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Acceptance

by [Marti Schuller](#)

Luke Skywalker stood amid the tumbled stones and charred wood, bitter emotions playing on his handsome face, shading his blue eyes with pain. Small wisps of ugly dark smoke still rose from the twisted black remains of the once tall, regal trees that had bordered the house. The house - no, not a house - a mansion, a manor, an estate - but not a house, and definitely never a home. Luke pushed at a large fallen block of marble with the toe of his black boot, raising a fine cloud of gray ash. The dark shadow of a high-flying predatory bird skimmed soundlessly across the rubble, sending a chill, unnatural shiver along Luke's spine. Involuntarily, he shuddered at the distant primal cry of the avian creature.

Despite the flow of warm sunshine, Luke wrapped his arms around himself a moment. He hadn't imagined this would be so hard. With conscious effort, he threw off the heavy mantle of despair threatening to settle firmly over him. With needlessly careful steps, he moved further into the ruins, his eyes scanning the debris sadly.

According to one who had reason to know, this had once been a place of incredible beauty. There had been a high, solid native stone wall surrounding the estate, now breached and broken, virtually non-existent. There had been a garden of vivid color and pleasing fragrance, with fountains and birdbaths and even a small rippling waterfall to add its bubbling music to the idyllic setting. There had been the trees of great height and majesty to shade the cool white marble facade of the mansion.

Luke shook his head in sorrow. He had hoped, more than he'd even realized, to see that mansion for himself, to walk its halls, learn its secrets. No one he'd encountered had been able to provide the slightest clue to its interior. Now, it was

forever gone, shattered, broken, burned beyond imagination's ability to envision. He sighed aloud, the sound seeming to echo eerily around him in this haunted setting.

There had always been rumors, hearsay, whispered suggestions in half-forgotten places, by being of every species and dubious background, of the vast wealth, hordes of treasure in coin and jewels. Luke had paid little attention, discounting even the tales of the secluded manor, a private sanctuary, as the stuff of fevered dreams for easy retribution and easier riches. Then had come the irrefutable evidence, the papers written in that unknown, but familiar script, written by the man himself, the man who had spawned the rumors.

As he settled tiredly on a block of stone to rest, Luke thought back to the day those papers had come into his possession. There had been no warning, no quiver of his finely honed Force senses to prepare him that morning as he'd approached the temporary offices of President-elect Mon Mothma, first acting head for the New Republic. It was not unusual for him to receive a quiet request from the soft-spoken, efficient leader of the one-time rebels on his quarters' private com-receiver. Building the new government was an overwhelming task - cementing old friendships, seeking fresh and reliable allies, searching out and bringing to justice the remnant fighting officers and men of the fallen Empire. There was housing to construct, new recruits to train, diplomatic ambassadors from various curious and sincere worlds to address, supplies to order, money to raise and so on. Mon Mothma was intelligent and accustomed to the role of delegation. Surrounded by capable and willing individuals, she had successfully laid a firm groundwork on which the fledgling New Republic could grow. She knew her people and utilized their skills to the maximum.

Luke Skywalker was among those on whom she most relied for a sane, comforting view beyond her own in a world that often seemed to have gone berserk. Theirs was an effortless, friendly relationship based on mutual admiration and understanding. Mon Mothma was one of the very few who knew the truth of Luke's parentage and his sibling status to Leia. By joint consent that truth remained, while not exactly secret, nonetheless a seldom referred to fact, with little or no bearing on the problems facing the new government, and therefore not for the general knowledge of the masses. Having known and respected many of the Jedi Knights of the Old Order before their ruthless destruction by Palpatine, Mon Mothma had proven an invaluable source of information to the sole surviving Jedi whenever they'd been able to steal a few precious moments for reflection on those bygone days. They had been too few and rare to suit either of them.

Mon Mothma knew of Luke's desire to resurrect and preserve the custom of Jedi neutrality, and applauded it, while still being able to enlist his aid and use his talents for the establishment of the young government she fostered. Luke's admiration for the seemingly tireless energy this woman devoted to her cause,

for her keen mind yet tender-hearted approach to this monumental undertaking, assured his continued involvement. At least until that time when the last black shadows of the Empire could be cast off and he could begin his search for future Jedi with a clear, untroubled conscience.

Thus, it was with no sense of concern, no inkling of what to expect, that Luke had entered the spartan office occupied by the New Republic's president that late morning on Dantooine. With memory's eye, he recalled it clearly.

Mon Mothma had been seated behind the large, paper-strewn desk at one side of the room, her face creased in an unusual frown as she pondered the object in her hands. Luke knew the droid outside in the corridor had announced his arrival before he'd reached the door to this room. The President's failure to greet him with her usual bright smile and glad welcome had sent the first ripple of discomfort ringing through the Force to touch his senses. He had cleared his throat loudly to proclaim his presence.

Looking up with startled eyes, Mon Mothma's smile had flickered recognition and faded quickly. Wordlessly, she'd motioned him to the only other furniture in the bare room, a simple wooden chair before the desk. The ripples had become waves of ill-ease lapping against his heightened senses. Once seated, he'd started to speak, only to be silenced by the abrupt rising of Mon Mothma.

