

The Emperor Eclipsed

By Brendon Wahlberg (

Third in a series of stories about the Emperor during the film trilogy
(episodes 4-6) see also A New Enemy (1) and The Hand Of Fate (2)

The Emperor's Grand Vizier, Sate Pestage, knew his master was dead before anyone else in the palace. The message he found waiting for him on his secure holonet terminal left no doubt in his mind. Once he had decrypted it, using codes known only to the Emperor and himself, Pestage knew the Empire had lost its dark center. Like the gigantic black hole at the center of the galaxy, Palpatine had been the hub around which every destiny in the Empire revolved. Now, without him, the Empire would spin out of control, heading for disaster. Pestage should have been filled with despair. He had found his life's meaning in his service to the Emperor. Without that purpose, the emptiness would surely swallow him. But the Grand Vizier could afford neither despair nor oblivion. It was entrusted to him to turn defeat into victory, to salvage order out of chaos, to restore hope. Palpatine, his Emperor, was depending on him. Pestage reviewed the contents of the message once more, as puzzled by its cryptic lines as ever. My old friend, the fact that you are reading this means that the worst has come to pass. I have reached the nexus I feared, and have not survived. But you must not surrender. If ever you have been my servant, you must serve me now. You must bring Mara Jade to the Citadel on Byss. No one, not even Jade, must know the reason for the journey, but if you succeed, I will be restored. The Empire is in your hands.

With one bony finger, Pestage touched the erase key. He knew that no one else must see the message. Bad times were coming. Now, a power vacuum existed, and someone would rush to fill it. No one had the right to the throne except his master. Not even Pestage himself could claim it. But those who would steal the throne would also kill to hold it, and that meant Pestage's life was in danger. Doubly so, if the usurpers knew of this message. Not that Pestage understood it. Palpatine was dead, somewhere near Endor. He had gone to face Skywalker, and that had led to the ultimate ruin. He had taken a clone with him, but evidently, that had not availed him. Pestage knew enough about the Emperor's cloning-based immortality to see that there was no salvation for his master, so far away from Byss. Without proximity to a clone, Palpatine was surely lost. Yet, he would trust that somehow, appearances were deceiving, and that there was hope. He would trust in his master, and he would trust in the Force. Suddenly, Pestage felt very old, very alone, and quite overwhelmed. He regarded his own frail frame. "It isn't fair," he muttered. "These weak bones cannot bear such a great burden. I must restore you, when you were all that kept me going... what have you done? You've staked all on an old man, whose only strength is his love for you. Well it may not be enough. But I...I will die trying to save you, if need be. There is no other way for me." Pestage hung his head. Now, he must deliver the terrible news of the Emperor's fall to Ars Dangor. He did not look forward to that duty in the slightest. Dangor was not a man who took bad news well.

* * *

The Emperor's Hand, Mara Jade, was the second person in the palace to know that Palpatine was dead, and the only one to see him die. She was standing alone in vast and ancient Manarai hall, in front of a huge window that displayed the breathtaking panorama of the distant Manarai Mountains. She could look down on the sprawling Imperial City that filled the valley, ocean like, its metallic waves braking against

the severe rock of the faraway peaks. The city heaved with activity, but high above, Mara had sought out this serene and empty place for her much needed meditation. She had been tormented by anxiety and guilt for days. She was afraid that something terrible was going to happen, and most of all, she felt that it would happen because her last mission had failed. Mara had been summoned into her master's presence just weeks ago, by a mental command. She had made her way to his private chambers. She knew that every courtier who saw her pass by, saw her beauty and concluded that she was Palpatine's pleasure toy. That misconception, that underestimation, suited her just fine. It made her job that much easier. For Mara Jade was in reality the Emperor's Hand, a special operative who took care of the tasks that couldn't be handled by a legion of stormtroopers. She was an assassin and a spy, a versatile extension of Palpatine's will. He had trained her in the dark side of the Force personally, and she could hear his mental commands from anywhere in the galaxy. That last ability made her very special to the Emperor, for she often ventured into places where communication was impossible, to work his will with an immediacy and an effectiveness that was impossible for other operatives to achieve. When she reached Palpatine's rooms, Mara slipped inside with a slight swaying of her graceful hips, for the benefit of an advisor who was waiting at the Emperor's door. She saw a

spark of outrage in the advisor's eyes, that he should wait even longer while the Emperor dallied, and then she was inside. Palpatine's rooms were sparsely decorated, and despite being well lit,

had a sense of shadowiness to them. "Come, Mara Jade," said Palpatine

from a side chamber. She found him in a tiny gallery of Jedi artifacts

and lightsabers, each one representing a vanquished foe. "I have a mission for you, one well suited to your talents." She stood very close to him, and he placed a fatherly hand on her red-gold hair. In a sense, he was her father. Mara's parents had died when she was very young, and she remembered very little of them. Palpatine had brought her to Coruscant, and she had grown up there, thinking of the Emperor as her father figure, despite their infrequent contact. When she came of age, he had revealed his special plans for her, and she had been overjoyed. Ever since then, it had been her pride to serve as his agent, rooting out his evil enemies and bringing an end to their schemes. And now, here was another chance to do just that. "What do you need me to do?" she asked eagerly. "I have told you of my visions

concerning the Jedi, Skywalker," He replied quietly. "You know that I will face him, and that there is some...uncertainty surrounding the outcome. I fear that the Force itself conspires against me. But you and I, my dear Mara Jade, you and I will cheat fate. We will deny destiny. I have intelligence that Skywalker is going to Tatooine to rescue his friend, the Correllian, from the local Hutt crime lord. You

will take full advantage of this knowledge, and find him on Tatooine. There you will see that our young Jedi meets a premature death." He smiled at her warmly, conspiratorially. "I leave the details to your capable mind." Mara Jade was filled with feelings of determination, pride, and anger towards Skywalker. Anger that such a young terrorist could give the slightest vexation to her beloved

Emperor, let alone threaten him. "As you command," she said with conviction, "so shall it be done." Mara had traveled to that forsaken dustball and infiltrated the grotesque slug's "palace" as a dancer. How it had disgusted her to perform for that drooling monstrosity! But apparently her lithe figure and shining hair had delighted the Hutt from the moment he saw her. It was degrading, but it was a good cover. She had waited, biding her time among the sick menagerie that thronged the Hutt's fortress. Then, finally, a few days later, Skywalker had shown up, walking into the palace with arrogant self-confidence. And Mara had been asleep! A long day of dancing had exhausted her, and by the time she woke up, the Jedi had already killed Jabba's rancor and earned the Hutt's personal hatred. Skywalker was to be executed at something called the Pit of Carkoon. Suddenly everything was spinning out of control. She didn't trust the bloated Hutt to be able to overcome the Jedi. She was in a panic that unless she came along to make sure Skywalker died, somehow he would escape. Anyone who could elude Darth Vader should have little trouble with a Hutt. Skywalker had some clever plan, she was sure of it. So she had asked to go with Jabba on the sail barge. And her cover identity had backfired on her. Jabba had become very "attached" to her, and wanted her safe in his chambers when he returned from his little excursion. The Pit of Carkoon was no place for a dancer, it was too dangerous. She had begged him, telling him she didn't want to be away from him for that long, but he had been adamant. She had even tried to use her Force skills on him, to no avail. And so, the sail barge and its prisoners had left without her. A day later, Bib Fortuna had made his way back to the palace, the only survivor of what was to him an astonishing debacle. Jabba was dead, Boba Fett as well, and the Jedi had escaped. Mara had been consumed by a helpless rage. Fortuna, already busy with his bid to take over the organization, did not even notice when she left. She returned to Coruscant in disgrace, but she was the only one who knew it. The Emperor had already left to go to Endor, where he planned to trap the Rebel fleet. He had not even contacted her, or acknowledged the failure of her mission. He had been forced to go and face his fears and it was her fault. Worry and a sense of doom hovered around her for several days until she finally came to the ancient hall to practice the meditation skills that Palpatine had taught her, to try to find some escape from her deep unease. She reached out to her master, calmly and carefully, but his mind was closed to her. She could not sense him. Then, just as she was settling into a meditative state, letting the Force flow through her, a vision of Palpatine hit her like a silent explosion. Her eyes jerked open, but the view of the distant mountain range was utterly blotted out by larger than life figures that floated before her; they seemed more real than the room she was in. The Jedi, Skywalker, and the Sith Lord, Darth Vader, were standing in front of a seated Palpatine. Behind her master, a circular window looked out on the stars. A moment later, she saw Skywalker gesture commandingly at Vader, and they both moved together to attack Palpatine with their lightsabers. To slaughter him. She saw his face between their grim forms as they closed the gap. He was looking directly at her. Such a sense of betrayal was in his yellow eyes - she gasped at his look of rage and terror. In his last seconds, a crystal clear message came through to her, so strong she could have sworn he was there in the room with her. "YOU WILL KILL LUKE SKYWALKER!" It was his last command. Vader and Skywalker cut him down without mercy, and the vision ended. Mara Jade crumpled to the floor, unconscious.

