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## THE CAPTIVE

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Luke Skywalker paused outside the doubly guarded doors of the med-center's private room turned temporary prison. A young soldier, clad in one of the New Republic's most recent uniforms, was both apologetic and efficient as he ran the portable bioscanner over the Jedi. Inwardly, Luke smiled while the guard studied the small machine's readouts. A relatively new invention, bioscanners had been developed to identify anyone using one of the Empire's latest deception devices --- a small molecular field screen that could alter a being's outward appearance for a short time period. As the scanner was passed over his body, the Jedi considered how foolish it was to depend so heavily on mechanics. A Force-user of any moderate skill could easily disable most of the technological tools being more and more relied on by Alliance members and Imperials alike.

"You're cleared for entry, sir," the soldier at last announced, nodding to the second guard to deactivate the shock curtain barring access to the sole doorway.

Luke nodded and entered the room of the prisoner whose very existence had generated so many extraordinary security precautions. Compared to the brightly lit corridor, the room was dimly lighted. Only a small recessed illumer high over the bed and the bank of monitoring machines along the far wall afforded any light. There were no windows for this patient, nor the usual med-center holo-entertainment unit either. The air within the room was rich with oxygen and other gases necessary to ease the patient's breathing, filtered and refiltered by hidden technology beyond Luke's education to understand.

The blond man studied the prisoner/patient, not wishing to disturb his sleep. He knew from frequent past visits that there would be no need to announce his presence anyway. Soon, the patient would stir from his shallow slumber, instantly awake and fully aware of his visitor.

It still marveled Luke somewhat. Given the grievous nature of the prisoner's injuries only a few Standard months earlier, and the grim prognosis that he would not live at all, the patient had amazed all with his survival instincts and sheer force of will. \*But then\*, Luke mused silently to his memory, \*look who they were dealing with.\*

He took a step closer to the bed and gazed studiously on the face he'd only recently come to know. Long years of childish fantasy had vanished some time ago, but Luke knew he would never tire of watching the true face of the man before him. Disfigured by scars too deep and too old to ever heal, pale to the point of death from imprisonment within the mask that had granted him mobility, bloated by the drugs necessary to keep him alive, the patient nonetheless exuded power even in sleep. To Luke's mind, there was a nobility about this man's outward symbols of suffering, proof of his will to endure, his inner strength even under unimaginable pain and horror. The Jedi half-smiled with pride, happy to share his blood with such a courageous man.

"That's an odd expression," observed the patient, having awakened without the usual traces of disorientation and remnant sleep common to less well-trained beings. "What are you thinking?"

"That I'm very glad you're alive," answered Luke truthfully, moving to stand beside the bed.

Anakin Skywalker, known throughout the galaxy as the dreaded Dark Lord Darth Vader, used the button to his left to elevate his bed and upper body to a sitting position. From that more natural posture, he addressed his only son once again. "Is that all you were thinking?" His pale blue eyes locked onto the deeper sky color of his offspring's.

"No," replied the Jedi slowly. "I was also thinking how proud I am of you, how proud I am to be your son."

"You haven't told anyone else about that, have you?" demanded Anakin abruptly, his body stiffening suddenly.

Luke reacted swiftly, laying his hand reassuringly atop the older man's scarred shoulder. "No, of course not. You asked me not to, and I've kept my promise. I've even checked this room for listening and

recording devices every time I enter. Our secret is safe, Father. As you requested."

Anakin visibly relaxed, leaning wearily back into his pillow, adjusting one of the many snakelike tubes attached to his chest. "Good. It is important that no one know of our true relationship, Luke. For your sake. Better I remain as your captive and you the hero who caught me." He smiled with mocking humor.

"So you keep telling me," sighed the blond Skywalker unhappily. "But the truth *will* come out sooner or later. You know that, don't you?"

In spite of his still weakened condition, Anakin managed a coarse laugh. "I am certain Obi-Wan taught you that there are many versions of 'truth', my son." He ignored the faint flinch he saw on Luke's face, knowing he'd touched a sensitive spot. "It would do me no good, and would cause you endless unhappiness if our true relationship was revealed. Trust me in this, Luke."

