



The Force Unleashed II (Star Wars) (Star Wars - Legends)

By Sean Williams

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The dark side could not seduce him.

The Empire could not control him.

Death could not defeat him.

And now, nothing can stop him from seizing his destiny.

As apprentice to Darth Vader, Starkiller was mercilessly schooled in the ways of the dark side and groomed for the ultimate Sith power play: assassination of the Emperor. He served without question, killed without remorse, and lost his heart without warning to beautiful Imperial fighter pilot Juno Eclipse, never suspecting that he was just a tool in the schemes of his masters—until it was too late to escape their lethal betrayal.

Juno mourned Starkiller as dead, but now he is back, purged of all memories and programmed to kill—and this time, Darth Vader is determined not to lose his assassin. As fate brings Juno and Starkiller closer to reuniting, they will both have to make a stand. The prize could be freedom. The punishment for failing will be eternal enslavement to the dark side of the Force.

Based on a story by Haden Blackman

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Sean Williams is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling and award-winning author of more than seventy published short stories and thirty novels, including *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed* and *Star Wars: The Old Republic: Fatal Alliance*. He is a judge for the Writers of the Future contest, which he won in 1993. He is also a multiple winner of Australia's speculative fiction awards and is the recipient of both the Ditmar and the Aurealis for *The Crooked Letter*, marking the first time in the history of the awards that a fantasy novel has won both. Williams lives with his wife, Amanda, in Adelaide, South Australia.

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Williams: STAR WARS FORCE UNLEASHED II

CHAPTER 1

Present day . . .

From the depths of meditation came a man's voice.

"You're running out of executioners, Baron!"

Starkiller opened his eyes. He knew that voice. It tugged at parts of him that had lain dormant for a long time—or never genuinely existed at all, depending on one's viewpoint.

He shied away from both memory and contemplation. There was no point wasting energy on either when his very survival was at stake. How many days he had been down the pit he no longer knew, but in that time he had neither eaten nor slept. His enemy wasn't physical in the sense of a foe he could strike down or manipulate. It was himself—his fallible body, his weak mind, his faltering spirit. He would endure and emerge whole, or never emerge at all.

Such was the life of Darth Vader's secret apprentice.

"He is dead."

"Then he is now more powerful than ever."

More voices. He closed his eyes and shook his head. Kneeling, he placed his manacled hands on the slick metal surface below him and concentrated on hearing the world outside.

Long stretches of isolation had attuned him to the cloning facility's many moods. Through the metal he heard a relentless hiss that could only be rain. Sharp cracking sounds were lightning, coming and going in staccato waves. Rolling rumbles were thunder, and a deeper note still was the song of seabed-hugging

currents that circled the world.

He was on Kamino. Starkiller was sure of that much. He had been reborn on the distant waterworld, where a significant percentage of the Emperor's stormtroopers were grown. Here it was that he would live and grow strong, or die weak and unmourned. Every hardship, every hurdle, was one step closer to full mastery of his fate. That was the lesson underlying all lessons.

A new note entered the planet's endless song: the scream of a TIE advanced prototype starfighter. Angular and fleet, with bent vanes, it entered the atmosphere with a whip-crack sonic boom and descended on a bold, high-energy descent toward the facility.

Starkiller tensed. He knew that ship's sound and could sense the well-practiced hand behind its controls. He heard stormtroopers marching quickly in response to their master's electronic summons, calling orders to one another as they went. Blast doors opened and closed with booming thuds. The facility woke from its unattended slumber.

He didn't move as the TIE fighter landed. He didn't open his eyes as two heavy, booted feet dropped onto the platform and began the long walk through the facility. He breathed at a steady pace through the whine of the turbolift and the hiss of doors opening. A ring of red lights at the top of the pit came on, and although he felt the light against his hunched back, he didn't look up.

He heard breathing, mechanical and regular. Heavy footsteps came to the very lip of the pit, and stopped.

"You're alive," said Darth Vader.

At the voice of his former Master, Starkiller looked up, blinking against the light. Vader's boots were three meters above him, barely visible behind the lights and the grate that separated the pit from the dark room beyond. The Dark Lord loomed like a shadow, a black hole in the shape of a robed man.

Starkiller's throat worked. It was so dry he could barely talk at all.

"How long this time?"

"Thirteen days. Impressive."

The compliment was hard-won. It ground out of the triangular grille covering Vader's mouth and fell on Starkiller's ears like dust.

"The Force gives me all I need."

"The Force?"

The hint of praise turned to warning, as it did so often.

Starkiller lowered his head. He knew what was required. The weeks of training and isolation he had endured made that exceedingly clear.

"The dark side, I mean, my Master."

One gloved hand moved. The grate flew open.

“Come,” said the dark figure above him.

The metal floor beneath Starkiller lurched and began to ascend. He forced his leg muscles to unlock from their long kneeling position, and stood to meet Darth Vader upright and unbowed.

