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## **Act III, Scene One**

by [Chris Callahan](#)

Leia sat on the floor in the middle of her room, eyes closed, going through the relaxation ritual preparatory to her lesson. It had been part of her daily routine since, with Maeve Solo's reluctant help, she had retrieved the Jedi teacher Jarren Blaess from hiding a fraction of a step ahead of the Empire. Under his guidance she had learned far more about using the Force than Ben Kenobi and his then-aide had ever suspected she could, back in her childhood when Ben and Jarren had trained her and some young relatives in the basics of meditation and defense against mind probes. Jarren, though almost as surprised by her recent progress as she was, had encountered latent talents before--abilities hidden from even skilled teachers till somehow triggered by unexpected influences.

In her case, they'd decided, the trigger had been Luke's call for help on Bespin, As soon as she got to the new base she'd begun studying on her own, using instruction tapes from the Alliance files; by the time Jarren arrived she'd already gotten everything she could from the tapes, and since then had gotten stronger at a rate that thoroughly impressed her teacher. While they emphasized the mental disciplines, Leia insisted on a reasonable level of skill at physical defense also. In her position she didn't have time to go through the regular physical training, but there was no need to neglect it entirely. And there was a very personal reason for it. Han, on his return from Tatooine, had been less than happy about the tape studies and the lessons with Jarren, wasting time and energy on that mystical nonsense! Only the obvious benefits of her learning better self-defense had stopped his complaints, at least in her hearing.

The now-familiar calm enveloped her. This session would be devoted to contact with Jarren elsewhere on the base, one of the more difficult exercises she'd recently started.

Blanking out her surroundings, she "reached" for contact. The general low level of Force emanations was a faint hum, against which the aura of her teacher should stand out clearly unless he was deliberately shielding. She swept the entire base, finding nothing. Shielding, then. Not all those trained in the Force could manage it, and Jarren wasn't one of the strongest of those who could. Leia herself had some ability, enough to make herself part of the background to a casual probe but practically useless against a deliberate search for active Force talent. Jarren could shield against her with ease, but her probing ability was getting stronger and he'd been finding it necessary to use a little more effort each time.

Carefully she searched the base again, section by section. Ah, there--a slight tremor, as if he were lightening the shield a bit. She reached more strongly. The tremor stopped, but she had the location, and she probed delicately and persistently,

Finally Jarren dropped his shield, *Very good, Your Highness! Your strength and control are improving admirably! Now let's try--*

Sudden powerful "static" erupted in her head, blinding her physically as well as mentally. Panicking, she started to retreat. She was pulled back, gently but firmly held by a power that made Jarren's as weak as her own by comparison. Faintly she heard Jarren's startled *Master Yoda!*

*Yoda?!* That was the name of Luke's teacher on Dagobah! What was he doing in her mind here? Dimly she realized that Jarren was being dismissed, but she had no time to protest the loss of his comforting familiarity,

*Princess Leia, urgent it is that you listen. Go you must to Hanorah; Luke Skywalker is there, your help he needs. On you all depends.*

This message drowned out her puzzlement at how Yoda could reach her at such a distance. *I -- I don't understand, Luke went to Dagobah to study with you. And what could I do?*

*To Hanorah he went for meditation and practice. Not then did I know of danger there, but Vader knows of Mm and will try to conquer him. Well trained is Luke now, but Vader is stronger and is deceptive. Needed your help is--defeated he must be!*

*How can my help mean Vader's defeat?*

Suggestion of an exasperated sigh, *You have I watched for a long time. Well you learned from Obi-wan and Jarren, and strong are you with the Force. The future I cannot see clearly except that you are the key. To Hanorah you must go, or all*

*has been in vain. More powerful than you realize the Emperor is, but without Vader, defeated he can be.*

Leia shuddered. Luke threatened by Vader again, with the added disadvantage of believing Vader was his father! She was positive Vader had lied, but had been unable to persuade Luke, and she was the key to the outcome of this climactic battle? *Master Yoda, what can I do? I'm not a Jedi--*

*Impatience, Important abilities and training you have. With proper use of them, succeed you will. Advice I can give now, but you must decide exactly what to do when comes the time. Later, help I cannot, only watch.*

