

## STAR WARS

Ebony and Jade

By Brendon J.Wahlberg

It is a dark time for the galaxy. The ruthless Emperor Palpatine has established a Galactic Empire upon the ashes of the Old Republic and destroyed the Jedi Knights.

But the ruling master of the dark side is dying. If an infant rebellion has no chance to end his crushing reign, death itself waits for a final victory.

The Dark Emperor also faces threats from his past. The Sith Lord who serves him covets his throne and a Jedi once thought dead has resurfaced to claim a brutal vengeance.

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It was in the hanging gardens of the Imperial Palace that Lord Darth Vader first spotted the face of the Jedi Knight he had once killed. His sighting of Ashka Boda happened purely by accident. As a rule, the Dark Lord never came to the oppressively green and humid area, where every step he took meant brushing clinging fronds away from his black durasteel mask. He was there against his will, at the Emperor's command, leading three Ho'Din master botanists on a tour of all the Palace gardens.

In contrast to Vader, the aliens were in their element; the Ho'Din loved to be surrounded by plants. On their homeworld, they created huge and beautiful gardens containing plants found nowhere else in the galaxy. They had come to Imperial Center to negotiate a trade for new rare plants to take home, in exchange for plant-derived medicines only they could supply. The plant species they wanted were rare because of the Emperor Palpatine's admittedly aggressive colonization policies. The only surviving examples of many important organisms now grew in the Emperor's gardens, after the destruction of their original ecosystems. Vader knew that his Master would take the Ho'Din's stock in trade from them by force, if he could. However, only the green reptilian Ho'Din themselves knew how to extract the wonder drugs from their environment.

As a result of his unwanted duty, Vader was in a foul mood. He glared up at the slender, rubbery aliens, trying to put some fear into their dark, bulging eyes and their wide, lipless mouths. But the botanists remained as expressionless as Vader's mask. Their violet-

scaled, snake like tresses squirmed incessantly as they stared over Vader at the bountiful flora around them. Vader seethed inside, finding it intolerable that the visiting aliens towered a full meter over his head. It was frustrating to lose the advantage of height that he usually enjoyed. No doubt that was part of the reason for the Emperor's assignment that Vader guide the Ho'Din. The Emperor, a short man, usually made Vader kneel; now Vader understood how he felt. Another reason for the assignment was probably a simple reminder of who was in authority, that even the Dark Lord of the Sith was subject to Palpatine's whims.

Vader looked around for an experienced garden supervisor, upon whom he could pass off the pointing, chattering botanists with their unceasing flow of comments and questions. He simply did not know the answers to most of their inquiries, and he reasoned that if he could find someone who did, he could entice them into letting him go without word of it getting back to the Emperor. If he had to respond to another question about this genetically altered herb, or that unusual sweet-smelling moss, he thought he might indulge in a little display of the power of the Force.

It was at that moment that he saw the Jedi. In the middle distance, coming around a vine covered wall, was an older, mostly bald man, wearing a loose brown sleeveless robe. He froze for a long moment as he made sudden eye contact with the Dark Lord. Vader's visual enhancement system zoomed in on the man's face. The Jedi had squinting slate gray eyes, surrounded by wrinkles and shadowed by his sun baked brow. His mouth was open in surprise below his sharp, straight nose. Only a few wisps of white hair remained at the sides of his head. His large, rough hands clutched at his soil stained clothes as he stared back at Vader with equal intensity.

Then the Jedi bolted and ran, disappearing into the foliage in an instant. Vader did not react immediately; he was too surprised. He knew the man he had just seen, thus he was certain that the man should have been dead. Dead at Vader's own hands. The man's name had been Ashka Boda, and he had been one of the Jedi that Vader had personally slain during the great Purge well over a decade ago.

It was a truth he kept only to himself: Vader recognized Ashka Boda because he remembered the face of every Jedi he had killed. He had memorized each face so he would never forget the price that was paid to win Palpatine's vision of a New Order for the future...the price of his former Jedi brothers' lives. In fact, he could even dimly recall the pain he had felt at the time, as he killed each Jedi Knight. But it was a distant memory, viewed through a hardened soul, and the sight of Ashka Boda caused him no fresh pain. Of all the emotions he might have felt at seeing one of the Jedi returned from the dead, his one cold feeling was that he had unfinished business to resolve. Even during the Purge, he had been able to bury his feelings under the conviction that Palpatine's promised order was needed, that the Jedi were fools to oppose it and to support the corrupt Old Republic. The killings were necessary combat. He had given each opponent a chance to join the Master and live. He had dueled each Knight fairly when they invariably refused. None had been his

match. All of them had died. And Ashka Boda had been among the dead, Vader was sure.

The Ho'Din were oblivious to what had happened. One of them was bending down to the Dark Lord to rasp in Basic, "Lord Vader, would you happen to know the location of the D'ian Orchid Vines from Sen III? We have heard of their famed sweet aroma, a scent potent enough to--"

Vader's moment of surprise was broken. The Ho'Din gasped and backpedaled as Vader's red lightsaber blade snapped into existence right in front of his small green nose. "I regret that this tour must be canceled," Vader boomed sarcastically. "I have the Emperor's business to attend to." With that, he moved swiftly into the maze of vine-covered walls and pillars where Ashka Boda had vanished.

"Cod ee say oo pay a loto!" one of the astonished Ho'Din said, reverting back to his native language.

"Sate Pestage ray indee pako a gammon!" His companions shook their head tresses in indignation, staring after the Dark Lord.

Vader quickly discovered that his moment of hesitation had cost him his quarry. Boda was gone. Reaching out with the Force, Vader confirmed it. The Jedi was no longer in the garden at all. Vader made his decision quickly. It was enough that a Jedi was loose on Coruscant, but this one seemed to hold the secret of immortality itself. If that was true, then a dangerous game was beginning, and another important player now had to enter it. He knew he had to inform the Emperor immediately.

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Sequestered within the jagged dark towers and walls of his Castle near the Palace, Darth Vader dismissed his Noghri guard and activated the holographic communication platform he used to speak to his Master. There was a blank period of waiting, as usual, during which Vader composed himself in the proper kneeling position, down on one knee, with his face lowered.

The first image to appear was not that of the Emperor, but instead that of his Grand Vizier, the wizened Sate Pestage. "Greetings, Lord Vader," Pestage said politely. "It is my unfortunate duty to inform you that the Emperor cannot be disturbed at this time. He is in a deep meditative state, and he expressly asked me to deal with matters on his behalf, as they arise. How may I be of service to you?"

Vader rose out of his kneeling position, and leaned towards the hologram. He hated dealing with an intermediary when he had such urgent news to convey. He resolved to cut through the bureaucracy as only he could. Lowering his voice to its most sinister level, Vader addressed the

Grand Vizier. "Your instructions do not apply to me. I will speak with the Emperor immediately. It is a matter of great importance. If you should decide to be an obstruction to me in this, then we shall find out how much the Emperor will miss your services...when he awakens."

Pestage's normally serene face betrayed the smallest twitch, a relative victory for Vader. The Grand Vizier's next words were merely a face-saving gesture, Vader knew. "I am certain, Lord Vader, that our Master requires both of us to serve him. Very well, I shall inform the Master of your request presently. But before I leave you, there is the small matter of a complaint I received from a group of Ho'Din dignitaries this morning. Perhaps you would care to shed some light on this--"

Vader abruptly cut off the transmission, wishing he could see Pestage's face as he did so. The elderly Grand Vizier annoyed Vader with the way he pampered and protected the Emperor. It was satisfying to face down the shifty old courtier for once. The true measure of Vader's victory was in the gratifyingly short time it took for the face of Palpatine to waver into the space in front of him. The Emperor's hooded face was much larger than Pestage's had been--it towered over the Dark Lord who once again knelt before it. Vader was used to this display of his Master's towering ego, and paid it no notice.

Palpatine spoke first, glaring down at the Sith Lord. "What is so important, Lord Vader, that you need to defy my orders to tell it to me?"

Vader raised his head to meet the Emperor's bright yellow eyes. "I have seen a Jedi, my Master, in the Palace itself. What is more, he was one of the Jedi I personally killed during your Purge. His name was Ashka Boda. Somehow, he has survived his own death, and come here for reasons unknown."

The Emperor's annoyance was replaced by a look of grave interest. He said nothing for a long moment, during which Vader studied his Master's looming face. Palpatine's reaction was all the proof Vader needed that he had done the right thing by bringing the matter swiftly to his attention. Of course, any Jedi sighting was a matter for great concern. The current belief was that all of the Jedi had been killed, some by Vader, some by Palpatine, and the rest by Imperial forces. Still, it was always possible that some were in hiding, waiting for the right time to emerge. The presence of a Jedi in the Palace itself was disturbing proof of that. There was no telling how much harm he could do while free; the Emperor would certainly want him dead or captured.

There was also the more subtle issue of Ashka Boda's mysterious survival of death. Vader was well aware that the secret of immortality was of great interest to his Master. The reason was as plain as the Emperor's withered face. Palpatine's flesh was twisted and sagging around his devious eyes and his hateful mouth full of blackened teeth. The dark side of the Force gave great power, it was true, but as time went on, and the Emperor needed more and more of that power, the price he physically paid for it became higher and higher. Vader, too, had paid a price for his use of the dark side, but as his power was less, so was the cost. He never looked at his face anymore, but he was sure it was nowhere near as

ravaged as his Master's. Vader's true price had been the loss of his body and his humanity--his imprisonment in a black durasteel shell. In the last year, Palpatine's deterioration had become extreme. Looking at the Emperor, Vader could tell that the ruler of the galaxy was dying. If there was any secret of defying death to be found, Palpatine would surely want it.

Vader had had to weigh this fact when he decided to contact the Emperor. He knew that not informing his Master might bring costly punishments. On the other hand, it was not in Vader's best interests to serve an immortal Emperor. Palpatine had promised an order for the galaxy that Vader had believed in, and fought for. That promised future was now, and Vader's frank assessment was that the promise had been broken. The Empire that had arisen to replace the Old Republic brought more chaos than it did order. There was too much destructive conflict, by far, to suit Vader. The Dark Lord never let any of these thoughts leak out to his Master...they were far too dangerous. Palpatine must never know that Vader held closely guarded desires to take over the Empire and correct its course. If he knew, Vader would die.

The Emperor's physical decline had given Vader hope that the throne would be vacant before long. It would be an easy solution...and there could be a smooth transition to Vader as Emperor. However, the potential knowledge of Ashka Boda threatened that hope. Vader had already decided that Boda had to die. How and when would depend on how the Emperor played things. Vader forced himself to be patient and to wait for his chance to destroy Boda and his secrets.

For now, Palpatine was giving his reply. "You've done well, Lord Vader, to bring this to my attention. Come to the private audience chamber tonight, and we will speak of our plans to deal with this Jedi. Until then, my friend," said the Emperor with a sudden fatherly smile. The hologram faded away, leaving Vader alone.

Vader stood in satisfaction. So, the contest began. The Sith Lord vowed that he, personally, would decide where it ended.

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In his meditation chamber, Darth Vader prepared himself, body and soul, for the trial to come. Advanced biomonitors fine-tuned his vital functions and adjusted his body chemistry for maximum endurance and energy. His bionic systems enjoyed a recharge, while the direct neural patching that controlled them was checked by medical sensors. The life systems control computer on his chest underwent a full self-diagnostic. Meanwhile, his helmet was suspended by a robot arm above his pasty, deeply scarred head. His eyes, however, were closed and his mind was with the Force, remembering...

More than a decade ago, during the campaign to destroy the Jedi, Vader had come to the home of a Jedi named Ashka Boda, in a slum district of the only spaceport on backwater Utapau. It was late in the campaign; most of the Jedi were defeated already. The grand battles were over. Now, all that remained was to finish off the impotent remnants of the Order. Boda was one such remnant. His name and location had been taken from the main Census Computer on Coruscant. All indications were that he had not fled, and was simply staying where he was.

Vader left his squad of stormtroopers behind as he entered the wretched dwelling of Ashka Boda. Word of Vader's arrival had apparently not affected the old Jedi; Vader found him just finishing a simple meal in the one-room second floor apartment.

Boda didn't get up as Vader's huge form filled the apartment's doorway. "I've been expecting you," he said, his voice weak, as he wiped a corner of his mouth. "And I'm ready. Go ahead. Do what you came to do. Do what you must do."

Vader paused in the doorway, studying the seated man. Boda seemed to offer no threat. Just the opposite--he seemed to be a broken man, devoid of resistance. "Are you so eager to die, old man?" Vader asked.

"I am ready to die," Boda said. He held up his large, empty hands. "I have no lightsaber, so I cannot duel you. I gave it up long ago. It brought me the ultimate grief, and I will never hold it again. You, however, could cut me down where I sit..."

Vader stared at him, considering. It went against his nature to kill an unresisting man. Still, this was a Jedi, and he had his orders. Eradicate the Jedi. "If you have nothing to live for," Vader offered, "why not give yourself to the dark side? Turn and serve my Master, and claim a new life for yourself."

"No," Boda said wearily. "It wouldn't bring back what I've lost--what I destroyed myself. Besides, I would be betraying the memory of my brother if I served your Emperor. It would make a mockery of what he died for. No...just take my life, as you have been ordered to. It might even be a mercy for me, to reach the end."

Vader nodded, looking closely at the old man's face, recording it in his memory. Not the first, and not the last one to die. Simply the next. He reached out one black gloved hand and made a clasping gesture. The Force flowed at his command and surrounded the old man's heart. Ashka Boda doubled over as his heart was grasped hard inside his chest. He fell from his chair as the heart stopped, collapsing onto the stained floor. Then his last breath left him.

After a minute, Vader walked over to the sprawled body and examined it. He took out a small scanner and held it over the corpse. There were no life signs. Suspicious of a deception, Vader probed with the Force to detect any hidden life within Boda, but he found none. This was not a hibernation trance. The old man was dead.

Vader noticed that the body did not fade away as sometimes happened with the Jedi. This did not disturb him. Fading was a function of being particularly close to the Force on the light side. It didn't always happen, particularly if the spirit was tainted. Boda's evident despair suggested that he had done something terrible in his lifetime. Finally, Vader left the body where it was and went down the narrow stairs to the front of the dilapidated building. He strode past the cluster of stormtroopers surrounding the decayed facade, gesturing to the building as he gave a single command. "Burn it." The white armored soldiers hurried to comply...

Vader awoke from his memory trance as his mask and helmet clamped firmly into place once more. He felt physically refreshed, and clear in his purpose. He was certain that Ashka Boda had died that day on Utapau, yet there was obviously more to the man than he had seen in that dingy room in the spaceport. Nevertheless, it didn't matter what powers or secrets the old man had. When Boda had seen Vader in the garden, he had run, proving he was still no warrior. Vader had no doubts. He had killed Ashka Boda once...he could do so again.

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The man who had caused such consternation for Vader had indeed fled at the sight of the Sith Lord. Boda had no desire to confront Lord Vader, not with so much at stake. It would be a pointless battle, because Boda's real target was the Emperor Palpatine. He had learned a lot about Vader over the years, while he worked at the Palace as a gardener. He knew the Dark Lord was just a servant, in thrall to his Master, who was the true evil. Vader was not an opponent to be destroyed, just an obstacle to be removed. Boda would spare Vader if he could, and he did not want to risk Vader killing him before his plans could come to fruition.

Boda knew it was endgame for Palpatine and himself. The moment Vader had seen him, Boda had known his time of planning and plotting was over. And was that so bad? He had been preparing for years upon years. Perhaps he had needed a small push to finally act.

Vader's sighting him had been a mistake, a chance encounter. The Sith Lord never visited the gardens, so Boda had always managed to avoid Vader by keeping to the gardens of the Palace and of his rooftop home. Avoiding Vader had been important--Boda was grateful to Vader for his second chance at life, but he knew Vader wouldn't feel the same way. But it was now over and done--he had been discovered and now he had to be ready. The Emperor would send Vader after him, Boda reasoned. The Dark Lord was Palpatine's Jedi-slaying machine from the Purge. Boda had decided to deal with the Sith Lord here, in his own greenhouse home, where his plants would give him an advantage. Once Vader was out of the game, it would be time to go to Palpatine and deliver the Emperor's long overdue death. It was going to be glorious. Years and tears of patient work had filled the Palace with explosive material. It was a colossal

bomb waiting to go off. And it would, once Boda was sure that he and Palpatine were inside it. So they could die together...

Boda walked along between the rows of Bafforr trees under a wide glass sky, working out the details of his defense in his mind. His home was a vast greenhouse atop one of Imperial City's skyscrapers. The glassed-in food producing facility had been built around the original penthouse apartments to help feed the huge metropolis, but years ago, Boda made the place his own. Using the Force, he had convinced the original owners to sell it to him cheaply, and now it was his own garden, where he grew the exotic plants that he enjoyed more than the company of people. Here, he grew giant carnivorous plants, moving vines, and exploding fungi. They protected him well. Here too, were his beloved Bafforr trees, sentient creatures that spoke to him in their unusual way, warning him of danger and removing his loneliness. And best of all was his sweet-smelling Phelarion moss, a soft, gray-green species that filled every nook and cranny, soothing Boda's anxieties away. He was truly at home, and he knew his home would fight with him.

Boda looked to be about sixty-five years old. His hands were large and rough with calluses from many years of gardening. The many wrinkles near his eyes were shadowed by his thick brow. Boda perpetually squinted from long years of looking at the sun. He had a patient, calm demeanor, gleaned from contact with the peace of slow growing things. Boda's simple, sleeveless brown robe was worn loose in the style of the Jedi. It concealed a lightsaber that was never taken out when someone might see it. His clothes and shoes were dirt-stained, old, and worn. He had a gruff voice, but he rarely used it, preferring the silence of the gardens and his private thoughts of Palpatine's defeat. It was best that he stayed solitary. People tended to feel uneasy around him, they sensed that there was something strange about him despite his ordinary appearance. Boda did not want to be noticed, so he stayed alone.

But he hadn't always been alone. Once, he had lived with his brother...a brother with whom he had disagreed deeply and passionately. It had, in fact, been a disagreement to the death. Just thinking about it made the whole memory start to replay itself in Boda's mind. It was a powerful memory, with strong emotions attached to it. Boda couldn't resist it, and it took him back, back to where this had all started...