"Of course," replied the Jedi quickly. "I disagree, but if it wasn't for you I'd be dead now. You saved my life. I'll do as you ask."

Anakin smiled gently at his grown child. "You also saved my life, Luke. Do not forget that. After the Emperor's assault on me, I was certain my life was over. Your skills are more powerful than I had realized."

"I was motivated." Young Skywalker grinned. "I'd finally found the father I'd dreamed of all my life. I couldn't let you die." He reached forward and took hold of the older man's replaced cybernetic hand, squeezing it lovingly. "There were a couple of times aboard the shuttle when I thought I'd lost you and then several more before the med staff could stabilize your condition."

"I felt your presence pulling me back from that empty void," acknowledged Anakin. "Without the strength of your will, the power of your Force skills, I would not be here now." He paused to study his son's face, as though memorizing every feature. "No matter how brief our time together, I am grateful for the opportunity to know you better. I want you to know that."

"Don't talk like that, Father. We'll have years together yet," the Jedi argued. However, a shadow of doubt shaded Luke's eyes as he spoke.

"We both know better than that, Son," denied Anakin. "Once I am sufficiently restored to as much health as necessary, I will face trial under your new government. There is not much question as to my guilt nor to the outcome of that tribunal. There is no sense in deluding ourselves or in skirting this issue any longer."

"Then, I'll visit you wherever they send you," answered Luke sadly, admitting the validity of the older man's words in spite of his inner wish to ignore the unpleasant future. "It won't be as I'd like, I'll grant you, but at least we can still be together now and then. There are so many things I need to know, so many questions I want to ask."

Anakin Skywalker shook his head slowly. "Son, my son. You must deny this tendency you harbor for fanciful delusion. It will only bring you pain in the end, and I would spare you that much. We both know that there will be no imprisonment for me. \*I\* accepted that when I followed your Force-call back to this life. I knew what awaited me should I choose to live and surrender myself as your captive. I do not regret my decision. But you cannot continue this fantasy. Accept my fate, Luke -- as I have. Let us enjoy what time we have now."

"You're wrong," the blond youth denied, releasing his father's hand and walking to the foot of the bed. Turning to look at the once formidable figure now shrouded by white sheets and medical equipment, the Jedi saw no menace, no threat to the New Republic. All he beheld was a man, older, injured and scarred both inside and out, certainly no longer the living symbol of all the Rebellion had fought against. "You're wrong," he repeated. "They won't order your death. If the Alliance wanted that, why would they have worked so hard to save your life?" His hands were unconsciously clenched atop the metal brace of the bed's footrest.

An expression of infinite sorrow and terribly bought wisdom settled on Anakin's face as he gazed at the hopeless need in his son's eyes. It was almost cruel to smash that youthful belief, he knew, but it would be crueler still to permit the vain dream to go unchallenged by harsh reality. "They keep me alive to bring me to trial, Luke. It is the only way to soothe their moral standards and justify my execution. I imagine my death will also serve as propaganda, proof that the Empire has truly fallen. It will be a public death, no doubt, an effort to persuade those foolish few still loyal to old ideals that they are defeated. The Emperor engaged in just such showmanship early in his career as well. The problem is that such displays often have the opposite effect, driving staunch resisters to covert, then open, rebellion. Ironic, don't you

think? My death may very well seed another generation that will one day destroy this new government as the Empire is being destroyed by yours."

"It won't happen. Not like that," stormed Luke, pacing his ill-ease across the small confines of the medical room. "The Alliance isn't like that. Maybe the Empire took pleasure in the public humiliation and annihilation of its enemies, but the New Republic is above that. We believe in justice, in reform, in rehabilitation."

"Politics, my son. You are not well versed in them, I see, but your sister grew up in their environs. Ask Leia, if you will not believe me. She knows the truth, though I suspect her feelings are divided regarding my fate. You have not told her who I am, have you?"

"Huh? Oh, no," Luke answered, his mind spinning with the remote possibility that his father spoke the truth. Still not wanting to accept such a dread future, he added, "Killing you, publicly or privately, would reduce the New Republic to no better than what we've fought to change, Father. I cannot believe they'd execute you, no matter what crimes you've committed."

