

STAR WARS: The Grip of the Emperor's Hand
a work of fanfiction by
Joe Mignano



It is a time of prosperity for the Galactic Empire. Despite the loss of the dreaded Death Star, the Imperials have driven the rebel freedom fighters from their hidden base on the remote ice world of Hoth. With the Rebels in full retreat, the evil Sith Lord and Emperor Darth Sidious has sent his apprentice Darth Vader and other Dark Jedi assassins after potential threats from within the Empire itself...

{Imperial citadel, Deep Core throne world of Byss}

Emperor Palpatine was genuinely concerned. Twelve of his best trained force-sensitive commandos hadn't been heard from in quite a while. It was now time to give the task at hand to someone much more capable.

Activating a holovid projector in front of him, Palpatine summoned his apprentice. From halfway across the galaxy, Vader knelt before the flickering image of his Sith master.

“What is thy bidding, my master?”

Palpatine replied, seemingly emotionless. “What do you make of this?”

An audio recording of an intercepted transmission then played, somewhat garbled but intelligible.

“...Emergency Code 913...This is Jedi Master Lors Na-Ghil...Is there anyone left?...”

Lord Vader then said, “Master Na-Ghil was a friend to Qui-Gon Jinn, and very formiddable with a lightsaber.”

Palpatine slowly nodded. “Several of my Shadow Guard assassins have been lost already.”

Still genuflecting, Vader instinctively concluded, “And you wish to send me after him.”

Palpatine paused for a moment, closed his eyes, then reopened them, saying, “Not yet. I have an Emperor's Hand that shows immense promise. This will be a perfect test for her. Should she fail, I will call upon you, my old friend. For now, resume your search for young *Skywalker*.”

“As you wish, my master,” Vader responded.

[Music change]

After the image of Darth Vader winked out, Sidious clasped his hands, grinning

with delight. If the Emperor's Hand *should* fail, then the task of eliminating the Jedi threat would of course fall to Vader. In the same way, however, should Vader fail to locate the force-sensitive *Skywalker* that destroyed the Death Star, then Sidious would task his Emperor's Hand with the job. Or even, perhaps, one of his secret Dark Jedi warriors; former knights that surrendered to the dark side during the Great Purge years before. Sidious was more than confident he had enough resources at his disposal from which, if *necessary*, a replacement for his apprentice could be found.

For the Sith, failure is never an option.

Sidious keyed an intercom on the armrest of his chair. "Send in Mara Jade."

[*Music Change*]

{Ziost System}

Mara eased back on the controls of Lambda class shuttle she was piloting. It was typical of the Emperor to send her on covert ops that even his best commandos couldn't succeed at. In this particular case, no less than twelve elite shadow guards had all but disappeared on a mission to locate a recently resurfaced Jedi Master named Lors Na-Ghil, who had somehow escaped The Great Purge years before. By every conceivable right, Mara should have been nervous, but she wasn't. In her eyes, this was just another mission given to her by her master.

The planet Ziost came into view as Mara exited hyperspace. The cold, desolate world with its frozen mountains was at one time the capital of the ancient Sith Empire. But it was now a wasteland, like Korriban. The dark side, however, was still exceedingly strong here; an ideal hiding place for a Jedi not wanting to be found. According to the intercepted transmission, though, Na-Ghil clearly wanted to be found by his light-sided comrades. Mara wondered if there might be any more Jedi hiding on the planet. The dark side could conceal their presence, but not the presences of many Jedi. She was prepared to confront Na-Ghil and perhaps a few others; there couldn't possibly be more Jedi than that.

She landed the ship at the ruins of an old temple that appeared to have been carved into the side of a mountain centuries before. The landing platform itself was a large precipice immediately adjacent to the temple ruins. On the side of the landing platform that was opposite the ancient temple was a ledge that led to absolutely nothing but open air, a drop to a boulder-filled void.

Mara exited the shuttle. On the stony side of the temple platform, a blue glow could be seen, accompanied by an all-too familiar hum. The glow surrounded the silhouette of a humanoid figure, as yet too distant amidst the rocky temple remains of the old Sith Temple to identify visually.

The Force-presence of the figure emerging from the ruins, armed with a lightsaber, was enough for the Emperor's Hand to know who this was. She ignited her own blade, its violet hue giving nearby rocks and ice formations an amethyst-like appearance.

She walked toward her quarry, ready for battle, ready to fulfill her master's bidding. As she approached, signs of other battles at this very spot revealed themselves. Broken bits of armor, charred skeletal remains, and the unmistakable red-visored black helmet of an Imperial Shadow Guard were scattered about.