* * *

Emperor Palpatine knew he wasn't dead, but then, he wasn't exactly alive, either. As the Death Star began to erupt, he reached out through the Force to find Mara Jade's mind. It was his only choice, given the pressing need for a swift escape. Finding it, he had established a special link between them, through which he could use her as a "spirit anchor". A moment later, the stormtroopers and officers around him screamed in final terror as simultaneously, a fireball devoured the air in the corridor and the floor vanished, opening a gate to an inferno. Palpatine's pain was all-consuming, but

very brief. His clone body was vaporized. He felt his consciousness stretch out, impossibly thin, bridging the gap from Endor to Coruscant. With a violent snap, he hurtled into the mind of Mara Jade. He huddled around the Force-sensitive node in her brain, trying to regain coherence of perception; the brief journey had been enough to leave him severely disoriented. For an eternal moment, he had been exposed to the dark side's chaotic force of dissolution. If it had been able to claim him, he would have been swallowed into its madness for eternity. But now, Mara Jade's living, organized mind provided him

with a shield against that chaos. He was safe. But something had happened that he hadn't expected. Most of his dark power had been stripped from him and left behind in space near Endor. Mara Jade's mind simply could not contain it. Additionally, his state was nothing like what he had expected from his studies on spirit anchors. It was different on the dark side, he now learned. He wasn't entirely within the Force while retaining his individuality. This was more like a kind

of possession. Worse, it was a kind of imprisonment. Palpatine was a guest who couldn't survive leaving. And so, diminished, shorn of his form and power, and almost defeated, the former master of the dark side of the Force clung to Mara Jade's mind as he slowly came back to himself. His main goal now was his restoration. He had not panicked at the end, that was critical. Instead, he had sent a message to Sate Pestage, which would hopefully convince the Grand Vizier to bring Jade

to Byss. There he could leave Jade's mind and reenter one of his clone

bodies. Even as he had made the transition into her mind, he had created a false vision of his death for her, calculated to make her blame Skywalker for his murder. Palpatine still wanted revenge, and he

still felt Mara Jade was best suited to carry it out. But she must have the complete conviction that the boy must die. From his position within her mind, Palpatine would do his best to encourage that belief. Skywalker had an unfortunate talent for making allies out of his enemies, and that must not happen with Mara. Even though he had lost, the game was not over. The Emperor's power was merely eclipsed for a time, and before long, he vowed, his name would once again inspire fear throughout the galaxy.

* * *

Still dwelling on his feelings of inadequacy, Sate Pestage knocked softly at the door of the Emperor's chief advisor, Ars Dangor. He had walked slowly through the ornate halls of the palace, staring disconsolately at what he perceived as a terrible emptiness. The advisors and government officials he passed knew nothing of the disaster that had occurred. They went on about their business in blissful ignorance, and the vast body of the Empire continued to lumber along, not realizing that it had been decapitated. The news sat

like a hot stone in Pestage's gut. He had to share it or it would sear

his innards. The first person who had to be told was Dangor, who took

care of so many of the day-to-day details of running the Empire.

After

Palpatine and Pestage himself, Dangor had the most power in the government. He would know what to do to prevent a panic. All too soon, news from the surviving military elements at Endor and from the Alliance forces would pour in. The government on Coruscant had to be prepared lest the blow shatter it. The door opened, and for an irrational moment, Pestage thought he saw Palpatine, miraculously returned from the dead, standing there cloaked in a black robe with a deep hood. But young hands reached up to pull the hood back, revealing

the face of Ars Dangor. Unlike the other advisors, Dangor dressed in a

manner similar to Palpatine. Not catching Pestage's disorientation, Dangor smoothly asked, "To what do I owe the honor of your presence, Grand Vizier?" Recovering, Pestage replied, "Chief Advisor Dangor, I need to speak with you privately, about a very grave matter. May I come in?" "Enter," said Dangor, and stood aside, beckoning with his robed arms. Pestage entered a suite of rooms that, unsurprisingly, mimicked the asceticism of the late Emperor. He faced Dangor, uncertain of how to begin. How to put such a calamity into words? Dangor waited patiently, and after a few moments, Pestage said the only thing he could. "Palpatine is dead, and we must prevent the Empire from collapsing." Dangor stared at him, speechless. Long moments passed. The chief advisor looked stricken, but his thoughts were racing. Palpatine - you fool! Curse you and your reckless obsessions! Skywalker. Endor. We are lost, unless... "He died at Endor?" Dangor demanded. "He was killed by Skywalker? No - it doesn't matter how. He is dead... I warned him not to pursue this course. I warned him. He put himself at risk in an unfinished battle station, just to capture a boy! We should have finished the Death Star and wiped out the rebellion planet by planet. This didn't need to happen...He didn't need to die..." Dangor turned away, trembling in his robes. "I never really thought he would die, you know. Even when he became old, he was somehow able to regenerate, to reclaim his youth. I thought I would be able to serve him for the rest of my life - longer, if he shared his secrets with me...I would have been content." Chief Advisor, Sate Pestage urged, "The reason I came to you first-" "Yes, Sate Pestage. The Empire must not fall." Dangor began speaking rapidly. "You were right to say that. It needs an Emperor. A strong person must be placed on the throne as soon as possible, someone whom the people know and respect. We must convene an

emergency meeting of the advisors, the Moffs, and COMPNOR, to deal with the crisis of leadership. Fear not, Sate Pestage, we will come through this with the Empire intact. I shall see to it immediately. We

will have to contain the information flowing in from Endor, and assemble as much of the fleet as we can here at Coruscant. CompForce must discourage any potentially treasonous acts by those who would take advantage of the situation for their own advancement. There is a great deal to do. And so, Grand Vizier, we must both keep our hopes intact even as we struggle with our despair. Go in peace." And before Pestage knew it, he had been ushered out into the hall. What had really happened in there? He had expected some sort of outburst from Dangor - the man was infamous for them. Instead, he had seemed grief-stricken. But, he had spoken like someone who had guessed what was going to happen, and who was somehow prepared. I warned him not to

pursue this course. What was Dangor up to, to send Pestage away so quickly? Something about Dangor's little speech was nagging at the Grand Vizier. Dangor had seemed too ready to deal with the news, and if that was true, then...a strong person must be placed on the throne...I would have been content...Of course. It was clear to Pestage. Dangor planned to be the new Emperor himself. Pestage

hurried back to his quarters, his thought in turmoil. Dangor as Emperor! He could not allow it to happen. But did he have any power to prevent it? And would he be placing his life in danger if he tried? Dangor had a well-earned reputation for dealing ruthlessly with his enemies. Right now, Pestage's life was not his own. His master depended on him for his very survival. When he reached his rooms, he sat down at his private terminal. Palpatine kept records of everything, and Pestage was Steward of the Emperor's personal archive. Documentation of his most secret communications was contained therein. There was a great deal of information that could aid Ars Dangor immeasurably in his bid for power, and so he must not have it. Pestage keyed in a long and elaborate code that permanently closed the archives. Now, no one could have access to the Emperor's secrets. Only Palpatine knew the code required to reopen them. Pestage sat back and breathed slowly, trying to calm down. He simply had not expected this, but in retrospect, it was predictable. Well, there was little he could do about it for the present, so he had best turn his efforts towards finding Mara Jade. Where would a secret assassin, known to no one, be in the event of her master's death? Pestage hoped desperately that she had not learned of the events at Endor and left Coruscant for good.

