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...In Lover's Meetings
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Prologue:

"...So the princess urges you to leave immediately, Commander. This is most important," the droid concluded.

Luke thanked it absently and gathered himself to dash for the hangar, only to halt abruptly after the first few faltering steps.

Something. Something wrong.

He cocked his head, sifting the Force for the source of his unease. Nothing firm, nothing specific lay there, just -- Leia.

And uneasiness.

She needed help, he thought. It was a bad time for him to leave base. The anniversary of Han's death was here and still Leia sank ever more deeply into a morass of grief and pain. Luke wavered; perhaps he should go to her. But if this mission is so vital ...

Luke shook his head as if to rid it of his misgivings. He'd see Leia when he returned. They'd talk it out then.

Still ...

Luke ran for his x-wing. The doubts following him.

The base was silent, too silent, as is a patient in shock. As soon as his x-wing set down, he knew.

The walls of the corridors blurred in Luke's vision as he ran and the faces of those he passed were soft and dripping, as well, with the pain of the unbelieving, the deserted.

He brushed passed Rieekan's assistant, blank-eyed and silent as the rest, guarding the deserted anteroom. Rieekan sat alone, his head bowed over the desk, a messagetape clutched between his hands. The face he raised to Luke was crumbled, aged, the brisk, businesslike general no more to be seen.

He looks like an old man...

Luke gently pried the tape from Rieekan's stiff fingers and slipped it into the desk machine. He didn't need to listen to it, but he did, nevertheless, wincing at the Dark Lord's mocking words.

Yes, Leia was gone. She had followed Vader, seeking revenge, and fallen, not to his saber, but to his seductive Darkness.

Luke mechanically ejected the tape and gripped it in one fist, the plastic casing creaking from the pressure. I'll go after her. I'll find Vader and...

The tape casing cracked under his fingers, spilling forth its celluloid insides

"Luke, don't give in to hate..."

Luke's face hardened. Yes, he was about to give in. Going to do it again, Skywalker? he jeered bitterly. Go rushing in without thought or plan? Maybe this time Vader will win and you can join Han in death -- or Leia in Darkness.

He stared unseeingly at the crushed messagetape in his hand. Everything in him cried out to follow Leia, to wrest her from Vader's black hold, but --

"Much anger in him, like his father ...like his father..." Luke dropped the tape quietly. "I have to leave, General."

Rieekan raised his head, frowning. "Luke, don't--"

"I have to finish my training."

He had put it off too long, day to day, moment to moment, feeling that he was needed with the Alliance. This was the result.

Leia.

"Only a fully-trained Jedi Knight with the Force as his ally..." Yes, he would follow Leia, but he would follow her armed. This time he would not follow the path of anger or impatience; he would return to Yoda and complete his training.

And then ...

Rieekan watched him silently, a touch of color returning to his haggard face. After a moment, he stood and offered his hand. "May the Force be with you, Luke." A pragmatic man of action, Rieekan had never before, at least in Luke's hearing, invoked the Force.

Luke took the hand. A grim smile curved his lips.

"It will be, General. It will be."

"After Vader you will go now?"

A wry smile twitched at the corners of Luke's mouth; Yoda made the question sound like an invitation to join him for a stroll in the park. It was, he supposed, a succinct method of dubbing him Jedi.

Luke nodded. "Yes, I'll go after Vader now." He turned away, gazing upward through the haze. "And Leia."

Yoda poked at the ground thoughtfully with his stick. "Once on the Dark Path," he reminded Luke, "forever will it dominate your destiny."

"As long as life lasts," Luke agreed. "But I'll find a way for Leia."

He would find a way.

The room seemed made for night, rendering the sunlight streaming through the leaded glass somehow incongruous. A beam struck the armchair pushed next to the window, igniting small, glittering sparks off the wine velvet cushions.