She had walked to the wall of windows overlooking the city, where it lay stretched and mostly under construction beneath her. In her hands, she'd carried a moderately thick, rectangular envelope of sorts. From his vantage point, Luke had made out only that it appeared made of hide and bound tightly by strong cord wrapped across and over its sides and ends. Mon Mothma had held it tightly, for her knuckles were white, as she'd stared across the sky above the noisy city.

At last, she'd faced the young Jedi, locking unreadable eyes with his concerned gaze. Her brief smile had been tinged with sadness before she'd spoken. "This arrived very early this morning at my apartments," she'd said, holding the parcel forward. "I cannot tell you much about it or the man who brought it to me. Most of the little I know I was asked to keep in confidence, and I will honor that request."

Luke had nodded.

"It's for you, Luke. No one else knows of it, and I leave it to you to decide if that shall remain the way you want it. You may decide not to take it, I don't know. But if you choose not to, I'll honor that, too. I can hold it for you or even destroy it, unseen, if you find you desire me to."

"Why should I -"

"Please, Luke, let me finish. This is not easy for me and it will not be for you. This package was delivered to me by a man I do not know, yet have heard much about. I have no reason to doubt that he was who he claimed to be, or that his instructions were from anyone but who he named. He told me enough to convince me of his errand and my need to co-operate."

She'd moved to stand beside him then, still holding firmly to the bundle. "I was asked to deliver this to you, personally, and in private. I was told to tell no one else of my visitor, our meeting, or of this matter in any way. The parcel's contents are unknown to be except that they are personal papers, and I have no curiosity about them beyond the effect they may have on you, Luke. We've all suffered enough." She'd paused, her eyes drifting away momentarily to old pain. Then, with a sigh, she'd uttered the words that had stunned the young Knight to numbness. "The package is not addressed, but it is yours by right and that is all the deliverer told me. Yours by right, because he knew, as I know, the truth of your past. This package belonged to Lord Vader."

Luke stretched his legs out straight before him, shifting to a more comfortable position on the cold stone where he sat. The sun had begun its slow descent toward the rolling hills, casting new shadows over the destruction in which the young Jedi sat. Once more his thoughts returned to the events of the few months previous.

With the distance of time to cushion him, Luke remembered the flood of mixed emotions that had washed over him as Mon Mothma had held forth the parcel. "This belonged to Lord Vader." He had been caught in a whirlpool, attracted and repelled in equal measure, curiosity and foreboding pushing and pulling at his mind, dread and desire sucking the air from his lungs, the old pain from his heart.

Somehow Mon Mothma's gentle voice had penetrated the roar of blood in his ears, providing him the lifeline he had needed to regain his bearings and orient his strength. "Luke, I can't imagine what this must mean to you. You've told me often of your feelings for the father you thought lost to you as a boy and of your torment when you learned the truth. I believe that only his deep-rooted love for you was able to redeem the man he truly was from the horror he had become. Whatever this package holds is unknown, the seals remain unbroken. It was Lord Vader's, whether it holds any link to Anakin Skywalker's past or not, only he knew. Now it's yours." She'd paused, contemplating the man before her who suddenly seemed more like a lost child. "One thing only can I advise you, Luke, and I say this as your friend. Make no decision now. Take it with you, think, meditate on your choice. It will keep."

Luke had nodded, mutely rising and taking the surprisingly light burden from Mon Mothma's steady hand. He remembered thanking her for her advice and understanding, promising to let her know of his decision. By the time he reached his quarters, he had regained much of his composure. He had still be troubled by the rush of emotions the parcel solicited from him, but he felt in control once more.

During some of the clean-up operations to rout the Imperial governors after the destruction of the second Death Star, he had gained access to orders that had carried this same official seal. The orders had seldom proved mundane or benign, sometimes detailing graphically the Emperor's desires for specific prisoners, the control of native populations, and so forth. They had caused Luke many a disquieted night.

Once again he had been facing that same seal. This time on the private papers of the man himself. What would they reveal? More images to haunt Luke's dreams? Every order from Vader that the young Jedi had compelled himself to read had only proven further just how deeply committed to the Emperor, and to the Dark Side of the Force, his father had been. They had tattered the last hopes he'd held that there had been some human side, some trace of the once proud Jedi inside, beyond the terror that was Darth Vader.

The joy, pride and peace that had permeated his soul the night of the victory party on Endor, when he'd seen and known the spectral image of his father with those of Ben and Yoda, had been but gossamer things, fragile bubbles easily exploded. The depth of Vader's servitude to Palpatine, clearly etched in every order, had effectively destroyed Luke's illusions.

It had been painful to accept the reality, history though it was, but Luke thought he had successfully come to terms with it. He had determined to help rebuild the New Republic, then move on and re-establish the Jedi Order, undoing as he could along the way some of the wrongs Vader had committed. Without conscious thought, he had begun to think of the one man as two, Anakin Skywalker - his father and Jedi Knight - and Darth Vader - puppet to the Emperor and Dark Side evil. The package delivered by someone unknown, who knew the facts of his lineage, had blurred the fine lines within Luke's mind that had separated the two, restirring all the old pain and confusion.

