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STAR WARS[®] DARTH PLAGUEIS



JAMES LUCENO

Author of *Star Wars: Millennium Falcon*

STAR WARS

DARTH PLAGUEIS

JAMES LUCENO



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For Howard Roffman, whose intelligence, critical acumen,
and stalwart direction helped shape this story

[Cover](#)
[Title Page](#)
[Copyright](#)
[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Part One: Enlistment - 67–65 Years Before the Battle of Yavin](#)

[1: The Underworld](#)
[2: The Inner Landscape](#)
[3: *Woebegone*](#)
[4: The Meaning of Death](#)
[5: Homecoming](#)
[6: The Hunters' Moon](#)
[7: There Where They Used to Stand](#)
[8: Victims of Their Own Device](#)
[9: Untapped Reserves](#)
[10: The Cycle of Violence](#)
[11: Avatar of Mortality](#)
[12: Seduced by the Dark Side of the Force](#)

[Part Two: Apprenticed to Power - 54–52 BBY](#)

[13: Riders on the Storm](#)
[14: The Shape of His Shadow](#)
[15: Quantum Being](#)
[16: Bold as Love](#)
[17: Days of Wine and Impropriety](#)
[18: Artful Dodging](#)
[19: The Trials](#)
[20: The Canted Circle](#)
[21: Investiture](#)

[Part Three: Mastery - 34–32 BBY](#)

[22: Ordinary Beings](#)
[23: Under the Midnight Sun](#)
[24: Sith'ari](#)
[25: The Discreet Charm of the Meritocracy](#)
[26: Their Baser Nature](#)

[27: Calibrations](#)

[28: Chain of Command](#)

[29: The Force Strikes Back](#)

[30: Taking the Future from the Now](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Excerpt from *Star Wars: Shadow Games*](#)

[Excerpt from *Star Wars: The Old Republic: Annihilation*](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by this Author](#)

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*Lost Tribe of the Sith**
Precipice
Skyborn
Paragon
Savior
Purgatory
Sentinel

3954 YEARS BEFORE *STAR WARS: A New Hope*

The Old Republic: Revan

3650 YEARS BEFORE *STAR WARS: A New Hope*

The Old Republic: Deceived
*Lost Tribe of the Sith**
Pantheon
Secrets
Red Harvest
The Old Republic: Fatal Alliance

1032 YEARS BEFORE *STAR WARS: A New Hope*

Knight Errant
Darth Bane: Path of Destruction
Darth Bane: Rule of Two
Darth Bane: Dynasty of Evil

67 YEARS BEFORE *STAR WARS: A New Hope*

Darth Plagueis



RISE OF THE EMPIRE 33–0 YEARS BEFORE *STAR WARS: A New Hope*

Darth Maul: Saboteur*
Cloak of Deception
Darth Maul: Shadow Hunter

32 YEARS BEFORE *STAR WARS: A New Hope*

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Outbound Flight
The Approaching Storm

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ATTACK OF THE CLONES****22–19** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

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 The Clone Wars: Wild Space
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Clone Wars Gambit

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 Order 66

Shatterpoint
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Coruscant Nights

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0-5 YEARS AFTER
STAR WARS: A New Hope

Death Star
Shadow Games

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Allegiance
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THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

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Shadows of the Empire

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STAR WARS: EPISODE VI
RETURN OF THE JEDI

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Slave Ship
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Bloodlines
Tempest
Exile
Sacrifice
Inferno
Fury
Revelation
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A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away...

PROLOGUE

A tremor took hold of the planet.

Sprung from death, it unleashed itself in a powerful wave, at once burrowing deep into the world's core and radiating through its saccharine atmosphere to shake the stars themselves. At the quake's epicenter stood Sidious, one elegant hand vised on the burnished sill of an expansive translucency, a vessel filled suddenly to bursting, the Force so strong within him that he feared he might disappear into it, never to return. But the moment didn't constitute an ending so much as a true beginning, long overdue; it was less a transformation than an intensification—a gravitic shift.

A welter of voices, near and far, present and from eons past, drowned his thoughts. Raised in praise, the voices proclaimed his reign and cheered the inauguration of a new order. Yellow eyes lifted to the night sky, he saw the trembling stars flare, and in the depth of his being he felt the power of the dark side anoint him.