*Very well, Master Yoda, I'll go. Tell me what I need to know.*

\* \* \* \* \*

As Leia prepared to leave, Jarren reached her, *Princess, can you tell me what's going on?*

*Sorry, Jarren, All I can say is that I have to go to Hanorah--alone. Amazing how easy it was to communicate while doing something else if he made the initial contact. There's a short tape here for you. Play it six hours after I leave and do what you think best. Thank you for everything you've taught me--I'm going to need it all and then some, I think.*

*Is there anything I can do to help?*

*Nothing--wait. You can watch the area around hangar eleven and divert anyone coming near it for the next hour or so. I'll be taking the Starbow and I can't afford any delay.*

*No problem. Hesitation. Princess, I know it's important if Yoda called you. But don't be so nervous. If he has confidence in you, the least you can do is trust yourself.*

She smiled, knowing Jarren would sense it. *Thank you, teacher, I'll keep that in mind. Best to break contact now, I think.*

*May the Force be with you, Princess and he was gone,*

Leia sagged a little, gripping the edge of the desk. The Force, Light and Dark sides, to be used by those who knew how. Was her knowledge sufficient now? Damn it, woman, don't be so uncertain! You've spent most of your life dedicated to a cause, now you're coming up on the true test of that dedication and there'll be no second chance! She straightened up and finished dressing in a white jumpsuit with the Organa crest high on the left breast, Next came the gunbelt and

the blaster made to order for her small hand. She smiled wryly at the blaster. Han's hadn't done him any good against Vader! But it might be handy for other dangers.

ÉLast came the lightsaber Jarren had loaned her for practicing. It was completely plain with a pure white blade--an anonymous weapon used by generations of students and kept by Jarren along with his own during his years of hiding. She hefted it, feeling once again a kinship with its previous users. Offering a silent prayer that she wouldn't disgrace those unknown Jedi, she attached the saber to a utility hook on her belt. One last look around to be sure there was nothing she'd forgotten. The tape for Jarren sat conspicuously in front of the reader.

She reached the hangar unseen. Starbow, barely large enough to be equipped with hyper-drive, would need no more than two minutes of preparation. Getting away from the base without interference might be a little tricky, though,

In the cockpit of the tiny yacht she opened the ground radio link, "Flight Control, I'm taking the Starbow up for a workout. We'll be back in a few hours." There, that should keep them quiet for a while. She'd done such things often enough in the past that no one would think to question her actions much before Jarren revealed the existence of the tape.

Once in hyperspace, Leia retreated to the grandiosely labeled "lounge". Starbow, the only survivor of several such yachts built for personal use by the Organa family, could carry three people in rather cramped luxury. It had been on Yavin's fourth moon in custody of Leia's favorite cousin when Alderaan was destroyed, and though Leia had become sole owner after the cousin's death on Hoth, she hadn't been in the ship since leaving that ice cube. After the relative spaciousness of transports and the Falcon, this toy was nearly stifling. With a shudder at the idea of two more people squeezed in here, she settled on the floor" to meditate.

It would be close to four hours ship time before the jump back to normal space, but she was already nervous about 'the possibility of Vader detecting her presence. Stop it! she ordered herself. The time to worry is when you get there. And then he probably won't notice you unless he's actually looking for someone coming to help Luke,

Yoda had suggested a set of exercises: meditation, review of possible action, saber practice, and meditation again. Saber practice, in this confined space! Well, her fine control needed a bit of work anyway... As she began the first meditation set she wondered wryly if Yoda'd designed the schedule simply to keep her from brooding.

Entirely too soon the ship entered normal space half an hour's travel time from Hanorah. It was a beautiful planet, rather like Alderaan, with several small

continents set in glowing blue ocean. The Jedi retreat, on the far side as Starbow approached, would be in late afternoon locally.

Guiding the tiny ship toward a steep atmospheric entry, she briefly probed for the distinctive aura of the enemy. Nothing. But, according to Yoda, Vader was one of those with shielding talent and he was probably using it to hide his presence from Luke. As a precaution she raised her own shield, before landing on a wide quiet beach at the foot of a nearly vertical cliff.