"No, Vantos, I...won't allow you to go through with this," said Ashka Boda. He gasped with exhaustion as he clambered onto the broad ledge next to his also tired brother. Vantos Boda looked at him, panting and incredulous. The brothers were standing on a rock cliff face, full of protruding ledges and natural stone stairways. The base of the cliff was a considerable distance below them, and even further up above them was the lonely house where the child of Vantos' vision lived alone with his father. Vantos had insisted on approaching the house this way in order to avoid being spotted on the wide mountain road. His plan was to scout out the house unobserved, wait for a chance to catch the child alone, and then kill him quickly with a lightsaber.



Wiping the sweat from his forehead, Vantos spat, "You can't be serious! Ashka, you disgust me. How can you do this to me now, when we're both so deep into it? I thought I had you convinced. Why did you come all this way with me if you were going to back out at the last second?"

"I never said I agreed with you, Vantos," Ashka said with weary anger. "I could never condone the murder of a child. I came with you so I could be at your side, in case you abandoned your evil goals-" Vantos growled, but Ashka ignored him. "Yes, evil, Vantos. Don't try to fool yourself. You're on the path that leads to the dark side. I don't want to lose you...but if you do this...you're already lost. I want you to understand me very clearly. I'm not 'backing out' and letting you finish this alone. I'm...I'm going to stop you right here. Whatever that takes."

Vantos looked steadily at his brother. "Oh, I understand you, Ashka. You're threatening me, your own brother. Would you kill me if you had to? Is it worth that much to you? Listen to me. It doesn't all have to happen this way."

Ashka didn't reply. He held Vantos' gaze with his own, his eyes full of dread.

"You'd kill me," Vantos continued, "and let that child live. He'll grow up, and murder trillions! Do you want to live with that? All those deaths will be on your head. You talk about the dark side...that child is going to be the greatest Master of the dark side that ever lived! He's going to destroy our order--wipe out the Jedi. He's going to build a machine that can shatter an entire world! He's going to bring down the Republic and become the Emperor of a galaxy in chains. But I have a chance to prevent all that. I was given the vision for a purpose. The Force itself wants me to be the savior. Just like it says in the Journal of the Whills! 'And in the time of greatest despair, there shall come a savior, and he shall be known as the son of the suns.'" Vantos choked out the words. "Ashka, what is the life of one child, set against so many billions? What is my life, even? If I had to die for this, I would. Even if...even if you have to..." Vantos looked away from his brother's eyes.

Ashka adopted a pleading tone. "These arguments didn't persuade me before, and they won't now. Listen to reason, Vantos. This child, this Espaa Pestage, he is only a child. He hasn't done any of the things you're talking about. The Republic and the Jedi Order are fine! What you say doesn't make any sense. No one child or adult is going to be able to do all those things. Remember what our Master taught us when we were training? She said you could try to see the future, but it wasn't set. Anything could change it. This vision of yours could be the stuff of fantasy."

"No, Ashka," Vantos said, his voice hollow. "This was no hazy glimpse of the future. This was a full, clear vision, in such detail that...that...Ashka, there is enough horror stored up in what's coming to drive you insane if you could see it. The Force itself doesn't want it to happen. The light side let me see what's ahead because it needs me to stop it."

"What if your vision wasn't from the light side?" asked Ashka.  
"What if the dark side wants you, and the way to claim you is to have you murder this child? Master Dina taught us there is no turning back from the dark path. And in the end, it will destroy you!"

Vantos folded his arms across his chest. "I know what I saw, and what I felt. I have to do this now, for the sake of the Republic. I am it's sworn protector, and this is my duty. Don't stand in my way. Go home Ashka, before one of us gets killed."

Ashka's only response was to draw out and ignite his lightsaber. He held it firmly in the ready position.

Vantos shook his head angrily. "That was a mistake, brother. Of the two of us, I've always been the better swordsman by far. I usually beat you, and I know all your weaknesses." Vantos ignited his own weapon and slowly set the silvery blade against the twin beam in Ashka's hand. The blades flashed and jumped slightly as they made contact. A crackling hum filled the air.

Ashka and Vantos squared off on the ledge. The stone platform was only six paces wide; beyond that was a nasty drop. Ashka began to sweat from his anxiety. Vantos seemed tense but collected, his expression cold. Ashka made the first move, swinging swiftly at Vantos' head. The blow was neatly blocked, and Vantos forcefully pushed the blade down and away from him. Ashka took a few careful steps backward, the drop-off to his right side. Vantos held his position, his stance defensive. They traded several more blows, but each time Ashka attacked, Vantos seemed to know how his brother would strike. Vantos' blade was there to block Ashka's, even as Ashka decided where to aim. A low side swing was blocked low, a high thrust was dodged. Ashka spun and struck high again, but Vantos swiftly ducked. Even a series of wild swings was avoided, as Vantos jumped away. Ashka quickly grew frustrated. Vantos was fighting a purely defensive battle, but it seemed effortless. Ashka was, in contrast, quickly running out of energy. It had already been a long climb, and once he tired too much, Vantos would move in to disable him, and continue up the cliff. A sense of rapidly dwindling time overcame him. With dismay twisting in his gut, Ashka put reckless force into his next blow. Vantos seemed to anticipate it yet again; he stepped backwards and completely dodged the attack.

"Bad move," Vantos grated, "you always did overextend."

The exhausted Ashka had leaned too far into his stroke. Vantos' downward return stroke hammered Ashka's weapon out of his hand. At the same time, Vantos took full advantage of his brother's momentum to trip him and shove him at the edge of the ledge. Ashka fell hard, his legs slipping over the side as he struggled to get a handhold. His desperate fingers found a purchase, but it was all he could do to avoid plummeting down the cliff face. His legs swung in the air below the ledge.

Vantos watched him impassively. He shut down his lightsaber and hooked it to his belt. "I'm sorry Ashka," he said, "but a fight was what you wanted. You were being a fool. Don't you understand? I saw the

future! I even saw our fight! I tried to stop you, but you wouldn't listen. Hang on as best you can. I'll be back for you, as soon as I'm finished. If you fall...just remember the healing techniques Master Dina taught us."

"But Vantos-" Ashka protested.

"This is my victory," Vantos cut him off. "I wasn't expecting to win like this, but I did. You may never thank me for it, but what I'm going to do...I'm doing it for you, too. I'll see you when it's done."

As Ashka Boda held doggedly to the ledge, Vantos Boda turned and began climbing higher, his back to his struggling brother. Ashka knew Vantos was lost to him. Drawing on the Force, he used precious seconds to bleed away his fatigue. His questing feet found a protruding rock below the ledge on which to gain a foothold, and he held still, breathing evenly. Though it made him slip a bit more, he lifted one hand from the rock and opened his palm towards his fallen saber. The weapon clinked and rolled into it, impelled by the Force. A glance towards Vantos verified that his single-minded brother was still ignoring him, but that Vantos had almost climbed out of range. Ashka took a few slow, deep breaths, then gritted his teeth and acted. Pushing up with his other hand and his legs, he raised himself enough to activate and throw his saber, guiding it with the Force. Immediately, he lost his purchase on the ledge, and fell back into open space. For a moment, he glimpsed the silvery saber spinning towards the unprotected back of his brother. He didn't see it hit, but as he fell, he heard an agonized cry that he would remember for the rest of his life. His brother's death cry.

Then Ashka struck the rocks at the bottom of the cliff. His body rolled a good distance down the slope, but Ashka's awareness had been smashed out of him, and he didn't know it.

Ashka awakened the next morning to the feel of another's probing hands on his head. He blinked in the bright sunlight, focusing on the long, thin face of a late middle aged man bending over him in concern. Ashka could feel the caked dried blood on his skin shift as he made a pained face. He didn't try to move his limbs yet, not until he could check them with his Force sense. He tried to speak, grunted airily, and cleared his parched throat to try again.

"I'm...Ashka Boda...My...my brother," he rasped, "is he...dead?"

"Your brother," repeated the lanky stranger. "Yes, I see. That explains the body up on the cliff. I'm sorry, but yes, your brother is dead."

Ashka moaned quietly. So. It was true. His brother, his training partner...his only family...was dead. Swift fragments of memory came to Ashka--the two of them burying their parents, learning the Force with Master Dina...he and Vantos roaring drunk and laughing. All of it...all of it gone, now.

"I found him when I was out looking for my son," the stranger said. "He's disappeared, and I'm very worried about him. I was combing the cliff side--Espaa likes to go there alone--when I found the body. He had been killed by a lightsaber. Was he a Jedi? Are you?"

"Yes," said Ashka slowly. "Both Jedi. I...killed him myself. He was going to kill your son. Had to stop him." Ashka began to cough painfully.

The stranger grimaced, and took a small flask from the pocket of his vest. Carefully, he tipped the contents into Ashka's mouth. It was water. Ashka drank gratefully.

"My son?" the man was saying. "What would your brother want to do that for? Do you know where Espaa is? Is he all right?"

"We...didn't see your son. I'm sorry." Ashka closed his eyes. "Vantos had a vision...that your son was going...going to turn to the dark side and kill many people. He thought it was up to him...to stop it before-" A jolt of pain shot up Ashka's leg, and he winced.

"Did your brother have anything to do with those three men from two days ago?"

"Men?" said Ashka, confused. "What men? We didn't see anyone else."

"Listen," the man said, "my name is Sate Pestage, and I live here alone with my son. My wife Gemsaa died in childbirth...she was a Jedi healer, but she couldn't save herself. Espaa is all I have left of her. These men came to our house...they wanted to take Espaa away, to 'fulfill an important destiny'. Of course I wasn't going to let him go away with any total strangers. I told them to leave us alone. Are you sure you don't know anything about them? They called themselves the 'Sith'. I think they came to my house last night in secret, and kidnapped my son. I have no idea who they are. I'm terrified I won't see my son again."

As Pestage spoke, Ashka felt a cold feeling of failure settle over him. He felt like he was physically plunged into a chilling shadow he knew would never lift until he died. As a Jedi Knight, Ashka knew who the Sith were: an order of dark side magicians from thousands of years ago. As far as any Jedi knew, they should all be dust, their threat belonging to ancient history. But three Sith had come to this world, to this place, to find the same child that Vantos foresaw becoming a dark side Master, a dark Emperor who would rule the galaxy. Had Vantos been right? Had Ashka killed his brother, only to allow the Sith to claim their prize? Ashka's confusion and remorse overwhelmed him. He slipped once more into unconsciousness as Vantos' words echoed in his head..."Do you want to live with that? All those deaths will be on your head..."

The memory faded out as Boda leaned against his Bafforr tree, letting the peace of the entire grove flood over him. His fight with his brother would always be a difficult memory, but that was in the past. The only important thing to learn from it was whether that long ago vision had been the truth. Boda sighed. How very, very true it had been...

Boda was certain that the boy of the vision, Espaa Pestage, was the same person as Emperor Palpatine. Yes, the name was different, but it was probable that he had changed it to avoid anyone learning about his past. The proof, to Boda, was the devoted service of Sate Pestage to the Emperor. It was almost...fatherly.

If Espaa had in fact trained with the Sith, it would explain his dark side powers. But somewhere along the line, Espaa must have surpassed the Sith, for now the Sith were all gone and their final Dark Lord was his servant. He had also fulfilled most of the prophecy of the vision. He had assisted in the destruction of the Republic, he had engineered the fall of the Jedi Order, and he had become a tyrannical Emperor. True, he had not built a machine that could destroy a world, but considering his build-up of Star Destroyers, could such a device be far behind?

It didn't matter how many years had gone by, or how much evil Palpatine had accomplished or not accomplished. What mattered, finally, was that justice had to be served. Only Palpatine's death could make up for the injustice of that long-ago day when brother had killed brother. And justice would come, soon, bringing a cleansing fire with it. Boda was ready for it to burn away his pain as well.

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The tallest spire of the Imperial Palace, and thus the tallest point of any building on Coruscant, contained a small transparisteel room known as the Emperor's observation deck. This room was shaped like a cylinder with see through walls, and was bare except for a throne that could rise up through the floor from the room below. The Emperor liked to sit here and view his planetary domain, reflecting on the knowledge that it was all his own. He might lay claim to distant worlds on the rim, but Imperial City was something he could touch and truly possess.

It was a magnificent sight this evening, as usual, and it served to distract Palpatine from his growing fears about his physical decline. The sun had just set, and two pale moons were visible, hanging in the dusk sky. The dimming light revealed a world surface made up, not of land, but of buildings, with cathedral like clusters of skyscrapers rising from a vast plain of rooftops, public squares, and spaceports. At the rooftop level, the narrow spaces between buildings looked like long roads from the Emperor's perch, but were actually dim canyons where windows and travel tubes were aglow, descending into darkness like the light starved lower levels of a dense forest.

The city extended from horizon to horizon, a world of densely packed structures that blended into each other from the vantage point of the observation deck. The buildings that stood out from that height were the colossi, structures that rose above the rest like castles on a field. Among these were the towering walls of Monument Plaza, an enclosed park where one could touch the bare rock of a mountain peak without going far

south to the Manarai range, as well as view many statues of the Emperor himself. Palpatine's gaze also fell on the Senate building, with its carved stone pillars. Once, it had been the tallest structure on the planet, but now the Palace cast its shadow completely over it. The Emperor smiled as he looked down on where he had once served as a Senator. Ah, how the mighty have risen, he thought. He moved on, revolving his throne to look for the sprawling University of Coruscant with its millions of students, all studying Imperial-approved subjects. There was the Imperial Justice Court, where his laws were enforced, and the giant cube of the Imperial Security Operations building, where the agents of the New Order congregated. And there was Lord Vader's dark castle, a brooding structure that suited its owner. It was the only large edifice without a multitude of surface lights. The Emperor took in the city glow that arose from everywhere else, smiling with satisfaction.

His eyes automatically skipped over certain areas of Imperial Center; they ignored the segregated alien sectors, and did not pause where the decaying underworld of Coruscant could be glimpsed. Instead, they tracked upwards, to the constant stream of ships flying all around against the shimmering green and red night sky auroras. It was beautiful, but he had saved the best for last. Palpatine rose from his throne and walked to the window. Looking straight down, he could see his masterpiece below him, his world, his Palace. It had been built over the ancient Presidential Palace, reconstructed, enlarged, and enhanced according to his design. It was a hybrid cathedral and pyramid made of polished gray-green rock and sparkling mirror crystals, beautified with marble and carvings based on old Sith symbols. The structure was never dark, and at night, it was lit up as if the sun had been trapped in a hollow glass mountain, a fortress of light with tapered spires and fragile looking towers rising from every conceivable surface. The Palace was Palpatine's monument to himself. He loved to gaze at its majesty, which reflected his own. His world contained treasuries and prisons, computer centers and war rooms, libraries and residential areas, vaults and studies, audience chambers and throne rooms. Most importantly, his world contained himself. But...for how long?

As they inevitably did, Palpatine's thoughts returned to his problem--his accelerated, unstoppable aging. For now, he owned this magnificent world, but bleak death waited in the shadows, marking time until it could steal all of this away. He couldn't bear the thought of another person ruling his Empire when he was gone. But what could he do? He was the victim of a hideous irony. The very power he had used to rise so high was now destroying him. It came down to this: Palpatine needed the dark side more than it needed him. The dark side eventually consumed its champions, so hungry to destroy life that it swallowed even its greatest servants. According to his studies with the Sith, if a great dark side adept died, his spirit would be forever lost in the howling chaos of the dark side itself. With that waiting for him, there was only one thing he could do. He had to find a way not to die at all.

So far, he had produced no solutions. And so, he lived with his fear every day. It was like a crushing weight, insubstantial as the air, heavy as the Palace itself. He strove to deny his fear, to bury it deep inside. Fear was slavery, and Palpatine was a proud servant, not a slave.

He knew he richly deserved the power granted to him. As he expanded his Empire, he generated fear, anger, and aggression across space, feeding the dark side on a galactic scale. His gift to the darkness was the chaos that was ironically called the New Order. All he asked in return was that he be spared. But his withered flesh held the answer to his plea--the dark side was indifferent, unconscious, amoral, relentless.

Palpatine was not ready to admit defeat. If there was a way to find, he would find it. He would continue to follow every lead. This strange Jedi Vader had spotted...now there was a possibility. Vader had sworn that he had killed this man, and yet, here he was at the Palace. Of course, it was possible that Vader was wrong...or even--dare he think it of his faithful servant--deceiving him. But something told Palpatine that that was not so. A tremor in the Force...a chill across his soul...the Emperor's instincts were rarely wrong. This Ashka Boda was important. He knew things...secrets that he would soon give up to Palpatine in the interrogation center. Perhaps the secret of surviving death itself. He shivered with anticipation. With immortality and his own dark genius, there would be nothing he could not accomplish.

He turned away from the windows. It was time to go and meet with Lord Vader. His servant would then go out and bring Ashka Boda to him. And, just to make certain that Vader carried out his mission properly, he was going to assign the Dark Lord a partner. Vader's role in this matter was still ambiguous, his connection with Ashka Boda not fully clear. Boda was too important a prize to risk killing...prematurely. And so, it was time to unveil his new and precious tool. His own creation...the new Emperor's Hand.

\* \* \*

The main audience chamber was a wide corridor with a scooped out floor. Platforms for Imperial guards lined the walls, alongside computer duty stations. Right now, as Darth Vader passed below these platforms, they were empty. This was to be a private meeting. At the far end, wide steps climbed up to the throne. Part way up these was a platform for projecting holograms. The ceiling was extremely high, with long light panels running vertically up the walls. Behind the throne, and to either side, were circular windows, divided by spoke like polished bars. The bars were joined by small curved pieces at odd intervals, giving the impression of a round web. A fourth such window was positioned high above the throne, dominating the room. Vader reflected with vague bitterness that very few people remained who understood that the shape of each window was the Sith symbol for chaos.

Vader's Master sat waiting in the throne at the top of the stairs. After Vader had climbed to just below eye level with the Emperor, he stopped and gave a small bow from the waist.

"Welcome, my friend," said the Emperor. "We have much to discuss." Palpatine smiled at his foremost servant. Vader trembled slightly. The

Emperor was an intense concentration of dark side power, like a black flame burning. Ever since Vader's new life began, he had craved his Master's presence. Being by his side was like being warmed by a fire, or cooled by a breeze. It filled up his hollow core with purpose. Vader guessed that his Master was transferring some of the Force's energy to him, perhaps as a reward for service. He straightened and replied simply, "What is thy bidding?"

Palpatine leaned forward in the throne. "I have taken your reports of a Jedi here in the Palace very seriously, Lord Vader. It is a matter that greatly disturbs me." The Emperor paused. "But I find your assertion that this Jedi has returned from the dead to be...questionable."

