

Revenge Is a Dish Best Served in an Instant

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Summary: Never underestimate the power of a darkened heart.

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Author's Note: I deliberately threw most known Superman and Star Wars lore out the window for this one. Please don't come at me with "That's not canon!" because I don't care. It's not meant to be canon, just a fun little AU scenario.

"Wilhuff R'kin, you are brought here before this Council to answer for your crimes," intoned a grim-faced, middle aged man as he looked down from his seat on the elevated dais in the pristine courtroom, all white walls and rich chocolate-colored furniture. "You are charged with the murders of two of your peers, Kio Zin and Farrak Al'Itel. We have all examined the evidence over the past two weeks. We have heard from the victims' families. We have questioned the witnesses. We have heard your side of the story and have found you guilty. Before I pass down the sentence, have you anything to say?"

The dour young man, Wilhuff, scowled as he met the Elder's eyes. "I only did what needed to be done. I am not ashamed of my actions."

"They were your brothers-in-arms," reminded the man seated directly to the left of Trey, the Chief Elder, and the one whose hands held Wilhuff's fate.

"Zan Po is right," Trey said with a serious nod. "They were both upstanding, promising young men and valiant military recruits."

"They were dangerous people," Wilhuff growled through clenched teeth. He was working hard not to explode and snap angrily at the pompous group of men before him. "They murdered my family! Murdered them and got away with it! I delivered justice... justice you *failed* to bring."

"It was never proven that they were the killers," the man to Trey's immediate right said. His voice was calm, even, and devoid of any accusation.

"Jor-El is right," Trey said thoughtfully, without giving the younger man so much as a fleeting glance. "The murderer was sentenced last year."

"It was a set-up," Wilhuff insisted. "How blind *is* this Council?"

"The evidence was consistent with the crime," Trey reminded him.

"*False* evidence," Wilhuff spat, as though the words were poison.

Trey cleared his throat, relaxed and unbothered by Wilhuff's attitude. "We're not here to rehash the past. We're here to address the present case. *Your* case. The Council has decided. You are to be executed for your crimes."

Jor-El stood up, shaking his head, as if unable to sit quietly by

and watch the scene unfold. "Trey, with all due respect, I still think the punishment is too extreme. It's clear Wilhuff wasn't... *still* isn't... in his right mind."

Trey sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose in annoyance. "Jor, with respect, we've already discussed this. At length. Or have you forgotten?"

"And I still stand opposed to the death penalty!" Jor-El insisted.

Wilhuff watched with silent interest. Of all the Elders, the young – by Council standards at any rate – Jor-El was known to be, by far, the most lenient and progressive one of the bunch. Wilhuff waited to see how the older members would react to this act of defiance by the newly inducted Jor-El. He didn't bother to hope that the man's pleas would stay his execution, but it might be interesting to watch if this turned into a full-blown argument.

"I would remind you that you are still in a probationary period with this Council," warned Zan Po, ignoring whatever it was that Trey was trying to say.

Jor-El dipped his head in deference. "I know," he quietly acknowledged as he left his seat and stepped off the dais to stand between Wilhuff and the Council. He seemed completely unafraid of the accused murderer, and Wilhuff supposed Jor-El had no reason to be. Four burly guards surrounded Wilhuff, and he was bound – ankles and wrists – with tight energy bonds that held him nearly locked in place. "And I understand that my ideas are a bit different than that of most of the Council. This man before us... his actions are reprehensible, there's no denying that." He gestured vaguely to the man behind him. "But what good does it serve to execute him? Will it bring back the men he killed? No."

"It will bring peace to their families," argued Zan Po, standing so suddenly and angrily that he knocked over his chair.

Jor-El shrugged. "Perhaps. But wouldn't it be more prudent to sentence him to life on one of the prison planets? Let him work his debt to society off?"

"You say that like he's going to one day be released back into society," Trey mused darkly.