The "retreat house" had been the newest of three such installations scattered around the galaxy for group meditation and refresher training. Vader, still a pupil when he turned to the Dark side, had known only of the two older centers and had personally seen to their destruction. The center on Hanorah had just become operational at the time, and its existence was not yet common knowledge except among the older Jedi who had made sure it remained both secret and operational for the future. And now, in pursuing Luke, Vader had discovered it.

Inside, the center was a complex of rooms and corridors cut into the cliff, with two partly camouflaged entrances. Leia soon found the one that should lead directly to the central assembly room. From there she could easily find Luke, according to Yoda. Carefully she tapped out a code on the lock plate, and felt absurdly relieved as the door slid open. Beyond, pale gray walls seemed to glow in the diffuse low light from some hidden source. She stepped cautiously into the corridor and looked around, startled, as the door shut behind her with a faint click. Irrationally she felt trapped. But that was ridiculous. If she could get in, she could get out--this was a Jedi installation, after all, not an Imperial prison!

She walked forward, her foam-soled boots silent on the plasteel floor. A quick mental probe detected a faint hint of a Force talent nearby, not enough to identify the source or pinpoint its location. She wanted desperately to probe further, to identify it, but retreated behind her shield again. It was still too risky.

Not far from the entrance the featureless corridor branched, left and right passages apparently identical in their sudden array of colored lights. Sensors? Indicators of various functions? Yoda had said the right-hand branch led to the assembly room. She started down that hall, drawing her blaster as she went. The light reminded her of little-used corridors at Massassi--just enough illumination that she could see where she was going, while the colors made her feel almost as if she had taken a hallucinatory drug.

After a few yards she stopped, listening and staring intently at the intermittently flickering lights. Had the flicker really changed in some way? And was there really an almost subliminal hum, more felt than heard? She probed delicately and staggered, catching at the wall with her free hand as she mentally pulled back. There was no mistaking that--Vader was here, and if he'd been shielding before he'd now dropped it totally.

Leia stood frozen for several seconds. There'd been no feeling of a search, just the overwhelming presence. For the first time she wondered seriously if she could force herself to continue, and not even her recognition of the unintended pun helped. Facing Vader had always been difficult. With her new perception of him it now seemed almost impossible. Finally she broke free of her paralysis and started walking again, more slowly, blaster ready (for what? Vader? Hah!) Very carefully she probed for a sign of Luke. Probably Vader's "aura" was hiding him from her less-developed power. Try again from the assembly room.

An ugly possibility insinuated itself into her consciousness. She had no idea how long Vader had been here. Yoda had been certain she'd arrive in time, but Yoda was not infallible. This once he could have been terribly, devastatingly wrong... NO! That line of thinking would lead to disaster for sure. Yoda had to be right, she had to be in time. Luke was alive and undefeated. He might not even know yet that Vader was here! She simply couldn't reach him past the wall of the Dark Lord, that was all.

Then she was standing in front of a double door covered with stylized images of various planets, the home worlds of the Jedi who would have gathered here. The room's equipment included a sort of psychic map that would help her find Luke, but could she find him without alerting Vader? Thinking of the enemy, she probed again- and slammed her shield into place, leaning against the wall by the door. Vader was here, in the assembly room!

*Master Yoda, help me!* Her panicked call was purely instinctive, she knew he couldn't help. She hadn't thought to ask earlier if the restriction was a sort of natural law or a matter of ethics among users of the Force. Now, faced with the reality instead of the abstract statement, she wondered resentfully if it was the latter, if that was why Yoda hadn't volunteered an explanation.

After a few seconds, however, her self-discipline reasserted itself, and she concentrated on the problem at hand. A control panel was set into the wall. Open the door just enough to slip past, survey the situation, and then decide what to do. Consider it an exercise in strategy, she told herself. You're supposed to be an expert at that sort of thing. Well, in this case strategy means make it up as you go along. Not the first time you've done it that way.