Vader bristled, and Palpatine continued soothingly, "I do not question your word to me, my servant. However, it is possible that you were somehow deceived." He smiled at Vader, then waved a wrinkled hand dismissively. "But that is a secondary concern. We are agreed that any Jedi is a threat that must be dealt with at once."

Vader nodded. "Yes, my Master."

"Good. In the past, you have served the Empire well in hunting down Jedi Knights. I command you to do so again. I wish you to capture this Ashka Boda and bring him before me. Then I will question him personally. This should be well within your capabilities, so long as he is merely a Jedi. After all," the Emperor chuckled dryly, "you have killed him before."

Vader did not reply. Had he spoken the angry words on his lips, he would have been punished for his insolence. Instead, he controlled his emotions and waited.

The Emperor stood, clasping his hands together between his enormous sleeves and looking down at Vader's helmet. "And yet, it is never wasteful to be cautious, Lord Vader. The Jedi might be more than he seems, as you believe. And so I have decided that you should be accompanied on this mission by an assistant."

The announcement took Vader completely by surprise. He took an involuntary step back down the stairs. In that one terrible second, his fierce pride had been cut to the quick. That his Master should think that he was not capable of handling Ashka Boda by himself! In his surprise, Vader did not notice the small figure that slipped into the chamber via one of the semi-hidden side doors. The newcomer walked nimbly up the stairs to stand by Palpatine's side. The Emperor placed a fatherly hand on this person's shoulders, his black sleeve draped around her small body.

"I would like you to meet Mara Jade," said Palpatine. "She is to be Emperor's Hand and your partner in capturing Ashka Boda."

Vader stared at Mara Jade in anger. His indignation spiraled out of control as he realized she was just a girl, a teenager. Usually so careful in the presence of the Emperor, Vader, for once, lost his



patience with Palpatine. "Is this to mock me, Master?" he rumbled harshly. "I swear to you that what I said about Ashka Boda is true. There is an unknown danger, and sending a mere girl..."

Palpatine's yellow eyes flashed, silencing the Dark Lord. He pointed a crooked finger at Vader and addressed him. "Perhaps I did not make myself clear, Lord Vader! You are acting like a young fool who speaks before he thinks. This young woman is my personal assassin, a trained agent. I demand that you treat her with respect." Palpatine turned abruptly away from Vader and returned to his throne.

Mara Jade remained standing, the picture of discomfort, looking unsteadily at Vader. Vader took the opportunity to examine her closely. She was short and thin in her black body suit. Her short-clipped hair was deep red with bright gold highlights. Her emerald green eyes seemed too large for her small face. She seemed at once competent, because of the combat training evident in her stance, and vulnerable, because of the naiveté evident in her eyes. She did not seem afraid of either Vader or the Emperor, but she did seem embarrassed by how the meeting had begun.

"Your reaction to Mara Jade," the Emperor spoke up pedantically, "is the reason she will make an excellent assassin. Her victims will not suspect a 'mere girl,' either. But that assumption will be their last mistake, for Mara has been trained well." Palpatine stared at Mara as he spoke. With his attention on her, she straightened with pride and abandoned Vader's face to look at the Emperor with gratitude. "Mara was raised here on Coruscant," he continued. "I took a personal interest in her education, keeping in contact with her and seeing that she had the best teachers. She is also a capable pilot, and knows many of the latest fighting forms." Palpatine placed one hand on his chest. "Even I have been her teacher. She has a minor sensitivity to the Force, which I have nurtured. It gives her an advantage as an assassin. I also think, Lord Vader, that there is much that she could learn from you."

Vader felt incredulous at this turn of events. There was a Jedi to be hunted down, and the Emperor wanted to send an adolescent to do it? And yet, Vader was not being mocked. There must be a very good reason for Palpatine to do this. Vader vowed he would find out what it was. He looked at his Master. The Emperor was watching him, with his jaw set and his mouth a thin line of displeasure. Vader could not afford the Emperor's displeasure, not now, and not ever. No one who directly defied him had ever survived the experience. Vader answered in the only way open to him. "It shall be as you wish, my Master."

Palpatine still glared at him. "Very good, Lord Vader. Given time, you will see the value of my new agent."

Mara Jade breathed a careful sigh of relief. She had sensed a possible confrontation building, and she was glad it had not materialized. She very reasonably did not want to see her Master angered,

and she did not want to be unable to work with her new partner. Palpatine's authority had carried the moment, but it would not be a permanent solution. Once she was alone with Vader, she would have to prove herself against his strong doubts. It was not going to be easy, but Mara didn't allow that to destroy her enthusiasm. This was her first real mission for the Emperor. She had only been recently declared his Hand. In her new capacity, she was going to expose traitors, assassinate the Empire's enemies, and spy for the Emperor. It was a source of great pride and joy to her to serve the man she thought of as her father figure. Her new identity filled her with zeal for her duties. She knew she could not let him down on her very first assignment, and that meant working successfully with Vader.

Mara had noticed that her Master had not told Vader everything about her. He had omitted the specific Force skill that made her most useful to him. She was a powerful receptive telepath, and could receive the Emperor's thoughts across light years. When he communicated with her, she could see his face and hear his words. She even felt his emotions. In this way, he could talk to her with an immediacy that made her more effective at carrying out his will than any other field agent. She wondered if Palpatine wanted Vader to know about that. She hoped there was a good reason to keep secrets from her partner. She really did hope to learn from the formidable warrior, and did not want to give him any reasons to mistrust her. Things were off to a bad enough start as it was.

The Emperor decided that Vader was going to comply concerning Mara Jade, and he relaxed a fraction. He needed Vader to cooperate in this. It was for the Dark Lord's own good. Palpatine had been wondering about Vader's ambition lately. With his physical decline, it was obvious what Vader might hope to gain if the throne was empty. They had not discussed it openly, but no doubt both of them knew Ashka Boda's potential knowledge of immortality would benefit only Palpatine. Vader might be tempted to destroy Boda outright, destroying any knowledge he might have. If Boda's means of surviving death required special preparation or equipment, then he would be helpless against Vader's treachery. Palpatine would have to kill Vader in punishment, and he did not want to do that; Vader was too valuable. With Mara Jade along, Palpatine could watch over Vader through her. He could then be sure of Vader's loyalty and good behavior.

The Emperor did have the ability to view Vader from afar through the Force, but there were two drawbacks to this. First, despite what he had instructed Pestage to tell his callers, Palpatine had not been spending his time in meditation. He had been extremely busy trying to research a cure for his malady. He simply lacked the time to observe the Dark Lord constantly. Second, if he should see Vader betray him, he could do nothing about it from a distance. No, using Mara was his best option. It would be a subtle way to keep tabs on the Sith Lord, which was also a necessary aspect of the plan. If Vader knew he was openly mistrusted, he might conclude he had nothing to lose, and act rashly. He might, for example, kill Boda, go into hiding until his Emperor died, and then try to take the throne with all of his dark side strength.

The plan served another purpose as well--he habitually tested all of his agents, especially the Emperor's Hands, by throwing them into the action and seeing which ones were the strongest...which ones survived. Palpatine had high hopes for Mara Jade. In Vader's hands, she would be tested to her limits.

The Emperor looked pointedly at each of his two servants. "Go then, and work my will. I want the Jedi brought to me alive, by whatever means are necessary. However, the operation is to keep as low a profile as possible. We do not want it known that the Jedi are on Coruscant. The people understand that their vile sect is gone forever...so let it remain. And if this Jedi you seek is somehow immortal..." the Emperor smiled, "Mara Jade should be able to keep him dead long enough to bring him before me."

Darth Vader and Mara Jade bowed to him, the Emperor observed, but not without giving each other a wary sidelong glance. Oh yes, the Emperor cackled softly, this is going to be an education for both of them.

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The main Palace computer center had two unusual visitors the next morning. Though many of the techs on duty wanted very much to inquire who the pretty young girl with the red hair was, the fact that she was accompanied by Darth Vader himself discouraged every one of them. Mara Jade felt their eyes on her anyway as she seated herself at an operator terminal of the powerful Imperial mainframe. Vader stood behind her, his attitude distant and superior. He had been like that all morning, since they met up in the Palace. It bothered her, of course, not to be taken seriously. Maybe now, when he saw her in action he would begin to show her some respect. She was the Emperor's Hand, after all.

"All right," she said, concentrating on the keypad in front of her. "We're going to find out what we can about Ashka Boda. There has to be something about him in the system. He couldn't live in, or even visit such an information-dense world without leaving some trace. Now. Where do you want to begin, Darth?"

Oops. Mara felt a wave of hostility from her partner at the familiar use of his first name. "May I call you Darth?" she said lamely.

"You may call me whatever you wish," he grated. "How you refer to me is of as little importance to me as your unnecessary assistance on this mission."

Mara stiffened. Her naturally heated pride began to steam inside her. The Emperor himself had ordered the two of them to work together, and Vader knew it. She turned in her swivel chair and found herself staring into the blinking chest plate of Vader's armor. Setting her jaw, she looked up into the sinister angles of his mask.

"Lord Vader," she said, holding her voice steady, "it wouldn't hurt you to stoop to the level of assisting a novice such as myself. We are temporarily assigned to work together. I know I don't have your respect...yet. But I'm working on it. You have my respect, but I think you're wrong about my being useless. I can help with this capture. But if you don't help me, I will be useless." Tensely, she waited, not taking her eyes from Vader's mask. The seconds ticked by, as she became acutely aware of his slow, mechanized breathing.

"There is some fire in you, young one," he said at last. "Very well. You will have your chance. But understand one thing. While we are on this mission, you are working for me. I will give the orders, and none other." Not even the Emperor, was the unspoken warning. "You will do as I say unquestioningly. If you can remember that, you may survive your first assignment."

Mara swallowed hard, unwilling to be intimidated, but feeling it nonetheless. She nodded once, without argument, hoping not to lose her unexpected headway. "It will be as you say...my Lord."

Vader broke their eye contact first, and turned his attention to the computer terminal. Relieved, Mara also returned to it.

"Try the name Ashka Boda in the planetary census to begin," said Vader.

Mara entered the commands. "As I expected," she said shortly. "No such name appears anywhere."

Vader considered this. "He was working in the Palace gardens when I saw him. If we cannot find his name, we will find his face. Bring up the work files for all Palace staff connected with the gardens. Include maintenance staff, decorators, sculptors, supervisors, suppliers, botanists, and geneticists."

Mara entered the new search parameters. "This may take a while," she said when the file appeared. "There are thousands of people here."

Vader moved closer to the screen. "No. I can speed things up considerably. Instruct the computer to display the identification photos of all personnel in the file at a rate of four per second."

Mara did as she was told. Faces began to flash rapidly on the screen. Mara couldn't follow them all--they seemed to blend into one face that constantly changed its features. A minute passed this way, with Vader staring intently at the screen. Suddenly, he reached out with one gloved hand and froze the display on a brutish looking alien janitor. Scrolling back several faces, Vader settled on an older man with a furrowed brow, squinting eyes, and an unfriendly expression. "Is that him?" Mara asked.

"That is the Jedi," Vader said firmly. "He is brazen to hide out in the open like this. He is either a fool, or he has reason to be

confident. Perhaps he is simply overconfident. He would not be the first such Jedi I destroyed."

"This says he's been using the name Vantos Coll," Mara read from the screen. "And...I don't believe it! He's been working at the Palace as a gardener for eleven years! What could he have been doing all that time?" She shook her head. "I've got a bad feeling about this. All right...Here's his place of residence. It's the top floor of a residential complex in grid 265 North, Square 3A. It's a converted greenhouse level. I can call up the plans in a moment...Here. It's a group of penthouse apartments that had a food production facility built around them. It was in service for sixteen years, but then it became private property. This lists the owner as Vantos Coll. That's it. It looks like we've got him."

"Knowing where a Jedi is and having him in your grasp are two very different things," Vader said.

"But we have all the pieces now," insisted Mara. "Think of this as an assassination, but with a capture instead of a kill as the final goal. You've exposed him at the Palace now, so chances are he won't come back here again. He'll go to where he feels the most secure--his home, hoping that his altered identity will throw us off. He can't be sure if we know who he is, or not, so he'll wait this out for a few days, to see what happens. This means he'll be at a known location, at a known time. That's most of what you need to kill someone. We can cut off his escape routes, and take him where he's alone. The only question in my mind is what sort of weapons to use. Usually, instant death is the desired outcome...I'll have to find something creative for an instant capture. I'll check with my contact in the Bounty Hunters Guild. I'll need something swift and sure that can be used at a distance. But for just one old man, it shouldn't be a problem."

Mara hoped she sounded professional. She was in her element now, and she wanted to impress the Dark Lord with her knowledge. Starting to plan the attack restored some measure of her confidence. She believed in herself and in her role as the Emperor's assassin. She eliminated enemies of the Empire, and this Jedi was an ideal example of that. Wiping out their order was one of the Emperor's greatest achievements, but the job wasn't quite finished. It was a great honor for Mara to help complete it. She liked to think she could change history for the better, in a way no army could. Eliminating the last Jedi was a wonderful beginning for her.

"Is that what you think of Ashka Boda?" Vader demanded. "Just one old man? Then there is a lesson for you to learn before you even leave this room. Do not underestimate the power of the Force. That is what we will be facing on this hunt. Your own overconfidence could kill you."

Of course Mara knew about the Force. She was a sensitive herself, able to sense any danger that might come from a Jedi's powers. And with Vader there, even those shouldn't be a threat. The Emperor had taught her that the dark side was stronger, and Vader was very strong in the dark side. "I'm sure you're right," she said diplomatically. "But you'll be

there to make sure that doesn't happen, won't you? I'm in your expert hands, Lord Vader." Mara dared to smile at him.

"Impudent youth," Vader said, clearly frustrated. "Do not assume that just because you are in my hands, I would not let you fall...if necessary. The Emperor knows that sacrifices must sometimes be made. Take care that you do not become one."

The Emperor's Hand swallowed dryly.

\* \* \*

Mara hurried along the secret tunnel running from the Palace to Lord Vader's Castle. It had been a long day of planning and preparation, and the time for their assault on Ashka Boda was at hand. They had studied the layout of the building and the rooftop greenhouse, and Mara had taken the time to outfit herself completely. She was ready for anything.

When she was halfway there, she received a mental message from the Emperor. His face hovered in the air before her, a vision only she could "see". First, she picked up a feeling of reassurance and encouragement from him, then she began to receive his thoughts.

---My dear Mara Jade...I see you have done well in preparing yourself, but the true test lies ahead. You must follow my instructions carefully, as regards Lord Vader. I have much to devote my attention to, so you will be my eyes to watch him closely.

---Watch him, my Emperor? I'm not sure I understand.

---I need you to see that he follows my orders to take Boda alive. I fear that his accustomed level of aggression when dealing with the Jedi will get the better of him. He may, in his zeal, destroy this Jedi outright.

---But why would he disobey you?

---Very well, Mara Jade. You deserve to know the truth. I do not believe this Jedi is truly immortal. Such a thing has never been achieved by any servant of the Force. I believe he once escaped Lord Vader, and that Vader reported him as dead, hoping he would never surface again. Now that he has returned, Lord Vader wishes to correct his mistake and cover his shame. If Boda is dead, he can never tell anyone of how Vader once let him go.

---If he isn't immortal, then why do you want him for questioning?

---Where there is one Jedi still alive, there may be more. I must learn what he knows about other survivors. The security of the Empire depends on it. That is why I have sent you, my servant.

---I see...I will do my best, Emperor.

---I know you will, Emperor's Hand. You will let me know if there are any signs of disobedience. I will be ready to hear you if you call to me. We will speak again soon.

Palpatine's face faded out as he left Mara's mind. She stood alone, frowning. This was just what she did not need. It was already a complicated mission, and now she had to serve as a spy, too. Of course, she was trained for spying, and she had shown some aptitude for it, but this was Darth Vader they were talking about. Mara hoped Vader would behave properly. She didn't know if she could handle another enemy on this trip...especially one so damned powerful.

Vader nodded as Mara Jade strode briskly up to him. She was exactly on time. Checking her over, he saw that she was well equipped for the mission, in her own way. Vader preferred not to carry devices and weapons, save for his lightsaber. His very life was dependent on an internal technology, and to balance this, he avoided external technology whenever possible. Instead, he relied on the Force. Mara Jade, evidently, relied on weapons.

"Well, assassin," he demanded, "what equipment have you deemed necessary?"

Mara posed confidently in her jet black skinsuit, giving him the inventory. "Modified slugthrower with neural inhibitor darts," she began, patting a blaster like weapon in her right leg holster. "Wrist laser gauntlets," she continued, holding up her slim arms. Then she took a large twin barreled rifle from her back. "Prax energy rifle: a rapid fire blaster and a grenade launcher. But instead of grenades, it has electronet canisters." Indicating her equipment belt, she concluded, "One magnaharness, some syntherope, and a medpac. Plus a good old fashioned throwing knife."

"Do you believe your equipment will save you?" Vader asked her.

"I believe in myself," she said seriously. "The rest are just tools of the trade."

Satisfied, Vader gestured for her to follow, and they walked off into Coruscant's underground.

The mid levels of the city's architecture were gloomy and ugly. Decay was evident here, in contrast to the gleaming top world. Exposed supports and enormous pipes dominated the scenery. Vader found the industrial landscape distasteful, but he knew it was attractive when compared to the dark and feral levels deeper down. Looking at the mold, rust, and flickering lights, he wondered about the infrastructure of the planet he would inherit. Perhaps, once the Rebel conflicts died down,

resources could be diverted to improving it. It might even be possible to reclaim much of Coruscant's lower regions.

This was also where the transport and delivery thoroughfares were. Long tubes, tunnels, railways, and pipes moved resources, food, and water to where it was needed in the vast metropolis. It had been Mara's idea to use the produce movers to approach Boda's building in secret, rather than flying in on a conspicuous shuttle. Because Boda's rooftop greenhouse had once been one of the thousands that grew food for Imperial Center, the food transport network was still hooked up to his building. By riding in an empty produce bin, they could pass under the city to the sub levels of Boda's skyscraper. There, they could access the two freight lifts that rose up the sides of the building and provided the only ways in or out of the greenhouse level. A satellite report had revealed someone moving around in the greenhouse, indicating that their quarry was at home.

It was a good plan, and it fit Vader's personal needs as well. Vader now suspected that the real reason for Mara's presence was to watch over him for the Emperor. The fact that there were two lifts would give him an excuse to split up their team, in order to cover both entrances at once. He hoped to temporarily lose Mara Jade, so that he could finish off Boda alone. Perhaps he would claim that Boda jumped from the roof to avoid capture, and without any witnesses, that would be that. The Emperor might suspect the truth, but without proof, Vader would be safe.