Slowly, almost reluctantly, he came back to himself, his gaze settling on his manicured hand. Returned to the present, he took note of his rapid breathing, while behind him the room labored to restore order. Air scrubbers hummed—costly wall tapestries undulating in the summoned breeze. Prized carpets sealed their fibers against the spread of spilled fluids. The droid shuffled in obvious conflict. Sidious pivoted to take in the disarray: antique furniture overturned; framed artworks askew. As if a whirlwind had swept through. And facedown on the floor lay a statue of Yanjon, one of four law-giving sages of Dwartii.

A piece Sidious had secretly coveted.

Also sprawled there, Plagueis: his slender limbs splayed and elongated head turned to one side. Dressed in finery, as for a night on the town.

And now dead.

Or was he?

Uncertainty rippled through Sidious, rage returning to his eyes. A tremor of his own making, or one of forewarning?

Was it possible that the wily Muun had deceived him? Had Plagueis unlocked the key to immortality, and survived after all? Never mind that it would constitute a petty move for one so wise—for one who had professed to place the Grand Plan above all else. Had Plagueis become ensnared in a self-spun web of jealousy and possessiveness, victim of his own engineering, his own foibles?

If he hadn't been concerned for his own safety, Sidious might have pitied him.

Wary of approaching the corpse of his former Master, he called on the Force to roll the aged Muun over onto his back. From that angle Plagueis looked almost as he had when Sidious first met him decades earlier: smooth, hairless cranium; humped nose, with its bridge flattened as if from a shockball blow and its sharp tip pressed almost to his upper lip; jutting lower jaw; sunken eyes still brimming with menace—a physical characteristic rarely encountered in a Muun. But then Plagueis had never been an ordinary Muun, nor an ordinary being of any sort.

Sidious took care, still reaching out with the Force. On closer inspection, he saw that Plagueis's already cyanotic flesh was smoothing out, his features relaxing.

Faintly aware of the whir of air scrubbers and sounds of the outside world infiltrating the luxurious suite, he continued the vigil; then, in relief, he pulled himself up to his full height and let out his breath. This was no Sith trick. Not an instance of feigning death, but one of succumbing to its cold embrace. The being who had guided him to power was gone.

Wry amusement narrowed his eyes.

~~The Muun might have lived another hundred years unchanged. He might have lived forever had he~~ succeeded fully in his quest. But in the end—though he could save others from death—he had failed to save himself.

A sense of supreme accomplishment puffed Sidious's chest, and his thoughts unreeled.

Well, then, that wasn't nearly as bad as we thought it might be ...

Rarely did events play out as imagined, in any case. The order of future events was transient. In the same way that the past was reconfigured by selective memory, future events, too, were moving targets. One could only act on instinct, grab hold of an intuited perfect moment, and spring into action. One heartbeat late and the universe would have recomposed itself, no imposition of will sufficient to forestall the currents. One could only observe and react. Surprise was the element absent from an otherwise periodic table. A keystone element; a missing ingredient. The means by which the Force amused itself. A reminder to all sentient beings that some secrets could never be unlocked.

Confident that the will of the dark side had been done, he returned to the suite's window wall.

Two beings in a galaxy of countless trillions, but what had transpired in the suite would affect the lives of all of them. Already the galaxy had been shaped by the birth of one, and henceforth would be reshaped by the death of the other. But had the change been felt and recognized elsewhere? Were his sworn enemies aware that the Force had shifted irrevocably? Would it be enough to rouse them from self-righteousness? He hoped not. For now the work of vengeance could begin in earnest.

His eyes sought and found an ascending constellation of stars, one of power and consequence new to the sky, though soon to be overwhelmed by dawn's first light. Low in the sky over the flatland, visible only to those who knew where and how to look, it ushered in a bold future. To some the stars and planets might seem to be moving as ever, destined to align in configurations calculated long before their fiery births. But in fact the heavens had been perturbed, tugged by dark matter into novel alignments. In his mouth, Sidious tasted the tang of blood; in his chest, he felt the monster rising, emerging from shadowy depths and contorting his aspect into something fearsome just short of revealing itself to the world.

The dark side had made him its property, and now he made the dark side his.

Breathless, not from exertion but from the sudden *inspiration* of power, he let go of the sill and allowed the monster to writhe through his body like an unbroken beast of range or prairie.

Had the Force ever been so strong in anyone?

Sidious had never learned how Plagueis's own Master had met his end. Had he died at Plagueis's hand? Had Plagueis, too, experienced a similar exultation on becoming a sole Sith Lord? Had the beast of the end time risen then to peek at the world it was to inhabit, knowing its release was imminent?

