



Star Wars: Darth Plagueis (Star Wars - Legends)

By James Luceno

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

“The best *Star Wars* publication to date . . . [James] Luceno takes *Darth Plagueis* down the dark path and never looks back.”—*Newsday*

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Darth Sidious: In secret he masters the power of the dark side, while publicly climbing to the highest government office.

One desires to rule supreme; the other dreams of living forever. Together, they will destroy the Jedi and rule the galaxy. Unless merciless Sith tradition becomes their undoing. . . .

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Editorial Review

About the Author

James Luceno is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the *Star Wars* novels *Millennium Falcon*, *Dark Lord: The Rise of Darth Vader*, *Cloak of Deception*, and *Labyrinth of Evil*, as well as the New Jedi Order novels *Agents of Chaos I: Hero's Trial* and *Agents of Chaos II: Jedi Eclipse*, *The Unifying Force*, and the eBook *Darth Maul: Saboteur*. He is also the author of the fantasy novel *Hunt for the Mayan Looking-Glass*, available as an eBook. He lives in Annapolis, Maryland, with his wife and youngest child.

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Lucerno / STAR WARS DARTH PLAGUEIS

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 crosshatched 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 generations 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 weapons 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 crystals. “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 their 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 to 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 wind-blown 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.

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