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Ghosts and Demons Part 2

by [J.A. Berger](#)

Solo stumbled to a halt, slapping uneasily at something that buzzed his face. There in a tiny clearing on the edge of a dark lake, sat a strangely built mud dwelling. Through one small, irregular shaped window shown a faint light.

"That's it."

He jumped, then whirled only to draw up at the sight of the small figure in fatigues standing at his shoulder. He forced his heart out of his throat and back into his chest where it belonged. "Leia, I thought you were going to stay on the Falcon until I found him! Geez, I could have shot you!"

"Not from that direction," she fenced lightly. "Come on." She started past him only to be stopped by a not too gentle hand to her shoulder.

"Hold on, we don't know who's..."

"Yes, we do. Come on..."

"He can't be in there," Solo denied. "It's too small."

"He's there." She touched Solo's hand with her own and he released her.

"At least, let me go first." He stopped her whispered retort. "I know how unlikely it is that you would walk into something a Princess couldn't handle, but humor me, okay?"

"Okay," she whispered, suppressing a smile. Solo pushed gently past her.

Together they entered the clearing and moved closer to the small, irregularly shaped open window of the tiny abode. Keeping close to the dwelling's thick mud walls, the Corellian pushed Leia behind him and into the deeper shadows with his free hand then leaned forward, blaster ready.

Inside, Luke Skywalker sat cross-legged on the dried mud floor in what might have been a living room of sorts inside the miniature house. His head barely cleared the low ceiling. Small table sat in front of him; the muddy prints of many small creatures marred its surface. Behind the table, small, cooking pots stood neatly stacked, but unused. Shifting his position, Han Solo could see a small, rumped cot in scale with the rest of the small furnishings against a wall behind the young Jedi. Its blankets already mildewed and tattered. A cot much too small for the silent giant that sat before it, his eyes closed.

Slowly, the Corellian holstered his blaster and motioned Leia Organa past, allowing her to peer into the small dwelling.

"He's in another of those Force trances." Solo whispered.

Leia slowly shook her head. "No, I don't think so."

He glanced back at her. She had the same vacant look on her face he had seen earlier, when she had made contact with her brother through the mystical force they shared as their birthright.

She blinked. "He's asleep."

"What?!"

She laid a finger to her lips and drew him aside. "A normal sleep."

Solo slowly shook his head. "I don't get it. He's not been able to sleep since...well, you know the story." He looked back at the small dwelling. "Why here? Why now?"

"I don't know. Maybe it has something to do with this place."

"Have you been here before?"

"I...don't think so, still..." Leia frowned, digging deeply into her earliest memories. "There's something familiar about it."

"It's from the dreams, isn't it?" Solo guessed, watching the young Senator closely. "How is it connected with Palpatine?"

She frowned. "I'm not sure it is. But the answer to everything is here." She looked past the Corellian spacer to the small window. "Luke knows it, too, or he wouldn't have come."

"So what now? Do we let him sleep? Gods know he needs it. But damn it..." He looked about, "This place gives me the willies. I'd just as soon do what needs to be done and get off this mud ball. If the Falcon hasn't become part of it by now."

"You needed worry about the Falcon," she assured him smiling. "Chewie's got the flotation devices deployed. She's doing fine."

"Okay," Han voiced reluctantly. "So, what now?"

"I take on Palpatine."

The Corellian and the young woman at his side started at the sound of the familiar voice. Behind them stood Luke Skywalker dressed from head to foot in the now familiar black outfit, his lightsaber hooked on his belt at his side. Smiling, he pulled a black glove from his belt and slide it on his right hand, the left soon followed.

"The dreams?" Leia whispered, "They made no sense to me. But I take it they did to you."

"Yes." Luke straightened. The old confidence shone from the pale blue eyes with a mature determination. "All this time, I've tried to put the dreams from me when I should have embraced them." He reached out a hand to his friend, who quickly took it. "Thanks, Han." He dropped Solo's hand and brushed his sister's cheek lightly with a gloved finger. "Leia, there's so much strength in you. An old friend of mine would have said, "A great Jedi would you make."

"I take it you've been here before." Solo remarked casually.

"Yes." Luke admitted. "I took my Jedi training here with an ancient Jedi master." The smile faded. "He died in this house just before the battle of Endor."

"After we rescued Han from Jabba and headed back to the fleet, you left us. This is where you came, isn't it?" Leia questioned softly.

Luke nodded.

"You two are losing me again." Solo interjected. "A Jedi Master lived here?" he looked again at the small hut. "Never mind, I think I'll leave it at that. Tell me about the dreams. Why were you afraid of them?"

"I think I know." Leia stepped to her brother's side. "It was the crying woman, wasn't it?"

"I never saw her, but I sensed despair, loneliness...and death." Anguish twisted his features.