* * *

Even as Sate Pestage wondered where Mara Jade might be, she was secure in a hospital bed in the Old Republic Hospital not far from the palace. She had been found unconscious in Manarai Hall, with dangerously low brain activity. She had been brought to the Hospital for treatment, and now she was recovering in a private room, the danger past. Fast asleep, she shifted, tossed and turned, clutching at the blankets and mumbling. "Skywalker...you killed him...kill...kill you..." Deep inside her mind, Palpatine was fashioning nightmares for her.

Mara could see the throne room on the Death Star, but the only clearly visible areas were the throne and the steps before it. The far walls were lost in the mist, and the window behind the throne looked out on absolute blackness. The throne was facing away from her, and she could see a dark figure standing behind it in the shadows, a barely visible silhouette against the window. She was aware of a low hum, then the dark figure raised a lightsaber, illuminating its face. It was Skywalker, and his face was a mask of sadistic pleasure. He put a bloody hand on the throne and slowly rotated it to face Mara. She felt a stab of ice in her vitals as she saw the occupant of the chair. It was Palpatine. Skywalker had dissected him. Atop a burnt stack of his limbs sat his head, severed and facing directly at her. An odd grouping of lightsaber wounds marred his face like a charcoal sketch. She could almost see a pattern in them. Then Skywalker spoke, showing his enjoyment by indicating the body parts with a flourish. "Amazing the things you can do with a lightsaber," he said. Then he pointed to a large black heap at the mist's edge. "That's Vader, or it was. We attacked the Emperor together. He couldn't defend against both of us at the same time, so he struck down the greater threat. Poor Vader. He wanted to share ruling the Empire so much. He never knew that I used him, that all I wanted was for the Empire to

fall. I thought this would be a fitting tribute for him, though." Skywalker indicated the burn marks on Palpatine's face. Suddenly Mara could see how the burns resembled the lines of Vader's breath mask, and she cried out in anger. Palpatine's dead, staring eyes held her own, seeming to accuse her. I will never rest until he is dead, they seemed to say. With one swift step, she seemed to close the distance to Skywalker's side in an instant. He froze in surprise, as if seeing her for the first time. She lashed out with her hand at his throat, bringing him to his knees, choking. Mara calmly picked up his fallen lightsaber and activated it. "You killed him, Skywalker," she said grimly. "Now I'll kill you." His left hand was the first thing to go.

In her hospital bed, Mara Jade's tormented expression smoothed out and shifted to a small tight smile.

* * *

When Mara Jade awoke, she had a splitting headache. She didn't dare to sit up, but she turned to face the Emdee droid that stood by her bedside. "Just relax, Mara Jade," the droid soothed. "You were found unconscious in Manarai Hall, in the old section of the palace. You almost slipped into a coma, but you seem to have recovered from your trauma. I can find no further signs of trouble. When you feel up to it, you may leave. I do suggest you seek out the advice of a specialist. We could not discover the reason for your trauma, and it may recur. And now, citizen, I have other patients to attend to. I wish you well." The droid glided away. "Thank you," she called after it. Mara lay still, thinking about her situation. She could still vividly recall her vision, and fragments of nightmares flitted through her memory. They had all been of killing Skywalker. He wasn't dead though. Not yet. She knew she had to do something about that, but right now, she was in no shape to do anything. Her master was dead. And what was she now? Where could she go? No one knew her, no one knew what she did. No one knew of the power she had possessed; they all saw her as the Emperor's lovely companion. In a twinkling, she had lost everything. Maybe the only meaning left to her was to fulfill Palpatine's last directive, to kill Skywalker. Well, she would try, but she had to be realistic. He would be no easy target, and it might take her years to find him. She might as well leave Coruscant, even though she had no idea where she might go. But first, she would get rid of her headache. She began to try to channel the Force to ease her pain, and was astonished to discover she couldn't sense the Force at all. The walls of her tiny room seemed like true boundaries. She couldn't sense anyone or anything beyond them. It was like losing a basic sense like eyesight or hearing. Enhanced perceptions she had come to take for granted were completely gone. Now Mara Jade began to despair. She felt awful. Palpatine was dead, and now she had lost the Force, too. Had her abilities all depended on his being alive, somehow? She felt violated, robbed. The Emperor's greatest gift to her had been torn from her. Without the Force, how could she ever hope to defeat, let alone find, a Jedi? She brooded for a long time, and finally decided that she would indeed leave Coruscant. Perhaps that would stop her nightmares of the Emperor's death. She would take one thing with her that the Emperor had owned. In his chambers was the lightsaber that had belonged to Skywalker's mentor, Kenobi. She would go claim it and make her way to the starport. With that weapon, Skywalker's death would be that much more satisfying.

* * *

Sate Pestage was just finishing instructing a team of ISB agents to track down Mara Jade and bring her to him, when he received a summons and a notification from Ars Dangor that the advisors, the Moffs, and COMPNOR's select committee would be assembled within two hours. Pestage knew it was necessary to organize their response to the fiasco at Endor, but he would just as soon not be directly involved. Evidently, Ars Dangor felt differently. If Dangor was going to announce his candidacy for leadership, he would want Sate Pestage's vote of approval in front of the other advisors. Well, he wasn't going to get it. The Empire could survive without an emperor until the true Emperor was restored. Pestage would attend as required of him, but he was anxious to get back to the task of locating Mara Jade. He chose his most somber looking garment, one with only a few jewels along the hem, and began to get ready. Hopefully, the ISB agents would be successful while he was occupied.

* * *

Mara Jade fumed as she waited in Ars Dangor's office, under guard by a CompForce soldier. She had left the hospital, finally, but before she could reach Palpatine's suite, she had been cornered by this oafish trooper. "Excuse me," he had said, halting her and consulting a datapad. "You are Mara Jade, is that correct?" She had seen no point in denying it. "Yes, what is it?" she had snapped. "I have orders to escort you to the office of Chief Imperial Advisor Dangor for a private meeting. If you would please come with me?" She had complied, not wanting to make a scene, and ended up here, sitting in Dangor's office for the past hour. She turned once more to the guard, who was without doubt a poor conversationalist. "What is this all about?" she asked for the fourth time. "Where is the Chief Advisor?" "I've told you, I don't have that information. The Chief Advisor will be here to see you shortly." He stared at the far wall, saying nothing else. Mara tried to bore a hole in his head with her eyes, but instead, she felt as if she were the one with the hole. Her headache had not relented, but she had grown somewhat used to it. A few minutes later, Dangor arrived, wearing that black robe similar to Palpatine's. She regarded him with respect but not awe. "Mara Jade, my dear, I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, but this is a very busy day. Thank you guard, you may leave." Once the guard was gone, Dangor motioned for her to take a more comfortable seat on a small couch. "What's this all about?" she asked, sitting. "All right then, we'll get directly to the point." Dangor stood in front of her. "I'm going to tell you something that only a few hundred people know at this moment. The news will reach the whole planet within another day, but hopefully we'll be ready for that. You see, our great Emperor has fallen. He is dead in battle with the rebel alliance. Someone needs to take his place, and I feel that person should be me -" Dangor looked at her in concern. "Are you unwell?" Mara had been reacting with convincing surprise at the news of Palpatine's death, but when Dangor had mentioned his being the new Emperor, her headache had intensified severely. She had grimaced