The only unknown factor was Boda himself. How had he survived when Vader had stopped his heart, all those years ago? And how could Vader stop it from happening again? And what had Boda been doing for eleven years? It was a disturbing set of questions. Yet, if Vader could simply have Boda dead, the answers could never be found for all he really cared.

The swift ride in the temperature controlled produce bin took Vader and Mara steadily north, giving the girl a chance to check all her weapons carefully. Vader watched her as she verified the charges on her blasters, examined her dart gun and grenade launcher, and adjusted her wrist lasers. He had to admit that despite her youth, she was a formidable figure. If Vader had ever had a daughter, he would have wanted her to be as competent as this girl was.

"The Jedi may have powers you are unprepared for," Vader commented as she finished.

"So you keep saying," Mara replied. "Tell me what to expect, then. We've got time."

"Indeed," Vader said, trying to ignore the automatic and probably unconscious lack of respect the teenager displayed. It would be a pointless waste of time to correct her every time she failed to address him properly. "I can tell you some few things, but only hard experience can teach you the true intricacies of the Force. Although the Jedi limit themselves to the lesser skills of the light side, Ashka Boda may have many ways to defend himself. He could tear that rifle out of your hands at a distance. He may sense your approach and be ready with his lightsaber. With it, he could stop your blaster fire or reflect it back



at you. He could try to touch your mind and manipulate you into making a mistake. Remember, the Jedi have no code against killing in self defense."

Mara thought for a minute, then shrugged. "All right. It sounds like it's crucial that I get the drop on him. That's okay. I'm good at that."

Vader gave her a hard stare. "I will do the fighting where Ashka Boda is concerned," he said. "You will be my back-up. Do not forget who is in command here, Mara Jade."

"I won't forget, Lord Vader," she said with a facial expression that said, how could I possibly forget? Vader ignored that as well.

The produce bin finally stopped in a dusty, unused storage area beneath Boda's skyscraper. Rusting carts sat still on their tracks, and trays rested on unmoving belts. Silence greeted them as they stepped out into the former warehouse level. It was lit only by a set of fading overhead glowstrips, but Vader sensed no one waiting in the semi-darkness.

"Very good," he said. "We are alone here. Your plan was most useful."

"Thank you, Lord Vader," Mara said. "The freight lifts should be accessible from this level. I see one of them over there, I think. The other one will be on the far side of the warehouse."

"I will take this lift," Vader told her. "I will wait exactly fifteen minutes for you to reach the other lift, then we will both go up at the same time. Once we reach the greenhouse level, we will disable the lifts, cutting off Boda's escape. We will each move in from our points of entry until we meet in the middle. I do not want you to underestimate Boda, but my prediction is that he will be hiding from us. I think that there will be little fight in this Jedi. When I first met him, he allowed me to stop his heart without resistance. Then, in the Palace garden yesterday, he ran from me."

"Now you tell me. After all that talk about how dangerous a Jedi can be."

"I do not want you to take anything for granted," Vader insisted. "He will be trapped within that greenhouse. We must assume he will fight, and be ready to defend ourselves."

Mara nodded. "All right. Is there anything else?"

"Remember that I will be doing the fighting, if it comes to that. Once he is defeated, some of your devices may be useful. Now go. I will meet you on the roof level."

Mara trotted off into the gloom, lighting her way with a lamp mounted on her rifle. Vader waited a few minutes, until he could no longer detect her, even with his enhanced senses. Then, long before the promised fifteen minutes had elapsed, he stepped onto the large elevator. Locking off the lift's access to the other floors of the skyscraper, the Dark Lord began his ascent to the roof.

\* \* \*

"The Sssith Lorrred issss coming," said the rustling voice of the Bafforr trees. Boda startled out of his meditation, a tightness in his chest instantly replacing his calm. Vader was on his way. Boda gratefully stroked the smooth pale blue trunks next to him. The many Bafforr trees in the enormous greenhouse were his early warning system. Just below the earth which he had layered deeply on the rooftop, their intertwined roots allowed them to communicate and to assemble a group intelligence. Beneath Boda's hands, the tree trunks hummed. He felt their gift, a soothing mind-touch that swept away his anxiety. Boda rose from his soft, mossy resting place, and breathed deep its sweet smell.

"Thank you," he said to the trees.

Using rustling branches and leaves, squeaking and twisting twigs, and creaking trunks, the trees were able to create an eerie voice to reply. "We ssserve you, Masssterrr.."

Yes, Boda thought, the trees loved him for now. He had been careful not to stain himself in the one way that mattered to them--to become a killer. Sadly, he reflected that once he had destroyed the Palace with Palpatine inside it, the trees would reject him forever. Provided, that is, he still lived, which was all too unlikely.

Now. To his plan of action. Boda placed his hands on the trees and spoke to them. "Where is the Sith Lord?"

"Sssouth lifffft," said the grove.

All right. That meant Boda could still escape via the north lift. He only had to delay Vader for a short time. The plants would help him to do that. Besides being able to tell him what was going on in the huge greenhouse, the trees were also able to pass on Boda's instructions to the animate vines and other defenses. "Have the vines, the fungi, and the flowers work together to stop him from advancing as long as they can," Boda commanded.

"It will be sssso," rustled the trees. This quivering passed from one tree to the next, moving away from Boda into the distance, towards Vader. Boda hated to sacrifice the plants, but he had no choice. He turned without a thought for his possessions in the apartment at the center of the greenhouse, and headed for the north lift. With Vader occupied here for a while, it was time for Boda to go and see Palpatine.

Darth Vader stepped off the roomy lift and emerged into a scene of bizarre wonder. It was as if he had arrived on a lush alien planet. Instead of the duracrete floor he expected, there was an expanse of gently curving earth. Thin blue trees with black leaves grew all over, and a carpet of gray-green moss covered most of the ground. Vader stared at low, flat, meter wide mushrooms, enormous orange flowers, and tough looking vines hanging between the trees. He took a few tentative steps out onto the springy ground, peering out into the greenhouse. There was no sign of Ashka Boda. Vader growled a curse. There were a thousand hiding places here, and a riot of life to confuse his Force senses. Angrily, he turned back, ignited his lightsaber, and slashed the turbolift controls. Then he stalked out into the garden, ready to hack his way to Boda if necessary.

What happened next took him totally by surprise. Several of the trees rustled briskly, although there was no wind. Abruptly, two of the giant mushrooms exploded. The concussion knocked Vader from his feet, and his lightsaber was jarred from his hand. Thick vines began to curl around his limbs of their own accord. Hurriedly, he reached out with the Force to reclaim his saber; it flew to him only to bounce off of the vines that had bunched around his hands. More and more vines reached out of the trees to wrap around his body. With his formidable strength, Vader tried to tear himself free, but the vines simply stretched, giving freely where he heaved. Now they began to drag him along the mossy ground, towards one of the grotesque, giant orange flowers. As he slid closer, the petals opened to reveal a gaping mouth like hole, lined with waving tendrils. Enraged and unable to concentrate, the Sith Lord was pulled up and into the carnivorous plant. With humiliating ease, it took him into its maw and wrapped its petals protectively around its still struggling prize. Vader had been completely engulfed.

Now this is an unwelcome complication, thought Boda as he stood in front of the north lift. It had already begun to rise towards his level before he arrived at it. Someone else was coming. But who? Could it be the Emperor himself? Boda had prepared for just such an eventuality...but no, it couldn't be. There would have been a very large disturbance in the Force, and there was none that he could sense. Boda quickly left the lift and hid behind a large cluster of giant mushrooms to wait.

The lift arrived, and the opening doors revealed a young girl dressed in black, carrying a large rifle. Did Vader have help? As he watched, the girl turned and fired a silent wrist laser beam into the lift controls, obliterating them. Then she moved out into the garden in a low crouch, silent on the soft moss. She quickly found cover and waited, listening. Yes, she was no doubt hunting him. She was an assassin of some kind, despite her youth. Now what was he going to do? Vader was delayed behind him, but Boda knew it was only a delay. Vader would come, and Boda would have to deal with both of them. He began to feel panic at the thought of his decade-long plan failing without even threatening the Emperor.

Then, the idea of threatening the Emperor combined in his mind with the idea of avoiding facing both hunters. Boda clutched at the sweet-smelling moss beneath his knees. Yes...he could still win free of this trap. He had only to defeat the assassin; then, if his understanding of Vader's character was correct, he would be able to leave. If not, this would be the end for him...

Mara Jade crouched, waiting for any sound from the garden. She was reluctant to enter the possibly dangerous environment, despite her agreement to meet Vader in the center. The array of alien plants changed matters, adding to the unknown risks.

Mara considered the situation. Boda was somewhere inside, which meant he was now trapped. Vader was there, too, and he stood a better chance of flushing Boda out. She decided to wait, and act as a backup as instructed. It was unlikely that Boda would be aware of Vader having a partner, so perhaps he would run in her direction, towards the lift.

A tiny noise alerted her to the presence of someone not far away. Her Force senses confirmed it. There was a human nearby, hiding among the plants. It could only be Boda. She gripped the Prax energy rifle, using its telescopic sight to check the Jedi's position. Through a gap in the mushrooms, she spotted a piece of his brown robe. Then she used the scope to look for any sign of Vader. She found nothing. Somehow, this man had eluded Vader...or perhaps he had approached her as the lesser threat. That was his mistake. She was on her own now, and Boda was hers.

Mara began circling through the trees in a wide arc around his position. She stayed low, using the trunks for cover. Then she paused, checking Boda's position again. He hadn't moved. Very good, she thought. We can finish this nice and easy. Just hold still...

She aimed and fired an electronet canister from the grenade launcher. It arced out, trailing a thin control wire. Mara thumbed a switch, and the projectile erupted into a web of sticky fibers covering a two meter spread. Boda spun and moved to the side with more speed than Mara would have thought possible for an old man, but he was still ensnared on half of his body against the mushrooms. The webbing was immediately electrified with a strong current from the guide wire. Boda thrashed about, trying to free himself. The next moment, the mushrooms he was next to exploded violently, startling Mara and hurling Boda and the net in two different directions. Mara dropped the rifle and quickly drew the dart gun from her leg holster. Running at the momentarily stunned Boda, she went to her knee with practiced ease and pumped several darts into his body. Each one contained enough neurotoxin to cause paralysis for ten minutes. Boda jerked at the impacts, tried to rise, and fell face down on the moss. He lay there, unmoving.

Wary of a trick, Mara activated her wrist lasers again, and walked slowly towards the Jedi. Keeping one laser aimed at all times, she removed the magnaharness from her belt and shook it open. The restraint employed micro magnetic fields to lock its bands in place around the captive's arms, hands, legs, and feet. Boda didn't move as she came

closer and closer. Sorry, old man, thought Mara. It's nothing personal. The Emperor wants to see you, and one just doesn't turn down his invitation.

Boda lay still as the assassin approached. The neurotoxin darts had pierced his skin, but he was by no means helpless. Already, he was in touch with the Force, using the power to purge the poison from his body. He could feel the filth leaving him, moment by moment, taking the paralysis with it. The assassin's slow pace served him well; he was almost fully emptied of the toxin by the time she crouched warily over him. She bent to attach some kind of restraint harness to his neck and torso, but Boda had recovered enough mobility to roll away from her, sending the harness flying. His opponent was good--she controlled her surprise. No more than a second later, the hot beam of a wrist laser burned into the ground where he had been and began tracking towards him. However, it was too late for the girl...Boda reached out with the Force and choked her.

Mara felt the invisible fingers of the Force close around her throat. The sensation was full of the distinctive chill ferocity of the dark side. Impossible, she thought through her shock. He's a Jedi. Isn't he? In a few moments, the frighteningly strong, crushing grip combined with her lack of oxygen, and Mara Jade blacked out.

Darth Vader was surrounded by a wet, suffocating blackness. He was held tight by a fleshy yet fibrous womb--the interior of the carnivorous plant. He did not suffocate; as soon as his life support system found itself unable to take in oxygen, it closed its intake valves and turned on his closed system reserves. Vader continued to breath normally as he pushed his rage to the back of his mind. He needed to think clearly in order to escape.

One advantage to his location was that the imprisoning vines had loosened all over him. He could open his hands and begin to move again. He guessed that the vines were being eaten away by the foul liquid that he lay in. Doubtless it was some sort of digestive acid. He was safe in his armor for the moment, but how long would it take for the acid to eat through those portions of his clothing that were not durasteel plated? He did not want to lose the few remaining parts of his body that were human and not machine.

Vader strained with his cyborg limbs, and with a satisfying wet ripping sound, the vines shredded, freeing his arms and legs. In response, the plant cavity fiercely contracted, crushing him back to immobility again. The Dark Lord's anger took control once again. It roared in his mind, and with it flowed the power of the dark side. The Force was with him. No oversized flower was going to withstand the potency of that weapon. Vader imagined what he would do if the plant was a normal flower at his feet; if it offended him, he would rip it from the ground. Size was unimportant to the Force. He gathered his will around the entire monstrosity, and began to raise it up with himself inside.

The great organism shuddered as it rose. The plant was helpless to stop what was happening. The earth in which it was planted was only a few feet deep, so its root system was shallow. Those roots tore up in a shower of soil and moss as the carnivorous creature hung helpless in the air. The violence of its uprooting had mortally wounded it; the flower convulsed and went limp, its underside in tatters.

Finally, it settled back to the ground. Although it was dead, the plant bulged outwards where it lay, until the black, slime coated form of Darth Vader burst forth from the bloated pod behind the collapsed flower. Vader stepped from the corpse and shoved futilely at his soaked, acid burned uniform. With a thought, he summoned his saber from the ground, up into his hand. Its searing red blade stabbed forth, and, still furious, he hacked the remains of the dead flower apart. The light blade hummed and moaned as he moved on to the vines, severing as many as he could find. Many of them withdrew, snake like, to safety among the deeper foliage. With broad, slashing strokes, Vader hewed the nearest blue trees down as well, hearing as he did so an eerie sound of inhuman pain. Finally, he stood in a cleared area, safe from further attacks.

He returned his attention to Ashka Boda and Mara Jade. What had happened to his partner? Vader hoped she was not fighting Boda alone, or worse, being consumed by one of the garden's monstrosities. He felt a sudden concern for her, and he wondered at it. He tried to tell himself that his Master would be displeased at Vader losing his new agent, but a deeper part of him quietly insisted that Vader himself would regret her death. Despite his initial doubts, Vader had seen something of a warrior in Mara Jade. It gave them an unlooked for sense of connection. But there was more to it than that...Vader had realized that they were in the same dangerous position in life. They were both servants of the Emperor, the most difficult Master in the galaxy. The thought gave him a rough sort of empathy for her. Besides, the only one who would really be served by friction between Vader and Mara would be the Emperor. Palpatine wanted all of his servants to be at odds with each other, worrying what each other was up to, so they had no time to plot against him. Perhaps it could benefit Vader, after all, to have an ally where the Emperor was concerned. He would consider it, once Ashka Boda was dealt with. Vader hurried off into the garden after his prey.

Boda wasted no time tightly tying up the assassin with her own syntherope. Leaving her securely bound on a bed of Phelarion moss, he hurried to the environmental control box next to the lift. He swung down the cover and rapidly punched a code into the numeric keypad: 52-5197-7, the override for the heating system in the greenhouse. Then he entered a new temperature command--one very much higher than the normal one. A temperature hot enough to set off the explosive organism growing all over the vast room...Boda's treasured moss.

The gray-green plant was an obscure organism from the outer rim planet Phelarion. Among the various rare and dangerous plants Boda had discovered and cultivated, the moss was the most innocent looking and the most destructive. The reason lay in its biochemistry. In its cells was an

enzyme that could catalyze the breakdown of a complex high-energy molecule in the cytoplasm. The enzyme was only catalytic at highly elevated temperatures, but then the reaction was intensely exothermic.

The whole phenomenon was a part of the plant's reproductive cycle. It multiplied through the distribution of heat resistant spores. An animal would eat some of the moss, and the plant cells would heat up in its stomach. In the resulting explosion, the animal would blow up, scattering spores and other organic material to fertilize the ground nearby. Taken out of the context of its normal reproductive cycle, the moss still exploded when heated too much in the open air. In fact, the blast was even more violent, involving deadly flames as well, and it could set off a chain reaction with any other Phelarion moss nearby.

Boda had discovered the organism through his hiring a pair of interplanetary scouts--they brought him a sample of the moss and the spores from one expedition, and he paid them well for these curiosities. Boda had realized at once that the Phelarion moss represented a weapon that he could hide out in the open...a weapon that could destroy the Emperor and his undeserved palace. For years, he had been cultivating the moss, distributing the spores by hand and making more and more of it. His job as a menial gardener took him all over the gardens of the huge Palace, and he had placed the moss everywhere. The Emperor like having exotic plants around, so it had been easy for Boda to introduce the moss to his supervisors as a new decorative touch. Its sweet smell, softness, and pleasant color made it a natural success for not only the gardens, but also the beautification of the Palace in general. Wherever there was a corner that could use a green touch, the maintenance free moss would appear. After years of this process, the entire Palace was ready to go up in flames. All it needed was a little heat...

The possibility had always existed that Palpatine would somehow discover Boda and come to his greenhouse to destroy him. It was a small possibility, admittedly, but Boda had wanted to be prepared just in case. So, he had blanketed his greenhouse with Phelarion moss and installed a heating system override. Now, his home itself was a bomb, just like the Palace. If the Emperor had ever come there, he would have met the very same death that awaited him at the Palace.

Boda could already feel the air getting hotter. In just ten minutes or so, the entire rooftop would go up in a flaming concussion. He had that long to get away. Darth Vader, however, would soon be upon him. He could feel the Dark Lord coming. Vader would never let him go, unless Boda could convince him that something else was more important...such as the life of this girl. Boda's entire hope now rested on his assessment of the Sith Lord. If, as Boda hoped, Vader was a warrior with honor, he would not pause to duel Boda while the girl, his partner, was in danger of dying. When Vader went to rescue her, Boda would flee, in order to preserve his last chance to destroy the Emperor. If Vader chose to fight him...there was only one outcome then. All three of them would die in the fire. Leaving the girl tied, Boda ran towards the approaching Sith Lord, racing to intercept the man who held all their lives in his black gloved hands.