Jor-El shook his head. "No. I think we can *all* agree that that can never be allowed to happen. But he *can* serve the community he shattered by working at one of the prisons – perhaps mining some of the resources we need."

"Being allowed to live is too good for him," spat another Council member, Daq O'ka. He crossed his arms as though he'd just won the argument.

"Killing him serves nothing," Jor-El countered calmly, and Wilhuff almost found himself appreciating the young Elder.

At that, all of the Council members began to argue in earnest, speaking over one another and thrusting accusatory fingers at one another. What had begun as a solemn sentencing for Wilhuff's crimes swiftly devolved into a dull roar of contention.

"Quiet! All of you!" Trey shouted, and immediately the dozen other men in the room hushed. He quietly steepled his fingers as he appeared to contemplate the things he'd heard. After a moment, his piercing gaze shot to Jor-El. "And which resource do you suggest he mine for?"

"Beskar," Jor-El replied without hesitation.

The others gasped and, inwardly, Wilhuff scowled, his fledgling respect for the young Jor-El vanishing like a snuffed out candle. Beskar mining was notoriously dangerous and, by all accounts, excruciatingly hard labor. He watched with growing dread as the Elders took this under consideration. One by one, each of them nodded and looked at Jor-El with new respect and even some admiration for his idea. A pit of growing dread coiled like a cold, coppery mass in Wilhuff's stomach as he realized with a sickening feeling that, while his life would be spared, he was headed for a possibly worse fate. Hatred for Jor-El, the Council of Elders, and all of Krypton in general flared into his heart like a ravaging wildfire.

Trey's raptor-like gaze swept over his fellow Elders. "All in

favor?" he asked simply.

"Aye."

The word was unanimously spoken, the sound of it a dull death knell in Wilhuff's ears.

"It's settled then," Trey said with a solemn nod. "Wilhuff R'kin, you are hereby sentenced to live out the remainder of your days on Al'tahara, as a prisoner and miner of Beskar. Bailiffs? You may take him when ready."

"Come on," one of the the vaguely wall-shaped bailiffs ordered in a voice as deep and gravelly as a peel of far-off thunder. "Let's go, killer."

Wilhuff R'Kin paused to wipe at the sheen of sweat that covered his brow. Everything hurt. His back was screaming in agony. His biceps and triceps felt as substantial as the jellied protein booster the prisoners were always given at meals. His hands were blistering and chafed, despite the protective gloves he wore. It was torture to even blink in his exhausted state.

Just another hour left, he told himself, his inner voice dark and vengeful.

"Alright, break's over," a portly guard dryly barked in his direction as he leaned on his pick axe.

Wilhuff bit his tongue against the seething retort burning on his tongue and fought down the desire to strangle the man with his bare hands. He was *attempting* to be a model prisoner and earn some of the privileges that went along with it. So far, in the five hellish years he'd been incarcerated here, he'd secured a few comforts — a small music device; paper and pens with which to write, sketch, and otherwise pass the time with; and even the ability to borrow reading materials from the tiny book cart that made weekly passes through the prison block. His ultimate aim, however, was to work his way up from the gritty, demeaning, difficult physical labor in the mines to something — *anything* — else. He didn't care what it was — refining the raw metal ore, melting it down and pouring it into molds to make neat, identical bars for easier transport, even loading the heavy pallets of finished bars onto transport ships destined for Krypton. Oh, he had no illusions about his non-existent chance of escape, but at least he would be out of these blasted mines and in the open air again.

He's not worth the trouble, he reminded himself with a sneer as his eyes threw daggers at the guard. *There's only an hour left before my shift is over and I can sleep.*

He ground his teeth and went back to work, but only after making it a point to wipe his brow once more. Immediately, he fell back into his established rhythm of hacking at the rock wall before him, stopping to check for ore, and chipping away at the rock again. It wasn't the way he'd been taught when he'd first arrived at the prison five years prior, but it was efficient enough that the guards didn't give him a hard time over it.