and put her hands to her temples. "Yes, I'm all right, just a headache
I've been having. Really. Please, go on...so, my Lord is dead?" Mara fought back the pain and put on a solemn expression. "Yes, well," continued Dangor, "the Emperor would certainly want his throne to pass
to one he trusted as much as myself, who was so much like him, and who
he had groomed for power for so many years. If I am chosen, and the throne becomes mine, I want you to know that you will not have to leave. I know how you served Palpatine, and I would like to retain you
in that capacity." Mara looked at him in surprise. How did he know about the Emperor's Hand? "You are quite a prize," Dangor went on. "Very lovely indeed. I can see why Palpatine enjoyed you so much, and indeed, I have admired your beauty for a long time. With great power comes great loneliness, and someone like you would be wonderful for helping me to avoid that." Mara was at a loss for words. Her mouth
opened, then closed, her eyes wide. "You don't need to decide at this
moment, my dear," Dangor said, "but you would be wise to say yes. Hard
times are on the horizon, and I can give you protection and wealth. Think about it. I shall see you in a few hours. Until then, Mara Jade." Dangor gave a little bow, smiling, then called for a guard. "Please escort this woman to my quarters and keep her there to await my return. Mara Jade, I have business to attend to, but I look forward to the pleasure of your company." He left her with the guard, who motioned for her to precede him. As she walked to Dangor's rooms, Mara's Jade's head was spinning. Her headache was terrible, and Dangor's conception of her was suddenly degrading and humiliating to her, despite all that she had done to contribute to it. She wanted to get out of the palace, to slip away unnoticed with Kenobi's lightsaber. For now, she would have to play along with Dangor's conceited game. It couldn't be any worse than dancing for the Hutt
had
been. The guard let her into Dangor's chambers, then closed the door,
no doubt stationing himself outside. He was a CompForce trooper, fanatically loyal to the New Order. His kind always overdid everything. Mara stared at the sparse furnishings and austere decor. It was a cheap imitation of Palpatine's rooms, she realized. Palpatine had tolerated Dangor's imitation, valuing him for his competence and loyalty, but he had never really thought of the Chief Advisor as being very intelligent. Mara knew that her master would never have given so much power to anyone with the ability to ever be his rival. She had no doubt that, if he were alive, he would be fairly angry that Dangor even thought he was fit to rule. Mara's headache worsened, and she groaned a little. She noticed the computer terminal in one corner, and, one hand held to her head, she sat down at it. One thing was for sure, she wasn't just going to sit in here doing nothing. She would see exactly what the Chief Advisor was up to.
Mara accessed the palace security cameras, using the access codes taught to her by Palpatine. She scanned through several dozen scenes before one arrested her gaze, a huge hall full of people. It was the central Hall of Address, where Ars Dangor traditionally delivered speeches on behalf of Palpatine to be broadcast to the galaxy over the
holonet. She recognized the uniforms of the COMPNOR leadership, the militaristic ranks of the Moffs, and the riot of multicultural fashions worn by the hundreds of Imperial advisors. An empty podium faced these rows upon rows of the Empire's elite. Something major was in store; no doubt she was about to see Dangor's bid for power. The crowd continued to murmur with anxiety. She could pick out several

discussions focused on the rumors of the Emperor's death. Then a hush fell over the assembly. Dangor entered, his resemblance to Palpatine rather eerie under the circumstances. He seemed to be using it to his full advantage; he moved like Palpatine and kept his hood over his face. When he reached the podium, he waited for total silence. He pulled back his hood, and his gaze touched each of the major groups present. When he spoke, it was with the practiced, ringing tones he had perfected in countless addresses in this hall. "Honorable Moff, the Select Committee, the Advisors of the Imperium, and the Emperor's Grand Vizier, welcome." Now, Mara Jade noticed Sate Pestage seated near the podium, looking uncomfortable. "This is a day of great sorrow. What you have heard is true. Our Emperor is lost to us. The Empire is bereft of its guide and master. Emperor Palpatine created this mighty galactic government. He built it, he shaped it, he brought

it to a level of power and glory that rivals even the Old Republic of legend. Palpatine truly was the Empire. With his great leadership, he forged an awesome future for all of us. But that future is now in question. "Today, we must ask ourselves, can the Empire that Palpatine created live on without him? Can a new Emperor take up his mantle and lead us onward? Many of you will think, no, he can never be

replaced. He should never have needed to be replaced. He was eternal. Well I tell you, no one of us is eternal. This day was inevitable. Nature dictated it. Some of you may believe that the cursed rebel alliance greatly hastened the coming of this day, that by

their treacherous murder of Palpatine, they stole from the Emperor and from us many decades of his wise rule. I am here to reveal to you that

his rule was neither wise nor apt to last. "This is the Emperor as you knew him." Dangor produced a hologram of Palpatine as a commanding, middle-aged man, no longer young but still strong. "This is the Emperor as he really was." The holo was replaced by a very recent image of the Emperor. He was, of course, terribly aged, his flesh deeply ravaged by the toll the dark side had taken on him. Most

of those present had never seen him like this. Exclamations of shock and disgust filled the hall. Even those who knew joined in the outrage, for now, their fear of the Emperor was gone. It took quite a while for order to be restored. But eventually, the huge crowd turned to Dangor for an explanation of this revelation. "He lied to you all about his age and his health," Dangor's voice boomed. "He had one foot

in the grave already when he died, but he never told you. He wanted his power to be absolute up to the end. But the end...the end was something he brought on himself! "He was obsessed with the rebel alliance. Despite the fact that they could never have defeated the Empire on their own, he was consumed with the desire to wipe them out completely. He created an elaborate trap to lure them to their final destruction at Endor. He also hoped to kill the famed rebel, Luke Skywalker, another of his obsessions. But Palpatine was the architect of his own failure. He placed himself at risk on board an unfinished battle station. His only protection was a defense shield, and reports from Endor tell us that the rebels easily destroyed that. He was destroyed along with all those on the Death Star, once his inherently suicidal plan reached its fruition. The Imperial fleet was crippled, and Lord Vader has died as well." Mara noticed several people looking relieved at that news. "Did Palpatine know he was going to die? Did he want to take his Empire with him? Did he mean for us all to go down

as well? Did he gamble so outrageously because he knew he was going to

lose it all anyway?" Dangor paused to let all of this sink in. Mara saw that Sate Pestage was ashen faced at what Dangor was doing. It

was

all a lie, but it was infinitely more believable than the truth. Palpatine had created a lie himself, to screen his true nature from the galaxy. Dangor was taking brilliant advantage of that. Now Dangor spoke into the complete silence. "There is a question we have not yet asked. What of an heir? Is there an heir to the Empire? A son or daughter to inherit his power? Even a chosen successor, designated by Palpatine to take over when he was gone? Was there even a procedure set up for choosing a successor? The answer is no! There is no heir! No one to be the successor! Or, if there is, the information is sealed in the Emperor's Personal Archive. I have tried to look there. It would be of utmost importance to me to see Palpatine's designated heir placed on the throne according to his wishes. But the archive has been permanently closed! The information in it, which alone could tell us who Palpatine might have envisioned as his heir, is denied to us. We can only conclude that there was never meant to be

an heir. Palpatine meant for the Empire to die when he did. "And who

among us, since Palpatine is dead, has closed the Archive? Who is assisting the dead, deceitful ruler in dealing this comprehensive death blow to the Empire? It is none other than Palpatine's Grand Vizier, Sate Pestage! The man who saw Palpatine as he really was, and helped to keep his secret. Who filled the senile Emperor's ears with encouragement for his fatal obsessions and support for his ruinous policies! Who even now sits guilty among us, ready to finish the job that Palpatine started, to see that the Empire completes the fall to its doom!" Mara looked on with horror. Dangor was totally in command of the assembly. And the old man whom he somehow saw as a rival for the throne was helpless before his poisonous assault. "Sate Pestage, as Grand Vizier to the fallen Emperor, you are accused of treason to the Empire. You used your position of intimacy with the Emperor to shield him from any views that may have dissuaded him from his path to

destruction. The advice of Palpatine's advisors, such as myself, fell on deaf ears because you deafened them, because you kept our voices from being heard." And here Mara Jade saw the emotions of the crowd shift firmly against Sate Pestage. It was a masterstroke by Dangor, for in truth, many of those gathered hated Pestage for that very reason. Whenever any of them were commanded to contact Palpatine, or desired to speak with him, they often had to wait for hours, on bended

knee. And the only face they saw, the only voice they heard during those humiliating vigils was that of Sate Pestage. Pestage, who passed

on his master's wishes to them, and who guarded his master's time by deciding who would gain his ear and who would not, became the natural focus for the hate born of that humiliation. The advisors, the Moffs,

and the COMPNOR officials could all share in the feeling evoked by Dangor. And, truth be told, their shock at seeing Palpatine so old still coursed through them, and they focused their distaste for that vision of decrepit weakness upon the similarly aged form of Sate Pestage. Angry mutterings began to sound out everywhere, and Dangor allowed them to grow. Then he turned on Sate Pestage and channeled the

accusation of the assembly at him. "Do you have anything to say in your defense? You have been accused of treason, and the penalty is death." Pestage slowly stood. Mara marveled at his dignity and bearing as he faced Dangor. He must have seen how he was being set up,