"That is your mistake," replied Anakin, paraphrasing words spoken to Luke a seeming lifetime ago by the old master, Yoda.

The similarity was not lost on the young Jedi. "I'll plead your case. I'll tell them it was you who killed the Emperor and saved my life," he stated passionately, his pacing resuming at a more frenetic speed as his mind struggled for solutions. "I'll make them understand that killing you would only be counterproductive, that it would lower the very standards the New Republic proposes to set and uphold. They'll realize I'm right. They'll see how wrong your execution would be. They have to!"

"Why? Because you wish it so? Politics do not work on the desires of one person, hero and Jedi or not," sighed Anakin sadly. "No, Luke, they will not understand nor see this issue your way. The only option they will see is murdering me. In fact, were I not so intimately involved, I might even approve their judgment." He smiled with sardonic humor.

Luke stopped his useless motions and stood transfixed, staring at the father he'd longed for all his life. The full impact of the pending future was pounding in his brain, yet still he fought to keep it at bay. "There are prisons," he began feebly.

"That will hold a Sith Lord?" Anakin laughed sarcastically.  
"Even you don't believe that. Shall I give my word not to escape? Would any sane being accept that? And even if I sincerely meant it, I cannot say that I would honor such a vow years from now. What then? Isolate me on some desolate rock, removed from all outside contact? And who would enforce such a ruling? Would that not be more heinous than a quick death? Face it, my son. For the likes of me, there can be no other sentence. Your president, Mon Mothma, and her legal advisors know what I'm saying is true. You must learn to accept it."

"Never! There *has* to be another way. You've remained here and not tried to escape."

"Because I am physically weak yet and because, selfishly, I want to spend what time I have left with you, Luke. Certainly, even now in my less-than-ideal condition, I could attempt to leave. There are factions of the Empire remaining that would welcome me as their new leader. That position once held great appeal for me, but I am weary of war and strife, of suffering and destruction.

"When I joined with the Emperor, I had grand delusions of rectifying all the ills of our galaxy. I dreamed of an end to poverty and civil uprisings, of peace and prosperity for all. I was young, naive, full of ideals. Much as you are now, I fear. I accepted terrible atrocities, committed many myself, believing blindly that the ends justified the means. I abandoned those false and foolish visions when I realized them for what they were.

"There will always be evil, my son. It cannot be destroyed or banished. It balances the good that you embrace so fully, as darkness exists alongside light. To spend your life in daily struggle against what cannot be changed is futile and draining. The waste takes its toll on body and mind. Soon, I no longer cared. I did my master's bidding, shutting my eyes to the monster he'd become. Until that fateful day when I learned that I had a child, a son.

"Amazing how such simple, everyday knowledge can alter a lifetime of perception. When I discovered your existence, all my old dreams reawakened, and I became vulnerable once more. I dared to hope again for the ideals that had become dust at my feet. In some strange way, I suppose I still do. But they will be your goals now, your dreams to fulfill. I will not be there to guide you past the dangers I fell victim to, to shelter you from unnecessary disappointment and pain."

"It's not fair," sighed Luke, lapsing momentarily into the lonely farm boy he had been not so long ago.

"Nothing in life is fair, Son, except that we work to make it so. That is your burden now. My time is drawing to a close, and my only remaining desire is to pass on to you the lessons I have learned throughout a lifetime of trial and regret." Anakin laid back more deeply into the pillow cushioning his scarred head.

"You're exhausted," observed Luke aloud. "I shouldn't have stayed so long. Rest, rebuild your strength, Father. I'll be back tomorrow, and we'll talk some more."

"Perhaps you are right. I am tired. But, Luke, promise me you will think about what I have told you today. Accept what time we have left together and discard this childish hope you nurture for my survival. It will only cause you suffering, and you've endured enough of that because of me."

The Jedi hesitated, a rebuttal on his lips. Seeing the fatigue on his father's face, he swallowed his words. "Rest. I'll be back tomorrow."

