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The burnished conference table was as soulless and unyielding as the mood of the eight Imperial Senators and officers ranged around it. Imperial troopers stood guard at the entrance to the chamber, which was sparse and coldly lit from lights in the table and walks. One of the youngest of the eight was declaiming. He exhibited the attitude of one who had climbed far and fast by methods best not examined too closely. General Tagge did possess a certain twisted genius, but it was only partly that ability which had lifted him to his present exalted position. Other noisome talents had proven equally efficacious. Though his uniform was as neatly molded and his body as clean as that of anyone else in the room, none of the remaining seven cared to touch him. A certain sliminess clung cloyingly to him, a sensation inferred rather than tactile. Despite this, many respected him. Or feared him. "I tell you, he ' s gone too far this time," the General was insisting vehemently. "This is Sith Lord inflicted on us at the urging of the Emperor will be our undoing. Until the battle station is fully operational, we remain vulnerable. "Some of you still don ' t seem to realize how well equipped and organized the rebel Alliance is. Their vessel are excellent, their pilots better. And they are propelled by something more powerful than mere engines: this perverse, reactionary fanaticism of theirs. They ' re more dangerous than most of you realize." An older officer, with facial scars so deeply

engraved that even the best cosmetic surgery could not fully repair them, shifted nervously in his chair. "Dangerous to your starfleet, General Tagge, but not to this battle station." Wized eyes hopped from man to man, traveling around the table. "I happen to think Lord Vader knows what he 's doing. The rebellion will continue only as long as those cowards have a sanctuary, a place where their pilots can relax and their machines can be repaired." Tagge objected. "I beg to differ with you, Romodi. I think the construction of this station has more to do with Governor Tarkin 's bid for personal power and recognition than with any justifiable military strategy. Within the Senate the rebels will continue to increase their support as long" The sound of the single doorway sliding aside and the guards snapping to attention cut him off. His head turned, as did everyone else 's. Two individuals as different in appearance as they were united in objective had entered the chamber. The nearest to Tagge was a thin, hatchet-faced man with hair and form borrowed from an old broom and the expression of a quiescent piranha. The Grand Moff Tarkin, Governor of numerous outlying Imperial territories, was dwarfed by broad, armored bulk of Lord Darth Vader. Tagge, unintimidated but subdued, slowly resumed his seat as Tarkin assumed his place at the end of the conference table. Vader stood next to him, a dominating presence behind the Governor 's chair. For a minute Tarkin stared directly at Tagge, then glanced away as if he had seen nothing. Tagge fumed but remained silent. As Tarkin 's gaze roved around the table a razor-thin smile of satisfaction remained frozen in his features. "The Imperial Senate will no longer

be of any concern to us, gentlemen. I have just receive word that the Emperor has permanently dissolved that misguided body." A ripple of astonishment ran through the assembly. "The last remnants," Tarkin continued, "of the Old Republic have finally been swept away." "This is impossible," Tagge interjected. "How will the Emperor maintain control of the Imperial bureau-crazy?" "Senatorial representation has not been formally abolished, you must understand," Tarkin explained. "It has merely been superseded for the" he smiled a bit more"duration of the emergency. Regional Governors will now have direct control and a free hand in administering their territories. This means that the Imperial presence can at last be brought to bear properly on the vacillating worlds of the Empire. From now on, fear will keep potentially traitorous local government in line. Fear of the Imperial fleet and fear of this battle station." "And what of the existing rebellion?" Tagge wanted to know.

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