He had safely stored the unopened parcel in the old trunk that he had carried with him everywhere since bringing it from Tatooine at the time of his encounter with Jabba the Hutt. The trunk had belonged to Obi-Wan Kenobi and had held at one time the first lightsaber Luke had ever seen, the one given to him then that had forever altered his life. Somehow it had seemed a fitting place for the papers while he sorted through his feelings.

It had not remained there long. Despite his staunchest efforts to meditate, to set aside the thing until he could reason out his reaction to it, he had not been able to forget it. His concentration had become divided, his sleep restless, his appetite poor. There was no one with whom he could discuss his reactions outside of Mon Mothma. Leia and Han, as well as the rest of his friends, were off on various errands and missions, and he would not trouble the already overworked President with his problems.

Within a few days after Luke had secreted the package away, he had found himself snapping angrily at a young recruit who'd been working with him, over a minor mishap the Jedi would have overlooked a month earlier. Luke had caught himself in mid-tirade, mumbled an apology and stalked off, leaving behind a shaken and confused youth. Luke had walked for hours, releasing the unnatural heat of his anger, at last deciding what he must do.

With his decision reached, he had found himself once more at peace, even eager to be finished with it. Either the parcel's contents would confirm his recent terrible realizations or it would provide new insight into the mysterious nature of the man who had seeded him. Either way it would be done and he could resume the business of his life.

He had broken the cord binding the package edges easily; it was old and brittle, having been tied into place long ago. Laying the envelope flat on his bed, Luke had noted that once it might have been a deep rich brown in color, now faded to a pale tan. He had carefully slid the edge of a knife, brought from the kitchenette for that purpose, beneath the ornate seal, releasing its hold on the folded flap.

Remembering the aged condition of the cord, Luke had gently reached inside the opened envelope, carefully extracting the contents so as not to risk damaging them. He had not paused to examine the individual items as he had removed them, preferring to empty the entire contents at once. Some had been merely single yellowed sheets of paper, others were folded documents of many pages, tied with thin string or enclosed in smaller folders, still more had been coated with a protective, permanent clear bond.

If Luke had been hoping for some personal memento, some link with Vader/Anakin's past life, he'd been disappointed. Only the papers littering his bed had been inside. Laying aside the flattened package, he had turned his attention first to the item strapped within the clear bond. He had gasped aloud when he'd realized what he held.

With a sense of detachment, he had examined the articles, recognizing them as pre-Imperial press notices, designed for release to the numerous media representatives that had proliferated during the Old Republic's rights of data and information laws. Each notice extolled some new venture of Palpatine's undertaking or proclaimed his much sought-after view on the popular questions

of the day. Some were announcements of scheduled appearances before the various civic groups, galaxy organizations and so on. Luke, with the knowledge of what had followed soon after the date of the last release, had seen the notices for what they were - propaganda meant to increase Senator Palpatine's prestige, to dupe the gullible and, by virtue of his increased popularity, to silence his critics.

Luke had wondered at Vader's inclusion of them with his personal papers until he had remembered Mon Mothma's stories. She had told him how closely Palpatine kept the young Skywalker, stroking his proud ego and stoking the fuels of his youthful passions. Perhaps, Luke had speculated, Anakin had even written these very releases, content that he was useful to his chosen leader.

Luke had set the notices aside. One-sided though they were, they could serve to remind others and warn future generations of the danger in believing too readily. Researched and studied, they could prove a flag to alert, a tool to teach. The horror of the Empire must be remembered if it was never to be repeated.

Next, he had turned to the yellowed single sheets, suspecting that the groups of folded documents might prove particularly fragile and require the most care. In spite of the extra care Luke had taken, the delicate, brittle pages had cracked where he held them, an odd corner here and there flaking loose to flutter onto the bed. The smell of them had been strong, a musty earthy odor of decay that Luke would ever after associate with that day.

The first pages he had seen had been imprinted, similar to the hard copy sheets Luke knew were used by the New Republic as printouts taken from the data displayed on the computer screens. Obviously, Vader must have had an earlier version of the system since the lettering was slightly different and not of the same quality, having faded considerably in several places. The information on the first three sheets had appeared to be of importance only to the enigmatic Vader, listing obscure dates and locations meaningless to Luke. The next three pages had been simply columns of nine digit numerical sequences. At one time the six pages had been attached at the top edges, but the adhesive holding them together had long since lost its effectiveness. Luke had frowned, pondering the mystery of the sheets, a vague idea nibbling at the edges of his memory. Giving up for the time being, he had set the pages down and proceeded further.

Beneath the six sheets, he had found the first of the handwritten pages. The precise, perfect script was another thing Luke had come to recognize as readily as the infamous seal, a script that did not flow, but marched across the page as if to some staccato beat in the writer's mind. It was impressive in its simplicity, intimidating in its coldness, commanding in its dark bold lines. This writing told no secrets, hinted at no weakness, defied analysis, protected and shielded its dark master.

The top pages had contained a long inventory of items, ranging from antique furniture to art to the most up-to-date technological communications system of that era. Beside each item was a cryptic, nonsensical emblem, a code of Vader's own making. Luke had wondered if the items were for Vader's rumored hideaway or, more likely, procured pieces of value taken from any number of conquered peoples, now stored and forgotten.