He raised his gaze to the ecliptic. The answers were out there, coded in light, speeding through space and time. Liquid fire coursing through him, visions of past and future riffling through his mind. He opened himself to the reconfigured galaxy, as if in an effort to peel away the decades ...

PART ONE:

Enlistment

67—65 Years Before the Battle of Yavin

1: THE UNDERWORLD

Forty-seven standard years before the harrowing reign of Emperor Palpatine, Bal'demnic was nothing more than an embryonic world in the Outer Rim's Auril sector, populated by reptilian sentients who expressed as little tolerance for outsiders as they did for one another. Decades later the planet would have a part to play in galactic events, its own wink of historical notoriety, but in those formative years that presaged the Republic's ineluctable slide into decadence and turmoil, Bal'demnic was of interest only to xenobiologists and cartographers. It might even have escaped the notice of Darth Plagueis, for whom remote worlds held a special allure, had his Master, Tenebrous, not discovered something special about the planet.

"Darth Bane would appreciate our efforts," the Sith Master was telling his apprentice as they stood side by side in the crystalline cave that had drawn them across the stars.

A Bith, Tenebrous was as tall as Plagueis and nearly as cadaverously thin. To human eyes, his bilious complexion might have made him appear as haggard as the pallid Muun, but in fact both beings were in robust health. Though they conversed in Basic, each was fluent in the other's native language.

"Darth Bane's early years," Plagueis said through his transpirator mask. "Carrying on the ancestral business, as it were."

Behind the faceplate of his own mask, Tenebrous's puckered lips twitched in disapproval. The breathing device looked absurdly small on his outsized cleft head, and the convexity of the mask made the flat disks of his lidless eyes look like close-set holes in his pinched face.

"Bane's seminal years," he corrected.

Plagueis weathered the gentle rebuke. He had been apprenticed to Tenebrous for as many years as the average human might live, and still Tenebrous never failed to find fault when he could.

"What more appropriate way for us to close the circle than by mimicking the Sith'ari's seminal efforts," Tenebrous continued. "We weave ourselves into the warp and weft of the tapestry he created."

Plagueis kept his thoughts to himself. The aptly named Darth Bane, who had redefined the Sith by limiting their number and operating from concealment, had mined cortosis as a youth on Apatros long before embracing the tenets of the dark side. In the thousand years since his death, Bane had become deified; the powers attributed to him, legendary. And indeed what more appropriate place for his disciples to complete the circle, Plagueis told himself, than in profound obscurity, deep within an escarpment that walled an azure expanse of Bal'demnic's Northern Sea.

The two Sith were outfitted in environment suits that protected them from scorching heat and noxious atmosphere. The cave was cross-hatched by scores of enormous crystals that resembled glowing lances thrust every which way into a trick chest by a stage magician. A recent seismic event had tipped the landmass, emptying the labyrinthine cave system of mineral-rich waters, but the magma chamber that had kept the waters simmering for millions of years still heated the humid air to temperatures in excess of what even Tenebrous and Plagueis could endure unaided. Close at hand sat a stubby treddroid tasked with monitoring the progress of a mining probe that was sampling a rich vein of cortosis ore at the bottom of a deep shaft. A fabled ore, some called it—owing to its scarcity, but even more for its intrinsic ability to diminish the effectiveness of the Jedi lightsaber. For that reason the Jedi Order had gone to great lengths to restrict mining and refinement of the ore. If not the bane of the Order's existence, cortosis was a kind of irritant, a challenge to their weapon's reputation for

fearsome invincibility.

It was to Tenebrous's credit that the Sith had learned of Bal'demnic's rich lodes before the Jedi, who by means of an agreement with the Republic Senate had first claim to all discoveries, as they had with Adegan crystals and Force-sensitive younglings of all species. But Tenebrous and the generation of Sith Masters who had preceded him were privy to covert data gleaned by vast networks of informants the Senate and the Jedi knew nothing about, including mining survey teams and weapon manufacturers.

"Based on the data I am receiving," the treddroid intoned, "eighty-two percent of the ore is capable of being purified into weapons-grade cortosis shield."

Plagueis looked at Tenebrous, who returned a nod of satisfaction. "The percentage is consistent with what I was told to expect."

"By whom, Master?"

"Of no consequence," Tenebrous said.