how he was being eliminated as the one person who might have claimed executive power in Dangor's place. But he didn't show any signs of anger on his suddenly serene face. Pestage spoke softly, so that most of the audience couldn't hear it. The security microphones picked up his words, however, and Mara heard him say to Dangor, "You have

betrayed our master. One day, you will pay for your crimes. I will not deny your accusations, for I did indeed seal the Archive. The master's secrets are not for such as you to know. Nor will I accept death at your hands. I choose exile from Imperial space, as is my undeniable right under law. I shall never return to your Empire." Then, Pestage walked out of the great auditorium, although as he reached the door, he was joined by CompForce soldiers who took his arms. He did not resist. Dangor was disoriented. His "script" for the proceedings was disrupted. He watched Pestage go with troubled eyes. Then he seemed to come back to himself. He faced the gathering once more. "The traitor has admitted his acts with his own voice. He has chosen exile from the Empire, never to return." Voices of protest rose up to him. Chief among them was the loud cry of Tarn Gemillian, the advisor from Mandalore. He clearly wanted Pestage to face execution, and he was trying to rally others to press the issue. But Dangor could not allow distractions from his main purpose. Those who wanted an execution would have to be satisfied with an exile. "No! Listen to me - it is his right under the law. That will be enough justice. Let us give no further thought to him. Now we must turn our minds to the future! Despite the worst Palpatine and his Vizier were able to do, we still have a chance to preserve the Empire. We need a new leader - a strong leader who can run the Empire well - who is known and respected - a leader who can be trusted not to hide in the shadows in this time of crisis. There is no heir! One among us must be chosen. The time for that choice is now." Dangor waited. All depended on the next few moments. He had revealed the truth to them, alerted them to danger, rooted out a traitor from their midst, and stood before them like a vision of the Emperor they had thought they knew, and had believed in. Would they accept him as Palpatine's replacement? Then, several of the advisors stood, and one of them called out, "Will you lead us, Ars Dangor?" Dangor still said nothing. Several more advisors rose. They began to call to him, "Dangor, you must lead us! You are the only choice!" The advisors were the easy part. He already led them. But then the Moffs and the Grand Moffs began to stand. Perhaps they realized that if one of them were to try to claim power, the others would fight him for it, no matter who he was. They added their voices to a growing chant, "Dangor! Dangor! Dangor!" The number of standing people steadily increased. Then, even the COMPNOR officials stood. Their loyalty was, after all, to the New Order, and they would go along with any means of preserving it. Before long, the entire gathering of several thousand people was standing and chanting. It was deafening. Mara was stunned. And then the chant became, "Emperor Dangor! The Emperor!" Dangor gave a deep bow, and Mara felt such a black anger build up inside her mind that she lurched away from the screen and fell to her knees. A violent surge of hatred coursed through her, blotting out any rational thought. She stiffened, and finally all thought left her as her consciousness went spiraling down into blackness.

* * *

Ars Dangor, the new Emperor, left the Hall of Address and hurried back to his quarters. He was heady with excitement. The throne was his! The adulation of the people would be directed at him alone! Of course, he also knew he would have to face the harsh realities of the crisis, but why shouldn't he be allowed a moment of triumph? For years he had run the day-to-day business of the Empire. Now he had the true power

that went with that responsibility. He had earned this. Dangor reached his quarters, and the guard by the door bowed to him. Now why was there a guard - ? Oh yes. Mara Jade was inside waiting for him. What a perfect way to celebrate his victory. She would certainly be his now that he actually was Emperor. Dangor licked his lips in anticipation as he dismissed the guard and opened the ornate door. "Mara Jade," he called, "I've come for you, as you knew I would."

* * *

Mara Jade was inside the new Emperor's chambers, but she was not seeing them as they really were. All around her were Palpatine's things, and they were all spattered with his blood. Cradled in her arms was her beloved master, dead in a pool of his own vital fluids. Palpatine's wounds were horrible. They had been made with a lightsaber, that was clear, but they were designed to make his death a slow one. Indeed, she had found him while he was still breathing. "Mara Jade," he had whispered in his agony, "It was the Jedi, Skywalker. It was Skywalker." He had coughed up a great deal of blood, and even more had spilled from the terrible open wound in his stomach. He was so very old and frail, so weak and helpless. He had managed to tell her of how Skywalker had found him weaponless, how the rebel had toyed with him, cutting him first on the leg, then the chest, stalking him around the room as he bled in his terror. The final cut had left him to die slowly. He had finally died in Mara's arms. Suddenly the door opened. Someone was invading Palpatine's rooms. A robed figure stepped in. It was the Jedi, Skywalker. "Mara Jade, I've come for you, as you knew I would," he said. He walked over to her. "I am Emperor now. I have taken the throne." He smiled. "Now it's your turn." Mara leaped to her feet. She snarled at the arrogant Jedi, so secure in his ability to kill her as well. That wasn't going to happen. She had no weapons, but her bare hands would suffice. She lunged for Skywalker, catching him by the throat before he could bring out his lightsaber. He looked just like he had in Jabba's palace, but now his boyish looks were suffused with shock and fear. Her hands were still covered with Palpatine's blood as she pressed her fingers deeply into his flesh. Skywalker choked, struggled, pleaded in gasps. "-no-ah-ah-wha-you-do-ss-sss-sto-" But Mara used all her skills as an assassin, countering his struggles and pressing home the death he deserved. "You killed the Emperor," she hissed into his face. "You've earned this, Skywalker!" The Jedi had begun to turn purple. He barely managed to rasp, "-y-you-m-make-m-mis-take-ah-", and then he had no more breath left for words. Then a strange look came over Mara Jade's face, and she suddenly grinned wickedly. Her voice deepened and became more sibilant as she bore down mercilessly, finally, upon Skywalker. "Oh no, Ars Dangor, you will find that it is you who are mistaken, about a great many things." At last, the man in Mara Jade's iron grasp died, his throat crushed. He sprawled at her feet. Mara Jade staggered back and turned to the body of her master. "I have avenged you," she said, and then she stared in surprise as the corpse and all the bloodstains dispersed like smoke. She spun to look at Skywalker's corpse, certain that she was in another nightmare, but it hadn't vanished. It had changed. Now she saw

the dead, bulging eyes of Ars Dangor staring at her. She had just murdered the new Emperor. Mara checked his body to make sure he was dead, and to dispel any doubt that it was an illusion. She felt dizzy. What was happening to her? Normally, she was able to adapt to swiftly changing situations, but this was too much. Her headache still

tormented her, she was unsure of what was real, and now, she realized, she was in a world of trouble. The entire crime must have been recorded by palace security cameras. Palpatine monitored all the rooms

of his advisors. Even now, security might be on its way to take her into custody, or even kill her on sight. She had to flee. She forced herself to take stock of her options. One thing was certain, she needed to leave Coruscant. After that, it was possible that she would be hunted, so she would have to change her identity and go into hiding. Her first task was to get out of the palace and find a ship to

steal or stow away on. That would be facilitated by her knowledge of the secret passages of the palace, and of the security systems. She could come and go like a ghost, and they would never suspect her of being able to do so. She decided she would take two things with her. One was Kenobi's lightsaber. The other was going to be tricky, but she felt she owed it to Palpatine. She was going to free Sate Pestage from his undeserved imprisonment and see that he got to go anywhere in the galaxy that he wanted to. He had served Palpatine faithfully to the end, and it was justice that he not be mistreated and exiled, without honor, to Wild Space. Now that Dangor was dead, Pestage might not even get the privilege of exile; in the chaos about to descend, he would probably become just another casualty. Mara tapped into the palace security systems through Dangor's computer, and

disabled the cameras on all nine floors of the advisors' wing. Swiftly, she left Dangor's quarters and hurried towards Palpatine's rooms. >From there, she would have access to the secret ways. Behind

her, the body of Ars Dangor lay very still, his hot stare definitely beginning to cool.