The rest of the study lay covered in shadow, half-obscuring the massive mantelpiece and the woman who stood beside it, her back to the doorway. Luke reached for her Force-presence and encountered only a heavy shroud, black, thick and suffocating.

it was almost as though she wasn't there.

"Leia."

He approached silently, his softly-uttered word dropping heavily into the molten silence surrounding her. His use of her name surprised her more than his presence; she had expected him to come, sooner or later, but her own name tasted strange to her senses, and the personality attached to that name was nearly forgotten, submerged in Darkness.

There is no Leia, she thought.

Nonetheless, she turned to face him, for those were her orders; she had but to obey. Her hand dropped mechanically to her waist, touching the weapon her lord had given her. Inside, she felt nothing, and it seemed to her that if her mind were not numb, she would scream in relief: I feel nothing.

Instead, she gazed indifferently at the man she once had called friend and planned his downfall. What they had shared was from a life not hers, or so it felt. Even his actions were strange. She thought he would run to her, and with that remembered, youthful exuberance, try to persuade her from the path she had chosen. But Luke stood silent, as though waiting for her to break the speaking silence which lay between them.

He had changed, then. Her lord had warned her of Skywalker's growing skills and she could see that now as truth. Could see it in his silence, where there had once been quick, impetuous speech, and in his contained manner, where there once had been uncertainty. Even his form had gathered bulk and stature since she had fled the Alliance, though perhaps that lay simply in his stance or, likely, was an outward reflection of the power within.

She reached tentatively to him with those senses her lord had taught her, and almost staggered back with the impact.

The power.

She swiftly drew that other sense back into herself; the touch of his pure aura made her skin crawl with revulsion. She forced herself to outward

stoicism, gathering her mental resources. It would be a difficult task, but she would do it for her lord. She would keep her bargain.

Behind shuttered eyes, her mind worked swiftly.

Skywalker had grown in power and control, but with her lord behind her she would be the stronger. On her side was the impetuosity she remembered--some trace must remain or he would not have followed her here to the place where he could find only death or darkness. Surely the teacher who tried to block the rash Bespin journey had also banned this rescue, nor would the Alliance High Command have sanctioned this double risk, this throwing of the good after the bad.

Had Luke, as she once had, shaken off the restraints of responsibility and discipline to follow a dark road here to Malebolge? Or--satisfying thought--had the incursions which she and her master had made against the rebels succeeded in throwing the Alliance into such confusion that Skywalker's disappearance was not even noticed?

Not that it mattered. To her lord-- and thus to her--it mattered only that Skywalker had taken the bait of herself, had followed the trail of the former Leia Organa to the Imperial center world and directly into Lord Vader's own mansion, even into the very study where she had taken her own step into Darkness. A good omen for the success of her task.

It had been night when her master showed her the way, offered her the oblivion of the Dark Side's smooth embrace, and the room had been full of shifting light and dark, set dancing by the single flickering glow at her master's back. Now it was day and the heavy velvet curtains were pulled aside to allow sunlight to pierce the thick glass.

She noted, almost idly, how the dustmotes which usually hung unnoticed in the air were revealed by the shaft of light falling between them, and how the light reflected off Skywalker's hair, transforming it from mere yellow to gold.

She held the silence an instant longer, her eyelids lowered against the brightness. When at last she spoke, her voice was passionless. It was not Leia Organa's voice at all.

"We've been expecting you, Skywalker."

"I know."

The most deliberately cruel words he could find, dredged up from his visions, brought not a flicker to her frozen face, now as inscrutable as

Vader's cold mask. Pain twisted at Luke's guts. It was true; Leia Organa trod the paths of Darkness. Han's last words to her, but not a muscle twitched, not a ripple disturbed her Force presence.

Luke had known what Vader would offer and here it was incarnate: for Leia Organa, Han Solo had never existed, never loved her, never died. Vader's Darkness blinded her to the pain of living.

Luke allowed his own pain to flow through him, accepting it. He had lost his friend, brother of his soul, to Vader, felt the very instant Han fell under the Sith's blade. Now, Leia, whom he had thought a goddess in human form, was fallen into Darkness.