Strewn about the superheated tunnel were broken borer bits, expended gasifiers, and clogged filtration masks, all abandoned by the exploratory team that had sunk the shaft several standard months earlier. From the shaft's broad mouth issued the repeated reports of the probe droid's hydraulic jacks. Music to Tenebrous's auditory organs, Plagueis was certain.

"Can you not share your plans for this discovery?"

"In due time, Darth Plagueis." Tenebrous turned away from him to address the treddroid. "Instruct the probe to evaluate the properties of the secondary lode."

Plagueis studied the screen affixed to the droid's flat head. It displayed a map of the probe's movements and a graphic analysis of its penetrating scans, which reached clear to the upper limits of the magma chamber.

"The probe is running an analysis," the treddroid updated.

With the reciprocating sounds of the probe's hydraulic jacks echoing in the crystal cave, Tenebrous began to circle the shaft, only to come to a sudden halt when the drilling ceased.

"Why has it stopped?" he asked before Plagueis could.

The droid's reply was immediate. "The Em-Two unit informs me that it has discovered a pocket of gas directly beneath the new borehole." The droid paused, then added: "I'm sorry to report, sirs, that the gas is a highly combustible variant of lethane. The Em-Two unit predicts that the heat generated by its hydraulic jacks will ignite an explosion of significant magnitude."

Suspicion crept into Tenebrous's voice. "The original report made no mention of lethane."

The droid pivoted to face him. "I know nothing of that, sir. But the Em-Two unit is quite insistent. What's more, my own programming corroborates the fact that it is not unusual to find pockets of lethane in close proximity to cortosis ore."

"Query the probe about excavating around the lethane pocket," Plagueis said.

"The Em-Two unit recommends employing that very strategy, sir. Shall I order it to proceed?"

Plagueis looked at Tenebrous, who nodded.

"Task the probe to proceed," Plagueis said. When the hammering recommenced, he fixed his gaze on the display screen to monitor the probe's progress. "Tell the probe to stop," he said after only a moment had elapsed.

"Why are you interfering?" Tenebrous said, storming forward.

Plagueis gestured to the display. "The map indicates a more massive concentration of lethane in the area where it's drilling."

"You're correct, sir," the droid said in what amounted to dismay. "I will order the unit to halt all activity."

And yet the hammering continued.

“Droid,” Plagueis snapped, “did the probe acknowledge your order?”

“No, sir. The Em-Two is not responding.”

Tenebrous stiffened, narrowly avoiding slamming his head into one of the cave’s massive crystal

“Is it still within range?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then run a communications diagnostic.”

“I have, sir, and all systems are nominal. The unit’s inability to respond—” It fell briefly silent and began again. “The unit’s refusal to respond appears to be deliberate.”

“Deactivate it,” Tenebrous said. “At once.”

The hammering slowed and eventually ceased, but not for long.

“The Em-Two unit has overridden my command.”

“Impossible,” Tenebrous said.

“Clearly not, sir. In fact, it is highly probable that the unit is executing a deep-seated subroutine that escaped earlier notice.”

Plagueis glanced at Tenebrous. “Who procured the probe?”

“This isn’t the time for questions. The probe is about to breach the pocket.”

Hastening to the rim of the circular shaft, the two Sith removed their gloves and aimed their long-fingered unprotected hands into the inky darkness. Instantly tangles of blue electrical energy discharged from their fingertips, raining into the borehole. Strobing and clawing for the bottom, the vigorous bolts coruscated into the lateral corridor the probe had excavated. Crackling sounds spewed from the opening long after the Sith had harnessed their powers.

Then the repetitive strikes of the jackhammer began once more.

“It’s the ore,” Tenebrous said. “There’s too much resistance here.”

Plagueis knew what needed to be done. “I’ll go down,” he said, and was on the verge of leaping into the shaft when Tenebrous restrained him.

“This can wait. We’re returning to the grotto.”

Plagueis hesitated, then nodded. “As you say, Master.”

Tenebrous swung to the droid. “Continue your attempts to deactivate the unit.”

“I will, sir. To do that, however, I will need to remain here.”

“What of it?” Tenebrous said, cocking his head to one side.

“Should I fail in my efforts, the ensuing explosion will surely result in my destruction.”

Plagueis understood. “You’ve been useful, droid.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Tenebrous scowled. “You waste your breath.”