The hour passed by slowly. Wilhuff was hardly able to lift his pick axe by the end. He stumbled, half asleep, through a rapid shower that was devised simply to clean the dust and grime from the miners rather than bring their aching muscles any relief. He wolfed down his meal in record time in the spartan cafeteria, then plodded to his cell. He asked the closest guard to lock him in for the night, and they were only too happy to oblige and have one less inmate to look after. They swiped their key-card and the door to the cell opened noiselessly. Wilhuff stepped in wordlessly and the door closed behind him, locking with a low *hiss* as the mechanics slid home. Wilhuff barely even noticed it as he shuffled to his cot at the far end of the tiny room and unceremoniously plopped down, face first, into the thin pillow. He was asleep in seconds.

The harsh clanging of the alarm system woke Wilhuff with a jolt. All around him, the world of the prison was bathed in an abrasive red from the emergency lights, washing everything in a bloody hue that he found more comforting than terrifying. With

the back of one hand, he scrubbed the sleep from his eyes and, with an effort, he sat up on his hard, narrow little cot. He yawned mightily, feeling unconcerned about the alarm. It was likely that some spirited new prisoner was learning his place at the prison. He'd seen it often enough. There was always some brash hot-shot who came to the prison full of thoughts of grandeur about how they were going to break the guards and run the place themselves or simply kill the guards, steal a transport ship, and escape to some other far-off planet. Wilhuff hadn't been so bold, or so stupid. He'd known better try some hairbrained, fruitless endeavor that would only earn him the pain of harsher work. Wisely, he'd held his tongue, actions, and anger in check.

He yawned again, stretched, and stood. Every muscle in his back popped in protest with his movement, and his sleep-fogged brain tried to cajole him back to the black void of the dreamless slumber he'd been in. He shrugged his shoulders and arched his neck left and right to clear his thoughts and work out some of the stiffness in his body. An idea crept into his mind. Maybe, if the upstart prisoner or whatever the problem was was close enough, he could get a little entertainment if he peered through the tiny air vents in the door. He placed his hands on the small of his back and then arched his body, working free a final kink in his sore back. But before he could so much as take a step forward, his cell door slid open with the hiss of the mechanical locks.

"What in the name of Rao?" he gasped in surprise as he reflexively stepped backward.

He'd expected one or more of the prison guards to be behind the door. But these fully-armored men in white were most definitely *not* guards. Each of them held a firearm — some of them casually as they surveyed the cell, a few of them in stances that screamed of their readiness to blast Wilhuff to pieces if he so much as breathed wrong. Slowly, he raised his hands in the air to display that he was not a threat to them.

"Don't shoot," he said calmly, his voice steady as though he were giving a command. He would not give them the satisfaction of pleading. "I'm a prisoner here. I'm unarmed."

"Kill him," one of the white-clad men said, and his voice sounded distorted by his helmet's microphone system, making him sound almost robotic.

"He could be of some use to us," another countered, his voice also warped by his helmet's mechanics.

"Indeed," Wilhuff offered, surreptitiously craning his head a little to look out into the hall beyond the six men. He could see bodies — lots of bodies — littering the once pristine white floor.

"Orders were to kill everyone on the planet," reminded the first man. "The Emperor won't tolerate us defying orders."

"The Emperor wasn't the one who gave us the command," argued the second as he glanced swiftly over his shoulder to the first speaker. He turned his gaze back to Wilhuff, and Wilhuff had to admit that the helmet's design was unnerving.

Wilhuff didn't wait for someone else to decide his fate. He went to one knee in a gesture of subservience. "Take me to your leader," he offered simply. "Let him decide if I can be of use."

A murmur of displeasure rang through the Council chambers. All of the Elders had been roused from their warm, comfortable beds in the middle of the night with no explanation, other than "it's an emergency." A scattered handful of the men were still in their bedclothes. Most had tugged on at least some proper clothing to be out and about in. Jor-El, Trey, and Zan Po were the only three who'd taken the time to slip into their official Council robes. All of the men were sleepy-eyed, yawning, and grumbling. It was a rare thing indeed that the Council was forced into a middle of the night emergency meeting, and none of them were too thrilled about being torn from their beds on such a cold, rainy night. A rumble of thunder outside and an ominous crack of lightning perfectly mirrored the stormy expressions on the men within the chamber.

