

A New Dawn (Star Wars)

By John Jackson Miller

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Now Emperor Palpatine, once Chancellor of the Republic and secretly a Sith follower of the dark side of the Force, has brought his own peace and order to the galaxy. Peace through brutal repression, and order through increasing control of his subjects’ lives.

But even as the Emperor tightens his iron grip, others have begun to question his means and motives. And still others, whose lives were destroyed by Palpatine’s machinations, lay scattered about the galaxy like unexploded bombs, waiting to go off. . . .

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Praise for *A New Dawn*

“*A New Dawn* is a fine start to the new Expanded Universe. [John Jackson] Miller steps confidently into the unexplored territory and owns it; he’s crafted a story with pacing and dialogue that feels like classic *Star Wars*.”***—Nerdist***

“An entertaining adventure . . . with a cast of heroes that mixes laughter with intriguing depths of character. . . . John Jackson Miller packs in plenty of action and surprises.”***—Roqoo Depot***

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"*A New Dawn* brings us into this new dawn of storytelling with energy, excitement, and characters that have become instantly ensconced into the *Star Wars* vernacular, and the results will satisfy *Star Wars* fans of many different palates."**—Coffee with Kenobi**

"*A New Dawn* is a well-written novel full of intrigue and twists and turns that does an excellent job of letting *Star Wars* fans get to know Kanan and Hera."**—Tosche Station**

"*A New Dawn* finds an era never before written about in the *Star Wars* universe—the years prior to the original movie, Episode IV—in robust good health. The narrative takes place on two worlds and a handful of ships in between them, but as with the best of all *Star Wars* moments, hints at hidden depths beyond."***—Mashable***

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Editorial Review

Review
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About the Author
Writer and game designer **John Jackson Miller** is the author of *Star Wars: Kenobi*, *Star Wars: Knight Errant,* and *Star Wars: Lost Tribe of the Sith: The Collected Stories,* as well as nine *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* graphic novels. His comics work includes writing for *Iron Man, Mass Effect, Bart Simpson,* and *Indiana Jones*. He lives in Wisconsin with his wife, two children, and far too many comic books.

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Chapter One

"Sound collision!"

Only a moment earlier, the Star Destroyer had emerged from hyperspace; now a cargo ship careened straight toward its bridge. Before Ultimatum's shields could be raised or cannons could be brought to bear, the approaching vessel abruptly veered upward.

Rae Sloane watched, incredulous, as the wayward freighter hurtled above her bridge's viewport and out of

sight. But not out of hearing: A tiny scraping ka-thump signaled it had just clipped the top of the giant ship's hull. The new captain looked back at her first officer. "Damage?"

"None, Captain."

No surprise, she thought. It was surely worse for the other guy. "These yokels act as if they haven't seen a Star Destroyer before!"

"I'm sure they haven't," Commander Chamas said.

"They'd better get used to it." Sloane observed the cloud of transports ahead of Ultimatum. Her enormous Imperial-class starship had arrived from hyperspace on the edge of the appointed safe-approach lane, bringing it perilously close to what had to be the biggest traffic jam in the Inner Rim. She addressed the dozens of crewmembers at their stations. "Stay alert. Ultimatum's too new to bring back with a scratched finish." Thinking again, she narrowed her eyes. "Send a message on the Mining Guild channel. The next moron that comes within a kilometer of us gets a turbolaser haircut."

"Aye, Captain."

Of course, Sloane had never been to this system, either, having just attained her captaincy in time for Ultimatum's shakedown cruise. Tall, muscular, dark-skinned, and black-haired, Sloane had performed exceptionally from the start and ascended swiftly through the ranks. True, she was only substituting on Ultimatum, whose intended captain was serving on assignment to the construction committee—but how many others had helmed capital ships at thirty? She didn't know: The Imperial Navy had been in existence by that name for less than a decade, since Chancellor Palpatine put down the traitorous Jedi and transformed the Republic into the Galactic Empire. Sloane just knew the days ahead would decide whether she got a ship of her own.