\* \* \*

"I heard you visited Vader again today, Luke," Leia Organa remarked with studied casualness that evening as she, her brother, and Han Solo shared a rare evenmeal together at one of the New Republic capital's more popular nightspots.

As a serving droid removed the last remains of their meal and delivered the postprandial brandy Han had ordered earlier, Skywalker avoided his sister's gaze. Sensing the sudden tension that threatened their pleasant get-together, the Corellian raised his glass and elaborately sniffed at the reddish contents. "Mmm. Lando swears this Rafen brandy is the finest in the galaxy. Knowing Lando, he's tasted enough to know. Here's to old friends." He raised his glass, thrusting it toward the center of the table.

Luke and Leia politely joined the toast, lifting their own drinks and gently clinking the crystal together before taking only token sips of the truly fine liquor. Disappointed, but experienced enough to accept defeat, Solo leaned back and waited for the conversation he dreaded to begin.

"Well?" persisted the princess.

"Well, what?" answered the blond man with uncharacteristic surliness.

"You know what. It isn't right for you to show so much interest in Vader, Luke. People are beginning to talk about how often you see him. They're getting uneasy. After all, you're the only Jedi left, as far as we know, and everyone knows Vader has Force skills of his own. They're concerned about what you two discuss."

"You mean they're afraid," confronted her brother. "They're afraid because they don't understand and don't want to. They needn't be. Vader saved my life, and he was grievously injured doing so. I owe it to him not to leave him isolated in that med-center prison. He nearly died, Leia. Because of me."

The princess cast a sideways glance at Solo before returning her attention to the man seated opposite her. "Your concern for Vader is admirable, Luke, and no one doubts the debt you feel you owe him, but ...."

"The debt I \*do\* owe him, that the whole New Republic owes him," interrupted Skywalker testily. "Leia, I'd be dead, the Emperor alive, and the Alliance broken if it hadn't been for Vader's intervention. I didn't make up what happened on the Death Star."

Solo leaned forward, his own concern for Luke heightened by the Jedi's tone. "No one's saying you did, kid. You gotta admit, though, that Vader's done some pretty despicable things. A couple of good turns doesn't wipe the record clean."

"Good thing I didn't feel that way about you when we first met, isn't it, Han?" the Jedi challenged, immediately regretting his anger. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that."

"No, it's all right. Yeah, I did some things I'm not proud of, and you did give me more chance than most to prove myself. But, Luke, no matter what I did, \*I\* wasn't the Emperor's right hand, and I didn't personally oversee the destruction of your sister's homeworld."

"He told me about that," defended the Jedi. "He didn't know Tarkin was going to carry out his insane plan. Vader wasn't in charge, but he would've stopped it if he could."

"I was there, Luke," Leia reminded him, sorrow deepening her voice. "Maybe Vader couldn't have prevented what happened, but we'll never know because he didn't try. The first Death Star was built to destroy whole worlds, and that's exactly what it did."

"You don't understand," sighed Skywalker. "Life creates the Force, gives it its power. To wipe out so many lives is against everything a Force-user would believe in. I saw the effect it had on Ben, and we were so far away. Couldn't you tell Vader was shaken by all that waste?"

The princess looked down where her fingers were laced around the stem of her brandy glass. Her hands were trembling slightly. "I suppose I did feel something. Vader's hand on my shoulder did seem to spasm strangely." At her brother's satisfied smile, she continued, "But, Luke, he had no such qualms about torturing me. My screams, my pain, meant nothing to him. Then later, on Bespin, he had no trouble ordering Han tortured either. With me, at least Vader wanted information, but with Han, it was just a senseless, vicious ploy."

"There was a reason. He knew I'd feel Han's pain and come as quickly as I could. It worked. I was just too late. I'm still sorry for that, Han."

"Ancient history, kid. You got me outta Jabba's, so any debt you owed me was canceled then. Not that I ever felt there was one. It wasn't you that put me in that living hell."

Though the Corellian didn't elaborate, Luke heard the unspoken accusation in his friend's statement. Vader *had* been the one who had ordered Solo's suffering. If only the Jedi could tell them the truth, why the Dark Lord had been so desperate to reach him. It wouldn't alter their opinions of Vader, Luke knew, but perhaps they would better understand his growing bond with the man they so hated. Yet, he had promised to keep his relationship with Vader -- Anakin -- a secret, and in his detached, lucid mind, he recognized the wisdom behind his father's request. Still, he hated not being able to confide in these two people he loved.