Vader saw the running form of his quarry approaching him, and he stopped his own advance, his lightsaber ready. The Jedi came around a cluster of the same kind of smooth blue trees Vader had cut down before, and stopped, panting, facing Vader across a clearing.

Vader waved his light blade through the air, and made a summoning gesture to his opponent. "Come to me, Ashka Boda. There is no more running to be done. I do not understand how you still live after our last meeting, but that is not important to me. Once, you asked me to kill you, and to do it quickly. Today, I will give you your wish once again. Defend yourself, or do not. The end will be the same." Vader began advancing on Boda, all his senses focused on the attack.

"Wait!" cried Boda. "You don't understand at all! I'm not Ashka, and I don't want to fight you! Stop--listen to me!"

Vader did not stop, and Boda desperately pulled out his lightsaber, extending the silvery blade. "Don't you want to know what happened to your partner--the girl?" Boda shouted as he backed up. "If you want to save her, there's very little time!"

Vader stopped. "What do you mean?" he demanded in a low voice.

"She's behind me, back at the north lift," Boda explained hurriedly. "There's going to be an explosion. She'll die unless you get her out of there in time. It's either me or her. Why don't you let me go, Vader? My business isn't with you, it's with your Master." Boda held his lightsaber low and non threateningly. "What's it going to be? What's your decision? Whatever it is, you have to decide quickly."

Vader hesitated. Boda was right there in front of him. He could attack, and perhaps kill the Jedi right away. It would be all over, and he would never have to worry whether the man had any secrets or not. But if Mara Jade's life really was in danger...Vader knew that her preventable death would be to his own dishonor. On this mission, she was his responsibility. If she had faced Boda alone and lost, it was the result of his miscalculations. The moment stretched out, as Boda and Vader faced each other in the rising heat.

Mara Jade came back to consciousness and immediately gasped for breath. The air was hot and stifling, and sweat was pouring down her face. She was firmly tied, and alone, she realized. Her equipment had all been removed. Boda was gone, and there was no sign of Vader. Afraid and confused, Mara did the only thing she could think of. She mentally called the Emperor.

Palpatine answered quickly, his expectant face floating in her mind's eye. He accosted her demandingly.

---Well? Have you captured the Jedi? What happened? Where is Lord Vader?



---I'm so sorry, Master. I let you down. I almost had him, but he overcame me and left me tied here. He got away.

The Emperor's irritation came through to her with sickening clarity. His reply was cruelly curt.

---I am disappointed. Lord Vader had best not be taking advantage of your absence...for his sake and yours. I will send someone to assist you in time. We will speak about your performance when I see you in person.

Abruptly, Palpatine's presence left her. Mara put her sweaty face down on the bed of moss, which was no longer soft. It had turned a brittle, ugly brown. It suited her. She did not deserve softness--she had failed in her first mission as Emperor's Hand, and there probably wouldn't be a second one.

Darth Vader made his decision. "Very well, Jedi. You win, this time. But this does not change anything. You are merely postponing your death. I will find you again, and soon."

"I'll probably be dead before we have a chance to meet again," said Boda. "This is the second time you've given me another chance to deal with your Master, and I won't waste it. Good-bye, Sith Lord."

Boda turned and ran off into the garden. Vader let him go, and set out for the north lift.

Drawing energy from the Force, Boda ran at full tilt for the side of the building. His beloved Bafforr trees and other plants seemed to streak past as he raced the clock to safety. Time was as short as his breath. He cursed his aged body--it was so limited! It had never fit him well anyway, like a scarf that was on too tight, or a shirt one size too small. But it was all he had. Panting, he reached the glass wall that surrounded the greenhouse. The panorama of Imperial City was spread out before him, a crowd of skyscrapers and a stream of flying craft above them. The sun was setting, creating a thousand shadows on the architectural landscape beyond the thick glass. Boda lifted his lightsaber, and sliced into the window in front of him. With several wide strokes, he cut out a large hole in the transparent wall, letting in the wind and noise of the endless city.

The Bafforr trees behind him rustled in alarm. "You arrre leaving," they said.

"Yes," Boda replied, not turning around. He couldn't look at them.

"Will you be coming back to usss?" asked the grove, sensing that something was very wrong.

Boda swallowed hard. He was going to miss the trees. They had been his only friends for so many years. "I--no, I won't be coming back. I have to go and destroy that great evil I told you about."

"Yesss. The darrrrk one. What will become of usss?"

"You...you don't have much time. The Sith Lord just couldn't be stopped. In order to save myself, I...I...the Phelarion moss is..."

"We fffeel the heat," the grove said. "And the mosss will brrring ffflamesss."

"I'm sorry," said Boda. "I wish it could have been different. I know you've served me well, for a long time. I have one more thing to ask of you. I need the vines to lower me out the window. There's not much time left...otherwise, I'll die right here."

Boda wondered if the trees he had betrayed would help him. They rustled in response, a vigorous sound made by dozens of them at once. Several of the thick vines snaked out and wrapped around his chest and shoulders. "Good-bye, masssterrr," the trees said. "Live forrrr usss." Then the vines lifted him out the hole he had made and began to lower him gently down the side of the skyscraper.

Boda saw a drop of several hundred stories below him, but the vines did not let him fall. When he had descended five stories, the tough vines reached their limit. Boda took his lightsaber and cut his way into the nearest window. He used his legs to push away from the side of the building, then swung back neatly into the hole he had made. He was in an empty, quiet residence hallway. With another slice of the saber, he severed the vines, and began to run down the hall in search of an elevator.

Vader found Mara Jade right where Boda had promised. She had been tied with syntherope, but seemed otherwise unharmed. As he approached, she looked up, groggily. Vader had noticed the rising heat, but it had not penetrated the temperature-controlled suit he wore. Mara was sweltering. Vader was relieved to see her uninjured, but perversely upset to find no explosives nearby. Had Boda taken him for a fool? Maybe there was no bomb here.

Without warning, the ground around him erupted, blasting stones, tree trunks, and soil into the air. A great wash of flames swept over him as he fell protectively over Mara Jade. The explosions did not stop there--instead, they intensified. All over the garden, a fireball of enormous proportions was building. Debris rained down hard on his armor as Vader scooped up Mara and sprinted for the open lift door. He rushed inside with her and pounded the closure button. The doors hissed shut against a wave of heat and fire, and a sound of thunder that went on and on. As Vader held on to the groaning girl, the lift shook hard. The interior lights were snuffed out, and the lift went into a sudden free fall.

Vader braced himself against the wall as the lift plummeted, experiencing a vivid thought of what the impact more than two hundred floors below would be like. He had to get both of them out of there immediately. Drawing his lightsaber, he reached up to cut a large hole in the roof of the lift, shoving the falling severed section to the floor next to him. Then, getting a tight grip on Mara, he gathered the power of the Force and leaped straight up. His powerful jump took him through the hole, and he landed on the roof of the lift, breaking smoothly into a run as he did so. He crossed the distance to the side of the shaft and jumped up at it. Vader slammed into the shaft wall as the lift continued to fall away. He protected Mara from the impact, taking it all on his prosthetic armored right arm and leg. His bionic hand clamped onto a rung of the shaft's maintenance ladder and refused to let go. When he finally stabilized, he looked down to see the lift disappear into the darkness until it hit bottom with a terrific crash. Distant rumblings sounded from above as well, signaling the end of Boda's rooftop home, and probably a considerable amount of the skyscraper itself.

For a long moment, he hung on the ladder, not moving. He was covered in slime and dirt, his cape had been partly burned, and he was disturbed at the narrow escape. Mara hung in his grasp, moaning in fear. Boda had escaped cleanly, and both of them had barely survived the aftermath. As Jedi hunting missions went, Vader thought ruefully, this one certainly could have gone better.

It did not take long for Vader to climb the ladder to a maintenance access hatch, which opened onto a hallway on the seventy-third floor of the building. The area was clogged with people, but even if they had not recognized the Dark Lord from the HoloNews, they would have cleared space for the imposing figure as he strode down the hall. Mara Jade had been untied, and had come back to herself. She walked briskly in Vader's wake. Taking an elevator (which emptied of people as if by magic), they descended to the fiftieth floor and the main building offices. Citizens continued to stream around them. The building was being evacuated due to the fire and the explosions which had collapsed the top ten floors. The offices were already empty, and Vader went straight to a HoloNet terminal in one of the cubicles.

"What are we doing now?" asked Mara. It was the first thing she had said since Vader had rescued her. She was wracked with shame, but Vader had not criticized her. Instead, he had simply led her along purposefully. In a way, she wanted to be chastised. She had failed her mission. Instead of capturing Boda, he had captured her, and she assumed that this had caused Vader to lose Boda as well.

"Now," he said, "we contact the Emperor. He will need to know what has happened. Then, we must continue searching for Ashka Boda."

"We?" asked Mara. "You mean I'm still a part of the mission? After what happened up there?"

"You may yet be of some use to me," Vader said dryly. "And do not berate yourself too much for what happened. I, too, underestimated Ashka Boda and his defenses. It was my mistake to separate us, not yours. Perhaps together, we might have succeeded."

Mara was stunned at this generosity, but she did not argue with it. "For what it's worth," she said, "you were absolutely right. Boda's Force powers were what caused me to fail. I had him pumped full of neurotoxin, but somehow, he got rid of the poison. Then he choked me with the Force....wait! I had almost forgotten that! He used the dark side--I could feel it! He's no Jedi--he's a dark side adept. We were wrong about him all along."

Vader's posture showed his surprise. "A dark side adept," he said wonderingly. "What does this mean?" Vader paused in thought. "He also told me that it was I who gave him a second chance at life...but he said his name was not Ashka. There is indeed more to this than I have guessed. We must consult with the Emperor at once."

Vader turned to the HoloNet station and, after a moment of examining it, pounded it in frustration. "It is useless. The explosion must have damaged the connection from this building to the network."

"I know another way to contact the Emperor," Mara said hesitantly. She felt gratitude towards Vader for what he had done, and she wanted to turn it into trust between them. She was no longer sure of the truth of what the Emperor had told her about Vader and Boda, but she was sure that Vader was treating her with more respect than Palpatine had. "I'm a strong projecting and receptive telepath...and I'm closely attuned to his mind. I can call him, and he'll hear me, whatever he's doing."

Vader stared at her, considering. Perhaps he was deducing why he had not been told about this before. Mara strongly suspected that there was a deficiency of trust on the parts of both Vader and his Master. Theirs must be a very strange relationship.

"I have received his thoughts at a distance as well," Vader said, "but I am rarely successful in sending my thoughts to him. His mental screens are formidable, and he does not like interruptions. Very well. Contact him, and tell him that Ashka Boda will be coming for him. I will wait in the next room."

Mara nodded as Vader moved away. She realized that he was in fact aware of the undercurrents here; he was preventing the Emperor from sensing him, so that Palpatine would not realize that Mara had revealed her talent. She concentrated on her connection to the Emperor, and soon, his face appeared to her. He was highly agitated.

---Where are you, Mara Jade? I was just told there was an explosion in the building where you were. Where is Ashka Boda, and where is Lord Vader?

---I got away in time, Master. Lord Vader rescued me. But it meant he had to let Boda go, in order to save me. He's...he's nearby, trying to find out what caused the explosion.

Mara glanced at the doorway nervously, hoping her cover story would be believed, but the Emperor wasn't even interested in such details. His anger was plain to Mara. She blanched at the heat of it.

---Curse Lord Vader! He had the Jedi in his hands, and he let him go?

---Yes, but-

---It seems that both of my servants are suffering from incompetence this day! Vader will pay for his foolish choice. Must I capture Boda myself?

---But Emperor...it was to save my life. I would have died...

---Young fool! This matter is more important than you realize. You have no idea what is at stake! A life far more important than yours hangs in the balance!

---Master...Ashka Boda...he...he might be coming to find you. Lord Vader told me-

The Emperor's mood changed like lightning.

---So! The Jedi is going to come to me? Excellent! I wonder what he hopes to accomplish by coming here? If you are correct, then I can deal with him myself. Perhaps your failure will be of no consequence after all. I must prepare a welcome for our fugitive...and so I have no more time for you right now. Return to the Palace with Lord Vader as soon as you can...

With that, he faded out, leaving Mara alone with her crushed feelings. Her Master would have wanted Vader to sacrifice her! What was so important to him about this Boda that he placed so little value on her own life? Slowly, her self-esteem began to bleed out of the ragged hole in her spirit.

Vader walked back in to find her sitting dejectedly in a swivel chair. "Well," demanded the Dark Lord. "What did he tell you?"

"He...he just cut me off. I didn't even have a chance to tell him that Boda is a dark side adept. He was just...furious that we let Boda get away. He thought...he thought you should have let me die instead."

"It is no worse than I expected," Vader said calmly. "The Emperor is not as forgiving as I am. Let him discover Boda's true nature for himself. I plan to follow him to the Palace. Perhaps I will reach him before he gets there. He and I have unfinished business to conclude."

"What does he want with the Emperor?" Mara asked.

"Like many others before him, he plans to put an end to our Master, even if it means dying himself."

"Does he have a chance? Can't we stop him?"

"If Ashka Boda reaches the Emperor, he will find him more than ready. I have little faith in his chances..."

"So what is he," Mara demanded, "a madman? Is he just going to stroll past a legion of guards, hoping to get to the throne room, when Palpatine knows he is coming?"

"He may indeed be mad," said Vader thoughtfully, "but I do not think he is a fool. He dealt with us in his garden with great cunning...and there is the matter of the explosion he caused. Such destruction in the Palace could alter the situation a great deal."

"What was it that exploded?" Mara asked. "Could you tell?"

"It seemed to be the ground itself," Vader said. "Perhaps an organic weapon of some kind, among his exotic plants."

Mara quickly put the pieces together. "He worked in the Palace for eleven years, as a gardener. If he had an organic explosive all that time, he could have put it anywhere. Maybe he plans to use it against the Emperor--it could be why he was so confident."

"Let me try to recall," Vader said. "The Force will enhance my memory. I believe I saw one of the organisms in the greenhouse elsewhere..." He fell silent for almost a minute. "I have it," he said finally. "When we were in the greenhouse, I saw a gray moss all over the ground. The same moss was in the Palace gardens where I saw Ashka Boda. The Ho'Din botanists asked me what it was, but I did not know."

"All right, maybe that is the explosive," said Mara, "but how does he set it off?"

"The most obvious change in the room," observed Vader, "was the increased temperature."

"Right, but how could he apply that much heat to the Palace? It's climate controlled."

"He will have a way," declared Vader. "Our dark Jedi is almost as devious as the Emperor himself. Let us be on our way immediately."

\* \* \*

As the enormous structures of Imperial Center cooled under the darkening sky, Vantos Boda boarded an express travel tube for the Palace.

Behind him was a small pocket of chaos and destruction. A flower of fire had bloomed among the cold steel towers, marking the irrevocable severance of Boda's past. His home of the past decade was gone--all of the trees and plants, his rooms, even the ancient Holocron that had been passed down to him by his Master Dina. He himself had barely escaped the building with his life. The tube car sped on, uncaring, delivering him to all that remained of his life--a short and violent future. It would be a fitting end to his unhappy career as a savior.

Boda's encounter with the young female assassin had left him shaken. To subdue the girl, he had been obligated to use the dark power. It sickened him to partake of the same strength that sustained Palpatine, but he had no choice. The healing peace of the light side was forever lost to him. Boda was not even certain when he it had turned away from him. All along the way he had been sure he was acting for the right reasons, serving the universal good. And he still believed it.

First had come the vision, which had given him his mission as a savior. He had foreseen the awful fate of the galaxy in the hands of the Emperor to come, and he knew that there must have been a purpose in his having had that vision. He had been chosen, chosen to change that future. An ancient passage from the Journal of the Whills had spoken to him when he had consulted that treasured text. The Journal was a huge collection of stories and prophecies, histories, and legends. It contained the words of kings, Jedi, philosophers, and scientists. Before the Empire, the Journal of the Whills never stopped growing. It was added to by the greatest minds of each generation. Now it was just one more book outlawed by the New Order. Vantos had believed the Journal contained everything that was important in the culture of the Old Republic. Somewhere in its pages, he knew, he would find the reason for his being chosen. The passage he had found told him that he was to be a savior in a time of despair--the Son of the Suns. There was very little said about this prophetic figure, but Boda knew it was himself.

There were terrible difficulties in store for the Son of the Suns. Besides the vision of the Emperor, Vantos had also foreseen his fight with his own brother, Ashka. Worse than that, he had hazily foreseen his own death at Ashka's hands. If that happened, Vantos could never alter the future. And so, he had delved deep into the lore of the Jedi for a way to prevent his own death, all in the name of fulfilling his destiny. He had to find a way--otherwise, why had he been shown the vision? Boda began to believe that perhaps it was part of the fate of the Son of the Suns to overcome death itself in order to be the galaxy's savior.

In the depths of the Holocron, Vantos had discovered the secret of lingering after death by using a spirit anchor. A spirit anchor was someone familiar to become attached to, in order to avoid the natural passage into the next realm. It was a power used by a few ancient Jedi to complete their unfinished business before passing on. He hoped against hope that he would not have to use it, but to his dismay, everything had unfolded just as in the vision. As soon as Vantos had tried to change the future by killing the boy, Espaa, his brother Ashka had opposed him. Suddenly, Vantos had found himself acting out the events of his vision. The duel unfolded, and at the end, Vantos died by his brother's sword.

But he was not extinguished. At the moment of his death, he attached his essence to his brother's life, lingering with him, watching him for decades as an invisible energy form.

It had been a prolonged limbo, an unfeeling suspension between physical life and the spiritual oneness with all life that a true Jedi passed into. Then finally, the chance he had waited for had come. Darth Vader came for Ashka. When the Sith Lord stopped Ashka's heart, Vantos' spirit had returned to life by inhabiting the body and restarting the heart. Ashka's troubled soul had departed forever, leaving the body free for the Son of the Suns to take it and make his triumph over death. The key had been another power recorded in the Holocron--the ability to transfer a life from one body to another. It had been presented in the record as an act of questionable morality, but what choice did he have? In combination with the power of taking a spirit anchor, the skill of life transfer had saved him.

Vantos had arisen in his new body, retrieved the Holocron and his lightsaber, and fled Ashka's burning apartment. When he emerged into the world, he found his worst nightmares realized. Just as the vision of his fight with Ashka had come true, so had his vision of the dark Emperor. Vantos had nearly despaired, then. Why show him the future at all, if he couldn't change it? He overcame his severe doubts by convincing himself that he was still chosen, still a savior. He was still meant to destroy the Emperor before he could fulfill all of his evil, such as the building of a machine able to destroy planets. Vantos moved to Coruscant, right to the home of his enemy, and took a job as a humble Palace gardener. While maintaining greenery throughout the immense structure, Vantos had patiently laid his plans. He placed the Phelarion moss wherever he could, and slowly, he made ready the Emperor's doom. But years followed years, and somehow, Boda did not act. He had come to love life, after so many years of being effectively dead. The plants gave him peace, and he became less and less interested in bringing it all to an end.