This system, she'd been briefed, was home to something rare: a true astronomical odd couple. Gorse, out the forward viewport, lived up to its reputation as perhaps the ugliest planet in the galaxy. Tidally locked to its parent star, the steaming mudball had one side that forever baked. Only the permanently dark side was habitable, home to an enormous industrial city amid a landscape of strip mines. Sloane couldn't imagine living on a world that never saw a sunrise—if you could call sweating through an endless muggy summer night living. Looking off to the right, she saw the real jewel: Cynda, Gorse's sole moon. Almost large enough to be counted in Imperial record keeping as a double planet with Gorse, Cynda had a glorious silver shine—as charming as its parent was bleak.

But Sloane wasn't interested in the sights, or the travails of all the losers on Gorse. She started to turn from the window. "Make doubly sure the convoys are respecting our clearance zone. Then inform Count Vidian we have—"

"Forget the old way," snapped a low baritone voice.

The harshly intoned words startled everyone on the bridge, for they had all heard them before—just seldom in this manner. It was their famous passenger's catchphrase, quoted on many a business program during the Republic days and still used to introduce his successful series of management aids now that he had moved on to government service. Everywhere, the Republic's old ways of doing things were being replaced. "Forget the old way" really was the slogan of the times.

Sloane wasn't sure why she was hearing it now, however. "Count Vidian," she stated, her eyes searching from doorway to doorway. "We were just setting up our safety perimeter. It's standard procedure."

Denetrius Vidian appeared in the entryway farthest from Sloane. "And I told you to forget the old way," he repeated, although there was no doubting everyone had heard him the first time. "I heard you transmit the order for mining traffic to avoid you. It would be more efficient for you to back away from their transit lanes."

Sloane straightened. "The Imperial Navy does not back away from commercial traffic."

Vidian stamped his metal heel on the deck. "Spare me your silly pride! If it weren't for the thorilide this system produces, you'd only have a shuttle to captain. You are slowing production down. The old way is wrong!"

Sloane scowled, hating to be talked down to on her own bridge. This needed to seem like her decision. "It's the Empire's thorilide. Give them a wide berth. Chamas, back us a kilometer from the convoy lanes—and monitor all traffic."

"Aye, Captain."

"Aye is right," Vidian said. Each syllable was crisply pronounced, mechanically modulated, and amplified so all could hear. But Sloane would never get over the strangest part, which she'd noticed when he boarded: The man's mouth never moved. Vidian's words came from a special vocal prosthetic, a computer attached to a speaker embedded in the silvery plating that ringed his neck.

She'd once heard the voice of Darth Vader, the Emperor's principal emissary; while electronically amplified, the Dark Lord's much deeper voice still retained some natural trace of whatever was inside that black armor. In contrast, Count Vidian had reportedly chosen his artificial voice based on opinion research, in a quest to own the most motivational voice in the business sector.

And since he had boarded her ship with his aides a week earlier, Vidian had shown no qualms about speaking as loudly as he felt necessary. About Ultimatum, her crew—and her.

Vidian strode mechanically onto the bridge. It was the only way to describe it. He was as human as she was, but much of his body had been replaced. His arms and legs were armor-plated, rather than synthflesh prosthetics; everyone knew because he made little effort to hide them. His regal burgundy tunic and knee-length black kilt were his only nods to normal attire for a fiftyish lord of industry.

But it was Vidian's face that attracted the most awkward notice. His flesh lost to the same malady that had once consumed his limbs and vocal cords, Vidian covered his features with a synthskin coating. And then there were his eyes: artificial constructs, glowing yellow irises sitting in seas of red. The eyes appeared meant for some other species besides humans; Vidian had chosen them solely for what they could do. She could tell that now as he walked, glancing outside from convoy to convoy, ship to ship, mentally analyzing the whole picture.