"I don't want to fight with you," Leia said sadly, breaking into his inner thoughts. "I really don't. I love you. We've just found one another as brother and sister after so long." She ignored the strange flicker of sorrow that darted over the Jedi's face. "I'm just worried about you, Luke. You only told us once how the Emperor attacked you, but the pain must have been nearly unbearable. I can almost understand why

you'd feel a kind of loyalty to the man who made that pain stop, who rescued you, so to speak."

"She's right, Luke," seconded Han quietly. "I've seen that sort of thing practiced firsthand. When I was still younger than you, in fact. See, there was a crime leader on Corell who wanted one of the other crooks out, but he needed certain information before he could make his move. Now, the second crime leader's troops were really loyal to him, outta ambition or fear. So, the first crime leader had one of his men kidnap the weakest member of the second leader's men. The kidnapper then made it look like this poor sap's boss suspected him and had hired the kidnapper to kill him. He hurt the guy pretty badly.

"Then, the first crime leader steps in and 'rescues' the poor schmuck. By then, the guy's so scared and beat up that he switched loyalties in a flash. He told the first leader all about the second one willingly. Got a blastershot to the head for his trouble."

"That's hardly the same, Han. Vader didn't torture me, and the Emperor certainly didn't expect Vader to turn and kill him in order to save me." "No, but what I'm saying, Luke, is that you feel the same kind of relief and gratitude toward Vader right now that poor bastard of the crime lord's felt. Just don't go getting a blastershot to your head because you let your guard down. At least \*think\* about it. Keep your defenses up, kid. It seldom hurts." The Corellian spoke with earnest concern, but something told him his words were only half-penetrating the stubborn shield Skywalker had erected around himself ever since the Battle of Endor and his return with the severely wounded Sith Lord.

"I worked in the old Imperial Senate, representing Alderaan on my father's behalf," reminded the princess. She waited while Luke downed half his brandy in one long swallow. "It wasn't often that Vader was there," she continued, "but I watched him closely when he was. He's a master at manipulation, Luke. He knows just which nerves to touch, which heartstrings to tug. It was seldom, indeed, that he didn't get exactly what he wanted, and it wasn't through intimidation alone. Vader can appear very sincere, very earnest, very persuasive, if it suits his needs."

"I'm not stupid, Leia. I know manipulation. My uncle, my so-called friends on Tatooine, even Ben and Yoda tried to manipulate me to do their bidding, be their tool. Vader's in no position to manipulate anyone anymore. You should see him. He nearly died! His armor, and with it his mobility, have been stripped from him. He can't even breathe without machines. He's so badly scarred that some of the med-center

physicians cringe when they examine him. Is that the monster you seem to remember?"

"Looks can be deceiving," warned Solo softly. "Who'd have ever expected that puffed-up worm Jabba of running one of the biggest illegal syndicates in the Tatooine System?"

The Jedi simply shook his head dejectedly.

"All we're saying is \*be careful\*, Luke. Don't risk your reputation for the likes of Vader. He isn't worth it. As soon as he's healthy enough, he'll stand trial for the crimes he's committed. Then maybe you'll see him for what he is and not for the sick old man you think you know."

Skywalker stiffened visibly. "And then what, Leia? \*Is\* the New Republic only healing him to murder him later?"

The princess's face paled so rapidly that, for a moment, the two men with her feared she might actually faint. Regaining her composure and taking a sip of her brandy, she resolutely faced the Jedi's unblinking challenge. "Very possibly," she managed to say, her voice weak but level. "What other choice is there, Luke?"

"That's what he told me you'd say," sighed the blond man with more disappointment than anger.

"Hey, Luke," cut in Han, "it isn't like you could just put Vader in a normal prison or rehab. The guy had power. No denying it. You can't just drop him off on some uninhabited world or moon either. First of all, there aren't that many that will support life that aren't already settled, and second, if Vader wanted off, he'd find some way to do it. There's still a lot of Imperials out there, too. They'd love to get hold of him, either to make him a new emperor or to kill him themselves for letting Palpatine die."