The room above was sparsely furnished, with no windows, just one exit—the turbolift—and little light. Shadows cast by terminals and floor lamps made its very dimensions ambiguous, but Starkiller knew from long training exercises that the room was circular and its walls were impenetrable. He flexed his fingers, yearning for a lightsaber to hold. Muscle memory was keener than any other kind. Even with the new skills Darth Vader had taught him, his hands wanted to fight the way he knew best.

At the very edge of his vision stood several skeletal PROXY droids, awaiting activation. If he was lucky, he would be unshackled and allowed to duel some of them. If not . . .

The lift ground to a halt. Vader stepped back to study him. Starkiller felt the keen eye of the Sith Lord on his gaunt form even through the layers of durasteel, obsidian, and plasteel that covered the man’s face. Something was different. Although nothing had been said, he could tell that this was no ordinary training session.

He waited. There was no hurrying Darth Vader.

“I have a mission for you.”

“Yes, my Master.”

“Starkiller’s former conspirator has been captured.”

He experienced a moment of confusion. Then his memories stirred, providing a name. The name of the one who had lured him away from the dark side and to his death.

The same voice that had disturbed him from his meditation . . .

“Vader thinks he’s turned you. But I can sense your future, and Vader isn’t part of it. I sense only . . . me?”

“General Kota,” he said, struggling to keep himself anchored to the present.

“Yes. You will travel to Cato Neimoidia and execute him.”

“And then will my training be complete, Master?”

“You will not be ready to face the Emperor until you have faced a true Jedi Master.”

The voice was Darth Vader’s, but again from another time, another memory. The present-day Darth Vader hadn’t spoken at all.

Starkiller put his manacled hands to his head and turned away, lest his disconcertion be exposed. No matter how he tried, no matter how he concentrated, the past simply wouldn’t leave him alone.

Vader's close attention hadn't ebbed. "You are still haunted by visions."

"Yes." There was no point denying it. "Yes, my Master."

"Tell me what you see."

He didn't know where to start. Thirteen days, this time, he had stayed motionless in the pit, subjected to visions and hallucinations through all his senses: strange odors, fleeting touches, voices calling him, sights he could never have imagined. He tried to ignore them, and when he couldn't ignore them, he tried to piece them together instead. Neither was entirely possible, and every attempt hurt so badly he despaired of it ever ending.

"Sometimes," he said, falteringly, "I smell a forest on fire."

"Continue."

"I see the general falling, and feel the ground shake as a starship crashes around me. And I hear a woman—a woman's voice—when I try to sleep." He swallowed. This was the most painful recollection of all. "I can't understand what she's saying. Do you know who she is?"

A pleading note had entered his voice, and he hated himself for it.

"They are the memories of a dead man." Vader came closer, his physical presence lending weight to his words. "A side effect of the accelerated cloning process and the memory flashes used to train you. They will fade."

"What if they don't?"

"Then you will be of no use to me."

Starkiller straightened. For the first time, that fact had been said aloud. He had always known it was so; Darth Vader wasn't renowned for his charity. But to hear it stated so baldly—that this Starkiller, this clone, would be disposed of like some faulty droid if he didn't pull himself together soon—had a profoundly focusing effect.

Not for long.

"Try the Corellian razor hounds."

That was a new voice, one he hadn't heard before. He winced, and knew that by wincing he had effectively doomed himself.

"Starkiller's emotions made him weak," the Dark Lord said. "If you are to serve me, you must be strong."

What form of service that might take, Darth Vader had never said. To take the former Starkiller's place, he presumed, as a weapon that could be aimed at the Emperor then Vader's enemies whenever he commanded. From treacherous commanders to perhaps the Emperor himself—that was how it had been, and how he assumed it would be now. For the moment, however, that didn't matter. The new Starkiller wanted only to live.

“I am strong, my Master, and I am getting stronger.”

Vader stepped behind him and waved a hand. Metal complained as the manacles dropped from Starkiller’s wrists and hit the floor with a boom.

“Show me.”

Numerous pairs of eyes lit up in the shadows. The PROXY droids were activating. Starkiller’s fists balled in readiness. He had defeated their training programs over and over again. There wasn’t a Jedi simulation that could beat him.

But this was different. Even as Darth Vader provided him with his weapons—two lightsabers with matched crystals, producing identical red blades—he saw that he wouldn’t be fighting Jedi Knights this time. The targets stepping out of the shadows wore uniforms not dissimilar in color to the Sith’s ancient enemy, but these were ordinary men armed with nothing more than blasters.

He had seen such armor before, in the memories of the original Starkiller’s life. Men like this had fought him in a TIE fighter factory high above Nar Shaddaa. They had been on Corellia, too. He remembered the places clearly, even if he couldn’t put them in context. The uniforms weren’t Imperial. That was the only thing he could be sure of.

More voices came to him, a veritable babble of overlapping statements that went some way to filling one hole in his memory.

“We’ll join your alliance.”

“All we needed was someone to take the initiative.”

“Let this be an official Declaration of Rebellion.”