“All right, all right! Settle down, everyone!” Trey commanded in a strong, clear voice. “Let’s get things started. The sooner we tend to this emergency, the sooner we can all return home.”

There was a scraping of chairs as everyone pulled their seats out from beneath the oval table. Within seconds, everyone was seated, some resting weary heads in their hands as they propped their elbows up on the table before them. Trey motioned for the young man near the door to step forward.

“Come, come. Tell us why you’ve summoned us,” Trey invited him in a calm, encouraging voice, though he stifled a yawn.

The young man cleared his throat nervously. “My name is Stanar Al’ris,” he began. “I’m one of the new prison guards stationed at the facility on Al’tahara. Or... I should be,” he corrected himself after an awkward pause. “My team and I were meant to provide a relief detail for the guards already stationed at the prison.”

Trey nodded. “But you are not there now,” he said flatly, though his voice brooked no accusation. Jor-El recognized the tone. Trey didn’t want the superfluous details. He wanted to get straight to the point.

Stanar shook his head. “When we got to the prison, we found nothing but carnage. Someone or something attacked the prison. There was nothing left alive, only droids, mining the beskar. My team and I set to work destroying as many as we could, but we’d sorely underestimated the amount of droids. They poured out of the mines like invading insects. I’m the only one who managed to escape, and that’s only through sheer luck, as my team leader insisted that I stay with the transport ship and ready it for the return home.”

Jor-El felt his heart skip a beat as his stomach bottomed out. “How many?” he managed to ask as his mouth went as dry as sand.

“Droids? Countless,” replied Shanar.

“And you’re *sure* no one was left alive?” Jor-El pressed.

“Affirmative. Even though I was at the ship, I wore one of the headsets, which allowed me to communicate with my team and them with me. Guards and prisoners alike... bodies were strewn everywhere, some in pieces. I can only imagine what kind of firepower would do that to a person.”

“We must launch a counter attack,” Zan Po said decisively. “We cannot afford to lose all that beskar.”

“It’s too late, I’m afraid,” Shanar said, hanging his head in shame. “I ran a scan of the planet as I fled home to report the news. By the time we could get a force together, provisioned, and flown out there, it’ll be too late. With that many droids at work, Al’tahara will already be stripped of its supply of the metal.”

“He’s probably right,” Jor-El said, rubbing his chin in thought. “We’ve been mining that planet for a century. We’ve known for a while that the beskar was mostly gone and that we’d have to shut the mines down sooner or later and move to a new location.”

“You’re suggesting we... *abandon* it?” Juntha Ok’ow asked, blinking in disbelief, his voice hard and angry.

“I’m *suggesting* that we don’t needlessly risk lives for a tiny little, dried up planet,” Jor-El volleyed back, his voice as steady and unyielding as stone, though he kept his own anger at having words put into his mouth in check.

Trey rubbed his tired eyes in thought but said nothing. He appeared unwilling to take a side just yet, a trait that had served him well over the years Jor-El had known him, but which had also caused the occasional problems. Jor-El knew, deep inside, that this was one of the situations that would come back to haunt the Chief Elder in the future.

“We have other planets within reach that have or are at least suspected of having beskar,” Jor-El added placatingly. “Ones we haven’t yet tapped. We can easily rebuild on one of them. Risking lives for one, insignificant prison planet is *not* the wise thing to do.”

He heard a few, grudging, murmurs of agreement from some of the other men in the room. He let out a soft sigh of relief as a little of the tension in his body relaxed. At least some of them were willing to listen to him. He knew he was still the most junior member of the Council, even after all these years, and that meant he still had a lot to prove to the others. But they were willing to listen now, and that gave him hope. Hope that he could avoid a disaster. Hope that he could gain their trust enough to make a difference to all of Krypton.