"So murdering him under the illusion of a fair trial and legal execution makes it acceptable?" growled Skywalker. "The Alliance is just doing him a favor, is that it?" He rose to his feet quickly, nearly knocking over the glasses atop the table.

"No, don't say anything. I can't believe you're willing to accept this. Either of you. I'm leaving. Suddenly it's a little hard to breathe in this sanctified New Republic air. Smells a lot like the Empire to me." He turned on his heel and marched swiftly out of the

building. Solo's hand on Leia's forearm prevented the princess from following after her brother.

"Let him go," the Corellian advised. "Give him some time to cool off. Once he thinks about it, he'll be all right. He may not ever approve, but Luke's practical enough to see the way things have to be."

"I hope you're right. I'm really worried about him. He hasn't acted like himself since he brought Vader back." Leia leaned against the Corellian, welcoming the warmth of his arm around her shoulders, her heart heavy in her chest.

Above the princess's head, Han frowned, admitting silently to himself that there was definitely more going on with Luke than the Jedi was telling anyone. Stubbornly, Solo vowed to corner his friend and question him about things at the first opportunity.

\* \* \*

The Jedi wandered aimlessly after leaving his sister and Han, calming the nearly overwhelming fury coursing through his veins. It was growing late, and he encountered fewer and fewer pedestrians as he walked, his mind and heart in turmoil. After some time, Luke found himself beside the lake on the east side of the capital. A small park surrounded the modest body of water, offering a tiny slice of nature to the urban populace. A nightbird dipped its ebony wings as it glided soundlessly over the mirror-like surface of the lake in search of insects. Starlight reflected on the still water, along with the crescent shape of one of the overhead moons. The other moon was still too low to appear before midnight. Along the low permacrete wall, built to both protect and confine the water, evening-blooming flowers spread their luminescent petals in wan shades of white, blue, and delicate gold.

Suddenly aware of a fatigue born more of mental anguish than physical exertion, Luke sought out one of the many stone seats fronting the lake. Leaning back against the cool support, he stretched his booted feet before him. Every muscle in his body ached with pent-up tension. He knew he should try to meditate, to draw on the soothing presence of the Force to ease his troubled mind and taut body. Yet every time he had tried over the past few months, the Jedi had failed. Each time he closed his eyes, all he saw was his father's ravaged face.

Even in his dreams, Luke found no escape. Over and over, he relived the agonizing pain of the Emperor's merciless Force barrage, seeing again and again his rescue by the man who had sired him. He awoke each day feeling less rested than amazed at his good fortune -- to not

only be alive, but to have his father alive as well. It had seemed a miracle. Still did, in spite of all his fears.

The Jedi had known, he reminded himself as the nightbird skimmed the water near him, that Anakin would have to answer for his crimes as Darth Vader one day. Yet, as in his youth, Luke had managed to ignore the obvious, to delay considering the consequences that might await the Dark Lord. The prospects had been too painful to ponder, and so he had postponed thinking about them until they loomed too large to ignore any longer.

Anakin, however, had known what fate lay ahead of him. He had lived too long, seen and suffered too much, to be as blindly idealistic as his son. He had known he would die at the hands of the Alliance, and still he had fought to live for that short additional time he would have with his son. The knowledge cut at young Skywalker's heart like the frozen winds of Hoth.

\*What have I done?\* Luke questioned the uncaring stars. \*Why didn't I realize?\* Yet he knew he'd had no choice. To leave his father on the Death Star, as Anakin had requested before lapsing into unconsciousness, had not been an option the Jedi could accept. When he'd dragged what he thought was Vader's deadbody aboard the stolen shuttle, it had been for his own selfish needs. Then, when safely free of the exploding space station, he'd heard his father's faint moan, and Luke had known only immediate medical care could save Anakin's life. No other thought had penetrated his hopeful dreams.