"Come." Taking his gloved hand, Leia started off past the small mud dwelling. "I'll show you what you didn't see. What you would have seen if Palpatine had allowed it."

Glancing helplessly over his shoulder at the tall Corellian, Luke followed his sister.

"Don't look at me," Solo grumbled, falling in behind. "I gave up trying to figure this one out hours ago."

Behind the small dwelling, along the edges of the dark water, ran a narrow pathway, at one time well traveled, the fast growing vegetation now all but obliterating its existence.

"Luke, did you know this was here?" Solo questioned, coming up behind the young Jedi.

"No." Luke replied, puzzled. "Yoda never brought me this way."

"Leia."

"It's okay, Han." Luke assured him softly. "She knows where she's going."

"I hate it when they do that." Solo mumbled under his breath.

A moment later, they stepped into another clearing and Luke drew up short. Memories whirled in a frightening cascade of sights, sounds, and colors before his mind's eye. He blinked. Before them stood what had once been another dwelling, dilapidated and fallen to ruin. Heavy vines and other vegetation unfamiliar to him had claimed it as their own, leaving only the bones of its existence to tell of what had once been.

In the dusky twilight of Dagobah's coming dawn, the two men watched Leia push aside the vegetation and reach past it. A moment later, a dark hole appeared and she disappeared inside. They hurried forward.

Reaching into a pocket on his utility belt, Luke pulled out a small device and activated it. A bright beam of light pointed out the overgrown doorway. He touched a button and the beam widened. Together the Jedi and the Corellian stepped into the darkened opening.

Inside Leia Organa Skywalker stood motionless, tears streaming down her face. Before her, in the center of the small room, stood two roughly hewn cradles, the blankets inside had long fallen to dust and decay. A few steps away, a cot, larger than the one in the smaller dwelling, stood empty and forlorn. Brother and sister exchanged knowing looks.

"We were born here." She stated simply. "I saw it in the dreams. I...I saw our mother's face hovering over us. Her pride. Her love. I saw her tears, heard her soft cries...the same ones you heard...when Obi-Wan Kenobi came to take you from her. You went to his brother on Tatooine, but I remained here with her...for a while."

"That's why you have memories of her I don't." Luke voiced softly. "I wish I had known her."

"She was very beautiful." Leia recalled. "Gentle. Kind." She looked at her brother. "I don't remember how long I was with her, Luke, but long enough to remember bits and pieces of this place." She looked again around the small room. "You remember it, too, don't you?"

"I sense it," Luke replied with feeling. "But I have no actual memories of it. I guess I was too young when I left. But I remember the kinship I felt for this place the first time I landed." He frowned. "But why these memories now? Why the dreams? What does it mean?"

She shook her head. "Maybe they were always there. The memories. Locked deep within you and released with the death of...our father. I don't know. Maybe they were memories passed on by your mentor who lived here." She looked again at the tiny cradles. "Separated from her children and exiled to protect them, it must have been a terribly lonely life. I think that's what you felt in the dreams." She shrugged. "Some things we'll likely never know. But, Luke, this dream was never meant to frighten you and I saw nothing in it that should have been a threat to Palpatine."

"I did." Luke said grimly. With one last look at the small, lifeless room, he turned and left the small dwelling.

Han and Leia exchanged quick glances. Solo bolted toward the door. "Come on, he's not getting away from us this time." Stepping outside, he stopped the Jedi with a shout. "Luke, wait up!"

Luke Skywalker reluctantly stopped and turned back.

"Not this time, Pal." Solo swore hotly. "I've been through this with you since Endor and your sister put her life on the line to help you. Now I think you owe us an explanation." He paused, locking gazes with his friend. "Don't you?"

Luke remained silent for several moments allowing his gaze to take in the overgrown dwelling and the small clearing all but reclaimed by Dagobah's fast growing vegetation. His life as he had known it had started on Tatooine or so he had always thought. But it had been another lie. His life had started here...with Leia. He drew a deep breath, shifted his attention to the two standing before him, and nodded. "Let's go back to Yoda's place. A lot of what I'll tell you has to do with him."

The brackish green haze of Dagobah's dawn brought humid warmth to the bog planet along with droves of hungry insects, which found the three humans a welcome change to their regular diets. Han and Leia sat in discomfort outside the small, mud dwelling. From inside, they heard the rattle of pans and smelled the first hint of wood smoke, followed by a gray-white curl drifting out the smoke hole in the top of the small dwelling. A moment later, Luke edges out of the small entry and handed them each a tiny cup of some hot beverage.

Han accepted his, making a face as his nostrils caught the pungent odor of the drink. He took a tongue wetting taste and grimaced. Luke, watching him, laughed. " "Drink it. You'll find it has some interesting effects on your visitors."

Sure enough, the small insects had backed off with the first whiff of the steaming beverage. Encouraged, the Corellian bolted down the strange drink, coughed, and handed Luke the empty cup.

