

//The Emperor has returned to us, a call to arms has been issued to those of us who remain of the Imperial Remnant Warlords and we must answer. Palpatine requires your services Admiral Idonis Val, will you kneel to him or will we have to force it? The choice is yours, the remaining warlords have already joined and you are yet to provide an answer. Two weeks. That is the time you have been given to make your decision, failure to do so within this time will result in your immediate and non-negotiable extermination. You, your crews and any territory will be subject to the Emperor's wrath. Consider this your one and only warning, good luck Admiral and I pray you make the right decision for your people.//

Admiral Idonis Val stood at the holotable on the bridge of his Executor Class Super Star Destroyer *Astaroth* and let out a heavy sigh, the news of Palpatine's return had left him shaken. Everyone on the bridge looked to him, as if wanting to know what his answer would be here and now. Truthfully he didn't have an answer, but what had to be done would be done out of necessity and nothing less. He would join this new 'Dark Empire' under Palpatine and wait for a chance to defect, his crews would likely follow. Most of them anyway. Everyone aboard the *Astaroth* had lived through most of the Empire's atrocities up until Endor, the two Ghorman massacres, Jedha, Scariff, Alderaan, Operation Cinder and Jakuu. Each of them knew there was more to that list, but those few stood out and no one could deny the loss of life aboard both Death Stars was due to Imperial incompetence. Hundreds of thousands of lives lost in mere moments because of poor strategy, Tarkin and the Emperor valued terror above all else. Vader was never much better, if Imperials got added to his kill count then it might get doubled. At least Vader understood strategy. Didn't excuse how many had died under his leadership.

Val had loyally served the Empire for years, originally commanding the Compellor Class BattleCruiser *Indomitable* during the Galactic Civil War's early years. Since the fall of the Empire at Endor he had continued to serve aboard the vessel until Ysanne Isard of Imperial Intelligence came to power. Isard noted that the fleet under Val had managed to defend Imperial territory amidst the chaos after Endor with minimal losses, even securing several planets in the core to keep Coruscant safe and ultimately keeping it out of the 'New Republic's' hands. For this she awarded him with defending Kuat Drive yards and gave him command of the *Astaroth* once it had been recovered from Deep Space following an expedition, its crew was missing, not a soul remained aboard the vessel and that in of itself was ominous enough. Many aboard thought the vessel might be cursed, Val himself didn't believe in superstitions such as this and refused to let the ghost stories scare him into refusing the command of a lifetime.

Isard had been run out of office and Coruscant by the New Republic, the Bacta War then ensued and Val did not heed her call for help. His task was to defend Kuat after all, but he also didn't agree with Isard's decision to release a virus that specifically targeted alien lifeforms, killing them if left untreated in a short time. Thrawn then came to power, Val heeded his call although ultimately too late to assist him at Bilbringi. Imperial leaders were dropping like flies, Pestage, Isard, Thrawn and even the recently infamous Warlord Zinsj had all been defeated. Remaining Warlords had pledged to help Palpatine, though Val was not a Warlord and served the

Imperial Ruling Council above all else just like Palleon, this individual offer to him meant that perhaps he held more sway than he initially believed. He wasn't on the council, but commanding a Super Star Destroyer carried some leverage with it and his success against the New Republic so far could not be ignored. Defenses against the New Republic on several worlds at the edge of the core were successful even before *Astaroth* was given to him and rumours of him taking on an Executor class with a small fleet had spread like wildfire. The rumour was of course true, he'd managed to eliminate an Executor using a small battlegroup, losses were heavy yet using only a few Imperial 1 class Star Destroyers, a mix of Victory classes, a handful of Corvettes, along with 3 BattleCruisers including his Compellor *Indomitable* and the Impellor BattleCarrier *Unsubmittable* had won the day.

He had no delusions of grandeur, his achievements all came at a cost of Imperial lives and he didn't forget the names of those ships and the number of crew members aboard. Each battle that followed he replayed them in his mind, trying to will himself into planning better and learning from the mistakes of those engagements. It had worked, keeping him grounded and always improving battle after battle. Refusing Palpatine would put him up against unstoppable odds, the New Republic wouldn't trust him and the bulk of the Remnant sided with the Emperor. Val was obligated to follow that path, to keep his people alive and hope for the best. It didn't sit right with him, but necessity was the deciding factor and deep down he regretted the lives that would be lost in the process. The Empire at its core was xenophobic and Val despite all the propaganda, the instance that Humans deserved to lead, it didn't click. In many ways he saw the New Republic's mission as righteous, even at points wondering if deep down he was wrong in continuing to stand by the Empire after so many atrocities and yet despite that here he was. The Empire was law and order, two things he valued above all else. The Rebellion, the New Republic represented change and chaos. Two things he hated, but Val could not deny the tyranny and corruption within the Empire any longer. Palpatine himself was corrupt, or was the source of corruption within their ranks and had in many ways caused this brutal Imperial Civil War that ensued after his supposed death.