Soon, Mara was close enough to make out the features of the silhouetted figure before her. He wore tattered robes in different shades of brown, covered in various places with fallen Shadow Guard armor. His hair, beard, and mustache were a sandy blonde color, all matted with dry blood. His eyes were a hate-filled yellow, and they were staring directly at her. Mara knew early on in her training that the dark side of Force was a beast not easily tamed. If a force-user embraced it, they could become a slave to it if they don't have the knowledge to make the dark side serve them. Clearly, Na-Ghil had fallen to the dark side, perhaps because of its still-powerful presence here, and he'd become a servant to it. Jedi Master Lors Na-Ghil, for all his alleged wisdom, had become corrupted and driven mad by the dark side of the Force.

Seeing her ignited lightsaber, Na-Ghil unexpectedly extinguished his, and said, "I have been expecting you."

Mara sensed his confusion in the Force; he thought she was a Jedi. Mara could have played along, but she didn't have time for games. She angled her blade into a combat-ready stance, saying, "Your good. But I'm better."

{Music change}

Na-Ghil's eyes widened, and he shouted in response, "You are NOT a Jedi!"

Bolts of blue lightning then arced from the fingertips of his free hand toward Mara. She blocked the bolts with her lightsaber and deflected them into the face of the mountain, causing a minor avalanche of rock and ice a few meters away.

"It would appear that neither are you," Mara said, in reference to Na-Ghil's usage of Sith Lightning, a talent that she did not possess. "But I'm still better."

Mara launched herself at Na-Ghil, somersaulting through mid-air, already engaged in lightsaber combat with him before she landed. She'd been right about one thing; he was good. Na-Ghil was all offense, parrying, slicing, and thrusting with his lightsaber so fast that Mara was forced to keep blocking his attacks defensively without being able to follow up her initial attack at Na-Ghil with any further momentum of her own. His advances steered her toward the edge of the landing pad. His strategy, if it could be called that, was simple but effective; if he couldn't best her at saber combat, then he'd simply walk her backwards and over the edge, to plummet to her doom.

Na-Ghil was good. But Mara had been right about something else; she was better. The insane dark Jedi before her was so focused on killing her, that he was not attuned to what was going on around him. Through the Force, Mara summoned the helmet of a dead Shadow Guard nearby, sending it hurtling toward the back of Na-Ghil's head. At the last second, he landed a kick to Mara's mid-section that she appeared to have allowed, but the impact sent her stumbling. In the same motion, Na-Ghil turned in the nick of time to block the airborne helmet with his lightsaber. As he did so, and while his back was turned toward Mara for that split second, she

quickly drew a hold-out blaster from her boot and fired, without pausing to aim.

Na-Ghil turned again toward Mara to block the incoming blaster bolt, but he was a fraction of a second too late. The single shot struck him in the stomach, and the Jedi Master-turned-dark side user crumpled to the deck. As Mara reholstered the small blaster inside her boot, she only then noticed that she was standing right at the very edge of the landing platform, the entire lower half of ice-covered mountain below her.

Na-Ghil was still alive, but barely. He was struggling to reach a pyramid-shaped object that had fallen from the inside of his cloak during the duel with Mara. This too, however, was a struggle that he could not win. The Emperor's Hand called the object to her with the Force, and then turned Na-Ghil's own twisted strategy against him. Clenching her fist she channeled the dark side into a choking grip around Na-Ghil's neck. She then raised Na-Ghil into the air, and force-pushed the wounded dark Jedi Master over the edge of the landing platform, sending him downward to his demise.

She then regarded the triangular object in her left hand. It glowed a deep red color, and was adorned with ancient inscriptions. An old Sith holocron. So, this must have been what turned Jedi Master Na-Ghil. It began to glow as her comlink chirped. Toggling its holo-projector function, Mara Jade took a knee and bowed her head respectfully as the image of the Emperor appeared.

"What is your bidding, my Lord?" Mara said.

No sooner had the words escaped Mara's lips, and before the flickering image of Sidious could respond, the gatekeeper of the Sith holocron appeared in front of Mara and said, "I am Darth Ruin. What do you wish to know?"

The flickering face of Sidious broadened with a sinister grin. "You have done well, child. Bring the holocron to me, and then I will have a new assignment for you. Follow my apprentice, and report all of his movements directly to me."

Mara nodded her head. "As you wish, my Emperor."

{Transition, music change}

Inside the Imperial Citadel on Byss, Sidious cackled delightfully. Vader would find and turn young Skywalker, or Mara Jade would kill the son of Anakin Skywalker should Vader fail.

The Emperor then prepared for a meeting with several high ranking Moffs, a meeting that would decide the final blow to a reported massive Rebel fleet massing near Sullest. Sidious relaxed, secure in the knowledge that all threats to his Empire were now safely contained.