The last handwritten letter had turned out to be a drawing, a lay-out for a magnificent mansion, and a small diagram for the landscape around it. Luke had been surprised at the detail, the planning and obvious care that had gone into the diagram.

The Jedi stretched and broke his remembrances, returning with saddened heart to the ruins that surrounded him. The documents of the parcel had proved to be the legal rights of full ownership to the land on which Luke now stood, including the myriad papers such construction required. The only information deleted from the papers had been the exact location where the estate could be found.

So Luke had to Mon Mothma, saying only that he must leave. She had needed no further explanation, wishing him well and reaffirming their friendship. He had searched long months, following every rumor, lead and hint he'd ever heard or could dredge from every possible source. Most had proven as unfounded as the Jedi had suspected earlier, although a rare few were enlightening.

He had interviewed Imperial officers in half a dozen different prisons where they awaited trial. Few were co-operative or even civil, but one had been quite interesting. He had served with Vader aboard the Executor and was openly congenial to Luke's inquiry. The man was a puzzle to the Jedi. He made no excuses for his Imperial sympathies, asked no quarter of Luke. When questioned as to his attitude, he had smiled, shrugged and replied that he was an ambitious man with an avaricious heart. He was able to tell Luke much about the Dark Lord's behavior those last weeks before his death and Luke found the new information of Vader's moodiness strangely comforting, sensing correctly that he had been the cause of it.

"Did you ever accompany Lord Vader to his private estate?" Luke had asked the officer as casually as possible.

The man smiled broadly, as if at a private joke, before replying. "I, too, have heard the rumors, Skywalker. There was always speculation about our dark leader. Always when he was well out of the way, mind you. I've heard the stories of his great wealth, hidden away. Tell me, does the Alliance believe all the fables of treasure seekers, or just this one?"

Luke had said nothing and the man had continued. "I know nothing beyond the stories I'm sure you've heard. I cannot help you, I'm afraid. However, I can tell you that Lord Vader was, of course, never far from our leader's call, but there were times when we were on Hadisha for long periods that he would vanish for days. No one knew where or cared to try and find out. It wasn't healthy to display too much curiosity about that one."

Luke had sat forward with ears pricked alert, his common - and Force - senses alike tingling. The prison-clad officer had laughed aloud at his reaction, but not unkindly. "Of course, he is no longer around to intimidate the curious, is he? Not that you would be easily intimidated, I see. I'm sorry I cannot give you a map, young Jedi, but I would advise you on this. If you truly seek Lord Vader's secret, don't look beyond the planet of Hadisha. If such a private place existed, it would be there. Though I doubt you'll find the riches you seek."

Luke had sincerely thanked the man, even offering to speak to the authorities about his case. The officer had declined, saying, "Save your sympathies, Jedi. I'm guilty, but I wish you the luck of the stars. If I should still be around after your search, though, you can show me your gratitude by letting me know what you find. If anything. After all, I'm as curious as the next.:"

The planet Hadisha had been the seat of Palpatine's power. From the giant metropolis of Setee had risen the iron hand of the Empire. On the Emperor's orders, the large Jedi institute located there had been torn down at the time when his power was nearly complete and the Knighthood had been destroyed. On those bloodstained grounds, he'd ordered erected a monstrous palace from which he would govern. Using the city's size, Hadisha's location central to the galaxy and the advanced technological state of the planet's civilization to his advantage, he had ordered the Old Republic's capital systems moved there. Senate meetings were ordered held within one of the cold gray stone rooms inside the palace, until Palpatine had found a way to abolish that impotent reminder of the old way.

It had been in Setee that the first Death Star had been designed. Large sections of its weapons systems had been developed in the city's many factories and foundries. There had also been, at one time, an inordinate number of stormtroopers, military men and officers stationed in and around the city's perimeter. But as Palpatine's power had grown and his stranglehold on the galaxy tightened, he had sent the fighters away, keeping only his elite palace guard and a small army of troopers to control the city.

The native population had been sympathizers with Palpatine's supposed plans for galactic peace and prosperity, believing his promise of great personal riches for those who aided him, even being convinced that bending laws was an

occasional and sometimes necessary detail. By the time the majority of influential men had realized Palpatine's true designs, it was too late. They were either in his debt or held silent by their own illegal acts on his behalf. Those who distrusted Palpatine from the start had been too poor and unorganized, too divided, to prevent his actions. The few that had tried had been quickly and efficiently eliminated.

The freeing of Setee had been the first objective of the Alliance after the Emperor's death. Luke had not gone on that mission since his services as the last Jedi had been needed more urgently elsewhere, but his friend Lando Calrissian had spearheaded the attack. Han Solo, his closest friend and soon-to-be bondbrother, had been excluded as well, being busy routing the stronger outlying Imperial bases. Lando had never failed to mention his success afterward each time the three of them met. Luke knew it was a continuing game of one-upmanship that Lando and Han had been playing long before the Jedi had met either man.