“Gentleman, let us calmly discuss the matter in depth,” he said when Trey failed to initiate the conversation to come.

Wilhuff looked in the mirror and inspected his crisp gray uniform with a discerning eye. He’d worked too hard over the last twenty years to make a name for himself with the Imperial Order. Starting out as a captured prisoner from the prison planet, Al’tahara, he’d thrown himself on the mercy of Emperor Palpatine. The ghostly, haggard, phantasm-like man had listened to Wilhuff and allowed him to live. Wilhuff had instantly sworn his allegiance to the vast Empire and had endured his slave-like days as a Storm Trooper without complaint. The constant drills and patrols had seemed heavenly compared to the miserable years he’d spent laboring away down in the dark, cold, unforgiving beskar mines.

Slowly, but surely, he’d proven his usefulness, intelligence, and ruthlessness. He’d risen swiftly through the ranks until he’d finally achieved what he’d been after from the start – the title of Grand Moff of the Imperial Order; the very first man to be granted the extra title of “Grand,” in fact. He’d become a trusted advisor to Lord Vader as well, making him a virtually untouchable figurehead in the Empire at large.

Wilhuff brushed a nearly invisible speck of lint from his left breast, where it had been sitting just above the numerous medals and accolades he wore with grim pride. He looked again at his reflection and saw the sharp lines in his gaunt face. He looked older than his forty-five years – a “gift” from his years of hard manual labor. His hair, once a light brown, had grayed and receded, making him look a lot like his late grandfather once had – before his family had been murdered, before he’d taken his revenge, before he’d been convicted and sent to endure a long, painful, exhausting existence as a miner. But his wiry frame was strong, not feeble, like a lithe figure forged from steel instead of brittle like his grandfather had been. His military training and years of mining work had hardened his body as much as it had deadened his heart and seared away his emotions. Sometimes, he felt as much of a robot as the countless droids who served aboard the Imperial Cruiser he commanded.

He closed his eyes for the briefest of moments, then opened them with determination. It was time to get the day started. He placed one, short, errant hair back into its proper place, then exited his chambers. He had a meeting to attend, and he would not be late for it. Yes, his underlings would wait for him as long as need be, but he was the Grand Moff Tarkin.

Tarkin.

The change in his surname name had been a strategic move on his part. First, and most importantly, it had distanced himself from his wretched Kryptonian roots. Secondly, he’d discovered that his new cohorts had difficulties in correctly pronouncing his true name.

It was odd, he knew, that he felt more connected to his new name than he ever had to his Kryptonian one. But he wasn’t bothered by such existential questions and concerns.

He was the Grand Moff Tarkin. He was a survivor. He was a warrior. He was a respected, feared member of the Imperial Order. *That* was what mattered, not something as trivial as a name. His reputation came before any concerns over what name he went by.

And the Grand Moff Tarkin had a reputation of *never* being late, especially when he was to discuss important issues with Lord

Vader.

It didn't take long for him to reach the command deck of the ship. He breathed a mental sigh of relief as he entered and saw his men focused on their various tasks. Lord Vader hadn't yet arrived. Wilhuff was always sure to be at a scheduled meeting first. Vader might be the pet project of Palpatine, but Wilhuff was nearly the black-clad, former Jedi's equal in terms of power. He would *never* let Vader forget that, *ever*, even if his ways were sometimes as subtle as denying Vader the opportunity to catch him late for a meeting.

The reprieve didn't last long. Ninety seconds later, Wilhuff could hear the rhythmic, robotic, strained, and very loud, breathing of Vader as he neared the ship's bridge. Wilhuff turned his attention away from one of the monitors he'd been idly checking and stood facing the doorway, his hands clasped behind his back in an "at ease" stance that bespoke of his calm collectedness and his casual view of the upcoming meeting. Though Vader's abilities scared him from time to time – Wilhuff had seen more than one incompetent twit choked to death by Vader's invisible Force projections – he never allowed Lord Vader the satisfaction of knowing that. He believed it was key to show no fear; if he didn't have any fear, perhaps one day he would gain the prestigious title of "Darth Tarkin" in the future. He would be *truly* unstoppable then.