Luke gazed into the blank eyes once again. _"Don't give in to anger..."_ a voice reminded him.

How could I feel anger, Ben? he replied calmly. _How could I feel anything but pity?_

Luke stepped forward a pace. Leia's hand clutched at the saber which hung from her waist. His own hand, outstretched to her, was empty. "I know, Leia," he repeated quietly. "You and Vader expected me, knew that I would follow you."

He advanced once again, his hand still extended, feeling delicately for her shrouded aura. "And I have come--perhaps later than our Master hoped--but nonetheless I have come to find you." He edged his spirit forward gently, not wishing to startle her with the Light.

A tremor shook Leia's slight frame. She unhooked her saber, holding it ignited before her, as if to ward him off.

"Join us." Her voice was colorless still, but it held uncertainty in its echo. "Join us or die, Skywalker."

Luke didn't answer. With one final, soft surge, he sent his spirit to meet hers, its brilliance spreading over the edges of Vader's blackness, seeping inward. The opiate night melted back; the radiance advanced. Another step. He was within arm's reach of her. Luke cupped his hand on air, not quite touching her.

"Join me, Leia," he urged softly. "Join and live."

Kill him.

Shaking, she clenched her fingers tighter on the saber's hilt, her thumb touching the button which would bring it to shimmering life. Her lord's orders were to kill Skywalker. Her lord had given her the surcease of her pain in the thick, velvet Darkness he cast over the light of her grief.

The price was now to be paid.

Leia felt Vader's psychic presence. He will not turn. Kill him. She activated the saber, feeling the power of the Dark flow through her into the blood-red blade. She would kill him.

Pain sparkled in Luke's light, bringing with it remembrance of one gone. Kill him. Her lover was dead; who then should live? They should all die, all die and descend into darkness.

She clutched the saber, willing herself to strike the killing blow. Luke stood motionless, hand outstretched, weapon on his belt.

Kill him.

She shook her head, striving to free her sight from the blindness caused by Skywalker's aura. Her lord moved closer to her spirit, and tried to cover her with his protective psychic cloak, but through it the brightness shone, shooting beams of pure color through her lord's dark spirit. Vader could not quench it, could not stop it. Warmth and pain spread through her.

No, she screamed silently, I can't go back. There is no turning back.

She raised the saber. Still Luke beckoned, wounding her with the pity which lay in the calm blue eyes. She remembered Han..the Light..

No way back.

Leia drew her blade into the salute position. She heard, as if in a dream, the swift intake of Luke's breath. He knows, he knows.

But he made no move to stop her.

There was a moment of balance, when it seemed her very form was divided: on one hand Dark, on the other Light. The balance shifted and she hurtled her spirit toward Luke, spread her emotions under his Light, accepting the pain, the horror, the guilt. Behind her, the Dark Lord's presence fled.

No, there was no going back from the Dark Path. But another step could be taken, off the path to that other estate where there were no paths.

Leia brought the saber down into herself. Light blazed about her, and her failing eyes saw a familiar form at the Lighted doorway, beckoning her Beyond...

... Han...

Epilogue:

Luke knelt. Leia's face was still and peaceful, cleared of shadows.

"Once on the Dark Path, forever will it dominate your destiny."

"As long as life lasts," Luke murmured. "Nevertheless, Yoda, there was a way."

Luke rose, and now that the battle was done, unhooked his lightsaber from his belt and ignited it. He swung it upward in the formal salute of one Jedi to another. For a time, Leia had been Jedi, a Jedi of the Light. He turned away from the emptied shell. Again he noted the armchair, positioned to catch the afternoon light; he moved to it. He needed to rest, to recruit his strength. One battle was finished, but there was another to face.

Soon Vader would come; this time Luke Skywalker would be ready.

He lowered himself into the chair and, clipping his saber once more to his belt, settled down to wait.

End

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