She looked down at the blaster in her hand. Against Vader? But it did give her a small sense of security. She reached for the door control and stopped. That sense of security could be dangerous--probably would be, dependant as it was on a weapon she knew was essentially useless. Firmly she holstered the blaster and, after a slight hesitation, unhooked the lightsaber from her belt. More nervous than she'd ever been in her life, she lightly pressed the door's "open" switch.

One side of the door slid back a couple of feet and stopped. She cautiously peered into the dimly lit, apparently large auditorium. Curving rows of seats faced a stage nearby on the right, and a gallery raised about three feet above floor level seemed to run along the sides. A lectern occupied center stage below a bank of flickering lights. The locator "map" would be there, ready for use. But Vader was somewhere in that auditorium also.

She strained her physical senses, not daring to risk a probe yet. Away from the stage end perhaps two seats beyond the open door, the room was dark. Carpeting, cushioned chairs, and fabric-covered walls would absorb any sound that might have betrayed the Sith's position. She realized belatedly that the open door would give her away if he looked in this direction, faint as the light was. Almost simultaneously with the thought, she edged through the gap, sliding down the wall to present the smallest possible target. She looked up for a control panel. There! A touch, and the door slid closed as quietly as it had opened about ten seconds earlier.

Now the glow from the stage was just enough to let her see the front rows of seats and the stage ends of the galleries. No sign of movement anywhere.

Delicately she probed, and quickly pulled back. At the dark end of the wall she crouched against, he waited. She'd felt no indication of a search, no sign that he suspected her presence. There was only the "color" that identified his aura, rippling now with confidence. She shuddered. How could she, relatively untrained, stand up to that? Yoda was insane! Even with his doubts, Luke was better prepared for this confrontation than she was. She clutched her saber more tightly, the familiar grip reminding her of Jarren. He should be here, not her! Yoda had said she was the key, but he didn't know everything!

A slight movement across the room distracted her from her incipient hysteria. Tensing, she peered into the darkness. At the far back corner a vertical line of light appeared, a door opening from another corridor. The line became a band, then a large rectangle illuminating most of the back of the room, showing a gallery. Along the back wall, a wide aisle between gallery and regular seats, and Vader standing absolutely still, hands hooked over his belt as he faced the open door.

Luke. The young Jedi stood in the middle of the block of light, a silhouette almost as dark as Vader. He stood straight, feet apart, deactivated saber in his right hand.

Leia, frozen, mentally cursed herself for wearing the white jumpsuit. It had seemed appropriate earlier, especially with the Organa crest and all it symbolized. Now the whiteness endangered her and possibly Luke, if he saw her across the seats and was distracted from his business.

"Very good of you to answer my request for a meeting so promptly, my son. I apologize for so rudely interrupting your meditation." The voice was almost gentle, but it made Leia shiver. Did Luke stiffen, or was it only her imagination?

"I'm not your son, Vader! My father is dead." His voice was bitter but steady.

Vader took a couple of steps forward, holding out his hand. "Luke, you still believe that nonsense? You know Kenobi lied to you." Amazing how persuasive he could sound, Leia thought. If she didn't know him for what he was.... "Forget the foolishness the old man taught you and listen to me. There is no need to repeat past mistakes. You seem to be recovered from our last meeting. I am willing to overlook your hostility and skepticism if you will join me against the Emperor."

"Never!" Luke stepped forward, activating his saber. "I nearly believed you, Vader. I nearly believed Ben lied, that you are my father. Then I went back to Dagobah and Yoda shoved me how I'd been taken in. It won't happen again!"

Vader shrugged, dropping his hand to his own saber. "Foolish boy! Whatever you believe, it is useless to try to defeat me." He swung the saber up to waist level, red blade flaming.

Experimentally Leia reached out to Luke, found she could touch him if she concentrated. He was nervous, as she'd expected. He was also coldly determined once and for all to end this battle of wills regardless of personal consequences. Maybe Yoda was wrong. Luke could defeat Vader alone. He'd apparently learned his lesson well this time, and seemed to have gained the necessary self-control.

For eternal seconds no one moved. Vader stood casually, holding his weapon almost negligently as if he'd forgotten its existence. Luke was tense, ready for attack or defense. Leia could feel his total concentration on Vader. She pulled back.