"Lord Vader," he greeted, dipping his head in acknowledgment.

"You have something you wish to show me?" Vader answered without a greeting or preamble.

Wilhuff nodded. "A demonstration of the Death Star's new weapon." He allowed a partial grim smile to break the stone-like features of his pinched face. "We call it a Star Killer." He gestured to the metal steps that led to the observation deck of the bridge. "Come," he encouraged.

"So, it's finished then," Vader said, a note of approval in his voice as they ascended the steps. "Tell me more, Grand Moff."

Wilhuff gestured to the large windows that surrounded the bridge. "The Death Star will be in position in minutes. But the laser is powerful enough to instantly destabilize a planet's core, causing an explosion with enough force to tear the planet to pieces, vaporizing every living thing on it and leaving nothing but small asteroids in its wake."

"I see," Vader replied with a slight nod. "Good. It will be an effective weapon against the rebels who dare to challenge the might of the Empire." He paused, his reflective eye coverings somehow appearing to scan the starfield beyond the windows. "What is our target for this demonstration?"

"A planet called Krypton, my Lord," Wilhuff answered without flinching.

"Populated?"

"Very much so."

"I don't know this planet. It resides outside even the Empire's vast reach. Are there rebels hiding there?" Vader inquired after a moment, but his voice held no sympathy, no hesitation, no unwillingness to see the demonstration through. It was merely as though he was working through some mental checklist.

"No, my Lord," Wilhuff admitted, holding back his worry that Vader might not approve of the test.

"Then why this planet?" Again, there was no true curiosity in the question. It was as if Vader was asking for the sole reason of testing Wilhuff's reasoning.

"Because I want to feel something again."

"Oh?" Was that a hint of actual interest?

He nodded curtly. "The satisfaction of revenge."

"Jor? Are you seeing what I'm seeing?" Lara asked her husband in a hushed, curious tone, though she was not alarmed.

"Hmm? What's that?" Jor-El asked, tearing his thoughts away from the experiment he was running on the bank of computer

screens in their shared lab.

Lara pointed to the windows, cradling their newborn son, Kal, to her chest with her other arm. The baby was fast asleep, his mop of peach fuzz black hair just visible above the dark blue blanket he was swaddled in. Lara shifted him from laying in her arms to resting his head on her shoulder.

"There's *two* moons in the sky tonight," she elaborated.

"Two moons? That's not possible," Jor-El said, rounding the high lab table that stood opposite the computers. He rushed to the window and followed with his eyes to where Lara was pointing. He frowned. "That *can't* be another moon. I've been tracking all the close celestial bodies, and there's nothing that should be close enough to become trapped in our gravitational pull."

He rushed back across the room to the leftmost computer and typed furiously, closing out the screen with his current experiment and opening up a new window that gave him access to Krypton's network of satellites and deep space telescopes. He hurriedly entered new coordinates and drummed his fingers impatiently on the tabletop as he waited for the telescopes to realign themselves to where he needed to look. When they finally did, he paled and his hands shook.

"That's no moon," he said with a sickening knot of fear coiling up instantly in his stomach and a tremble in his voice. "It's a massive space station." As he watched, momentarily frozen in horror, a point on the space station started to glow green.

"You have to warn the Council, *now*," Lara urged in a near panic as she retreated from the window to look at the monitors as well.

"There's no time," Jor-El said, his voice sounding hollow in his own ears. "I think they're about to fire on us."

Lara clutched the newborn Kal to her chest, as though that would protect her precious infant son. "What do we do?"

The green glow grew more intense as Jor-El racked his brains. "We have to protect Kal," he said decisively.

"How? How can we protect him against...?"

Lara's question was cut off as a blast from the space station rocked Krypton. A deep rumbling quake shuddered the planet as though it were a giant roused from sleep and angered by the interruption of its dreams.

