

Star Wars: Elegy

The Fire Within

***What if Han Solo didn't survive the Carbon
Freezing process...? Part II***

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Climbing an infinite staircase out of a murky bog, each step a grueling agony, slowly climbing upwards from an unfathomable darkness to an unending blackness, Luke Skywalker struggled back to consciousness.

Everything hurt.

He was battered and bruised, aching from a thousand cuts. His back burned. His cheek throbbed. And his arm...

His arm was *gone*.

Even in waking, the nightmare wasn't over.

He was vaguely aware of lying in a medical bay. It was opulent by Imperial standards- in other words, cold, grey, metallic, utilitarian... but the metal examination slab that served as his makeshift bed had a *pad* on it, so it was practically a VIP suite.

The door opened.

The nightmare returned.

It's loud, rasping breath preceded it.

Darth Vader entered the room, striding slowly to the foot of Luke's bed. Luke could barely move. He wouldn't be escaping any time soon.

Vader stood there, regarding him silently.

"My son." The two words, a bass rumble with a mechanical tinge, hit Luke like a pail of ice.

"Never." He whispered through dry, crackled lips.

"It is pointless to deny the truth."

"I'll never join you..." Weak, confused, hurting, he clung to the mantra that he had shouted defiantly only hours ago, though now it was a hoarse croak. "Never."

"In time, you will come to see differently. It is your destiny."

Luke wanted to sneer, but didn't have the energy. "I am a Jedi. I'll never turn. I will avenge my father."

Vader simply stared at him for a long moment.

"Perhaps you are not as strong as I once believed. There is another that I will train. Perhaps I shall take her before the Emperor; perhaps he will be appeased."

"And then... what? We have a chance to get to know each other?" Luke croaked, as defiantly sarcastic as he could manage with no strength left in his body, and precious little in his spirit.

"I will train you as I always should have. You are my son, and you *will* embrace your destiny by my side."

Luke didn't have the energy for this.

"Fine. If you're my father... then who was my mother? Who would marry a thing like..."

He trailed off. A deep rumble filled the room. It seemed to grow colder. The bed rattled.

"You will not speak of her again." Vader's words seemed to strike directly at his mind; they left no room for defiance or rebellion.

Luke knew to pick his battles. Perhaps this one would be wiser to obey.

"I will return to complete your training. Do not attempt to escape; it will go poorly for the princess."

"Leia?" Luke cried in alarm.

Vader turned, abruptly, and was gone again.

There was nothing left.

Han was gone, frozen in a slab of carbonite.

Chewbacca was gone; having fallen only after slaying enough stormtroopers to be worthy of song, perhaps, but gone nonetheless.

The rage had burned itself out; she had no anger left to give. Only numbness remained.

The cell was more spacious than her quarters aboard the Death Star; perhaps it was once someone's quarters. But she was here; a prisoner of the Empire, which she'd never wished to be- and still alive, which she no longer wished to be.

She hurt. She simply hurt.

Her soul ached, and it wanted to rest.

Her tears were all cried out. Her screams had ravaged her throat into silence. Her boiling blood now simmered; exhaustion had overtaken rage.

Vader wouldn't need to torture her- she'd broken herself.

She'd lost her love. That was more than enough to destroy a person. But she'd lost so much more, so very much more... until the fight was all that sustained her, all that kept her alive. She was the fight. And then... she'd simply lost.

Somewhere, out there, the Rebellion was still alive.

But she wasn't.

She was just a husk. No life remained in her.

She heard footsteps. She didn't care.

The door opened, and with it came that horrible breathing, that deep rasp, coming to steal something else precious from her soul.

Well, the joke was on Vader. There was nothing left to take.

He strode purposefully in, motioning to the guards to remain outside. In his hand, he held a lightsaber; another was clipped to his belt.

He began without preamble.

"The Force is with you, Leia Organa. This is unexpected. You showed great skill in attempting your vengeance; great skill and great spirit."

That much was true; it had taken the Dark Lord himself to subdue her, though he'd done so with little difficulty. A touch, and she was dropping to the floor, landing on the thick carpet of stormtrooper corpses that littered the deck around the Millennium Falcon.