Having stripped Lando's increasingly elaborate tale (it grew more so at each telling) by conversing with others who'd been involved, Luke had been able to surmise much of the battle's true nature. It seemed that when word of the Emperor's death had reach Setee, there had been unrivaled chaos. Those handful of high office holders left behind at the palace had done much of the Alliance's work for them, either by killing each other in bids to take the Emperor's place or by fleeing in fear, taking many of the limited army's strength with them for their own personal protection.

By the time the news of Palpatine's death and rumors of what was occurring at the palace had reached the general populace, there were so few troopers left that the people themselves had overwhelmed them. They had spent too many years under the Emperor's dark reign. Once released from the terror that had kept them obedient, they had regressed to near-animal behavior.

When Lando's rebels had landed, after a few minor skirmishes, it had been the masses of everyday citizens that they had had to fight. The people were running in the streets, looting, burning, tearing apart by the sheer maniacal strength of their hatred anything and anyone that had belonged to the Empire. The broken bodies of Palpatine's followers had churned even the battle-tested rebels' stomachs. Much that could have aided the Alliance had been devastated, fires burned freely, papers of unknown import littered every avenue and alleyway. It was as though the people, in their fevered delirium, had hoped to level the mammoth metropolis to the very ground in their anger.

It had taken weeks to gain control of the city and begin the repairs needed to erase the scars of that awful day. Once their anger had cooled, the people of Setee had become like eager children wanting to please, ashamed of their actions, hailing and welcoming Lando and his men as heroes. Yet the damage

was done and could not be undone. Records that could have eased the Alliance's search for Imperial ties were gone, the palace having been the first striking point of the people's hatred. It lay empty and abandoned, a blight for the eye and mind of all who saw it.

Into this turbulence, Luke had entered, seeking a place of mystery. Setee was again functioning, but confusion still ruled over all inquiries having to do with anything remotely connected to the Empire. Too much had been lost. Luke's frustration had been keen.

When the young Jedi had exhausted every source without success, he had been on the verge of giving up. It seemed impossible to find the truth and he had felt no longer certain that he even wanted to. Not after seeing the result of the people's angry assault. He had visited a small cantina one night, being more of the neighborhood variety catering to local patrons. It was small, dark and relatively plain, but just the place Luke had needed.

At the bar he had ordered a mug of the native brew. When the barman had brought it, Luke had asked out of habit if he was familiar with any large, private estates outside the city. The man had snorted derisively and said there had been plenty, belonging to the rich who'd grown fat while he and others had starved. He hadn't looked as if he'd known hunger, his belly overhanging his trousers, but Luke had heard it all before. The Jedi had started to silence the man with a word of thanks, when something he'd said pricked Luke's ears. The barman had mentioned a long-time patron of his cantina who'd been gardener to some of the larger estates, suggesting that Luke should talk to him.

With his good fortune holding, Luke had been directed to a side booth of the bar where the old gardener could be found most every night now that he was out of work. Luke had approached the rear booth slowly, telling himself that this could prove another dead end, but his senses had refused to listen.

The old gardener had turned out to be ancient, his skin burned a leathery brown from his days in the sun. His hands, wrapped around the mug of warm beer, were as gnarled as tree trunks, the fingers twisted and bent. His shoulders were permanently stooped and rounded, as though even sitting there in the bar he was hunched over a tender young plant. His name was Tulie, the barman had said, and he'd welcome Luke's company eagerly.

"So, you wanna know 'bout the old estates?" Tulie had replied to Luke's question. His voice cracked with age, but his bloodshot, watery eyes had sparkled. "I'll tell you 'bout them, son. Anythin' I can. Ya know they're all gone now, don't ya? Torn down by the 'good citizens' of this town. Maybe that's as it should be, who knows? But they didn't hafta destroy everythin'. Not the flowers or the trees.

What harm had they done? Tore it all up, anyway. Burned 'em and trampled 'em to death, they did, those 'good righteous people'."

Luke had ached for the pain in the old man's words, but there was nothing he could say to ease his suffering. Instead he had let the man ramble, buying him drinks and listening with care.

"You're a good fella, son. I can tell," Tulie had told him hours later. "You'd've never killed my pretties, would ya, boy?"

"No, I wouldn't have," Luke had assured him. "I'm sorry I won't get to see your gardens," he'd said sincerely. "I'm sure the landowners were proud of your work, though."

"Humph. Most never tol' me if they were. They were a pompous bunch, lad. Full o' themselves, too busy, too important to deal with the likes o' me."

"But you did know them, didn't you?" Luke had prompted.

"Know them? Sure, I knew 'em, better than they knew themselves, I 'spect. I'd see 'em come and go with never a glance at my lovelies." He had taken a large gulp of his beer then, before continuing thoughtfully onward. "All but one, that is. Now, that's a strange story, I can tell ya."

Luke had signalled for more beer for the old man, resisting his anxious nerves. Turning back to Tulie, he'd said, "I'd like to hear it, if you don't mind."

"Mind? Why should I? All I got left is my memories and my beer. You keep buying the brew, son, and I'll tell ya stories 'til sun-up." He'd laughed a sad, croaking, mirthless laugh then. "But this story is a weird one and that's no lie," he'd continued seriously.