"I thought the result was supposed to be instantaneous," Darth Vader quipped, his body posture denoting his extreme disappointment and rising anger.

"It is," Wilhuff said with a scowl. "But the weapon *is* untested, save for that last blast. It likely just needs some fine tuning." He looked down from the observation deck to his underlings below. "Get in contact with the Death Star! Have them intensify the power. Full blast. I want that planet *obliterated*," he snapped, barking orders in a deadly tone of voice.

"Your next attempt better not fail me," Vader hissed threateningly.

With one hand, Vader sent out tendrils of his mysterious power. Wilhuff felt his body rise into the air. Vader's fingers curled slightly, like he was about to grasp a drink. A crushing pressure gripped Wilhuff around his neck, squeezing against his windpipe. Breathing became problematic. Despite repeated warnings to his body not to betray his fear and to remain calm, his hands flew to his neck of their own accord, tearing in vain at the imaginary fingers that were cutting off his air supply.

"I never fail," he vowed, making eye contact with Palpatine's favorite lackey, as he thought of Vader. "It will be done. And then the rebels won't stand a chance against us."

Vader held him for another long, unnecessary moment, as if securing his place as the alpha male in their confrontation. Then he abruptly relaxed his hand and the invisible vice around Wilhuff's neck vanished as he fell to the floor. Wilhuff landed on his feet with a jolt of pain that raced up his body, but he maintained his blank expression.

“This weapon had *better* deliver,” Vader threatened, an accusatory finger pointed at Wilhuff. “Or no title will protect you from my wrath, *Grand Moff*.”

“It will. I swear it. The next blast will rip that planet to shreds.”

Alarms rang throughout the city as the wounded planet continued to lurch and shudder like a stabbed beast. Buildings collapsed. Roads cracked and sinkholes opened their gaping, hungry maws. Statues crumbled, sending tons of stone hurtling downward on screaming, fleeing citizens. Fleeing to where, Jor-El wasn't sure. This wasn't as easy as escaping the vast city into the mountains until things settled down. The only safe place to be was off the planet. But there was simply no time to coordinate an evacuation effort.

“The prototype,” he said distractedly as he gazed at his baby boy, who'd barely just begun to live. Now, it seemed like he might perish well before his natural time.

“You mean the ship?” Lara asked, incredulous. “We can't! It's an untested prototype!”

“It's Kal's only chance,” Jor-El said with a nod.

“It's not designed for a passenger! It's a mockup of a cargo ship,” his wife argued, holding Kal even closer until the boy let out a squeal of displeasure. She quickly shifted him in her arms and rocked him, making soothing shushing noises as she did so. “It's a death sentence!”

“No,” Jor-El said resolutely. “Staying here is the death sentence. The hyperlight drive can guide the ship someplace safe if we can't stop this threat. And, honestly, I don't see a way for us to counter this space station in time to save our world. We're simply not prepared for an attack like this.”

“And if we *can* save Krypton?” Lara asked.

“A few simple lines of code and I can remotely take control of the vessel and direct it back home to us,” Jor-El promised.

Lara looked uncertainly at their boy. “Where would we send him?”

Jor-El shook his head. “I'll run a search for a compatible planet.” He quickly turned away from her, partly to begin his work and partly to hide the anguish he felt inside about sending Kal away. “While the computer finds a match, I'll program the hyperlight drive.”

He typed diligently as the seconds raced by, each one feeling more desperate and oppressive as the one before. Any moment now the space station would strike again, and he could only venture to guess as to why a second attack hadn't yet come. Perhaps the weapon was recharging? Or perhaps being recalibrated? Or was it being positioned to strike at another part of the planet?

It took only a few minutes to add in the coding he needed, then to upload the information and a few brief messages to Kal into the small spherical drive. As a last-minute decision, he had the computer digitally impress a map face of Krypton onto the surface of the miniature globe. Cradling it gently in the palm of his hand, he turned to his wife.