Luke moved first, one-handedly bringing his blade up and across. The Sith parried easily--except there was nothing to parry as Luke shifted direction in mid-swing to go for the shoulder. But he'd misjudged his opponent's movement ever so slightly and caught only the edge of the flowing cape.

"Indeed! You have learned since our last meeting!"

Luke stepped back quickly, gripping his saber with both hands. "A lot more than you know!"

He lunged. Blades crashed.



Leia willed herself not to move. He could do it. Just don't distract him!

The antagonists circled. Leia gritted her teeth, afraid one would look past the other and see her. She almost wished it would happen simply to relieve the tension. Again she reached, this time to Vader. He focused so narrowly on Luke that it seemed he could almost use his concentration as a saber. The confidence was still there, undisturbed by Luke's powerful resistance. Afraid of detection, she withdrew. They seemed to be evenly matched. Sheer endurance might be the deciding factor.

Vader moved back a step, on guard. "Luke, this is wasted effort. Be sensible. Use your powers as they should be used and join me."

"No." Flat, cold.

"You are foolish. Even if you win here, you cannot defeat the Emperor alone. Believe me, son, he is more than a match for your weakling friends. Stop wasting yourself on a hopeless cause. Let me show you the power of the Dark side. It is the only way!"

Luke answered with a lunge that Vader just barely parried. Luke pulled back. "I'll never join you. And stop calling me son!"

Leia flinched at the sudden barely controlled fury in his voice, and reached for him again as he renewed the attack. His resistance was strong as ever, but his anger and hatred were no longer buried. Under control, yes, but for how long now?

Vader had apparently realized what was happening also, because his fighting became obvious nonverbal taunting. Luke refused to be drawn out -- she could feel his clamping down and concentration on the simple cold necessity of victory. Then Vader added mental pressure to the physical.

Leia felt Luke's concentration waver. He resisted, but doubts that had been merely buried rather than eradicated came to the surface, causing emotional turmoil that interfered with his use of the Force. Leia retreated and closed her eyes. Yoda, you were right about him needing help--you damn well better be right about me being the one to give it!

Sith and Jedi were at the center of the aisle, totally absorbed. Leia stood, took a deep breath, and walked a few steps to loosen her muscles. The clash of red and blue - white blades hid the sound of her own saber activating. Holding it up slightly to light her face and the insignia on her suit she stopped several rows from the end--and gasped as Luke's saber went spinning into the back gallery. "NO!"

Startled, Vader whirled. Luke's head jerked in her direction, mouth open in shock.

Leia recovered first and walked firmly toward them, saber in both hands, hoping her nervousness didn't show. She briefly considered trying to "read" Vader and rejected the idea. Best to keep her shield up, if only as an aid in blocking his influence.

"Princess Leia, your foolishness never ceases to amaze me. What brings you here, and what do you expect to accomplish with that?"

"Isn't it obvious, Lord Vader? Luke isn't the only Alliance member who knows how to use the weapon you've disgraced for so long." She hoped he wouldn't notice she'd ignored the first question. Peripherally she saw Luke reach out to grasp the saber flying up from the gallery seats. Vader, seeing or "seeing" the same, stepped back to keep them both in view.

"My first statement still stands." He was outwardly relaxed--a danger sign? At least he seemed to have forgotten the unanswered question.

Luke looked resigned to the situation for now. He moved a bit closer, saber up.

Vader made a noise that might have been a laugh. "So the great Alliance is reduced to letting children attempt the work of their elders. I think it is time to put an end to this farce." He raised his free hand toward Leia.

She felt as if the hand had clamped around her throat. Choking, she fought back instinctively, and was both surprised and relieved to feel the pressure disappear.

Vader swore. "A Force talent!"

The two rebels attacked simultaneously while he was off guard, but he parried them both easily. They fell back. Leia risked a quick call to Luke. *How long can you resist?*

Amazement, then, *Don't know. You?*

Vader slammed at both their minds. Leia jerked back, all defenses up. Well, she hadn't expected it to be easy. So now Vader knew she had some ability to use the Force. Too bad he'd found out so quickly, but if he thought she could use it only for resistance....