* * *

Sate Pestage shifted uncomfortably on the hard slab that was the only furniture in his cell. He regarded the bars that imprisoned him. Beyond their super dense material was a sterile, empty corridor. He had had no visitors since he was deposited roughly here by the CompForce troopers. The former Grand Vizier was alone with his dismal outlook. The thing that tortured him the most was how he had failed Palpatine. His master had placed his only chance for restoration in his hands, and what had he done? He had failed to find Mara Jade and he had underestimated Ars Dangor. Now there was a new Emperor, he was sure, and he, Sate Pestage, had only avoided execution by choosing exile. Exile would take him to Wild Space, where he wouldn't survive long. He would be as far from Byss as it was possible to be and remain

in the galaxy. He would never see Palpatine again. Now, for the first

time since he had received the Emperor's final message, Sate Pestage felt despair. Even when he had known Palpatine was dead, he had not given in to despair, for he had to believe in the crazy hope that his master could be restored. He had clung to that, avoiding facing reality. But events had defeated him. Now, that cruel reality was his only companion. Sate Pestage was alone in the universe. Twice before,

he had felt thus bereft, but those times had been many years in the past. He had lost his beloved wife in childbirth. Even today, as he thought of her, he still felt a pang from the loss of his Gemsaa, so

long ago. His son, his only child from her, sadly had not reminded him of her. Gemsaa had been so full of light. Her powers in the Force as a healer had been widely known and revered. But her son, Espaa, had been more at home in the shadows. He had been a serious child, who shunned other children and seldom laughed. Even so, Pestage had loved Espaa, for the child was all that was left of his bright Gemsaa. One day, even that was taken from him; he was bereft a second time when strangers had arrived at his home to ask that his son be given to them. They identified themselves only as the Sith, a name that had meant nothing to him. He had refused, and despite that refusal, they had taken Espaa, stealing the boy in the night. And Pestage had been alone in the universe. What did it matter to him, that the strangers had spoken of his son's "destiny"? He had known only his loss. He could not quite recall what had kept him going during those bleak years. He wished he could remember, for he needed that something now. He did remember what had brought him back to life. He had found Palpatine, and found his life's work in the service of his awesome master. It was the meaning of his existence. A meaning that was now gone. Bootsteps in the hall intruded upon his misery. A group of four CompForce troopers marched into view, followed by a man dressed flamboyantly in metallic blue. It was Tarn Gemillian. Sate Pestage didn't get up. Gemillian looked scornfully at him. "So, Grand Vizier. I see that your fortunes have fallen somewhat of late," Gemillian gloated. "You will no doubt be able to recall a certain day, several years ago, when you disgraced me in front of the Emperor. I told you that someday our positions would be reversed. I told you that someday, you would pay. You probably didn't ever think that day would come to pass. But the late Ars Dangor has given me that gift, and so here we are." Gemillian smiled meanly. "Grand Vizier, your expression betrays you, even as you sit in silence. You didn't know Ars Dangor was dead." Gemillian shrugged his shoulders. "The new Emperor's reign was a short one indeed! A young woman named Mara Jade strangled him in his own room. She is being hunted, of course, and she'll be executed, but the damage is done. Dangor was the only chance we had to fend off riots and destruction here in the city. There will be many dead before the morning comes. I don't think you had anything to do with that. But there is still the old score that I have to settle with you. Who will notice one more death, especially that of an old man, and a traitor to boot?" Gemillian stepped close to the bars and looked straight into Pestage's eyes. "Have you nothing to say? Nothing? Well then. This is goodbye. You may have thought you were clever, choosing exile, but I cannot allow that. So sorry, old man. "Guards. As soon as I am gone, kill him." Gemillian gave a small bow, and strutted out of sight. Still Sate Pestage did not stand, or even turn away. He had accepted his own death already. There was nothing left in life for him. He looked steadily at the troopers, as they fingered their blasters. Suddenly there was an electric hum, and a bright blue bar of light flashed among the soldiers. They screamed and fell, revealing a young woman with red-gold hair. Her green eyes glittered in the sharp glare of an ignited lightsaber, held ready for further combat. But no other troops appeared, and she relaxed a fraction. "Grand Vizier Pestage," she said, "I've come to escort you to freedom." He stared in wonderment at the vision of redemption before him. Joy flared within

him, burning as brightly as the Jedi weapon held by the young woman. "I would be pleased to accept your kind offer, Mara Jade, Emperor's Hand," he said tremulously, "but there is the small matter of my confinement." He gestured at the bars. Mara looked steadily at him for a moment, her eyes shining. Then, with two sweeping strokes of her lightsaber, she severed the bars, top and bottom. They fell with a clatter to the floor, and Pestage gingerly stepped over them and into the hall. "What did that man have against you, anyway?" asked Mara. Pestage frowned. "A few years ago, on his homeworld, the rebel alliance was making great progress in winning over the sympathies of the planetary government. Had the Emperor known, he would have punished Mandalore with a fleet of Star Destroyers, but Gemillian didn't want to lose his vast land holdings. So he hid the information from the Emperor. I merely informed the Emperor of the truth. Gemillian never truly had the ear of the Emperor again, having been shown to be a liar." "Why keep him on at all?" Mara wanted to know. "The Emperor liked there to be rivalry and scheming among his advisors. Gemillian was very good for that. So why waste good talent?" Pestage said simply. Mara let the matter drop, and led Pestage to a secret door at the far end of the cell block. "Sometimes the Emperor would come here to interrogate his prisoners in his own special way, privately," Mara explained. "Yes, I know," said Pestage. "It was very thoughtful of him to have planned for our escape like this." Together, they vanished into the dimly lit corridor, sealing it invisibly behind them.

* * *

Mara Jade and Sate Pestage descended into the tunnels far below the palace. Imperial City had been built up like rock strata upon the structures of days gone by, so that going down was like going back in time. Soon, they passed beyond the gleaming, modern corridors with artificial light, and entered halls of stone where the only light was the glare of Mara's lightsaber. Now and then, they saw creatures in the shadows that resembled Womp rats the size of Nerfs, but these were evidently scared of the light and quickly vanished into their hiding places. Mara hurried along, followed by a puffing Sate Pestage, who was pushing his scarecrow like body as fast as it would go. "What...what are we rushing for?" Sate Pestage breathed heavily, "surely we would never face pursuit down here!" She turned, realizing for the first time how he was struggling to keep up. "I'm sorry, Grand Vizier," she said, "we can rest a moment. I'm not worried about being followed. I'm worried about them closing the starports to...to keep me from escaping." She paused, looking pained. "Tarn Gemillian told me that you killed Ars Dangor. Is this true?" Sate Pestage asked softly. "Yes, it's true. But I don't know how it happened. I didn't mean to do it. I didn't even know I was doing it...but then he changed, and he was dead, and - I think I'd better start from the beginning, huh?" Mara put a hand to her temple, and, not facing Pestage, told him the story. "It started for me yesterday, when I saw the Emperor die." Pestage peered at her in surprise. "I was in Manarai hall when I saw it in a vision. Lord Vader and Skywalker turned on him and killed him. It was awful. He looked at me, and he looked so betrayed. He told me I had to kill Skywalker. I blacked out, and had nightmare after nightmare of doing just that, in so many ways...so many ways. As for

Vader, I think he's already dead. He was dead in all my nightmares...that must mean something. When I woke up, I had a splitting headache, and my ability to sense the Force, to use it in any way, was gone. I've had to deal with that loss, the loss of the Emperor, and on top of all that, I can't help but feel that it was all

my fault." She started to weep softly. Pestage put a wrinkled hand on her shoulder. She turned to him, and said, "I had the chance to kill Skywalker on Tatooine. I was sent there to do it, and I failed. I failed. And now he's dead." Pestage felt the deep hurt of this young woman, and he knew he could help with at least part of it. "It wasn't your fault," he said gently. "The Emperor must have known he might die, and he had a message prepared in advance to send to me if it happened. In it, he told me to get myself to a safe place, and to see that you were safe as well. He knew it wasn't your fault, and he didn't blame you. He may want you to kill this Skywalker, but Palpatine's death was something he chose to face. But you were telling

me about Ars Dangor." "Well," she continued, "Dangor sent his men to get me while I was still pretty messed up. It turned out he wanted me for his pleasure. He thought I was Palpatine's lover, and because he was going to take the throne, he wanted to claim me, too. I felt degraded, but not enough to kill him. I was sent to his rooms, where I

broke into the security systems. I watched the meeting where he set you up, and took you down. Again, I was angry, but not that angry. But

when he was actually declared Emperor, I felt such a rage that...that I blacked out. Then - this is the really strange part - I thought I was having another nightmare. Palpatine was dead at my feet, and Skywalker came back to kill me, too. This time, I strangled him with my bare hands. After he was dead, I could see that he was really Dangor. I wouldn't have killed him. I only wanted to escape from him and leave the planet. I don't know what's wrong with me." She looked into Pestage's eyes. "You don't know what it meant to me, when you called me Emperor's Hand. I was feeling like no one knew who I was anymore. It - it just meant a lot to me." She took his hand, holding it warmly. Pestage was thinking furiously. Something incredible was beginning to dawn on him. There was Palpatine's order for him to bring