“It's done. The computer has identified a planet called Earth. Its inhabitants look like us, though it has a strange yellow sun. Kal will fit in there in case the worst happens and Earth becomes his new home.”

Lara nodded, tears streaking down her face as she refused to stop gazing at her son. She tried to speak, but the words were drowned out by her grief. Jor-El didn't need her to speak. He understood her perfectly. He tapped a button on the complex computer and the robotic assistants in the lab retrieved the prototype spacecraft. Hastily, the robots exited the room at his next command, which came out harsher than he'd intended.

The pod only just fit Kal with no room to spare. The child would have to be content to take only his blanket and the hyperlight drive with him into the cold, unknown reaches of space,

out beyond the confines of his home galaxy to a faraway corner of the universe. Jor-El cradled Kal one final time in his arms as he said his heartfelt goodbyes to the baby they'd so desperately yearned for for so many long years. Then he passed Kal back to his mother, and Lara made her own weeping farewells to the son she would never be able to raise.

“He'll be safe,” Jor-El assured her, not five minutes after the first blast had rocked Krypton to its core. “The ship is sturdy and fast, even for a prototype. It will carry him to safety at a speed that will bring him to Earth swiftly and smoothly. He will feel no hunger as his body goes into a stasis state for the duration of the voyage.” He wasn't sure if he was speaking for his wife's benefit or for his own.

“I just hope that he finds someone to love him, if we can't bring him home again,” Lara sniffled through a fresh batch of tears as her husband gently closed the capsule.

“He will. He's our son. There is no force in the universe that will prevent him from having all that he needs,” Jor-El replied with conviction, though he had no way to guarantee the truth of his promise.

Silently, the ship rose into the air. The hatch on the lab's roof opened. Kal's ship floated upward, slowly at first, until it cleared the lab. Then, with a streak, it was racing away, too fast for any mortal eye to follow.

Feeling bereft and powerless, Jor-El and Lara sank into each other's arms, oblivious to the computer monitors at their backs, which now featured a steadily growing green glow coming from the space station.

“Weapon is hot, Grand Moff,” announced a young man standing at a monitor on the deck below the observation deck. “Awaiting your orders.”

Wilhuff took a deep breath, savoring the moment of anticipation. He was the Grand Moff Tarkin, and his hour of vengeance was at hand at long last.

“Fire,” he said coldly, though a thrill shot up his spine in eagerness to see his home world burn.

From a safe distance away, the Death Star's weapon glowed hotly green, intensifying in brightness like a miniature sun. Then, without warning, the laser pulsed forth; one long, green trail of death ripping through the inky blackness of space like a morbid scar. Krypton blazed with light as the laser ignited the planet's core into a supernova, making the once formidable, bustling planet glow as red as the sun it orbited, just for a heartbeat. Then, in the next moment, an incredible explosion tore Krypton into a billion little pieces – some of which glowed red or green as they shot out into every conceivable direction.

Wilhuff shielded his eyes against the brightness of his home world's demise. Blinded by the light, no one saw the lone, tiny capsule race ahead of the explosion into a warp speed and escape to a faraway sanctuary.

“Impressive,” Vader allowed when the event was over and the space before them housed only an asteroid field. “You've done well, Tarkin. Your work will not go unrewarded.”

“I have my reward already,” Wilhuff said, mostly to himself. “I have my revenge.”

Vader considered him for a moment. “And how does it feel?”

“Good,” Grand Moff Tarkin replied, feeling the last shreds of Wilhuff slip from his shoulders as he gazed out at the barren space before him.

“Revenge is a dish best served cold,” Vader said in what sounded like understanding and maybe even a little agreement.

“No,” Tarkin replied with a shake of his head, still staring dead ahead. “Revenge is a dish best served in an instant.” He grinned wickedly, then turned his attention to his underlings. “Get this ship turned around. We have rebel scum to hunt and a Death Star that's hungry for fresh sacrifices.”

THE END