\*And what good did I do?\* he silently asked the unmoving water of the lake. \*For a few weeks of private conversation, the chance to know my father at last, I've condemned him to public humiliation and an ignoble death as surely as the New Republic will. I've been a selfish, blind fool!\*

When Anakin had begun to recover, Luke's joy had been boundless. At long last, after years of wondering and being told nothing but lies, he'd had the chance to really get to know his father. The man he'd come to respect -- yes, even love -- was not the monster the Rebellion feared, nor the machine Ben had wanted him to be to assuage his own guilt, nor even the heroic figure of a lonely boy's imaginings. Anakin Skywalker was simply a man -- a man who'd once had hopes and dreams, ambitions and desires. A man who had seen his aspirations wither and die, even as his own body had been twisted and destroyed. Small wonder, to Luke's eager justification, that Anakin had become Vader, willing implement of the evil Emperor. What had happened to his father could have happened to anyone -- himself, Han, even Leia. But Vader was dead now. The soul-less shell that had served as Palpatine's destructive instrument was gone,

replaced once more by only a man. And that man was his father. Anakin had been betrayed so often in his life, could Luke now add to those betrayals by idly standing by and allowing his father's death at the hands of those the Jedi had once considered friends? What had changed so drastically and so suddenly that Luke had failed to notice? When had the cause for which he'd fought, for which friends had died, become so calloused that ending one man's life could be viewed as just and necessary? Where was the equality, the desperate desire for peace and unity that had powered the Rebellion? Had he misjudged his allies as badly as Anakin had misjudged Palpatine those long years ago?

Questions bred more questions, chasing one another through Luke's troubled mind like crazed rodents in an endless maze. As the night deepened around him, the Jedi's anger turned to self-incrimination, then to sorrow and regret. From remorse to confusion and doubt. He sat as still as the stone beneath him, heedless of the passage of time. As the first bright rays of the morning sun began to sparkle over the lake, the Jedi stirred, stretching stiff muscles and blinking the grit from his eyes. He stood and looked around him, fully seeing the park and water for the first time in hours. With purposeful strides, he turned his back on the pastoral scene and set forth, his resolutions firmly reached, his decisions finally made.

\* \* \*

"Please, pardon my intrusion, President Mon Mothma," Luke apologized. He'd gone to his quarters to freshen up and change into his formal black uniform before presenting himself to the New Republic leader in her office. Now he felt ready for what must be done. "I know you have a busy schedule, but I need to speak with you."

The older woman smiled politely, but her eyes did not reflect the gesture. Standing behind her desk, she faced the somber Jedi. "I've rather been expecting your visit, Luke. Won't you have a seat?"

"No, thank you. I won't take up any more of your valuable time than necessary. I have only one question: is Darth Vader to be executed?"

"I'm afraid that's a complex issue," sighed the Alliance president, showing no surprise at the bluntness of the question. "In fact, I've had several discussions regarding this problem with my top advisors."

"And you've concluded?" prompted Skywalker.

"Luke, this is a complicated matter, as you must surely realize. Of course I read your report of the events aboard the Death Star. I know that Vader may have saved your life."

"Not 'may', President. \*Did\*," interrupted the Jedi.

"Very well," she quietly conceded. "He did save your life, but he must stand trial nonetheless. You must see the need for that?"

Skywalker took one step closer. "Frankly, no, I don't. It would be a mockery of the very justice the New Republic is supposed to represent. There are none among the Alliance who would plead for leniency for the Dark Lord of the Sith. None who believed in him, who haven't already judged him guilty. Fine, setting aside any trial for the moment, what of the sentence, Mon Mothma? Since it's obviously a foregone conclusion that Vader will be found guilty, you must have considered his sentence."

In spite of all her political and diplomatic training, the older woman could no longer face the cold accusation in the Jedi's steely eyes. Glancing down at her desk, she swallowed before speaking. "Yes, we've considered Vader's sentence. We've discussed every possibility at length."

"So, how thoughtful of you. And all your discussions have led to only one conclusive option, am I correct? Execution. Sanctioned murder for the sake of political convenience," charged Luke, his voice flat, emotionless.

