot discover you.

Excited though he was by the thought of hunting Jedi, the reminder of the goal his Master allowed him to share was instantly sobering. All his life he had been trained to turn fear into anger, and anger into power. It was no different, he realized, for Darth Vader. Where else could Lord Vader look for increased power than to the Emperor himself? People were either predators or prey. That was one of the most basic rules of life. Together, Darth Vader and his apprentice would ensure that their joint power only increased.

But first he had to survive an encounter with a Jedi. That his Master had found one at liberty was unsurprising. A handful were suspected to have survived the Great Jedi Purge, and none was more adept at finding them than Darth Vader. The dark side infiltrated every corner of the galaxy; nothing could remain hidden from it forever. Perhaps one day, the apprentice thought, he, too, could seek out his enemies by their thoughts and feelings alone, but like the visions of the future that were closed to him, that ability remained elusive. He had never met a Jedi. Their natures were mysterious to him.

Their history, however, was not. His Master set no lesson plans or written examinations, but Darth Vader did give him access to records surviving from the Republic and the Order he had helped unseat from its position of undeserved privilege. The apprentice had devoted himself to the study, understanding that knowledge of his enemy might mean the difference one day between life and death.

General Rahm Kota.

The name still brought forth no details of combat styles, character, or last sightings from his memory. He would access the records when he reached the Rogue Shadow. There would be time to research on the journey to Nar Shaddaa. If he dug deeply enough, he might find some small detail that would give him an edge when he most needed one. That was the only preparation he required.

Entering the hangar bay, he wound his way through the familiar maze of crates, weapons racks, and starfighter parts. The ambient lighting was dim, with shadows pooling in every corner. The air tasted of metal and ozone—a sharp stink that had by now become very familiar. For some, the underbelly of a Star Destroyer might have seemed a strange place to grow up, but for him it was a comfort to be surrounded by such unambiguous symbols of technological and political power. Ships like these had patrolled the trade lanes of the galaxy for years. They had put down insurrections and quashed resistance around hundreds of worlds. Where else would a Sith apprentice live and learn?

Kill everyone aboard, Imperials and insurgents alike. Leave no witnesses.

Even as he mulled over this new development, a familiar snap-hiss sounded to his right and a glowing blue-white blade sprang into life in a dark corner of the hangar. A brown-robed figure ran forward, weapon raised.

Instantly in a fighting crouch, the apprentice brought his own blade up to block the blow, teeth bared in a delighted snarl.

He and his adversary held the pose for a bare second, lightsabers locked across their chests. The apprentice quickly sized up the being who had attacked him. Human male, fair-haired and bearded, with calm, serious eyes and a firm set to his jaw. Anyone within living memory of the Clone Wars—or possessing free access to the Jedi Archives—would have recognized him immediately.

Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi, High General of the Galactic Republic and master of the Soresu form...

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