A real saber fight was very different from practice with a teacher or a remote. Thank the Maker she'd had mental as well as physical sparring in her lessons! Keeping up mental defenses while physically battling a much stronger opponent was a considerable strain even with an ally to occupy part of the opponent's attention. She didn't try to contact Luke again but watched him as well as Vader.

Luke was physically stronger and better trained than she, but he soon showed signs of tiring. From his description of the Bespin encounter, Vader had been willing to settle for disabling him then--now it was literally life or death.

Parry, fall back, attack, feint, dodge, don't let him knock the saber out of her hands, don't let him past the mental guards - or suspect the real extent of her abilities. She'd resisted on the Death Star without knowing how to consciously use the Force. The Death Star--it must have been a dream. Surely she'd spent her life in this absurd battle. Strike, pull back, stand, dodge, attack, RESIST! That above all--resist the power slamming at her shield, don't let him get past. Feint, dodge--Vader's swing caught her off balance, knocking her sideways toward the last row of seats. The edge of a chair back caught her hard just below the ribs. She nearly blacked out, unable to scream or even breathe. Vision and breath returned quickly, but she was still effectively paralyzed by the pain in her right side.

With great effort she forced herself to maintain her shield, but the mental pressure was gone. She turned her head very slightly, eyes half closed, and saw Vader with his back to her, apparently concentrating on Luke. She felt a flash of annoyance at being considered unworthy of notice before she realized the implication. From the worry on his face, Luke also thought she was unconscious. Good! If only she dared probe Vader again! But he'd probably detect her and the advantage would be lost. If she could get an idea of what was happening from Luke, "read" him without his noticing, just touch the surface....

It was almost as bad as Vader in her own mind! The Sith was battering at Luke's psychological defenses, feeding the doubts, drawing out the hatred and anger that once released would destroy the Jedi's control. She pulled back before (she hoped!) either noticed the intrusion. Luke, you mustn't give in! You can't!

Luke's inner battle showed on his face, in the slight unsteadiness of his stance. He hesitated as if unsure of his next move. Vader attacked. Luke barely evaded the blow and stepped back. He looked suddenly older, radiating anger and hate.

"You see? You cannot win!" Vader swung. Luke parried with almost frantic viciousness.

Leia groaned silently. Vader was right--about Luke. But he was discounting her. She thought quickly. She couldn't do real damage by a direct assault, the armor was too strong for her even if she weren't hurt, and her blaster was effectively a toy. But there was another possibility, one that neither she nor Luke had considered so far. Think. Remember the details consciously or unconsciously noticed in previous confrontations. Choose the target, decide on the angle of attack, wait for the right moment, all the while keeping the thoughts buried under every defense her mind could put up. There would be only one chance. If she failed, the battle--indeed, the war--could be lost. What she did in the next few

seconds would help determine the future of the Galaxy. That thought, amazingly, calmed her. She'd been trained all her life in devotion to duty, regardless of consequences to particular individuals, and now was the time to act. Stiffly she straightened up, ignoring the feeling of a dull knife in her side.

"Lord Vader!"

He half turned, obviously surprised to see her move. For an impossibly brief moment, his chest power pack was undefended. Leia slashed her saber across it. Sparks flew, something flared like a minuscule nova. The shock slammed up the blade to her shoulders, hurled her several feet backward against the side wall, half stunned but still gripping her saber in her left hand. Vader screamed, a horrible grating, strangled sound. Even worse was the psychic scream that leaked past her shield. Luke staggered, apparently getting the full effect, as Vader collapsed. A couple of lights on the power pack still blinked ominously.

"Luke! His saber!"

Vader, now silent, had dropped the saber. Hesitating, Luke reached for it--

"LOOK OUT!"

He hit the floor, rolling toward her as a trooper fired from the open door. Leia pulled out her own blaster and fired back, simultaneously deactivating her saber. A detached portion of her mind noted that Luke had managed to snatch up Vader's weapon. His own was still on. The trooper ducked back and fired again, joined now by another. Leia flattened herself against the floor. A quick probe told her that Luke was too exhausted to use the Force against the troopers, and she hadn't learned how. They'd have to rely on conventional means.