"Not for convenience," disputed the president. "For security. Vader is too great a threat. You, of all people, must realize that when it comes to a Force-user of his power, execution is the only possible control. We have neither the means nor the manpower, nor, honestly, the desire to waste in guarding such a unique prisoner." Her words were spoken more sharply than she'd intended, belying the extreme feelings she felt on this subject.

"I see," replied Luke icily. "Then am I to presume that if \*I\* should be deemed a liability to the New Republic, I might look forward to the same fate?"

"Never," gasped Mon Mothma, her shock genuine.

"Careful, President. Never is a very long time. Thank you for your truthfulness. I'll leave you to more pressing issues now." Luke pivoted and exited the office before Mothma could stop him.

\* \* \*

Alone with Anakin Skywalker once more that evening in the secure med-center room, Luke sat tensely in a chair by the bed. The prisoner-patient was fully alert now, his former physical weakness having receded like an ocean tide.

"You were right, Father. I should never have brought you here. I thought only of myself, of my longing to know you, to repay you for saving me. I never considered the possibility of, the ...." Luke stammered as he struggled for the right words to cover his disillusionment and outrage.

"It's all right, my son. Your actions were understandable. It is not you who failed but I. I should not have let us become so close. I knew my fate, and I knew your desires. It was *\*my\** selfishness in wanting to be near you that has led to your sadness."

"I didn't want to believe this could happen. I thought I understood the Alliance's goals better. But if they can do this, if they can sentence you to die before a trial has even begun...."

"We both know any trial would be strictly a technicality of law anyway, Luke. Do not delude yourself further. I *\*am\** guilty -- of all they will accuse me of and more. I have accepted who I am and the things I have done. Now you must learn to do likewise."

"But you aren't like that anymore," flared the Jedi. "I know you aren't."

"It does not matter."

"Well, it matters to me." The blond man fell silent as he considered his choices for the last time. After several long moments, he lifted his face toward his father, a fresh brightness shining in his eyes. "Will you trust me, Father? I know I've given you no reason to, but ...."

"Of course I trust you, Son. And you have given me reason. You are all I once was, my past *\*and\** my future." Anakin Skywalker stretched out his hand and smiled as Luke clasped it warmly with both of his own.

"Then, we're leaving. You and I. You're as healthy as this facility can make you now. The New Republic won't wait long to set a date for your false trial once they realize this. It's now or never

for us. I know a place where we can go, where you and I can be alone while you rebuild your strength. I have a ship that will take us there. It's all loaded and ready. I've also located your armor and the life support units it contains. It was damaged, but I've repaired it. It will work once more, give you back your freedom."

Anakin seemed to ponder his son's offer before answering. "That may be, Luke. But what of *your* freedom? Your life has been here, among your friends. Would you so easily cast that aside for a life of isolation? You'll be named an enemy of the Alliance. You'll be branded an outlaw, a renegade." The Jedi nearly laughed aloud. "I've been little else but a renegade, an outlaw, for some time now, Father." Sobering, he added, "As for my friends, they're all too eager to murder you in the name of a justice I cannot accept."

Anakin slowly nodded his understanding. "It seems you have given this much thought."

"I have. Will you come with me, as you once asked me to come with you?"

"Of course I will," replied Anakin solemnly, squeezing Luke's hands.

"I'll help you dress then. I have most of what you'll need beneath my cape and uniform. It will get you safely to the ship where your armor is stored." As he assisted his father, the Jedi felt joy fill his heart, driving out the last remnants of guilt or remorse he felt for leaving Han and Leia. Either they would come to understand his choice or they would not. He could not turn back now. As he helped Anakin slip on the soft boots he'd brought for him, he said, "There's so much you can teach me, Father. Now, we'll have time."

"Indeed we will, my son," smiled the older man. "And there is much for you to learn yet."

*\*I will show you the true nature of the Force\**, he thought silently.

\* \* \*

As the shuttle safely lifted, carrying father and son away from the New Republic capital and all it promised, Anakin watched his son as he piloted the craft with expert skill. Behind his newly-shined ebony mask, Darth Vader smiled. Matters were proceeding exactly as he had

planned. And, this time, there would be nothing -- no one -- to stop him.

END

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