"This was a new place then, maybe ten, fifteen, no twenty years ago. Anyway, I was a lot younger and known as the best gardener 'round. Folks said I could grow flowers outa solid rock, and they weren't far from right. Now most o' them bigshots gotta meet ya once, sorta size you up and let ya know who's boss. Most o' them never knew what they wanted, neither, just flowers here, trees there. So I had pretty much free rein.

"This here job was different. Like I said, it was new, great big house all surrounded by a high stone wall. The ground was all dug up from the buildin' of it, just dirt and a few clumps o' grass here and there. It was way outa town, too, so I wasn't so sure I wanted to take it. I had quite a few places as it was. 'Course, I had a bunch o' young fellas that worked for me, too, can't do them big places alone, no matter how good you are, ya, know. But I was the boss and they all knew it.

"So, anyway, I go out to this fancy new place and I see all this plain old dirt. Well, my old mind went straight to work. I could see exactly how I'd do this one up. Oh, I knew it'd be lots o' work, and take lots of money too for that matter, but I figured anybody who'd build himself a crazy wall like that, all 'round the place, in the middle o' nowhere, must have money to throw away. Besides, it ain't wasteful if ya spend it on somethin' pretty to look at, is it now?"

"I sure had some grand plans for that place, but here's where it gets strange. This man comes outa the door to meet me and I figure, so this is the bigshot hisself, but he don't seem right, ya know? Too stiff and short-worded, like one o' those trooper fellas. He asks me if I'm Tulie an' he tells me the owner has 'authorized him to hire me'. Now, I ain't said I'd take the job yet and I told him so, but this stiff little man wouldn't listen, just hands me the damnedest paper I've ever seen in my life.

"It's a blueprint, now mind ya, a damned blueprint for a garden! Every flower, every tree, every bush is named on it, even how far apart I should put 'em. Well, that part was insultin', I can say, but it was such a shock and so unexpected, I just stood there, staring. I could tell right away that this landlord was different. All those flowers and plants he'd listed on that paper, and half o' them ones I'd've picked! Why it was gonna be gorgeous, and expensive too, more'n even I'd figured.

"But that little man told me to order it all and the bills'll be paid without question. Now, son, that in itself ain't usual. Them rich folks watch their coins like an old mama with young kids, scared to death somethin' might happen to 'em. Then he tells me I can name my own price, too. Well, let me tell you, I thought of retiring right there. That garden was gonna be my best ever and I'd've done it just to see how she looked, but to get paid my own price, too ... well, I'd've been a fool not to jump at it, and I ain't no fool.

"Yessir, that was the prettiest place that ever was. There'll never be another like it, and I mean that. Took care of that garden for all them years, too. I used to look forward to going out there, ya know. Never was a more peaceful, soul-restin' place than that garden. Why, just walkin' in it put your mind to ease."

"Did you ever meet the owner in all those years?" Luke had urged gently.

"No, son, I never did. In fact, most days I'd be out there, the place looked empty, no sign of anybody a'tall. I did see a couple o' house droids now and then, but they were just keepin' the place clean. Made me sick sometimes to know that beautiful garden was out there and nobody ever around to appreciate it. Most of them rich people'll have parties and such, and in good weather, they'll more'n likely either spill outdoors or set up a tent in their gardens to show them off. Never saw sign of any parties, or any visitors either, at that place. Like it was real private, not meant for no one else, ya know?"

"Weren't you curious?"

"Sure I was, boy, but when you got a garden pretty as that one to care for and all the money you want, you don't risk spoiling it by nosing 'round what ain't your business."

"Very wise of you," Luke had conceded. "Would you recognise the house if you saw a diagram of it?"

"Never was in it," Tulie slurred, the brew showing at last. "Paid 'tention to my garden, just 'member it was big, bigger than most those other hotshots' places.

Luke had removed a piece of paper from inside his jacket. On it he had traced the plans he'd found in the personal papers given him by Mon Mothma. He had laid it on the table, noting again the detail of it; even the treeline had been marked and a vague garden outlined. If this was Lord Vader's private estate, and he strongly guessed it was, then he must have detailed the garden later on a separate sheet.

Tulie had picked up the diagram, pulling on ancient eyeglasses and squinting through them with his watery, red eyes. Holding the paper so it nearly touched his nose, he'd turned it this way and that, making use of the bar's dim light as best he could. Finally, he had returned the paper to the table where Luke had placed it.

"That's it, boy. The house seems a little different, but I never paid much 'tention. Could be I don't remember, or could be they changed it some to fit the land, but them trees is my trees and that spot's where my garden was. Even shows the old wall here 'round the edges, like a squiggle 'cause the property must not've been square."

Luke had wondered what that line had been, now he knew.

"Did you know this fella, son? Was he family of yours?"

"I'm not sure," Luke had admitted. "But I'd like to see this place. Could you give me directions to it?"

"That I can," Tulie had told him. "But you don't wanna go there now, lad. Not after what these 'good people' did to it. There ain't nothing there anymore, nothin' but wreck and ruin."

"I understand, but I still have to go. Maybe I'll find something, maybe not, but I must go. I'll know once I'm there if it's the place I'm looking for."

The old gardener had sighed unhappily before giving Luke the directions.