"We've already met some of the locals," she said. "You probably heard the bump. The people here are—"

"Disorganized. It's why I'm here." He turned and walked along the line of terminal operators until he arrived at the tactical station depicting all the ships in the area. He pushed past Cauley, the young human ensign, and

tapped a command key. Then Vidian stepped back from the console and froze, seeming to stare blankly into space.

“My lord?” Cauley asked, unnerved.

“I have fed the output from your screen to my optical implants,” Vidian said. “You may return to your work while I read.”

The tactical officer did so—no doubt relieved, Sloane thought, not to have the cyborg hanging over his shoulder. Vidian’s ways were strange, to be sure, but effective, and that was why he was on her ship. The onetime industrialist was now the Emperor’s favorite efficiency expert.

Gorse’s factories produced refined thorilide, a rare strategic substance needed in massive quantities for a variety of Imperial projects. But the raw material these days came from Cynda, its moon: hence the traffic jam of cargo ships crisscrossing the void between the two globes. The Emperor had dispatched Vidian to improve production—a job for which he was uniquely qualified.

Vidian was known for squeezing the very last erg of energy, the very last kilogram of raw material, the very last unit of factory production from one world after another. He was not in the Emperor’s closest circle of advisers—not yet. But it was clear to Sloane he soon would be, provided there was no relapse of whatever ailment it was that had brought him low years earlier. Vidian’s billions had bought him extra life—and he seemed determined that neither he nor anyone else waste a moment of it.

Since he’d boarded, she hadn’t had a conversation with him where he hadn’t interrupted at least a dozen times.

“We’ve alerted the local mining guild to your arrival, Count. The thorilide production totals—”

“—are already coming in,” Vidian said, and with that, he marched to another data terminal in the aft section of the bridge.

Commander Chamas joined her far forward, many meters away from the count. In his late forties, Chamas had been leapfrogged in rank by several younger officers. The man loved gossip too much.

“You know,” Chamas said quietly, “I heard he bought the title.”

“Are you surprised? Everything else about him is artificial,” Sloane whispered. “Ship’s doctor even thinks some of his parts were voluntarily—”

“You waste time wondering,” Vidian said, not looking up from where he was studying.

Sloane’s dark eyes widened. “I’m sorry, my lord—”

“Forget the formality—and the apology. There is little point for either. But it’s well for your crew to know someone is always listening—and may have better ears than yours.”

Even if they had to buy them in a store, Sloane thought. The ragged fleshy lobes that had once been Vidian’s ears held special hearing aids. They could obviously hear her words—and more. She approached him.

“This is exactly what I’d expected,” Vidian said, staring at whatever unseen thing was before his eyes. “I told the Emperor it would be worth sending me here.” A number of underproducing worlds that manufactured items critical to the security of the Empire had been removed from their local governors’ jurisdictions and placed under Vidian’s authority: Gorse was the latest. “Messy work might have been good enough for the Republic—but the Empire is order from chaos. What we do here—and in thousands of systems just like this one—brings us closer to our ultimate goal.”

Sloane thought for a moment. “Perfection?”

“Whatever the Emperor wants.”

Sloane nodded.

A tinny squawk came from Vidian’s neck-speaker—an unnerving sound she’d learned to interpret as his equivalent of an angry sigh. “There’s a laggard holding up the moonward convoy,” he said, staring into nothingness. Looking at her tactician’s screen, Sloane saw it was the cargo vessel that had bumped them earlier. She ordered Ultimatum turned to face it.

A shower of sparks flew from the freighter’s underside. Other vessels hung back, fearful it might explode. “Hail the freighter,” she said.

A quavering nonhuman voice was piped onto the bridge. “This is Cynda Dreaming. Sorry about that scrape earlier. We weren’t expecting—”

Sloane cut to the point. “What’s your payload?”

“Nothing, yet. We were heading to pick up a load of thorilide on the moon for refining at Calladan Chemworks down on Gorse.”

“Can you haul in your condition?”