Mara to Byss, the nightmares and headaches she was having, the blackouts, and her hatred of Dangor when he became Emperor. He didn't know how it could have happened, but he suddenly understood that he was in the presence of his master. Palpatine existed within the mind of this young woman. "What you did meant a lot to me, too, Mara Jade," he told her. "You saved my life, and I owe you more than you will ever know. But there is something else I need to ask of you. There is a world in the Deep Core called Byss, where the Emperor has a stronghold of those loyal to him. I would be safe there. We both

need to escape, we are both fugitives. Would you help me to reach there? Perhaps you, too, can find a home there." "I'll take you anywhere you need to go. That was part of my plan. But how are we going to get off planet?" "Don't worry about that, Mara Jade. I know of the ideal transport. The Emperor's personal shuttlecraft is in a docking bay near the palace. If you can pilot it, it can get us free of Coruscant." She clasped Pestage's hands firmly with her own. "Can I pilot it? Does a Wookiee live in the trees? Let's get out of here!"

Pestage smiled at her, and they moved off in a different direction, sharing hope like the first taste of food after a long fast.

* * *

Emerging from the secret ways late that night, the fugitives found themselves in a quiet docking bay, empty of other people. Before

them,
a Lambda class shuttle crouched like a white bird with its wings folded. Sate Pestage motioned for Mara to stay put, then he walked up to the open boarding ramp that beckoned invitingly. "Sate Pestage, Grand Vizier, code SGW0027, deactivate defense systems." He turned back to Mara. "It's all right now, we can get on board." She climbed the ramp, looking nervously around her. "What would have happened If I had been alone?" she asked. "You would now be dead," Pestage told her. "This ship is equipped with the navicomputer programs necessary to penetrate the Deep Core, and the recognition signals for bypassing the Hyperspace Security net. It would not do to let those things fall into the wrong hands." Mara followed him into the cockpit of the little craft. She immediately began activating the ship's systems and monitoring communications from Imperial City. "I'm getting some information you should know about," she said to Pestage after a minute. "There's a total blackout on holonet transmissions, and traffic to and from Coruscant has been prohibited. That might slow down or even prevent any pursuit from the ground, but listen to this. A lot of the surviving Star Destroyers from Endor have returned at Dangor's orders, and are now in orbit. There are a lot of very angry, very confused Captains up there demanding to know what's going on down here. And no one's answering them. Imperial City doesn't want the news from Endor to get out until they're ready for it. Things haven't fallen apart yet, but they could at any moment. We'll have to fly right through a fleet of Star Destroyers to get away from Coruscant -" "And they could easily capture us or shoot us down, depending on their mood, which is no doubt poor," finished Pestage. "Don't worry - I said this ship could get us away from here and it will. The Emperor has given us a little insurance." Mara finished her preparations. "All right, Grand Vizier, here goes nothing. You'd better know what you're talking about." The shuttle rose up, wings unfolding into a triangular configuration, and shot out of the bay into the night sky of Coruscant, the city spread out below them like a glittering tapestry. Mara pushed the shuttle for all the speed she could coax out of it, and, as she had guessed, nothing rose up to intercept them. Driving towards the upper atmosphere, Mara powered up the weapons systems. Her scanners registered no less than twelve Imperial Star Destroyers directly above her. Her skin prickled as she pictured their hundreds of turbolasers locking onto the tiny craft. Sate Pestage was completely calm. He touched a switch with his long, thin finger, and sat back in his seat, smiling slightly. The shuttle continued to climb, leaving the atmosphere behind. The stars became sharp pinpoints of light as they came within visual range of the enormous wedge shaped cruisers. Mara fought the urge to turn and flee, and they hurtled past the fleet, at a distance of less than ten kilometers. Suddenly the Imperial ships were dwindling behind them, and they were in the clear. Mara let out a whoop of relief and called up the coordinates for the hyperspace journey to Byss. "You see," said Pestage, "this ship broadcasts a code that tells the computers of any other Imperial ships not to fire, and not to lock on a tractor beam. Palpatine never wanted to be in danger of becoming the victim of a quick and easy coup by an ambitious admiral while he traveling in such a tiny vessel as this. So, they may have tried, but they couldn't shoot at this shuttle. We were perfectly safe." Mara stared at Pestage as the stars out of the viewport flared into starlines. "I've got to hand it to you," she said with admiration, "this is some rescue."

* * *

Sate Pestage awoke in his tiny makeshift bunk on the shuttle to the

sound of Mara Jade's screams. She was clearly in the grip of her nightmares. Pestage was hesitant to approach her, recalling what had happened to Dangor. Why do you torment her so, my master, he wondered silently, looking sorrowfully at the restless form of the young woman. She tossed and turned, seeming to grapple with the air. She struck at nothing, and slumped down into a dreamless sleep once more. Pestage waited a few minutes, then, judging it to be safe, he gently prodded her awake. Groggily, she looked at him, grimacing in pain.

She

still had her headache. "Are you all right, Mara?" Pestage asked her.

"Not really," she said, "I can't say I'm in any way right." Her eyes had a haunted look. "I may never be all right again. I can't shake this headache, I feel so empty, cut off from the Force. And the nightmares...I can remember that last one. The Emperor was dead, and Skywalker had his head on a sort of pike. I come in, and he doesn't seem to think of me as a real threat. He just sort of laughs. And this

time I have this really wicked knife. I throw it, and it hits Skywalker in the eye. But he isn't dead. He comes at me, and we struggle hand to hand. Then I'm able to punch the knife hilt, and drive the blade all the way in. Of course, he dies then. And the dream

ends with my putting his head on the pike. I don't know what's happening to me. When I kill, it's clean, fast, as efficient as possible, as painless as possible. You don't make it as an assassin by

putting on some kind of scene from a horror holovid. I don't understand where these ideas, this hate, comes from." Pestage thought

he knew very well, but he had his orders not to let Mara Jade know about her role. Still, he pitied her. Palpatine was using her; when she would have obeyed him on her own, he was driving her to obey. And

why was Palpatine taking that approach? Pestage thought he knew that, too. He had come to believe that it had been Vader who most likely would have, or could have, killed the Emperor. The young Jedi didn't seem powerful enough, and from what Pestage knew, the boy wouldn't have joined Vader in an evil act, either. No, Vader must have done it,

and died in the process, while Skywalker survived. It would be entirely like Palpatine to hate Skywalker and want him dead, just for not surrendering and not dying. And so, he had to twist the truth for Mara Jade to carry out his "revenge". Still, Pestage would not defy his master. He would have to hope that all this would work out for the

best, somehow. "I'm sick of dwelling on death," Mara said, looking up

sadly. "I want to talk about him, about what he meant to us, while he was alive. I need to mourn him in a healthier way than this." "Yes, we can do that. He was very important to both of us. You know, there are really very few people in the galaxy who really knew him, who would mourn him at all. We may be the only two. It is very hard to love someone who is really above humanity...who is so much a part of his power, when that power is so very great. It is too easy to give in

to things like awe and fear. But somehow, we two managed not to.