Vader tossed the lightsaber at her. She let it clatter dully to the floor, too numb to expend the energy to think, to process the meaning of this random occurrence.

"Pick it up. Attack me."

Vader ordered.

Leia stared at him dully.

"You have great power in the Dark Side; it could be a powerful weapon."

Leia didn't blink.

"With it, you could overthrow the Emperor and restore your precious Republic- give in to your hatred, learn to use it, and you could become more powerful than your wildest dreams!"

Leia lowered her head and studied her shoes.

Vader extended a hand, and the lightsaber floated up to her, into her hand.

"Your heart burns from a fire within. Use it- take up your weapon. Strike!" Vader commanded.

She looked at it, then back to her shoes. They had blood on them.

Vader studied her in silence for a moment.

"Very well, princess. I will return to Skywalker."

Leia's head snapped up.

"If you will not embrace your anger and learn the full power of the Dark Side, then perhaps *he* will."

Vader accomplished something incredible. Somewhere, deep within her withered and twisted will, he found a small pool of rage that had not yet been exploited.

As her turned his back, Leia sprang with a primal scream of defiance, igniting the lightsaber and bringing it down towards his head.

He caught her arm with one hand and shook the lightsaber from it. It clattered to the ground, deactivated.

Caught in his vice-like grip, Leia sank to her knees, teeth bared.

"Now," proclaimed Vader, "Your training will begin."

Leia was too numb to do anything but nod.

This was the first time Luke had been allowed out of his cell in months. He flexed his new mechanical arm beside him in readiness, but knew it was a futile gesture- there was nowhere to escape too, even if he could defeat his stormtrooper escort unarmed.

Vader's initial persistence seemed to give way to less and less interest- perhaps he was tiring of the 'father' pretense, or perhaps he was tiring of Luke. Maybe he was distracted by bigger things; perhaps the Rebellion was winning. Now there was a thought... a glimmer of hope at last.

Vader had initially been able to manipulate him by threatening the princess harm if he disobeyed- but before he could get Luke to do anything truly dark, Luke had called his bluff. It crushed him inside, but he doubted that Leia was still alive. Even though he imagined that he'd be able to heal his death, his stupor

after Cloud City had probably concealed the pain- perhaps that was for the best. After his demands for proof that Leia was still alive, Vader had failed to bring up the 'tool' again.

Luke had mostly been left to rot the last few weeks.

The doors before him parted, and the sight that greeted him drew an involuntary gasp from Luke.

It wasn't possible. Not so soon.

The Death Star hung before him, a skeletal shadow circling a green and verdant world. Tellingly, it's main weapon was already well-completed.

Luke's dismay became sorrow; no matter what happened, this development could only entail more death, in great numbers- no fewer than the compliment of the station itself- possibly many, many more. Did the Rebel Alliance know?

Another figure stood in front of the viewport; a woman dressed all in black, body-hugging clothes, a cape draped over her shoulder, and...

A lightsaber on her belt.

Another Jedi? No, of course not- another Sith. So this was why Vader had been losing interest; he had another apprentice. Luke could feel the Dark Side radiating off of her, like waves... but with a strange emptiness underneath, as if the Dark Side were an outline of wax poured over a mould of ice, long since melted away; and all that remained was the shape, with nothing inside.

Luke shuddered.

And then she turned.

Luke gasped aloud.

Her skin was pale, accentuated by dark eyes and dark lips, and hair dyed black- but it was her.

"Leia!"

And then, incongruously, she smiled. A warm, bright smile, as she'd favored him with when he was recovering in Echo Base.

"Luke. It's good to see you."

Luke was at a loss for words. How could she pretend that...? What was...? How in...?

He needed to lie down. For a long time.

"How are you? Have they been treating you well?"

Her voice hadn't changed. Her mannerisms were the same.

But she looked different.

Felt different.

She was devoted to the Dark Side.

Luke found his voice. Barely.

"What... happened...?"