“We need to get to the repair shop to know. I’m not sure how bad it is. Could be a couple of months—”

Vidian spoke up. “Captain, target that vessel and fire.”

It was almost idly stated, to the extent that Vidian’s intonations ever conveyed much genuine emotion. The directive nonetheless startled Chamas. Standing before the gunnery crew, he turned to the captain for guidance.

The freighter pilot, having heard the new voice, sounded no less surprised. “I’m sorry—I didn’t get that. Did you just—”

Sloane looked for an instant at Vidian, and then at her first officer. “Fire.”

The freighter captain sounded stunned. “What? You can’t be—”

This time, Ultimatum’s turbolasers provided the interruption. Orange energy ripped through space, turning Cynda Dreaming into a confusion of fire and flak.

Sloane watched as the other ships of the convoy quickly rerouted. Her gunners had done their jobs, targeting the ship in a way that resulted in minimal hazard for the nearby ships. All the freighters were moving faster.

“You understand,” Vidian said, turning toward her. “Replacement time for one freighter and crew in this sector is—”

“—three weeks,” Sloane said, “which is less than two months.” See, I’ve read your reports, too.

This was the way to handle this assignment, she realized. So what if Vidian was strange? Figuring out what the Emperor—and those who spoke for him—wanted and then providing it was the path to success. Debating his directives only wasted time and made her look bad. It was the secret of advancement in the service: Always be on the side of what is going to happen anyway.

Sloane clasped her arms behind her back. “We’ll see that the convoys make double time—and challenge any ship that refuses.”

“It isn’t just transit,” Vidian said. “There are problems on the ground, too—on planet and moon. Surveillance speaks of unruly labor, of safety and environmental protests. And there’s always the unexpected.”

Sloane clasped her arms behind her back. “Ultimatum stands at your service, my lord. This system will do what you—what the Emperor—requires of it.”

“So it will,” Vidian said, eyes glowing blood-red. “So it will.”

Hera Syndulla watched from afar as the scattered remains of the freighter burned silently in space. No recovery vehicles were in sight. As unlikely a prospect as survivors were, no one looked for any. There were only the shipping convoys, quickly rerouting around the wreckage.

Obeying the master’s whip.

This was mercy in the time of the Empire, she thought. The Imperials had none; now, to all appearances, their lack of care was infecting the people.

The green-skinned Twi’lek in her stealth-rigged starship didn’t believe that was true. People were basically decent .?.?. and one day, they would rise up against their unjust government. But it wouldn’t happen now, and certainly not here. It was too soon, and Gorse was barely awake politically. This wasn’t a recruitment trip. No, these days were for seeing what the Empire could do—a project that suited the ever-curious Hera perfectly. And Count Vidian, the Emperor’s miracle man, practically begged investigation.

In previous weeks, the Imperial fixer had cut a swath through the sector, “improving efficiency.” On three previous worlds, like-minded acquaintances of Hera’s on the HoloNet had reported misery levels skyrocketing under Vidian’s electronic eyes. Then her associates had simply vanished. That had piqued Hera’s interest—and learning of the count’s visit to the Gorse system brought her the rest of the way.

She had another contact on Gorse, one who had promised much information on the regime. She wanted that information—but first she wanted to check out Vidian, and the system’s notoriously anarchic mining trade offered her a variety of chances to get close. Industrial confusion, the perfect lure for Vidian, would provide excellent cover for her to study his methods.

Emperor Palpatine had too many minions with great power and influence. It was worth finding out whether Count Vidian had real magic before he rose any higher.

It was time to move. She picked out the identifying transponder signal of a ship in the convoy. One button-push later, her ship was that vessel, as far as anyone trying to watch traffic was concerned. With practiced ease, she weaved her freighter into the chaotic flood of cargo ships heading to the moon.

None of these guys can fly worth a flip, she thought. It was just as well it wasn’t a recruiting trip. She probably wouldn’t have found anyone worth her time.

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