Evidence could be found in Super Star Destroyers, oftentimes they went to those who had garnered favour with Palpatine and hadn't truly earned them. This was the case with several current Warlords, along with deceased ones. Isard and Kaine chief amongst them, though even Vader alongside Inquisitor Jarek were gifted them. Perhaps Vader deserved it, but the Admirals in charge of his *Executor* often failed miserably, Ozzel and Piett both paid the price for their incompetence with it. Val was gifted his as well in hindsight, but his naval prowess had shown and still made it feel like he'd earned it.

Other signs of the corruption showed through this 'Dark Empire' and the massive secret fleet, alongside the countless inhumane experiments done using the dark side of the force. What could have been different if those forces were aiding the Empire then? What if the Death Stars weren't built? How many lives could be saved? The Dark Empire just solidified the fact that he wanted to cull the weak from the ranks and recreate the Empire from the ashes, everything he did in the past led to this moment. Operation Cinder should've been a dead giveaway.

He couldn't stand for all these atrocities, ignoring them only made him worse of a person and redemption already felt so far away. Lives of people he cared for were at stake here, so were lives of countless innocents in the Galaxy and Palpatine would see it all burned to ash if he got his way. Despite allying with Palpatine, Val would wait things out and see what happened. The New Republic would arrive to fight the reborn Emperor soon enough, if they won then all would return to as it was and if they did not Val would rally his fleet to aid them in whatever desperate attack they committed to. *Astaroth* would provide much needed assistance to the New Republic, especially if rumours of a ghost ship known as the *Eclipse* were true and he knew they were since it was being built at Kuat before vanishing into thin air. It could destroy a Super Star Destroyer in a single shot, but Val hoped it would be unexpected to have *Astaroth* suddenly turn on the Emperor's flagship and provide enough of a chance to damage the dreadnought. This information would be withheld from his crew until such a day came, for now it was time to play the long game and hope to win.

Val finally realized he'd been entrenched in his thoughts for some time now, running through the odds and all of what he'd witnessed while serving the Empire. His crew were still watching him expectantly, waiting for his answer with anticipation. The tension was palpable, everyone was on edge and many likely shared his thoughts on the Emperor's return. This was no hero coming back to save the Empire, it was a curse upon the stars themselves and a disease that needed to be cut out. "We will accept the Emperor's offer, but rest assured that all of you will be well taken care of and have nothing to fear. We're together in this until the end, Palpatine will lead us and perhaps things will be different. Hope for the best and if it does not come to pass we will take matters into our own hands, but for now this is the path that is laid before us. This road will be hard, there will be challenges that all of us must face and in time new decisions may come into play. We are Imperials! We are the truth. We are the law. We are the order. We shall stand strong. We shall stand united. Long live the Empire!" His voice was cracking as he got through the speech, some would know that he did not truly mean all his words and others would surmise what he meant through their years of service with him.

"Long live the Empire!" Everyone on the bridge responded, regardless of their stance and whether or not they knew the Admirals plan.

Val knew many of them were disillusioned, he also knew that seeing the Dark Empire and Palpatine's lack of regard for life across the stars would sway some of those who did not yet know how to feel. It was politics, Palpatine was good at that when he was a chancellor in the Republic, but as an Emperor he had grown less cunning and diligent. Reliance on sheer power alone as opposed to strategic maneuvering. It was with this knowledge that Val hoped his plan may work, outsmarting a foe who was too focused on ensuring he was the most powerful man in the Galaxy. It worked for the Rebels; it would likely do the same for him. Timing was everything, so he would wait as long as it would take and spring the trap only when the moment was right. Any sooner and he risked losing everything. The people under him would be punished and the worlds that pledged to him would fall if he failed, so he had to succeed. For them. For the people serving him. For the People living in his sector. He didn't matter, only they did.