Late the next morning, after a restless night, the young Jedi had arrived by rented landskipper at the broken remains of the wall that had surrounded the estate. He had not needed solid proof to know that this had been the rumoured hideaway of Lord Darth Vader. His Force senses had swept him with confused emotion from the moment he'd approached.

He had wandered aimlessly through the ruins of his hope, stopping now and then to examine something or other that had caught his eye, only to have it turn out to be a bit of shattered glass or an unidentifiable piece of broken furniture. Tulie had told him how the mobs had descended on the rich estates, looting and carrying off anything of value or use, then firebombing the gutted houses until they all lay scattered and destroyed. Luke had not expected to find much left, but something had pushed him into seeing for himself.

He had spent the day here, searching for something he could not name. Now he noticed the sky was nearly dark, a full golden moon rising steadily over the low hills. He gave up his futile hunt and started, with heavy steps, for the place where he'd left the landskipper parked. As he walked, he passed out of the manor's ruins, down a much-trodden side trail that he had not seen before. It turned and wandered, growing muddy where his boots settled. In the failing light, Luke stooped to find the cause for the damp soil, knowing it had not rained recently in these parts.

In his mind, he saw again the vague garden of Vader's diagram, and remembered the waterfall. There were burn marks on the nearby rocks and scorched grasses; newly overturned dirt lay filling a shallow bowl, snaking away out of sight. So the mobs had destroyed even this, he thought. They must have deliberately smothered the little stream with earth, stilling its rippling song, in their madness. No wonder Tulie had been heartbroken; their devastation had been quite thorough.

Foregoing his plans for immediate departure, Luke followed the winding trail. Wilted, dying petals of once vivid hue pillowed his footsteps as he walked, their uprooted, burned plants now part of the ash where nearby a terrible bonfire had lit the sky. His foot brushed against something hard and Luke bent to see what it was. The headless body of a broken statue revealed itself as he parted the grass that covered it.

Further down from the forgotten statue, the trail curled back on itself, returning the way it had come. An overlooked stone bench sat upright and intact beside the curving trail. The young Jedi could not resist its invitation and moved quickly toward it. At its side, where it had rolled to rest when toppled by the angry crowds, he found a shallow dish that had once served as top to some marble birdbath.

Luke eased his weary body onto the cold, unyielding stone of the bench, the golden moonlight casting flickering shadows on his troubled face. If only he'd found some clue, some link between Vader and Anakin that could reconcile him, ease his anguish over Vader's evil. It had not been enough for Luke that his father had saved his life and returned to the Light Side of the Force. The blackness of Vader's crimes had erased that joy. It had been Anakin who had surfaced to rescue his son - Anakin Skywalker, Jedi Knight, father of a small boy's dreams. Darth Vader had been the nightmare, the creature of evil and cold that mindlessly did his dark master's bidding, even to the destruction and near annihilation of his own kind.

"Hmpph, Jedi do you call yourself, but see what is before you you do not," came Yoda's chiding voice from the shadows.

"Master Yoda?" Luke called, surprise widening his eyes.

"Eyes you have ... brain, too use them son of Skywalker."

"What are you saying? What is it I should see?" Luke pleaded, confused, but the shadows were silent except for the chirp and call of nocturnal insects.

What had Yoda meant? What had he missed? Tired, bewildered, emotionally stretched thin, Luke's mind refused to find the answer. What should he see? The broken stones, the smoldering trees? Unable to focus his thoughts, the Jedi relaxed his efforts, slowed his breathing and closed his eyes, drifting subconsciously into the comfort-giving meditation he knew so well. Gradually, his concentration returned, bathed in the warmth of the Force that always enveloped him during this quiet exercise, bringing new strength to his tired body and soul.

Then suddenly Luke felt the years rolling backward. Cautiously, he opened his eyes. The garden lived once more. Bright sunshine dappled the silver leaves of the trees, birds sang gaily. Colorful butterflies chased each other among blooms of brilliant tint and shade. The music of a bubbling stream competed with the hum of bees. A serenity settled over Luke, a peace generated by the beauty of the living garden. And in that calm repose, he found the answer that had eluded him, the answer to Yoda's command.

With his new awareness, the bygone vision faded, returning Luke to the moonlit bench and the ruined harmony that had been Vader's garden. He spoke aloud to the mooncast shadows.

"I understand, Master Yoda. There was a part of Anakin Skywalker alive in Vader. This garden is the proof."

"You are almost right, Luke," came a deep, resonant voice from the path to Luke's right.

Skywalker jumped to his feet, turning quickly in the direction of the voice. In the spill of moonlight, the young Jedi saw the spectral image he'd seen only once before, on the Endor moon. "Father?" he whispered, his voice choked.

The image moved beside him, sitting on the edge of the bench, drawing Luke to sit, too. The love he saw reflecting from the gentle, unscarred face was mirrored in his own. How long had he hoped for just this chance to finally talk with his father? He was tongue-tied, nervous, afraid Anakin would vanish if he breathed.

"Luke - son -" the image spoke.

"Father," Luke interrupted. "You don't know how glad I am to see you."

"You must listen, Luke. I owe you so much, I love you more, but my time with you is short. It's vital that you understand what I'm about to say."