Only one thing tormented him--the loss of the light side. When Vantos had awakened in his new body, the only part of the Force he could touch was the dark side. Where once serenity had resided in him, a core of anger now burned. He resisted it, using it only when he had to. Boda knew what price the dark side exacted, and he did not want to become ensnared in it beyond hope of redemption. But to achieve victory over Palpatine, Vantos knew he would have to use the dark side...and use it well. He practiced his new powers reluctantly, gaining skill in them year by year.

Vantos smiled sadly as he continued his ride in the tube car. It was so very ironic to him that the Sith Lord had thought he was Ashka. Yes, he outwardly looked like Ashka, but his brother could never have done what Vantos had done. Ashka was too weak. He had died in his weakness, unwilling to go on. It took strength to achieve great things, and Vantos was strong...strong enough to defeat Palpatine now, using the hateful dark powers against him. He would only have to immerse himself in the darkness for a short time, to keep the Emperor occupied until the Palace came crashing down onto both of them. He would give his final



service on behalf of the light, and he knew his reward would be acceptance back into its embrace in the end.

For now, it was time to take the next step. His Phelarion moss needed heat, and there was an excellent source of heat floating serenely in orbit around the planet. Boda peered out the window of the speeding tube car at the starry sky. Up there, unseen, was one of the huge climate control mirrors that focused sunlight on the poles, making them more habitable for humans. It was piloted, Vantos knew, by a low ranking naval trooper who had made an error punishable with the lonely, tedious assignment. The mirror was a kilometers-wide reflector with a very small control station attached. The latter contained a few entertainment systems, an autochef, and a cramped observation bubble for the pilot to squeeze into among the computers. Vantos was expecting the man to be bored, unhappy, and a little tired, thus easily manipulated by the Force.

In preparation for this day, Boda had learned as much about him as he could without arousing suspicion. Ensign Handli was as close to being a failure in the Imperial navy as a man could get without being discharged. The mistakes he made turned out not to be disasters by the slimmest of margins. The Ensign's wealthy uncle, however, had a large influence as a major military supplier based on Coruscant. He had persuaded the Navy to retain the young man, but had not argued when they replied that his nephew would have to "ride the mirrors" for a while. Both parties agreed it was a good discipline for Ensign Handli. What they had really done was to supply Boda with the ideal tool.

Vantos smiled in his cushioned transit seat. He let his mind reach out to the void of space beyond the atmosphere, to find the mind of the foolish young pilot of the mirror station. Handli was there in his claustrophobic chair, staring at the scintillating planet below with eyes glazed over. He concentrated on Handli's thoughts, smoothly taking possession of his will, compelling him to trust what he was going to be told, to believe, and to comply. Then he implanted a series of commands into the Ensign's mind, which would seem like prearranged orders to him. Handli nodded at the viewport, and began to adjust his attitude control rockets, gently tilting the vast reflective surface towards a new set of coordinates. He then keyed new parameters into the focusing controller. As the mirror turned, fiber cables retracted into the control station, pulling the thin, silvery fabric inwards, narrowing the beam of reflected light. Handli was unaware of just how narrowly he was adjusting the beam, blindly programming the mirror to redirect the sun's energy into a tight shaft of baking heat. When the mirror was properly focused and oriented, it was going to aim that shaft right at the Imperial Palace...and all the Phelarion moss in the gardens.

\* \* \*

There were certainly more impressive ways to travel to the Palace, thought Vader, looking doubtfully at the poorly designed interior of the public airbus. The vehicle moved slowly, and it seemed to be designed to

fit in the maximum number of passengers with the minimum of comfort. But it was the only transport that Vader and Mara had been able to appropriate at the scene of the destruction of Boda's home. Vader had claimed the ponderous, graffiti-covered bus in the name of the Emperor, as its driver flew hesitantly up to the stop. Mara had taken the driver's seat, ejecting the rude, scruffy pilot, and Vader had advised all of the passengers to wait for the next airbus. No one had argued. Finally, Mara had flown them out a crowd of medical shuttles, security floaters, and fire fighting platforms, and aimed the bus southwards.

In the distance lay the glowing mountain like Palace. Boda, or whatever his name was, had probably headed in that direction as well. Vader had believed the man when he asserted that his real business was with the Emperor. Palpatine had many enemies...he just did not take many of them seriously. Vader made a point of not underestimating his foes. Boda's strength was in his cleverness, and he had had a very long time to plan. Vader respected the subtlety of Boda's approach even as he disdained the man's apparent cowardice. Boda had run from Vader twice, now, for the purpose of continuing a sneaking, secretive plot. It was unwarriorlike, and unbefitting a former Jedi. Vader intended that he not escape again. The Dark Lord was going to find him, and somehow prevent him from falling into the Emperor's hands...permanently.

There were troubling complications, however, associated with the organic explosive itself. Vader was still unsure how Boda meant to trigger it, assuming it was going to be used at all. Their ideas concerning the alien species of moss and a heat source were only theories. Vader's instincts, however, told him they were correct. His first Master, Obi-Wan, had taught him to rely on those instincts. Right now, they told him that Boda was coward enough to assume he would lose to the Emperor in a direct confrontation.. Furthermore, Boda would feel the need for a huge advantage to offset his weakness, like a massive explosion capable of killing the Emperor. Boda's own words had revealed that he was expecting to die. All the facts fit. The conclusion was that Vader's opponent was suiciding by walking into a death trap...one set to catch the Emperor as well. Vader now had to eliminate Boda, not only before the Emperor could claim him, but also before he did serious damage to the Palace.

How could he stop the explosions from happening? Vader reasoned that the explosives would have to be spread all over the Palace, so they could not be quickly removed if discovered. It seemed the only option was to prevent them from getting hot in the first place. Vader had checked his armor's computer memory after their escape from the greenhouse. The temperature had reached one hundred and twenty one standard degrees at the moment of the explosion. The Palace was indeed climate controlled, and its heating systems would not reach so high a temperature. Vader stared at the distant peak of lights where the Emperor waited. How else could such heat be applied?

Then he saw it. His helmet's light-amplifying visual sensors picked out a hazy column of light rising up at an angle from the Palace itself. The beam was emerging from the upper half of the pyramidal collection of towers. It was hard to notice against the blaze of illumination from the

Palace itself, but it was there, and it was getting brighter. Vader switched to infrared viewing, and confirmed his suspicions. His readouts told him that the heat content of the energy beam was growing as it narrowed. The pace of these changes was quite slow, but measurable. Suddenly, Vader understood that the beam wasn't going up--it was coming down.

"He is using the orbital solar energy transfer satellites to heat up the organic explosives!" Vader said suddenly and loudly.

Mara Jade jerked the controls in surprise and the airbus swerved momentarily. "What?" Mara exclaimed. "He's using what?"

"The orbital mirrors. He is redirecting and focusing solar energy onto the Palace, to create another explosion like the one in the greenhouse," Vader said. "Only this one will no doubt be much larger in scope."

Mara was shocked. "He can do that? But...we can't let the whole Palace be destroyed. That would kill tens of thousands of people!"

"Evidently, Ashka Boda does not care about that," Vader replied. He thought for a moment. "I believe we must separate once again. It is not your place to confront a dark Jedi. I will face him myself."

"Are you going to kill him?" she asked, hesitation in her voice.

By now, both of them knew the reason for the question, and Vader chose his answer carefully. "I will do what is necessary to protect the life of the Emperor," he said.

Mara evidently could find no fault with that. "What do I do?" she asked.

Vader pointed at the night sky above them. "You must take a fighter and destroy the orbital mirror. Perhaps the process can be stopped in time. I presume you know how to pilot a TIE fighter?" Mara nodded. "Good. We will land on the roof of the Imperial Security Operations Building. They will have a fighter available there. Are you authorized to obtain such equipment?"

"It won't be a problem," Mara assured him.

"I will proceed to the Palace, and try to find the dark Jedi. With the Force on our side, we should be victorious. The Emperor placed his trust in us to resolve the problem of Ashka Boda. We will show him that it was not misplaced."

Mara seemed grateful for the vote of confidence. Vader knew she had been out of her league before. Hopefully, she would be successful tonight, and restore the Emperor's faith in her. Aside from the real importance of her task, Vader personally wanted her to succeed. His unaccustomed compassion flowed from his understanding of what it was like to have Palpatine as a Master. Once Vader had overcome his resistance to

her helping him, he had seen some of the bravery and determination that she must have needed to rise as high as she had. He knew Mara's fall would be just as far as her rise, when the Emperor judged her. He didn't want to see her destroyed like that--it would be too graphic a reminder of the abyss he himself hung over.

Soon, Mara landed the airbus on top of the enormous ImpSec building. She leaped out of the pilot seat and ran down the steps to the roof. Vader took her place at the poorly maintained driver's controls, and lifted off again the moment Mara was clear. He could see her out the window being surrounded by security forces, but he knew she would be able to handle herself.

The Sith Lord aimed the sluggish public vehicle at the Imperial Palace, swearing by the Force that when this was all over, he was going to find this particular airbus, and remodel it with his lightsaber. The bus was unimpressed by his threats, and as it crawled towards the Palace, Vader could physically sense the dwindling of precious time.

Mara held herself steady and proud as she faced a stern and haughty Captain of Imperial Security. She was surrounded by stormtroopers, and her ride had just departed. She knew she must look like a mess, with her weapons lost, her hair filthy, and her black skinsuit ragged with tears. But she faced the Captain's sneering disdain, holding on to her dignity as if it were a rope, and she, suspended over a chasm. She was still the Emperor's Hand, at least for now. As yet, there were no real consequences to Palpatine's displeasure with her, and she intended to take full advantage of her position while it lasted.

"What have we here?" asked the Captain of Security in clipped tones. "Were you kicked off of that bus, or is this some sort of prank? Either way, you'll regret your choice of destinations. This is a restricted area, and the penalties for trespass are very harsh indeed."

Mara looked him straight in the eye, her own expression as grave as she could make it. "Don't be mislead by my appearance, Captain. I'm an agent of the Emperor on a vital assignment. I need a fueled TIE fighter released to me at once."

Some of the stormtroopers emitted muffled snickers. The Captain frowned at them, then glared down at Mara. "This is not amusing me. You are in serious trouble here. Now tell me your name and show me some identification at once. I don't have time for this juvenile nonsense."

Mara smiled tightly. "I'll show you some identification. Give me your data pad. Program it to accept the security code for the Emperor's covert agents. And do it quickly. The Emperor will not be pleased if you delay me."

The Captain continued to frown deeply, uncertain now what to make of this. After a few moments, he grumbled in irritation and punched a few commands into his data pad. Reversing it, he handed it to Mara. She took it gracefully, and quickly entered her security code, which identified

her as the Emperor's Hand. The security program confirmed her code, and flashed its acceptance on the small screen. She handed it back to the Captain with a small flourish.

He stared at the readout, then stared at her. Abruptly, his resistance crumbled. "Very well...this seems to be in order...and it instructs me to supply you with whatever you shall require." He stared straight ahead, looking over the young assassin's head to avoid her satisfaction filled face.

"A fueled TIE fighter, as fast as possible," she repeated. "Fully charged weapons, of course."

One of the stormtroopers in the back quietly commented, "She could use some clothing, too..."

"And a vacuum-sealed flight suit," Mara added to the Captain. "In my size." She smiled in the trooper's direction.

The Captain briskly gave the orders, and ImpSec personnel scurried to make her fighter ready. He stayed with Mara while she waited, a grain of suspicion remaining in him. She pretended not to notice as he called up her detailed image on his datapad, and checked her identification numbers against the list of rogue agents. Finally, he sighed. "What is your mission...what did you say your name was?"

"I didn't say," Mara replied. "And my mission is classified. However, I can tell you that you did the right thing here. What I'm doing is very important."

"Yes, well," he said uncomfortably, "it's not the usual kind of occurrence around here, Miss..."

"Just call me the Emperor's Hand," Mara said with a small smile.

\* \* \*

After what felt like a long time to Palpatine, his holocomm received the signal he had been waiting for. He peered eagerly at the image of one of his red armored and robed personal guards. "What is your report?" he asked immediately.

"My Emperor," the guard said, "a man exactly matching the visual data we were given has been seen approaching the Palace. He was observed riding a tube car on line twenty seven. At the fiftieth grid exchange, he boarded a car on the Imperial Palace line. He should arrive in thirty minutes."

"Good," replied Palpatine. "The Jedi is on his way to me, as Vader thought. I wish there to be no impediments to his journey. I am instructing you to have the Grand Corridor cleared. This will provide a

path from the visitor center, through the Grand Corridor, to the assemblage auditorium throne room where I will await him. The Jedi is not to be interfered with, provided he follows that path. From the time he enters the throne room, I will take charge of him. There are to be no interruptions or communications. That is all."

"Your orders are clear," the red guard said. "We hear you, and obey." The transmission terminated, leaving Palpatine to feel pleased at the efficiency of his guards. The officer had not hesitated for a moment at the daunting command to clear the Grand Corridor. It was a huge task, but he had no doubt it would be done before the half hour had elapsed.

The Emperor was also pleased with his upcoming meeting with the mysterious Jedi. He hoped Boda would present a challenge. It had been far too long since he had been given the chance to destroy a Jedi. Thus, he was not overly disturbed that events had unfolded as they had. Yes, it would have been better if Vader could have captured the Jedi for him. But Vader's participation had held the worrisome risk of betrayal. Now, however, the Jedi was going to come directly to him, as if considerate of Palpatine's inability to personally hunt him down. It was going to be a very satisfying night, with a Jedi to vanquish, and the prospect of learning of a way to cheat death itself. It was time to get to the throne room and prepare to meet the immortal man himself. Palpatine felt hungry for it.

\* \* \*

Vantos' tube car finally reached its destination at the Palace Visitor Center. He disembarked with a small crowd of people and walked warily out amongst the news and propaganda screens, the holographic tour advertisements, and the statues of the first leaders of the Empire. Palpatine's statue was among the latter, sculpted in white marble and made to show him as a young man. Boda ignored the automated tourist help stations and headed for the corridor marked: To the Grand Corridor. His eyes shifted nervously as he watched for Palace Guards or stormtroopers to notice and approach him. If he had been reported to the Emperor, then surely his arrest was imminent. At stake was how Vantos would spend the remaining time before his death. Would he be free to try to find the Emperor, or would he be held prisoner by a guard until the explosions started? He wanted to be there with Palpatine when the Palace collapsed, so he could be sure the Emperor died.

Boda kept walking, trying to look inconspicuous among the other tourists. It was not easy; the others all appeared more wealthy than Vantos. The crowd he was following moved onto a transparisteel walkway between two towers of the Palace. Standing in the middle of this bridge, he could look up at the incredible slope of the main body of the Palace. He looked high, past level upon level of blazing lights, to the very top of the pyramid. Up there, open to the sky, was a row of hanging gardens that went all the way around the perimeter. Several levels down was another garden, also extending around all four sides of the Palace. Below

that, another garden, and so on down the outside of the structure. The gardens formed a series of concentric squares when viewed from above. Each one contained generous amounts of Phelarion moss. These outer gardens would be the first to explode. From the gardens inward, Boda had grown his organic weapon on every level, at the bases of statues, around indoor trees, among stones in decorative natural displays, next to flower beds, and on multilevel fountains. In addition, there were hidden quantities of the organism, packed into forgotten storerooms where only Vantos tended them. These deposits formed the basis for a chain reaction of explosions that would occur as the fires spread inwards.

Boda had planned for the destruction to spread downwards as well. One of his commands to the mirror pilot was to move the energy beam down the side of the Palace, detonating more garden levels and setting off more chain reactions. If all went as planned, the Palace was going to fall in on itself like an imploding wedding cake.

Vantos squinted as he stared through the lights of the Palace, looking for the beam of light and heat from the mirror. He couldn't see it, but he knew it was there. It would be narrowed and trained on the top garden levels, providing the heat to initiate the exothermic reaction. Vantos imagined the moss beginning to stiffen and darken to brown, as the heat was concentrated on it.

He suddenly looked around him, and was disconcerted to find the transparent bridge empty except for himself. The other tourists had moved on, and Boda felt vulnerable in his solitude. Uneasy, he hurried along the bridge and down the hall leading to the Grand Corridor itself. As he moved briskly along, he saw no other tourists, nor did he see any Palace staff. His discomfort grew when he realized that he could hear his own footsteps in the silence. The constant background noise of the complex had dwindled away, and he had not noticed it while he daydreamed about the explosives. Gone were the murmuring voices, the intercom calls, and the tramp of feet. A chill settled over Vantos as he walked the last few steps to the entryway to the Grand Corridor.

As he emerged into the vast thoroughfare, his suspicions were realized. The Grand Corridor was empty. It was a trap, set for him by the Emperor. Palpatine was expecting him after all.

Normally, the Grand Corridor should have been teeming with people. The hour of the day was irrelevant. One could find, at any time, info-runners, bureaucrats, advisors, diplomats, ambassadors, droids, administrators, dignitaries, stormtroopers, Royal Guards, and tourists filling the enclosed canyon in the thousands. Now, the kilometers long hall stood vacant. No one moved beneath the uncounted banners representing every world in the Empire. The promenade balcony level was deserted, and the gray granite pillars were the only things standing as far as Vantos could see.

Even so...he could sense life all around him, hidden and silent. The Emperor's Royal Guard, perhaps? Boda hesitated in the doorway. He knew it was a giant snare, but did that matter? He was still going where

he wanted to go. In fact, the Emperor was making it easier for him. Palpatine must want him very badly, Vantos realized. But for what?

Setting his jaw, Vantos stepped out into the corridor and began to walk purposefully along it. His footsteps sent waves of color through the vibration sensitive Ch'hala trees as he went by them, but each tree settled back to inactivity when he was past. Vantos marched towards the main public throne room, where he predicted the Emperor would be. It was a symbol of Palpatine's authority, and it was a main destination from the Grand Corridor. Up on the balconies, he sensed the watchful eyes of hidden guards looking down on him. He suspected they would do nothing, so long as he walked along the intended path, so he took their noninterference for confirmation of his goal. The guards also meant that there would be no retreat; he was in the trap, and so be it. The Emperor did not know that Vantos had set a trap of his own, and by the time he realized it, it would be too late.