Leia's eyes fell; she couldn't meet his horrified gaze.

"Luke, they... they killed Han."

Luke should have been more shocked, more saddened; but he'd assumed that as a given already. He'd assumed the same about Leia.

"And Chewbacca...?"

"Dead. And C-3PO is now Vader's personal servant. R2 is slaved to his fighter. The Empire's beat us, Luke."

"You can't mean that, Leia!"

He reached out in the Force, looked for some glimmer of hope, some glimmer of life inside of her; it was clear that her old persona was nothing more than a mask over whoever Leia Organa was now.

"We're still alive! We're still!"

He froze. He couldn't believe what he felt inside of her.

Yet he could *understand* it.

"Maybe you're right." He said. "Maybe they have won."

The door opened, and Darth Vader entered. The event didn't carry the cold dread that it used to.

"Does your new home please you?"

Luke was trying to formulate a properly defiant response when Leia bowed, and replied "Yes, my master."

It hit Luke like the cold weight of Vader's Cloud City revelation. It was the logical conclusion, of course- but hearing her confirm it, using the same voice she'd just used for a friendly greeting...

"Leia, what have you done?" He asked, knowing full well the answer.

She looked at him, oddly devoid of emotion.

"I'm using the fire within."
They fell into the shadow of the Death Star.

Walking the corridors of the Death Star, Leia prepared to meet her master's master. Vader was ready to show his Emperor the fruits of his cultivation, his careful and methodical nurture of the fire within her heart.

She was ready to embrace those fruits.

But there was one thing left to do first.

Hanging back several steps, behind the stormtrooper escort, she fell in alongside Luke.

"I'll never see you again." She said, quietly.

"I know." He replied, solemnly, avoiding her eyes.

"I'm sorry." She said. For what, she did not elaborate.

"Leia, it's-"

She cut him off before he could say anything foolish.

"No, Luke. It's not. There's no going back. There never is, with hating. It fuels you, it drives you... but only in one direction. There's no turning aside."

"I know you've lost so much, Leia. But-"

"Oh, I know, Luke. You've lost so much too, is that it?" She seemed to be growing genuinely angry.

"Your aunt and uncle, your father. Your mentor. Your friends in rogue flight. Now, even your arm, and your last memento of your father with it. And you think that makes you qualified to tell me about loss. To tell me that you've lived through it, so will I. Or some other nonsense. Am I right, Luke?"

She looked at him with a piercing gaze.

At the same time, he felt something in the folds of his shirt; a sudden weight, though she had not raised a hand to touch him.

Leia turned her gaze away.

"I learned a lesson about loss, Luke. Early in my training, I built my own lightsaber. Lord Vader said it was a paltry effort; he threw it in the incinerator and told me to build another. From that loss, I grew stronger. Pushed myself harder. Used it to drive me where I needed to go."

Luke glanced down for the tiniest fraction of a second; there within his shirt lay a blackened, charred metal cylinder. The damage looked mostly superficial.

Leia fixed him with a pointed look.

"That was the lesson I learned. I hope that it can get you where you need to go."

Before he could respond, she strode forward, taking her place at the head of the line.

They stopped before a bank of turboshafts.

"Take Skywalker to the detention block." Vader ordered. "My apprentice, it is time to meet your new master."

As he was led away, Luke saw Leia enter the lift without looking back.

The doors of the lift parted into the heart of darkness; a domain of evil lay before Leia.

To the eyes, it was a throne room.

To the Force, it was a black pit. A void.

The Emperor's domain.

And there he sat- Palpatine, Sidious, the Emperor; the heart of the Dark Side on his throne of power.

The heart of flame strode out confidently behind her master to meet him.

"Lord Vader," the wizened Sith Master croaked, his voice a melodious politician's croon, coated in the slick oil of manipulation, then dried and cracked from the ravages of age. "Welcome. You have had the time that you sought- now present to me your apprentice... and I shall judge her worthiness."

She stepped forward, from behind her master's cloak.

She locked eyes with the man that her life had been dedicated to overthrowing.

The Emperor chuckled, a dry, rasping gloat that contained mirth but no warmth.