"Luke, there's a door near the stage. I'll cover for you."

"Right." He squirmed along the wall toward the shelter of the seats while she kept the attackers occupied. As soon as Luke was hidden, she followed. It was awkward firing from that position, and worse when she reached cover and had to resort to a crouching scramble. The door seemed to be parsecs away, and those troopers wouldn't cooperate by giving her a decent target! Worse, she could hear reinforcements coming.

Luke had the door half open as she finally reached it and they scrambled through together. She managed one last shot as he hit the "close" switch, and shivered at the sound of a blast hitting the other side.

"This way!" Blaster still in hand, she led him at a run through the corridors. Briefly she searched for signs of any other life forms. Only the troopers and Vader registered, the latter barely. The troopers seemed to be near Vader, but she

couldn't be sure.

At the exit they stood on either side of the door. Leia pressed the switch. Nothing was immediately visible outside. She looked toward the ship as Luke checked the other direction "Clear as far as I can see," she whispered.

"Same here."

Leia was gasping, hand pressed to her side, by the time they reached the ship, but she shook off Luke's attempts to help.

"I'm all right!" She snapped impatiently, and then avoided looking at him all through takeoff and the hyperspace jump. The jump itself put a strain on her self-control as the dull knife turned suddenly sharp. She hoped Luke didn't see her grimace. After they unstrapped, she went straight to the first aid station. A quick check showed no serious damage, but she had a spectacular bruise of impressive size and color (she hated to think what the underlying muscle must look like!) It still hurt enough to justify a good painkiller, she decided.

Luke provided lightly brandied caff, and they sat at a small table folded down from the wall, the captured saber between them. For several minutes they said nothing, just sipped their caff and stared alternately at their mugs and at the saber. Leia wondered who'd crack first, either saying something or trying to "read" the other,

Silence thickened.

Luke set down his mug and picked up the saber almost gingerly. He turned it over in his hands, examining it as if he'd never seen such a thing before. Finally he set it back in exactly the same spot and folded his hands. The knuckles showed white. Not looking up, he asked with obviously forced casualness, "How'd you happen to be there?"

Leia set her mug down but kept both hands around it, her eyes on the film of liquid at the bottom. In a tone to match his she briefly described her work with Jarren, Yoda's call, her arrival at the center, leaving out most of her feelings on the whole matter. She hesitated when she reached Luke's entry, then pushed on. "After a while I could tell you were having difficulty, so I stepped in." She stopped but didn't look up.

"Yeah, I was 'having difficulty' all right," His tone was bitter, "So much for the new Jedi." He picked up the saber again, "If Vader was lying, this thing probably killed my father, and it nearly killed me. Yoda was right, Ben was wrong--I'm not Jedi material."

Leia looked up at that. "Luke, this isn't the time to give up."

Bleak blue eyes focused on her, then dropped again, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you still have a lot of work to do--we both do, the whole Alliance does. The symbolic value of taking that saber is immense, but it won't topple the Emperor," She put her hand over his. His was cold, "You weren't ready to face Vader and he knew it. He forced a confrontation before you could handle it. That doesn't mean you've failed, Luke, Go back and complete your training. We need you now more than ever!"

He put the saber down and touched her hand. "In that case you're really in trouble!"

Stars, how could she get through to him? He had to understand she meant every word, she wasn't just trying to soothe his damaged ego. Sometimes he was harder to deal with than Han. "Luke, it will take every resource we have, including you, to defeat the Emperor, even with Vader out of the way. And we don't know how long he'll be out- unfortunately I was too busy with those troopers to take care of him personally. It's too soon to even consider relaxing,

"I don't know if I mentioned it before, but when I was leaving for Bespin Yoda said only a fully trained Jedi could defeat Vader and the Emperor. But you got Vader..."

"Because he was occupied with you and thought I was out of the fight! I caught him by surprise, Luke. And there is still the Emperor." She grinned conspiratorially. "Maybe together we add up to one 'fully trained Jedi!'"