After walking for several minutes, Vantos reached the ornate entryway to the assemblage auditorium where the Emperor listened to petitions and made decrees to large seated gatherings. A quick extension of his Force senses told him what he needed to know. The Emperor was there. Boda felt his presence like a bloated black storm cloud gathering in the distance. He winced at the level of power he sensed there. Why could I not have killed you as a child? he lamented to himself.

He knew the throne room was a cavernous auditorium, with the throne on the lowest level, which was reached by descending in a single turbolift. The spectators sat on the various levels of audience decks, which were rows above rows of platforms containing thousands of benches. These decks were entered via a multitude of doorways, according to rank and social status, with the most important people sitting on the lowest levels, closest to the Emperor. Vantos decided to avoid the turbolift, and entered the doorway to the lowest audience deck; he was, he decided, a very important person on this night. After taking the stairs and emerging onto the deck, he paused among the marble benches. About ten meters below him, the Emperor's throne sat at the top of a stepped platform at the far end of the immense room. Behind the throne, a wheel shaped Imperial symbol was carved into the wall. Above the Emperor's seat, a prism poured a rainbow of light down from the ceiling. The throne itself levitated above the dais, and in it was seated the Galactic Emperor.

Palpatine was all robed in black, with a hood that hid his face. His voice emerged from the hood as a sharp near-whisper, but the perfect acoustics of the room carried it clearly all the way to Vantos. "Welcome, Jedi," said the Emperor. "I have been expecting you. We have much to discuss, you and I, concerning your purported immortality."

So, thought Boda, that is why I am so interesting to the Emperor. It is not every Jedi who comes back from the dead.

"I've been looking forward to meeting you also," replied Vantos. "I've waited a very long time for it, in fact. But I should tell you



right now, that I'm not here to talk. I've come to kill you...Espaa Pestage."

Palpatine rose from his throne and partly cast back his hood, his teeth clenched in rage. "How did you learn that name?!" he demanded. The colors of the spectrum played on his pale face and tight fists. He was suddenly off balance, his former confidence marred. No one was supposed to know of his childhood name. The Emperor himself only vaguely remembered his origins, because they meant little to him as the chosen servant of the dark side. His true origin had come at the moment of that choosing. Yet, somehow this Jedi had intimate knowledge of him, and sounded certain of what he knew. Palpatine's didn't even allow his own biological father to be so certain. When, as President of the Republic, Palpatine was approached by the aging Sate Pestage, he had accepted Pestage's offer of service to him. He had never expected anyone to discover his origins, but because Pestage had, it was important to keep him close by. Unexpectedly, the old man had no motivation aside from service, and he eventually became Palpatine's trusted Grand Vizier. But their relationship was never acknowledged. There was no place for it in Palpatine's life. The old man had unobtrusively tried to find proof that Palpatine was his son, but he had failed utterly. The Emperor had buried his past too well.

The intruder seemed calm. "I'll explain it to you, Highness," he said. "We have time."

"You have only as much time as I decide!" snapped the Emperor. "You were a fool to come here. Now your life is in my hands, and I have already personally destroyed a hundred like you."

"Oh, surely not exactly like me, Espaa. I'm not a simple Jedi like they were," replied the intruder slowly. He was keeping his distance at the far side of the room, one level above. Palpatine sensed that the man might be playing for time. He decided to allow that. He wanted to converse with the man for as long as possible. If matters erupted into a fight, the intruder might not survive to be interrogated. Any information he could extract without torture was desirable to the Emperor.

"Then tell me, Ashka Boda," said Palpatine in a low voice, "what kind of Jedi are you?"

"Let's start with my name, Highness. It's not Ashka, it's Vantos. Ashka was my brother."

"And my name, Vantos Boda, is Palpatine. You may call me Master for the time that remains to you."

"I beg to differ, Highness, because I know otherwise. You see, I've come close to destroying you in the past, when you were just a child. Your name was Espaa then, no matter what you changed it to." Vantos strolled closer, moving slowly, keeping a row of solid marble chair backs in front of him. He was peering down at Palpatine. "I also think,

Emperor, that time has not been kind to you. You are a long way from the boy I tried to kill. I wonder if your health is satisfactory?"

Anger boiled up within the Emperor, but he contained it. He refused to be manipulated by this old Jedi. "I can see that your youth is gone too, old man," he said calmly. "And do not take my apparent age for a sign of weakness. It is merely the price I have paid for my power. Against that power, you cannot stand, and your advanced years will merely bring your end more quickly. Now...why don't you come down here, where we can talk more closely. Do not be afraid. I will not destroy you until I have satisfied my curiosity."

"I'm quite content to be up here for now," Vantos said, sitting down on a bench. "But I do want you to know why I am here to kill you. I was chosen by the Force to fulfill a special destiny...to be a savior...to be the Son of the Suns."

"I am sure I have never heard of that title," said Palpatine, "and Lord Vader described you merely as a victim, one he disposed of easily years ago."

"He has me confused with my brother, I think," said Vantos. "I'm not at all sure why," he smiled slyly. "I was always meant for greater things than Ashka. A long time ago, I had a vision that concerned you. Yes, you. I foresaw...all this." Vantos indicated the throne room. "All the evil you've done. I tried to kill you as a child, but I failed. My brother stopped me. He...killed me in cold blood. Otherwise, all this...would never have come to be. No Emperor, no Empire. I would have been the Galaxy's unknown savior. But, thanks to Ashka..."

"Still, I never gave up. I even came back from the dead to keep on trying, because I can still make a difference. I can still be a savior. Today, after all these years, I have another chance to end your evil reign."

Palpatine listened intently, scowling. He was deeply disturbed that this man had come so close to killing him as a child. It disgusted him that he had been so...vulnerable. But that was the past, and right now, he needed Boda's secrets in order to save his own life for the Empire's future.

"You returned from the dead?" prompted Palpatine. "Are you immortal then, as Lord Vader believes?"

"I'm afraid I cannot be of much help to you there," said Vantos. "I only came back once, and it is by no means certain I could do so again. Does the subject interest you...personally?"

The Emperor cursed silently. Vantos was coming too close to understanding too much. The damnable Jedi was too crafty, much more so than Palpatine had expected. Whoever he was, he was also clearly a fool with delusions of grandeur. He was too mysterious as well. Vader had sworn that this man was Ashka Boda, but now the Jedi claimed to be Ashka's unheard-of brother. And did he have the secret of immortality or

not? Palpatine forced himself to reason it out. Perhaps there was a way of taking a new body after one's death. If that was true, then this Vantos might have taken over his own brother's form. The theory explained Lord Vader's assertions, and more--it might offer Palpatine some real hope for his own affliction. However, it was becoming clear that Vantos was not going to divulge anything important voluntarily. It was time to end their conversation, take the Jedi down, and proceed with a more efficient form of questioning.

"It is such a pity, Vantos Boda," he said with mock sadness, "that your life's work has to come to nothing." Palpatine walked steadily closer to the Jedi. His voice was laden with sarcasm. "I have enjoyed our conversation. It is an uncommon pleasure to speak with a Jedi in these times. However..." His withered hands slowly lifted. "This audience is at an end."

Palpatine allowed all his fear for his own mortality and all his anger at this mocking interloper to ignite the power of the dark side within him. The raging energy burst forth from his hands and sprayed out as searing blue-tinged Force Lightning. The surging bolts climbed instantly up to the defenseless Vantos Boda, hungry to rip the life energy from him. What happened next stunned the galactic ruler. Boda spread his arms wide, and seemingly absorbed the Force Lightning. Then he thrust his arms forward and hurled his own stream of writhing energy down at the Emperor. Frozen in surprise, Palpatine almost failed to defend himself. His reflexes saved him, as the power of the Force formed an energy shield to shunt away Boda's attack.

"Dark Jedi!" hissed the Emperor, raging. "A dark side adept! I should have known a Jedi would not approach me like this. But I am deceived no longer! Now you will meet your true Master, old fool!"

Without warning, a severe tremor shook the throne room. A deep rumbling filled the air. As the floor and walls continued to shake, Palpatine fought to keep his footing.

Vantos had ducked out of sight among the benches above, but his voice could still be heard over the muffled booming. "It's the end!" he cried triumphantly. "The end at last, for both of us 'old fools'!" The fallen Jedi laughed coldly, and in that moment, the Emperor realized Vantos Boda was insane.

In one area of the gardens of the Palace summit, directly under the beam of concentrated sunlight, the overheated Phelarion moss exploded with sufficient force to crack the polished stone. The explosion raced around the entire garden, as more and more moss ignited. Those looking at the structure from a distance saw a fireball swell up and engulf the entire peak. Great sections of marble, crystal, and gray-green rock shuddered and fell away from the eruption, cascading like an avalanche into the tapered spires and stylized towers below. As the flames penetrated inwards, more of the organic explosive reached the critical temperature and blew up before it could burn. A deep, rumbling concussion flowed over Imperial Center, as the peak of the Palace was weakened

enough to collapse. The Emperor's observation deck rocked back and forth, then plummeted with the rest of the top few levels into a billowing cloud of fragments and flames.

Imperial citizens died by the thousands in the space of a minute. Entire residential towers were smashed at their bases, and tipped ponderously over to fall down the Palace slope. Advisors and military personnel alike were crushed as ceilings came down, one upon the other, like a collapsing house of cards. Flaming debris dropped into the next several rows of gardens open to the sky, and touched off more explosions. The destruction of the upper levels of the Palace proceeded vigorously, but so far, the great bulk of the complex was untouched. The effects, however, were felt all through the Palace. Walls and floors shook, banners fell, statues tipped over, glass shattered, and all types of administrators and staff scurried bewildered, looking for cover.

Multiple levels below the center of the destruction, The Emperor listened in shock as his world was assaulted. Fine dust fell all around him, as the shaking throne room's roof began to feel the strain. He looked up for Vantos Boda, and saw that the man had vanished or hidden. He hesitated, then decided to be cautious, and started for the turbolift across the floor.

And there was Boda, blocking the way, hands raised aggressively, his face stretched by his bared, clenched teeth.

Palpatine readied himself for a battle, ignoring the explosions and tremors filtering down from above. He opened himself completely to the Force, and it leaped at his call. Relentless and hateful, the power of the dark side was with him. Pulling destructive energy into himself like a black hole, the Emperor advanced on his new enemy.

\* \* \*

Ensign Handli had everything under control. He confidently prepared to shift the mirror's coordinates once again, as ordered. That was when he noticed the TIE fighter. The small Imperial ball-shaped ship with its large flanking solar panels was aimed straight at him, and coming in fast. His scanner readouts showed that its weapons were powered up as well. A sudden fear stabbed at him. What was going on? Was he under attack? What had he done this time, and who had found out about it? In the face of his fear, the lingering traces of Vantos Boda's influence evaporated. It was as if a fog had suddenly lifted from Handli's thoughts. He was suddenly able to think clearly. His eyes fell on the mirror's settings and he was immediately aghast. What had he done, indeed! The focusing apparatus was dialed to an absurdly tight setting. He didn't remember doing it, but he must have. And the coordinates! At that moment, his mirror was sending a baking shaft of energy down to the

Palace itself! People could be getting burned down there, or worse. The Emperor would order his execution! Handli panicked. He had to turn it off immediately. Desperately, he began to press buttons and turn dials, almost at random. He stared wildly out at the approaching TIE fighter. Could it be the Emperor's punishment, so soon?

Handli screamed as the TIE fighter's twin laser guns shot a sudden stream of green bolts at his viewport. The mirror control station exploded around him, and the terrified Ensign's final sight was the beautiful scintillant planet below him, with nothing but open space between them.

Mara Jade watched through the polarized lenses of her black helmet as the mirror control station was vaporized. Now, the mirror could not be turned to do further damage to the Palace. The pilot's death was unfortunate, but Mara had decided that he was either Boda's partner or a tool of Boda's. Either way, he had to die. And she was the Emperor's Hand. A killing in the service of the Emperor was merely her job. Now, Mara had to eliminate the enormous mirror itself. This particular reflector was twelve kilometers in diameter, yet it was made of a silvery fabric only a fraction of a millimeter thick. It dwarfed her tiny fighter as she sped towards it.

Mara's gloved hands tightened on the fire controls as she let loose a series of laser shots at the shining surface. The lasers punched a group of small holes into the fabric, but had no overall effect on the reflective surface. She realized that there simply wasn't time to shoot down the mirror that way. Then Mara glanced out her cockpit window, and her eyes fell on the thin edges of her vertical solar panel wings. Each wing is a little like a dagger, she thought, and the mirror is one huge piece of cloth. Smiling, she realized she could slice it apart.

Responding to her rigid control, the TIE swooped in low over the long flat fabric surface. Another adjustment, and the fighter dropped closer to the silvery sea, causing the leading edges of the solar panels to initiate long, straight, twin tears. The rips lengthened rapidly in the TIE's wake, until Mara reached the edge of the mirror. She quickly reversed course, and commenced making a new set of slices at another angle. As the fabric parted, tension on the support cables was unevenly released, and large sections of the mirror were pulled out of alignment. After a few more passes, the formerly carefully oriented fragile construct was a wreck, its tattered remains unable to focus any sunlight at all.

Mara spun the TIE fighter in a brief victory roll, and dove down towards the atmosphere. Below her was the Palace and her Master. Mara's worried tension returned as she wondered in what shape she would find either of them.

\* \* \*

The Emperor was heady with the power coursing into him. He focused it deep inside, sharpening it against the stone core of his fury. Then he extended his hands like knife blades, and thrust them at Vantos Boda. The telekinetic attack was meant to stab Boda's brain within his skull, incapacitating him in an instant. But Vantos merely stood in place, continuing to block the way to the turbolift. The Emperor's eyes narrowed. It was impossible, unless... His danger sense rang wildly in his mind, warning him of another attack. He pivoted, and caught another shower of dark side energy bolts on his Force shield. Vantos was still up on the audience deck, striking down at him, and the figure blocking Palpatine's way was merely a Force-generated doppleganger, meant to distract him.

After releasing the Force Lightning, Vantos ducked back into hiding among the seats. Palpatine gritted his teeth, his yellow eyes blazing. Boda's foolish game of hiding had become intolerable. All thoughts of leaving vanished, as the Emperor raised his pale hands and rose from the trembling floor. His trailing black robes and sleeves gave him the aspect of a dark angel as he lifted himself ten meters to the audience deck. He landed gently among the polished marble benches and began to look for his enemy.

He was outraged that a darksider would approach him like this. All of the others acknowledged him as their Master, even the Dark Lord of the Sith. It was one thing to have a brave but foolish Jedi after him, and quite another to have an inferior dark side user trying to best him. Among dark side adepts, there was always the potential for battles over supremacy. Palpatine had forbidden them amongst his own students. The penalty for challenging each other or himself was death. This Vantos Boda was apparently ignorant of the natural order. Palpatine would find great satisfaction in teaching it to him.

Beneath the Emperor's outrage, however, lurked a certain uneasiness. Vantos Boda knew of some advanced and potent Force skills. At least one, the ability to absorb Force Lightning, was unknown to Palpatine. Where had Boda learned it? The thought of a more knowledgeable Force user taking his power and his throne from him inspired a wave of unwelcome fear. Could Vantos be more powerful? It was impossible, and yet...

There! A movement among the seats--Boda's hiding place. Palpatine unleashed a storm of Force Lightning at the location. Vantos Boda was driven out and back down the aisle, but once again, he took the energy into himself. How was he doing it, the Emperor wondered, and how much of it can he take?

Another shuddering boom shook the room, causing both men to flinch. Vantos ran up a flight of stairs to the next level, and faced the Emperor below. "The explosions are my doing!" he shouted. "There was always more to my plan than just attacking you one on one. That was too risky! Instead, I'm bringing the whole Palace down on you! I don't expect to get out alive, but I'll be here when you get buried!"

As Vantos gloated, the Emperor wrapped his mind around a huge marble bench. Wanting only to bludgeon the smile from Vantos' face, he raised it from the floor and telekinetically hurled it at his enemy. Vantos seemed to blur for a moment as he enhanced his speed with the Force. The heavy stone bench crashed into the space he had just vacated, shattering other seats and sending stone chips flying. In the confusion of the impact, Vantos ducked out of sight once again.

Palpatine could hear Boda's words coming from an indeterminate location on the second level. Some kind of auditory illusion was involved, making the voice hard to pinpoint. "Highness, there's no use fighting this. The Force itself wants you gone. I was chosen by the Force to do it, that's all. It's time for it to happen, so you can't avoid it. It's your destiny, and mine. I came back from death itself for this. Do you think I would have left you a way out?"

"You took your brother's body, didn't you?" Palpatine shot back. "Is that the behavior of a servant of the light side?"

"So what if I did? He was dead already, so he didn't need it any more. That didn't harm anyone."

By now, the rumbling above them was steady, and getting louder. Palpatine extended his senses outwards to see what was happening, and he was appalled at what he found. The Palace was on fire at it's peak, and the upper floors were collapsing onto one another, driving a shock wave of destruction down towards the throne room.

"Servant of the light side indeed!" Palpatine cried hastily. "You have deceived yourself, Vantos Boda! Do you think I do not understand? The dark side has you! You think you are a savior, but that is only the sense of self-importance that the dark side gives to its servants. You were never able to prevent the future you saw. It all happened just as your vision told you it would. I have seen the same kind of visions, old fool, and I know they rightfully predict my victory! You were never meant to change any of it! The dark side showed you that vision to seduce you, and now it has you, totally!" Palpatine lowered his voice dangerously. "I will give you one chance to keep on living, so listen carefully, Vantos Boda. Serve me, your rightful Master in the dark side, and I will not destroy you. Surrender your knowledge to me, and I will not torture it out of you. Resist me any more, and die."

There was no answer. Palpatine closed his eyes and concentrated. He did not need to see Vantos directly in order to attack him. He thrust out his arms and sent a wide wave of terrific pain rushing in Boda's general direction. Vantos screamed in agony, but didn't emerge. The Emperor was torn with indecision. Should he stay and try to capture Boda alive, or leave the throne room? He was surely in danger if he stayed--the collapse of the room was imminent. But Boda was valuable to him. Palpatine now knew that Boda had the secret of transferring his life essence to a new body. If Boda died, that would be lost. He decided he had to risk it, and attempt to subdue and capture Boda before leaving.