And he did remember now. The PROXY droids were wearing the uniform of Kota’s militia, later adopted by the Rebellion—the Rebellion the original Starkiller had brought into being through a mixture of deceit and something that felt, through the obscuring veils of the cloning process, remarkably like sincerity.

“You must destroy what he created,” Darth Vader intoned.

Starkiller ground his teeth together. If he was going to survive the coming minutes, he had to concentrate. He wasn’t really destroying the Rebellion, just an imitation of it. And what did the Rebellion matter now, anyway? It existed. The original Starkiller was dead. He needed to move on.

The troopers rushed him from all sides. Twin red blades flashed as he met their advance, spinning and slashing with an easy grace that belied the strength behind it. Mastery of the Jar’Kai dual-lightsaber fighting style hadn’t come easily, even given his inherited knowledge of the Niman and Ataru techniques. Using two blades came with both advantages and disadvantages. Although he could attack or defend himself against more than one opponent at once, he could only wield his lightsabers one-handed, reducing the power of his blows.

Building up his physical strength had therefore been a key part of his training on Kamino, starting with simple weights and graduating to combat training with droids like these. Dueling the Dark Lord himself had

come last of all, and he had clung to that ultimate challenge even as his mind played games with him. He might not know who he was, but he could learn—and had learned—how to fight.

Fight he did, deflecting every attack the faux-Rebels dealt against him, singly or in pairs and trios. Holographic limbs and blasters were no match for his blades. Sparks flew. Droids fell in pieces. Brown uniforms turned red with illusory blood.

More droids issued from the wall, crowding him, coming at him in waves of four or more. Starkiller went into a fighting trance, stabbing and sweeping complex arcs through the air. His nostrils were full of smoke. The stink cleared his head. No more voices assailed him, and no doubts, either. He was who he was. Born to kill, he killed.

With a roar he forced his way through a wall of Rebels, slashing and hacking as he went. They fell apart on either side, leaving just one standing before him. He raised both blades to strike him down.

Not him. Her. She was a slender, blond woman in an officer's uniform clutching a blaster in both hands.

Starkiller froze.

He knew that face.

He took a step toward the woman.

"You're still loyal to Vader! After all he did to us—branding me a traitor and trying to kill you—"

"No," he said.

The words in his head wouldn't be drowned out.

"I saw you die. But you've come back."

"No," he repeated, raising his blades.

"Don't make me leave another life behind."

"No!"

The woman cowered before him. "Wait," she said in a voice identical to the one in his head. "Don't!"

"Now the fate of this Alliance rests only with you."

He lowered his blades, stunned out of his fighting trance. The voices were the same!

Memories stirred in his mind. Images of the woman before him came in a bewildering rush. Vader wanted him to destroy everyone the original Starkiller had fought with, and that meant this woman, this Rebel officer, this . . .

"Juno?"

“Yes,” she said.

“Strike her down” came the command from Vader.

“I—I can’t.”

“You must learn to hate what he loved,” said Vader, and suddenly it was just the three of them in the center of the droid-strewn training ground. Starkiller, the Sith who had created him, and a woman from the first Starkiller’s past.

Conflicting impulses warred within him, triggered by the ongoing cascade of recollections. Juno was Juno Eclipse, the woman Starkiller had, yes, loved. But he wasn’t Starkiller, so what did he owe her? He was just a clone, and she was only a droid, an illusion fashioned to test him. What did it matter if he did as he was told, as he had been bred to do?

His hands trembled. The twin red blades wavered. They grew steadier as he drew his elbows back, preparing to strike.

“I guess I’ll never need to live this down.”

He remembered a tender pressure against his lips, the feel of her body against his, a heat he had never experienced before, in this life or any other . . .

He couldn’t do it. He couldn’t kill her.

With a double click, he deactivated his blades. His arms came down and hung at his sides.

“It is as I feared.”

Darth Vader lashed out, channeling the dark side with practiced ease. Starkiller winced, but it was the training droid the Dark Lord had targeted. His lightsaber sliced it neatly in two. The image of Juno Eclipse vanished in a shower of sparks.

Starkiller held his ground. No more my Master. No more pretense. “What will you do with me?”

Darth Vader strode to face his former apprentice, kicking the body of the droid out of his path.

“You will receive the same treatment as the others.”

“What others?”

“Those who came before you went mad within months, tormented by emotional imprints I was unable to erase. Some would not kill their father, others their younger self. With you, it is this woman. Now you will suffer the fate they did.”

Starkiller bowed his head, rocked by the revelation that he wasn’t the only Starkiller Darth Vader had re-created. This he had never been told. The possibility hadn’t even been insinuated—although he should have guessed.

How many had come before him? How many had died before they had ever truly lived? Could his creator possibly be telling the truth about their stubborn emotional imprints? He spared no feelings for the father he could no longer remember or the boy he had stopped being long ago. It didn't seem remotely possible that any version of Starkiller could do anything other than share that love for Juno Eclipse.

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