He laughed shakily. "Well, he did say Vader and the Emperor. We might make a good team." He sobered. "But, Leia, suppose it's true? If Vader is my father, how can I?"

She slammed her free hand on the table so hard the saber bounced. "Luke, for once will you please be sensible! In the first place, he is not your father! But your doubts about that were nearly fatal today. And even if he were, don't you see how much more important it would be for you to finish what you've started?" She withdrew her hand from his and stood up to pace the small lounge. "Let's assume he told the truth, which I don't believe for a nanosecond! In that case it would be absolutely essential for you to act, to redeem his crimes. You would have to provide the counter to defeat the Dark side." She put her hands on the table, leaning toward him. She had to convince him! "Luke, please trust me. I'm going to let you see into my mind so you can know that I mean every word I say."

He looked skeptical. "I hate to say it, but how do I know you won't use your ability to control what you show me? You've obviously got some talents I don't have,

and control is one of your strong points." His tone on the last few words was flat and cold.

Maker, this was going to be even harder than she'd thought! Vader had done a damn good job of neutralizing him after all. Well, nobody'd ever accused Leia Organa of giving up easily. Reminding herself that he did have excellent reason for his attitude, she sat down very calmly. "You have to trust people sometimes, Luke. I doubt Yoda would have sent me if he didn't consider me trustworthy. I give you my word as an Organa and as a leader of the Alliance that what I show you is what I truly believe." Please, Luke!

He sighed. "All right. I'll try."

"Good! Go ahead."

She felt a mental touch, cautious at first, then more confident. He was still wary, but any attempt to encourage or reassure him could be misinterpreted. Just let him see, let him feel the truth of her statements, the sincerity of her beliefs.

At last he pulled back, looking so relieved that she almost wanted to laugh. Almost. Instead she reached out and squeezed his hand gently. "Satisfied?"

He nodded. "I'm sorry I doubted you, Leia. I couldn't help it..."

"I know," she interrupted soothingly. "That's why I let you in."

They sat quietly for a few minutes, starting to relax a little. Suddenly Luke smiled. "Y'know, maybe together we do add up to a fully trained Jedi. We could go into partnership, two for the price of one!"

Leia actually giggled. "A team to strike terror into the hearts of Imperials everywhere!"

The idea set both of them laughing, though the laughter held an edge of hysteria. They recovered about the same time, and Leia became very much the Alliance leader again. "We still have to work out a scheme for using this saber very soon. I'm sure Vader can replace it, but just the fact that we have this one is to our advantage. And once you complete your training..."

He grimaced, "Poor Yoda! He'll be glad to see the last of me. Seriously, I think I've learned enough from this experience that I should be able to finish soon." He looked at the saber, then raised his eyes to meet hers. "I should have said this earlier, instead of wasting time feeling sorry for myself, Leia, thank you. Thank you very much."

"Yes, you have learned a lot. You're welcome, Luke." She paused to choose her

words carefully, "As for the partnership idea, it's not really such a joke, you know. As Jedi and Alliance leaders we will have to work closely together,"

"Jedi leader? What Jedi?"

"We're searching for others in hiding like Ben and Jarren--Jarren's sure several are alive somewhere. The survivors will be able to find potential trainees and start teaching them, Jarren thinks he's already found a couple on the base."

"But leader? What about Yoda? And Jarren? Or the others?" He sounded panicked.

She shrugged, "What about them? Yoda's a teacher, not a warrior, so's Jarren, to a great extent, and he's not young any more. Neither are the others. So you're the obvious choice. You're young, your training is still fresh, and most important, you have no real association with the past." She leaned forward, trying to project her determination. "With you, the Jedi can make a new start, a restoration of the Order to go with the restoration of the Republic. The Organas have worked closely with the Jedi for generations, and I intend to continue that tradition."

He stared at her, stunned, "Leia, I . . . I . . ."

She stifled a laugh. Poor guy, it was probably the first time he'd really seen this side of her, no wonder he was floundering! "Where's all that Skywalker confidence, Luke?"

He grinned suddenly, "If you think we can do it, we can! Partners?"

"Partners!"

They shook hands over the captured lightsaber.

**THE END**

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