There

are very good reasons why that is so, I think." "He seemed like a father to me, I suppose," Mara replied, hugging her knees. "When both of my parents died in an accident, he saw that I had caretakers on Coruscant. He came to see me, teaching me things as I grew up. I came to admire him, and he showed me that I could do amazing things. He gave me pride in myself." Sate Pestage nodded, encouraging her to go on. "One day, " she said, smiling, "he made me his special agent. It felt great to be trusted with so many secrets. To have that special

ability to hear his call from anywhere, instantly. It gave me an identity. The Emperor's Hand." She stopped for a moment, lost in memories. Pestage had been with Palpatine for a long time, and he remembered the real story of how his master had found Mara Jade. Palpatine had learned through the Holocron that some people were born with the ability to instantly receive thoughts across vast distances

—
powerful receptive telepaths. He had cast out mentally for such a person, and found the tiny child, Mara Jade, on a distant world. He had had her parents "eliminated" and her brought to Coruscant to be raised. Her ability had served Palpatine very well indeed, and Pestage strongly suspected that it had served him one final time when he escaped from the second Death Star. Pestage decided that it would do much more harm than good for her to know these things. She had been used, yes, but also repaid with many gifts. And most importantly, she had been happy. For both Mara and himself, that said it all. "So you see," Pestage said, "a good reason. You thought of him as a father." Pestage paused. He decided to tell her a secret. She had been deceived

so much lately, and maybe she just deserved to hear some truth. "As for me," he said, "I believe I was his father." Mara's mouth fell open, but Pestage maintained a placid expression. He realized as he spoke that Palpatine may somehow be able to hear him. Somehow, that was all right. "I never told him, of course, and he never guessed. He

never treated me as a father, and I never treated him as a son. But perhaps my long service to him will now be easier for you to understand." Mara stammered, "That's incredible! But what do you mean, you 'believe' you were his father?" Pestage told her the story of Gamsaa, and his stolen son, Espaa. "Many years passed, after I lost my son, during which I was alone. Then, I heard of the rise of Senator Palpatine to the Presidency. I was in the same place as him by

chance, and he had come to make a speech. I watched him, and a strong feeling, a suspicion came over me. I felt a connection. I managed to get to see him, and I offered my services as his personal servant. He must have felt something, too, for he accepted at once. Over the years, I tried to find out for sure if he was my son, but I never could. He spoke of the Sith, however, the one word by which my son's captors identified themselves. And once, when I asked him about his parents, he said he never knew them. He was young enough when he was taken to have forgotten me. In any case, I believe it is true, and so,

to serve the great being my son became was enough to fill my life with meaning." "Why did you never tell him?" pressed Mara, who was spellbound. "To do so would have changed our relationship. He had to be the master. The Emperor. The one ruler of the galaxy and the greatest master of the Force. There could be no one above him that he could see. And so, I was content to serve him, to be close to him, and

to share in his glory." "I think I understand," said Mara. "He mastered both of us, but we wanted it that way." They sat in silence for a while, then Pestage stirred. "You should get more sleep, Mara Jade," he said, and went back to his own sleeping spot in the shuttle. Eventually, Mara did go back to sleep. Pestage, who needed little sleep, listened to her breathing for a long time. She seemed to

be having a dreamless rest. Perhaps Palpatine had been given something else to think about.

* * *

The Emperor's shuttle emerged from hyperspace in the Deep Core,

surrounded by a glorious profusion of stars. The closest was a binary, a blue star and its blue dwarf companion, and Pestage told Mara to plot a course for the world orbiting them. So they came at last to Byss, a world full of the energies of the dark side where the Emperor and his adepts had built a model of the galactic society they were striving for. Warm and peaceful blue-green sunlight shone on the billions of citizens that had followed the lure of this beautiful planet, and settled among the islands and canyons in the luxurious cities. The life force of these billions was gently leached away by the dark side adepts while they complacently enjoyed endless resort life. On Byss, the dark side had total sway without anyone firing a single shot. And Mara Jade could sense none of it. Mara flew over the Imperial Control Sector, which dominated an entire continent. She approached the Imperial Citadel, an enormous spire several kilometers high. Pestage informed her that, were it not for the recognition codes being broadcast by their ship, they would never have penetrated the defensive zone of the Citadel alive. As it was, they registered the tracking signatures of hundreds of turbolasers as they sailed smoothly into Palpatine's private docking bay. Three hundred Sovereign Protectors were ceremonially lined up in the bay to receive them. Pestage and Mara descended the ramp and stood wearily before one of the Emperor's dark side adepts, Savuud Thimram. Thimram was visibly shocked to see the dirty, exhausted looking pair, and he could not suppress his anxious questions. "Grand Vizier! Where is the Emperor? We have heard rumors of his death, and indeed, we have felt the weakness in the dark side. You have come in the Emperor's personal transport. What can you tell us?" Pestage summoned as much dignity as he could. "I would speak with you privately, Savuud. But first we need some rest. We have been mistreated and sorely pressed. See that quarters are prepared for us." Pestage was looking at Thimram with a certain expression that signalled the adept to probe the old man's surface thoughts: Palpatine is dead, but there may yet be hope. He has somehow preserved himself in the mind of this woman. She must be brought to the clone labs as soon as possible. Thimram nodded and signalled that he understood. He spoke rapidly into his comlink, then led Mara and Pestage out of the bay and into the halls of the Citadel. Mara stumbled along, and her face showed that she still needed a lot more sleep. Her headache was still plaguing her, and only the thought of a real bed kept her going. Thimram gave Pestage a significant look. They were nearing the clone labs. Stay close to her, Pestage thought. And even as Thimram stepped near to Mara, she suddenly cried out, clutched at her head, and collapsed into the adept's arms. "It is done, my master," sighed Sate Pestage.

* * *

"Are you sure you will not stay, Mara Jade?" asked the Grand Vizier. "Byss is a soothing place, it is said, and after your help in getting me here, the least you are owed is a secure life among those who were loyal to the Emperor." Mara stared out at the beautiful city of lights, glistening under the five moons of Byss. They were standing in the Emperor's docking bay, several days after Mara's collapse. She had awakened in a comfortable bed, her headache gone at last. But her Force powers were still gone, and she had still dreamed of killing Skywalker. She had explored Byss for a while, but despite its beauty,

she had only seen Palpatine's ghost, staring at her wherever she went. She knew she could never find peace here, not until she carried out the Emperor's last command. "I appreciate the offer," Mara said sadly, "but I have unfinished business to take care of." Her hand strayed to the lightsaber at her belt. "Where will you go?" asked Pestage. "I'm not sure. I can't go to the Empire, or what's left of it, and I can't go to the rebels either. I suppose I'll try to survive

on the Fringe...I don't know." "At least you will accept this gift," Pestage said firmly, indicating the shuttle. "The coordinates of Byss will be erased when you leave, but the codes protecting you from hostile Imperials will still be there. I'll know you are safe." "I accept," she smiled. "You know, I'm going to miss you. You're a good man. Thanks for sharing your secrets with me. I feel like you're my grandfather, in a way. Is that okay?" Pestage nodded, smiling. "May the Force be with you, Grand Vizier," Mara said, and went up into the shuttle. "May the Force return to you, Mara Jade," he said softly, after her. A while later, the shuttle lifted off gracefully, and climbed for the stars. When it had dwindled to a distant point of light, Pestage heard quiet footsteps approach him from behind. It was

Palpatine. He was alive, and young again. He stood next to Pestage, not speaking, just sharing his presence with the man to whom he owed so much. "You may have mishandled her, Master," Pestage said after a while. "I'm not sure she will finally do as you wish." "Only time will tell," Palpatine said simply. "The future is no longer...open to me." "Are you well, Master?" Pestage asked. "I am alive, Sate Pestage, but I have lost a great deal. My powers are at their lowest level in decades. My adepts have become my teachers, and they say I can be restored, but it will take years. Years while the rebels claim my galaxy." "Master, there will be a chance to reclaim that, too, I am sure. When that day comes, you may encounter Luke Skywalker again. If you will accept my advice, I would ask you to consider that meeting with care. Perhaps it is not necessary to be his adversary. Perhaps you can turn him next time, and even make him the heir to your Empire." "I will consider your words, Sate Pestage," Palpatine said. "With Vader gone, it may be the wisest course to follow. But that, too, must wait." Palpatine was silent for a time. Pestage bowed slightly. "I will leave you to your thoughts, Master, and retire for the evening." "Good night, Old Friend," said Palpatine. Pestage walked away, his robes whispering, and Palpatine stood gazing at the city. For now, it was all that was left of his Empire. That would have to be enough. The doors closed behind the Grand Vizier. Hearing that, Palpatine said quietly, "Good night, Father."