"And so, the renegade princess becomes a servant of the Dark Side."

She stood at attention, silent.

He continued.

"You are strong in the Force, young one. I wonder who your real parents were... a pity that Bail Organa is no longer present for questioning."

Once, her eyes would have flashed with fire as her jaw tightened and her fist clenched.

Once, she would have raged at the casual invocation of her father's name by the man who commissioned his murderers.

But now the fire was only within her heart, and there it stayed- no outward sign would betray her rage as the Emperor did his best to stoke the fire.

"I wonder, my dear, if you would be interested in the view..." he mused, indicating the great viewport behind him, the portal from which he surveyed his domain. Beyond it was the blackness of space, speckled with small pinpricks of light, all but swallowed up by the blackness surrounding them from every side. Among them, small points of light flared in silent torrents.

"It would seem that the pitiful band of rebels and traitors that oppose my Empire has finally decided to strike." His voice grew low, mock-compassionate, mocking. "I'm afraid they are quite trapped, with no means of escape. They are dying, to a man."

He studied her; her face betrayed no reaction.

"Yet they continue to fight... they have embraced their destiny. And you, my dear?"

She had embraced this day as her destiny since the moment that she had failed her strike at Vader.

"I am Darth Raze." She announced.

With cries of surprise, three stormtroopers were cut in half.

Charred as it was, the lightsaber still worked.

Slicing through his binders, Luke stretched out with the Force. He could sense that the shield was down; an attack run had begun. Probably good old Wedge leading the charge.

It was time to get out of here.

Luke was barely a step into his search for Leia when he spun, heading for the landing bay instead.

He had a good guess as to where she was.

That she couldn't be rescued... was a certainty.

"You have done well, Lord Vader." The Emperor announced. "I am pleased."

"Thank you, my master."

The fire within was stoked to boiling; it forged her resolve into unbreakable steel as it burned away all of the dross. It was time.

"May I ask a question, my liege?"

She stepped past him, studying the distant points of light flaring in the darkness outside.

"Ah! So, the pupil is ready for her new teacher!" Palpatine cackled. "You may ask, my child." he oozed, as he studied her, his magnanimous tone intended to disguise his critical eye.

"There is a matter of the Sith that I don't understand, my master." She said, slowly, turning her gaze back to Palpatine, and to Vader standing beyond him.

It was a farce.

They were the ones who didn't understand.

Her whole life was given over to the Dark Side.

Not to Vader. Not to the Sith.

But to her own darkness.

The fire within her heart raged; she'd learned to hide it, but it never ceased its ravages- it had never stopped burning, day or night. It demanded new fuel.

"I didn't understand it at first, when I embraced the Dark Side," she said, turning to stare out the great master window.

"It seemed like a strange method of recruitment, garnering an apprentice by causing them to want to kill you more than anything."

Shielded from sight by her body, her right hand slowly raised the lightsaber's tip, pointing it at the glass.

"That hardly seems to breed loyalty. It seems to me that the convert would be more likely to pretend to

agree just long enough for you to turn your back- and then, finish the mission that they started."

She pressed the activation stud.

There was a burst of light from the emitter nozzle.

In a silent storm of wind and shattered glass, three black hearts were cast into the void.

The fire within, at long last, blew out like a candle.

The lurch of Luke's shuttle as it left the floor of the hangar deck was nothing compared to the lurch of his heart as he felt Leia's death.

Yet, he knew it had been inevitable. He'd felt it when he touched her through the Force.

He sped away from the shattering husk of the Death Star, transmitting a rebel-friendly transponder code, as flames consumed the battlestation.

That was the way of fire.

Let it burn long enough, and the flames would consume everything. When the fuel ran out, the fire died; but not before leaving dead everything that it had devoured.

All that was Leia Organa had been burned away before she ever set foot on the Death Star.

Pain leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering.

The fire within turned in on itself until nothing was left for it to devour; and then, it simply burned away.

Luke signaled the nearest frigate and set his course for Endor, letting the final flames burn themselves to nothing behind him.