Nearly knocked over by the swiftness of Tenebrous’s departure, Plagueis had to call deeply on the Force merely to keep up. Retracing the inclined path they had taken from the grotto in which the starship waited, they fairly flew up the crystal-studded tunnel they had picked their way through earlier. Plagueis grasped that a powerful explosion was perhaps imminent, but was mystified by his Master’s almost mad dash for the surface. In the past Tenebrous had rarely evinced signs of discomfort, let alone fear; so what danger had he sensed that propelled him with such abandon? And when, in the past, had they fled danger of any sort? Safeguarded by the powers of the dark side, the Sith could hardly fear death when they were allied to it. Plagueis stretched out with his feelings in an attempt to identify the source of Tenebrous’s dread, but the Force was silent.

Ten meters ahead of him, the Bith had ducked under a scabrous outcropping. Haste, however, brought him upright too quickly and his left shoulder glanced off the rough rock, leaving a portion of his suit shredded.

“Master, allow me to lead,” Plagueis said when he reached Tenebrous. He was only slightly more

agile than the Bith, but he had better night vision and a keener sense of direction, over and above what the Force imparted.

His pride wounded more than his shoulder, Tenebrous waved off the offer. "Be mindful of your place." Regaining his balance and composure, he streaked off. But at a fork in the tunnel, he took the wrong turn.

"This way, Master," Plagueis called from the other corridor, but he stopped to surrender the lead.

Closer to the surface the tunnels opened into caverns the size of cathedrals, smoothed and hollowed by rainwater that still surged in certain seasons of Bal'demnic's long year. In pools of standing water darted various species of blind fish. Overhead, hawk-bats took panicked flight from their roosting places in the stippled ceiling. Natural light in the far distance prompted the two Sith to race for the grotto; but, even so, they were a moment late.

The gas explosion caught up with them just as they were entering the light-filled cavity at the top of the escarpment. From deep in the tunnel resounded a squealing electronic wail, and at the same time almost as if the cave system were gasping for breath, a searing wind tore down from a perforation in the grotto's arched ceiling through which the ship had entered. A muffled but ground-heaving detonation followed; then a roiling fireball that was the labyrinth's scorching exhalation. Whirling in the tunnel they had just exited and managing somehow to remain on his feet, Tenebrous conjured a Force shield with his waving arms that met the fireball and contained it, thousands of flaming hawk-bats spiraling within the tumult like windblown embers.

A few meters away Plagueis, hurled face-first to the ground by the intensity of the vaporizing blast, lifted his head in time to see the underside of the domed ceiling begin to shed enormous slabs of rock. Directly below the plummeting slabs sat their starship.

"Master!" he said, scrambling to his feet with arms lifted in an attempt to hold the rocks in midair.

His own arms still raised in a Force-summoning posture, Tenebrous swung around to bolster Plagueis's intent. Behind him, the fireball's final flames surged from the mouth of the tunnel to lick his back and drive him deeper into the grotto.

The cave continued to spasm underfoot, sending shock waves through the crazed ceiling. Cracks spread like a web from the oculus, triggering collapses throughout the grotto. Plagueis heard a rending sound overhead and watched a fissure zigzag its way across the ceiling, sloughing layer after layer of stone as it followed the grotto's curved wall.

Now, though, it was Tenebrous who was positioned beneath the fall.

And in that instant Plagueis perceived the danger Tenebrous had foreseen earlier: his death.

His death at Plagueis's hands.

While Tenebrous was preoccupied holding aloft the slabs that threatened to crush the ship, Plagueis quickly reoriented himself, aiming his raised hands at the plummeting slabs above his Master and with a downward motion of both arms, brought them down so quickly and with so much momentum that Tenebrous was buried almost before he understood what had hit him.

Stone dust eddying around him, Plagueis stood rooted in place as slabs interred the starship, as well. But he gave it no thought. His success in bringing the ceiling down on Tenebrous was proof enough that the Bith had grown sluggish and expendable. Otherwise, he would have divined the true source of the danger he had sensed, and Plagueis would be the one pressed to the floor of the grotto, head cracked open like an egg and chest cavity pierced by the pointed end of a fallen stalactite.

His race to Tenebrous's side was informed as much by excitement as charade. "Master," he said, genuflecting and removing his and Tenebrous's respirators. His hands pawed at the stones, removing some of the crushing weight. But Tenebrous's single lung was pierced, and blood gurgled in his throat. Ragged tears in the sleeves of the envirosuit revealed esoteric body markings and tattoos.

"Stop, apprentice," Tenebrous strained to say. "You're going to need all your strength."

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