Vantos was sobbing somewhere above him. "Only now do you begin to see yourself," said Palpatine as he walked up the stairs. "You are no savior...you are only a killer." It was clear to him that Boda was nearly defeated, perhaps from the attacks, or perhaps even from the Emperor's cutting words. Good. There was a good deal of both left to give him. Preparing another bolt of Force Lightning, the strongest yet, Palpatine continued his verbal lesson. "Reach out with your senses, murderer. Let the Force be your eyes, servant of the dark side. The Palace you are destroying is full of Imperial citizens who have done you no wrong. They appeared in no prophetic vision, yet they are dying right now by the thousands, at your hands. Come, Vantos Boda. Follow me, now. There is no shame in serving the greatness of the dark side! Only admit what you already are. You cannot say you serve the weakness of the light side--you cannot! Come and kneel before me, and I will remove your pain." The Emperor moved among the high-backed benches, closing in on his crying adversary.

Vantos thought he might be going mad. He sobbed in his confusion, hating the Emperor's words. He was the Son of the Suns! He did not serve the dark side! He was only using the dark powers to accomplish the light side's goals. Surely, when it was done, his spirit would return to the light side's oneness. He would be welcomed back, even in death, to the belonging that he had once felt.

But Palpatine's words raped his convictions. Boda was unable to resist opening the Eyes of the Force to see the Palace above him. The dead were everywhere. Bodies...crushed and mutilated bodies, burned bodies, broken bodies by the thousands. He had never imagined this, never! He had thought the end would come quickly for Palpatine and himself, but he had not reckoned with the sheer size of the Palace. His Phelarian moss was working, but the collapse of the immense structure was taking much longer than he had expected. He and Palpatine were still cursedly alive, and there was time, damnable time, to see the terrible dying of all the other victims of his plan. With the anger of a mob, the victims seemed to tell him the same things the Emperor was saying...Killer! Murderer! Servant of the dark side!

Vantos wailed as he lay where Palpatine's wave of pain had made him fall. He was evil! No...it was impossible! He had been chosen! But his dead brother's words came back to him unbidden..."What if your vision wasn't from the light side? What if the dark side wants you, and the way to claim you is to have you murder this child?" Murder this child. Murder. Murder. Murder! Thousands of murders happening above him. Vantos had become the thing his beloved Bafforr trees would have hated utterly. He was no savior, after all. He was only a killer.

Emperor Palpatine stepped into view next to him. Vantos saw the ruler's black robe and boots through a curtain of tears. He had lost. It didn't matter any more what happened to Palpatine...nothing Vantos did would ever serve the good. He stared at his hands. For years, they had nurtured life in the gardens...for years, they had helped things grow. Now, they were the hands of a common killer.



"I'm going to take you with me now, my servant," the Emperor said quietly. "This will be painful, but that, too, will be an important lesson for you."

Vantos heard the crackle of dark side lightning begin to arc between Palpatine's fingers, but the next moment, a louder sound overwhelmed it. The ceiling of the throne room cracked open from a gigantic impact on the next level up. Great chunks of rock fell everywhere, breaking the marble seats and bouncing down onto the floor of the auditorium. The rainbow-lit throne was covered in rubble and crushed to the ground. Palpatine lifted his arms and released the dreadful lightning he had prepared for Vantos. Writhing electric blue power hammered the falling boulders apart. Many of them exploded into harmless showers of small stones, but the Emperor could not stop all of them. He was beaten to the floor and quickly covered up by the heavy debris. Vantos luckily escaped the worst of it. Several large pieces of the ceiling hit the bench he was cowering next to, tipping it on top of him. Instead of crushing him, the bench back was stopped by the next row of seats, leaving Vantos in a protective stone tent while the wreckage of the ceiling pummeled everything else.

Less than a minute later, it was over. The shaking stopped. The last boulders had fallen. There was silence.

Vantos coughed at the swirling dust and wondered. Something was wrong. The explosions had stopped...but why? The chain reaction should be continuing, as the mirror satellite ignited moss all the way down the side of the Palace. There was enough of it to carry the destruction all the way down through the rest of the Palace below him. He expected to die in the kind of ruin a great earthquake would produce. Instead, the ceiling had come down, and that was all. No fireball racing in from the Grand Corridor. No explosions blasting the floor out from under him. Something had failed! And he was still alive! And the Emperor...

Vantos saw the Emperor's body half buried in the rubble nearby. He was unconscious, but evidently still breathing, still alive! Neither of them had died, while thousands of others had been killed instead! It was horrifying, and intolerable. Vantos choked on the dust as he pulled himself out from beneath the fallen benches. This could not be how it ended. Palpatine could not live on. He looked at his filthy, bleeding hands. All right then...if he was a killer and no more than that, he would go over to that fallen, pinned man and kill.

He clambered over the rocks and hunched over the Emperor. A single thought possessed his mind. I will kill you, kill you with my own hands. Pushing away the black hood, Vantos dug his fingers into the age-ravaged throat. A thrill of horror went through him as he saw the naked head of Palpatine. The bald skin was cracked with seeping fissures that looked like they reached to the bone. Black, worm like objects nestled in the wounds, shadow-fragments of Palpatine's power that stopped the progress of his decay. Boda grimaced, and looked away from them, then forced his attention back to the mechanical process of strangling his prone foe. Die, he thought, die...so that my life can have some small meaning...

Darth Vader entered the ruined throne room while cloaked in Sith magic. He was silent and invisible in the shadows, and it took him only moments to find the room's two other occupants. There was the dark Jedi at last, but the Emperor had fallen before him. It was unthinkable, but there it was in front of him. Boda was trying to choke the Emperor to death--a crude and cowardly method. Vader had been correct about this man. He was killing a helpless opponent, without courage or honor.

For a frozen moment, Darth Vader considered what he would do. Boda would die, that was certain, but what of his Master? Vader had been hoping for the Emperor to die, so that he could take the throne. But the Royal Guards knew Vader was here--he had met them in the Grand Corridor. He had found it difficult to convince them not to follow him into the throne room. The Guards were held back only by Palpatine's direct orders, and they had been on the verge of defying them. If the Emperor died, and Vader failed to stop it, they would accuse him of being an accessory to the murder. Under those circumstances, he would not take the throne without a great deal of opposition. Vader was not well liked in the Empire, and he knew it. The best way to overcome the opposition and take the throne was to have it officially given to him by the dying Emperor himself. And Palpatine would die soon enough, without the secrets held by Boda to help him.

But he would not die today.

Vader stepped out of the shadows, seeming to emerge from thin air. "Boda!" he boomed. "I have come for you!" His black cape billowed out around him as he took four swift steps towards the Emperor's body, activated his crimson lightsaber, and hurled it blazing through the short distance. The lightsaber made a circle of red and white glare as it spun three times through the air. The blade stabbed into Boda's breast, and the man threw up his arms, impaled. He gave a strangled cry as the saber fell downwards, slicing him apart as it dropped to the broken stones. Boda's corpse fell back onto the ruins of a marble bench, as the weapon flew neatly back to Vader's hand. The Dark Lord deactivated it, and clipped it to his belt. For a long moment, Vader stood silent, breathing mechanically. It was over at last.

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The morning light shone through the circular webbed window behind Palpatine's throne in the undamaged audience chamber near the base of the Imperial Palace. Vader and Mara stood in the soft glow, where they had met two nights before, having been summoned before the Emperor. It had been a long night, and both of them had forsaken sleep to remain in the thick of the chaos left by Boda's attack. Vader's armor and cape were still in disarray, and Mara still wore her black flight suit, which was at least two sizes too large.

Fire fighting teams had swarmed over the Palace all night, and now that the sun had risen, towering Construction Droids ponderously removed the rubble. One of the forty story high machines could be seen through the window behind the Emperor, removing and recycling shattered building materials.

Vader decided that his Master looked none the worse for wear, despite all that had happened. Palpatine even seemed to be in a generous mood, which made Vader suspicious. Given that his orders had been disobeyed, his Master could have been angry. Or, given that his life had been saved, perhaps his Master had little choice but to seem grateful. Vader could rarely fathom the Emperor's mercurial temperament.

Vader himself was quite satisfied. He had killed Boda without bringing down the Emperor's wrath, and kept the man's knowledge from being revealed. At least the status quo had been preserved, as well as his chance to inherit the Empire.

"Lord Vader, Mara Jade," the Emperor addressed them. "I have summoned you here to discuss the events surrounding the dark Jedi's attack. I assure you that the damage done to my person was of no consequence...thanks to you, Lord Vader. But what happened to me reflects our lack of knowledge of our opponent. Although he was far from being immortal, he had considerable power. The price of our ignorance has been much destruction and loss of life. And because even I found this foe to be a challenge, I am forgiving you both for your considerable mistakes. See to it that you perform with more competence in the future, however." The Emperor managed a smile. "There, you see Lord Vader? I can be reasonable...from time to time. And who is more deserving of my good graces than the servant who saved my life, and the servant whose actions saved most of my Palace? In the end, you have both served me well."

Vader and Mara bowed to their Emperor. The Dark Lord was relieved at the speech, yet he sensed a certain artificial quality to it. Surely, the Emperor must be experiencing some frustration at having been outmaneuvered by Vader. If so, he was hiding it well.

"Lord Vader," said Palpatine, "I wish you to organize a study of the species of moss that Boda used as an explosive. See to it that we learn where it came from, and whether it can be used as a weapon. Perhaps it can be genetically engineered to be useful to us. After all, we must salvage something from this disaster."

"Yes, my Master."

"And Mara Jade," Palpatine continued, "remain here with me to discuss an additional task I have for you." He turned to Vader. "You may go, Lord Vader."

Vader glanced at Mara. She seemed to be full of pride and satisfaction at receiving the Emperor's thanks. No doubt, being restored to his good graces had been an immense relief to her, as it should have been. Just as Vader's positive and negative actions had balanced out, so had Mara's, saving her career as Vader had hoped. Satisfied that he had

achieved what he wanted with both the Emperor and Mara Jade, the Sith Lord turned and descended the stairs. He walked down the long hall to the turbolift, leaving behind the throne he hoped someday to claim.

When Vader was gone, the Emperor leaned in close to speak with Mara. "I know you are in need of rest, Emperor's Hand, but I require you to return to Vantos Boda's home, and seek out an important object."

"But Master, it was destroyed," said Mara. "Nothing was left."

"The object I have in mind would have been very valuable to Boda, and he would have stored it in a safe place. It is a Jedi artifact, a recording device that would contain certain knowledge...knowledge that would be very useful to me."

"But what makes you think--"

"As I was fighting Vantos Boda, it was clear to me that he had access to a number of lost secrets of Jedi lore. Such secrets are often recorded in ancient devices known as Holocrons. Search the wreckage of his home, and stay in contact with me. Look for a smooth cube or other geometric shape, covered with writing or carvings. If you find such a device, you must bring it to me at once."

"All right," said Mara uncertainly. "I'll see what I can find."

"I have the utmost faith in you, my dear Mara Jade," said Palpatine.

\* \* \*

Three days later, the Emperor smiled triumphantly over his prize, the Jedi Holocron of Ashka and Vantos Boda. Mara Jade had found it in the ruins of Boda's greenhouse, in a force field-protected box. The Holocron was a cube made of precious gems. Ancient writings could be seen on its surface in the right light, and it had a slight glowing blue aura at all times. It felt warm in his hands, and he knew that with a thought, he could bring it to life, summoning the holographic gatekeeper, Bodo Baas. Baas was an interactive teaching entity, able to answer Palpatine's questions about the Jedi lore stored within. Although the holographic alien had amusingly called Palpatine "dark one", the thing had cooperated well enough.

The Holocron contained teachings concerning Life Transfer, the power to move one's spirit into another body. This was surely what Vantos had used to inhabit Ashka's body. Palpatine was further amused that the holographic Jedi Master who imparted this knowledge referred to it in the gravest sense as a power of the dark side. The Emperor had laughed out loud at that.

Palpatine had spent a day studying the new power, until he decided how to use it. Although it could be employed to enter another's body and drive out the consciousness within, he had no desire to take another's body. He wanted his own body, and he wanted it to be young again, and not dying. The key, of course, was to combine the knowledge with the science of cloning. Already, Palpatine had experimented with creating a clone of the former Jedi Master Jorus C'Baath. He had learned that the clone could inherit the same Force sensitivity as the original...but what good was a clone of himself if it was not himself? But now that he could transfer his actual essence into a new body, he could conceivably transfer into one of his own clones. His new body would have the same vast Force sensitivity he had come to depend on, and it would be a chance to recapture his youth and vitality.

For the first time in over a year, Palpatine felt the fear lift from him. He was going to live! He had accomplished what no other dark side adept ever had. He had outsmarted the destructive irony that brought low the dark side's greatest servants. Let the power exact its price! From now on, it would be nothing to pay! He could claim ever greater rewards, while simply using up a series of replaceable physical bodies. It was wonderful to imagine.

The Emperor owed a great debt to Ashka and Vantos Boda. It was a pity he could never thank them. Ashka, especially, had wished him well when Palpatine was only a child. As for Vantos, he had fulfilled his mission from the Force after all, though it had turned out to be serving the dark side by supplying Palpatine with the Holocron. And even if Vantos had felt a certain hostility towards Palpatine's reign, the best revenge was, as always, to live well.

He was going to do so for a long, long time...

\* \* \*

Sate Pestage finally finished meticulously cleaning the dust and broken glass from his austere quarters in the Palace. A housekeeping droid could have done it for him, but he preferred to do it by hand. It gave him something to occupy his thoughts while his Master remained in isolation from him for three days. His only other option was to face the hordes of inquiries regarding the Emperor's health after the Palace explosions, and he just couldn't do that. Beyond issuing a statement that the Emperor was unhurt, there was nothing he could tell them, and their worried questions only made Pestage focus on his own worries.

Pestage had been afraid of losing his Master to an unstoppable physical decline for the past year, and now, to make matters worse, a dark Jedi had struck at Palpatine in the throne room itself. Pestage's spies had ferreted out the name of this Jedi...Ashka Boda. Besides a deep outrage, Pestage also felt a nagging sense of recognition of that name. He finally placed the memory as dating back to the traumatic day when he had lost his son. He had saved the life of an injured Jedi named Ashka

Boda on that same day. Was it really the same man, who now repaid Pestage's kindness with this horrific violence? If so, then Pestage regretted what he had done. He would never have rescued the man, had he known it would someday endanger his Master, his Emperor, his...son. He would have left Boda as broken as the rare vase in his refuse bin.

Pestage realized that Boda's return gave him another piece of evidence that Palpatine was in fact his lost son...but as usual, it was not proof. There was no proof to be had, despite all of Pestage's efforts. But the Grand Vizier refused to let that fact undercut his loyalty to the Master. There was no proof because the Emperor simply did not want Pestage as a father. He wanted him as a Vizier, and that was enough...because Sate Pestage knew the truth in his heart. He would stay by his Master's side however he could, and as long as he could. His greatest fear was that he would live to see his son die before he did.

As Pestage poured glass shards into the waste container, he heard his comm signal beckoning to him. He found it to be a message from the Emperor, a single line of text glowing on the screen. The few words made Pestage's heart beat fast with sudden gratified relief.

They read:

Everything is going to be all right, old friend.

Pestage understood what they meant. The Emperor was going to live, and Pestage was going to stay by his side for the rest of his life. Pestage's eventual death would separate them someday, but part of him would live on in his Master. Exhaling a great tension that had held him for three days, Pestage fell back onto his bed, arms outstretched, a large smile on his wrinkled face.

\* \* \*

Vader turned from his worktable where he was adjusting his lightsaber, at the hesitant knock on his door.

"Come in," he said, already aware of who it was. The door swung open, and Mara Jade entered the small room. She was wearing some kind of formal gown, the color of her eyes. It made her look older, which was probably the intended effect. She had come, perhaps, from an Imperial function where her youthful beauty would be on display. It was part of her cover, Vader knew, to be seen as one of the Emperor's female trinkets, rather than as an assassin and spy. Mara shifted nervously in the fancy dress, trying to find the words to begin.

"You wished to see me, Mara Jade," Vader prompted.

"Yes...I realized I never thanked you for saving my life."

"It was my duty," Vader replied with a slightly impatient tone. "Nothing more."

"But it meant a lot to me, obviously...and I took it as a sign that you cared about my well being, and my future. So I came here to ask you if...whether I can continue to learn from you."

Vader's reply was curt. "The answer is no, assassin. We were instructed to work together, but that assignment is now over. We each have our separate jobs to do for our Master. And I have no time to entertain a student."

"Entertain!" Mara said, hurt. "You still think of me as a child, don't you? I thought I earned your respect while we were after Boda."

"You have my respect. Mara Jade. What you do not want is my wrath. Never forget what I can do to those who displease me...Emperor or no Emperor. Let Boda be your reminder. Right now, it displeases me to repeat myself. I work alone, and I take no apprentices. Is that clear?"

Mara stiffened. "It's clear, my Lord. I'll be going, now. I'm sorry to have disturbed you." She turned, and walked out of the chamber, not bothering to shut the door.

Blast Vader, Mara thought as she left. Treating me like I'm so far beneath him now. The encounter had soured her satisfaction at having been a heroine a few days ago. She had been a fool to march into Vader's Castle like that, expecting so much. Still, she regretted that he would never be her teacher. There was something almost noble about him, that she wanted to understand better. And she had seen the value of having an ally where the Emperor was concerned. What she had learned about her Master was all unpleasant. He was an unpredictable and dangerous man to work for, as Vader seemed to know well already. Mara knew that she and Vader were both Palpatine's tools. Separate, they were weaker than they might have been together. She saw Vader, and recognized the bitter chains of his long servitude. She wondered, then, what her own service would lead her to. Would she be haunted with regrets, as Vader was? Mara prayed she wouldn't. The path ahead of her was a long and dangerous one, and regrets would only weigh her down.

Darth Vader gripped his lightsaber as he watched Mara Jade leave. The weapon was one he had constructed at the beginning of his service to the Emperor. Mara was in that position now, but Vader knew he really could not help her. Despite Vader's honest respect for the young assassin, he was a loner with his own agenda, and she was his Master's tool who told Palpatine everything. He could never trust her not to compromise his plans. He regretted the necessities that kept him alone and unable to admit anyone else into his dangerous game of ambition, but he had no choice.

For now, Vader still had his goals intact. He was no closer to gaining the throne, but with Palpatine dying, and Boda dead, at least he was not forever prevented from it. However frustrating, the status quo was better than failure. The Dark Lord of the Sith held on to his fragile hopes, and tried to put Mara Jade out of his mind.

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