Luke's enthusiasm cooled instantly. Sobering, nodding, he stilled his fast-beating heart as Anakin resumed.

"I'm more proud of you, son, than you can know. You are all that I could have been, if only I'd learned to control my impatience and listen to those wiser than myself. Because I couldn't do those simple things, you can never feel a pride in me as I have in you.

"Luke, you must accept the truth of who I was before it tears you apart. I am grieved and ashamed at the acts I committed as Darth Vader, but I cannot, will not deny that I did them. You must not, either!"

"But you weren't yourself! You'd been near death, used by Palpatine, turned at your weakest moment. It wasn't your fault. It could have been anyone ..."

"No, Luke! Stop it! I had made my choice, turned from the light before I was ever hurt. I chose to serve the Dark Side!"

"That's not true," Luke denied. "It can't be."

"You've used those words before, the first time you learned the truth of who and what I was. Then you chose almost certain death rather than join me. Was it the Dark Side you fled from or your own inability to deal with the truth? Then, you were a boy, untrained, undisciplined. What will you choose now, son?"

"You cannot go on, dividing me, excusing me. Listen to me, Luke - for both our sakes! I am your father, all of me - Anakin Skywalker and the Dark Lord of the Sith, Darth Vader! As Anakin, I was a strong ally of the Force; the very power you possess came from me. I was young, dedicated, a loving husband to your mother, and a willing friend. But I was also impatient, ambitious, greedy and full

of my own importance, an ego. As Darth Vader, I was heartless, commanding, even cruel. I accepted no weakness, no failure from those around me. I did do unspeakable things for which I have and will yet pay. But I was also capable of kindness, generosity, compassion.

"The few times I could get away, I came here. I built this place as my retreat, my respite from the need to think every word, every gesture, every nuance that might be misconstrued by my so-called friends and enemies alike to harm me. I found a fragile peace in this garden unlike any I'd ever known, as either man, even though I saw it through visored eyes, heard the birdsong and creek through muffled ears, could not enjoy the sweet fragrance of the flowers around me.

"No man, no creature in the galaxy, the universe, is all good or all evil, all Light or all Dark. Judge easy, my son, lest someday you find yourself on trial. Accept the truth of me, your father, and all that I was, Luke. Only then will you be at peace, able to fulfill the destiny that is yours. For both our sakes, accept - and if it's in your heart, forgive."

A high, black cloud closed over the full moon, shutting out its gentle light, turning the ruined garden to velvet dark. Seconds later, the soft golden rays penetrated the gloom, pale gold beams falling on the lone figure seated on the stone bench. Anakin Skywalker - Lord Darth Vader's time with his son had come to an end.

Luke's heart ached as his eyes lingered where his father's image had been. The elder Jedi's words still echoed in his mind, touching the chords of his soul. And he knew the truth, finally, fully for the first time. He accepted the man who'd sired him then, for all he had been, good and evil. And, by so doing, he found at last the means to confront and control his own darker side. He was ready to face tomorrow with new strength and will.

EPILOG

It took months, using every means of sophisticated equipment at the New Republic's disposal, but at long last, Luke Skywalker, first of the New Order of Jedi Knights, had succeeded in deciphering approximately half the cryptic printed pages contained in his father's private papers. He had not been disappointed by his discoveries. The numerical sequences belonged to financial accounts of bogus companies, fronts for the identity of the true owner - Darth Vader - allowing continued deposits of large sums of money to many different banking firms on many different worlds.

A check of those institutions that had remained solvent after the Empire's fall, and most had, proving Vader's business acumen, had shown the whereabouts of the lost treasures of the Dark Lord. Yet other accounts had shown systematic withdrawals as well as the routinely made deposits. These had proven the most difficult to uncover.

Luke had grown so frustrated that he had ultimately taken his pride in hand and gone to President Mon Mothma for help. Once more she had assured him of her aid, unquestioned. A few discreet communications later, Luke had found even the strictest banking rules set aside for him, records suddenly became available, previously surly financiers co-operative in the extreme.

Surprised and pleased by what he found in those tedious trails of bureaucratic paperwork, Luke had discovered an ever deeper respect, a clearer picture of the complex nature that had been his father. After long hours and days of tracing one artificial name after another, he had learned that the monies withdrawn so routinely were doled out on schedule, and quite anonymously, to a charity hospital on one of the poorer worlds, one dealing with extensive burn victims, mainly children.

Luke left the operations running as he'd found them, arranging secretly to add to their funds from those untapped sources he'd discovered earlier. One account only did he withdraw completely, transferring the considerable sum to a neutral banking service used by the Alliance during its rebel period. With careful planning, he set in motion the making of a dream. Instructing the banking service's president to conduct the account's handling personally, he created a fund for the construction and maintenance of a protected park outside the city of Setee on Hadisha. His only firm demands were that the gift of the park remain anonymously donated and forever free to all peoples to enjoy; and that a gardener by the name of Tulie be allowed to live in a small, comfortable cottage on the land so that he might plan and upkeep the park's gardens. On his death, the cottage and park responsibilities were to be passed on to one of his own choosing.

Luke trusted that Tulie, and his father, would be pleased.

THE END

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