Following Solo's example, Leia downed hers.

Finding a place between them, Luke dropped comfortably into a cross-legged position. Draining his cup, he set it aside with the others. "Where do you want me to start?"

"What happened when you went into the trance and Leia joined you?" Han questioned.

"As soon as I was under, I heard the voice.' Luke eased back, putting his back to the small hut. "Like you suggested, I allowed myself to be drawn to it until I was confident that Leia was with me. At almost the same time, the voice stopped. There was nothing but black silence---ominous---like the stillness before a storm. I could 'see' nothing. It was as if a dark curtain had been thrown over my mind. Then suddenly, there were there. The dreams. This time they were flashing by me in a panorama in frames of scenes and dialogue as if suddenly released from

behind a floodgate, but too fast for me to grasp. I reached for some; Leia for others." Luke paused. His brow wrinkled with memories.

"It's hard to explain. I saw Dagobah as I had the first time. I saw it as it was before the Empire...maybe before the beginning of time. But the scenes were in random order, making it difficult to understand. I heard the cries of the woman. I felt her pain. Her desperation. Her loneliness. In and among all this, a voice kept repeating something over and over." He paused again, his expression hard. "That's when Palpatine made himself known. He stepped between me and the dreams and quickly drown out the other voice." He turned to his sister. "But Leia heard it."

She nodded. "Although the words meant nothing to me, somehow, I sensed their importance."

Luke turned to the Corellian. "It was those words that Palpatine has made every effort to keep from me. Leia brought them when she came the second time with your message to break contact." The young Jedi took a lingering look about the small clearing. "You were right, Han. He couldn't handle us both. She got past him."

"And it allowed you to break away." Solo guessed.

Luke nodded. "He's mad. I sensed his anger. But now, he's also afraid."

"Of the message?" Han looked to Leia seated on the other side of the Jedi. "What did the voice say? What did it mean?"

Leia shook her head. "I don't know the meaning, only the words. 'The tree. Remember the tree. Your failure, it was. You must return to the tree.'"

Luke lifted himself from the ground, straightened and brushed at his clothing. "And now it's time to end this...once and for all. The hatred, the sorrow, the deceptions, and betrayals started here and here is where they must end."

"Whoa, hold on." Solo stopped the young Jedi with a hand to his arm. "The business about the tree...what did it mean?"

Luke shook Han's hand from his arm, but not unkindly. "It means I must complete a lesson given to me a long time ago. A lesson I failed." He turned and gave the tall Corellian a grim smile. "And it's something I have to do alone."

"And what do we do?" Solo questioned in frustration. "Sit here and wait?"

"If you like." Luke agreed. "Or go back to the Falcon. I'll find you after..."

"No." The Corellian refused. "Not this time, Luke."

Leia stepped forward, putting herself next to the Corellian. "Han's right, Luke. Whatever must be faced, we'll do it together."

Luke looked from his sister to his friend. "I know you mean well, both of you, but this time, believe me, I must go alone." He reached out and placed a light kiss on his sister's cheek. "You've done all you can. Both of you." He smiled, including the Corellian in his gratitude. "Wait for me."

They stood in silence as the slender figure in black turned and jogged off, disappearing into the darkness of the brooding forest.

Solo grabbed Leia's hand and started after the Jedi, pulling her after him. "Come on. If he gets too far ahead we'll lose him."

"But he said..." She panted, increasing her stride to keep up with the longer ones of the Corellian.

"Do you want to stay here and wait for him?" He threw back, but kept running.

"No." She decided and rushed on. "I don't."

Hand in hand they ran, dodging trees, jumping fallen branches, and making up time on the few stretches of open ground they crossed. Always, the young Jedi stayed well ahead of them. He had disappeared when they finally pulled up, winded, in yet another clearing much like several others they had passed. In the center of the clearing, stood a huge, ancient and gnarled tree surrounded by a small pond of stagnant water.

Han bent over, grasping for breath, his face red from the exertion and the rich, humid atmosphere of the planet. He waited another moment, then straightened. Leia stood beside him, looking no better. "I think we may...have...lost him." He panted.

"I don't think so." Leia caught his attention and pointed to an overhanging branch of a downfall next to the huge tree. There, hanging from a broken branch was a utility belt with the familiar silver tube attached to it.

Drawing deeply on the thick, vibrant air, the two made their way carefully to the overhang. Once there, they got a better look at the old tree; its bark dry and crumbling. Gigantic roots had grown to form an opening at the base that led to a darkly sinister cave.

"Something's not right here." Leia voiced softly. "This is not a good place."

"What are you talking about?" Han questioned, looking about the clearing for the Jedi. "Luke! Where are you?"

"He's in there." Leia whispered, motioning toward the tree's darkened depths, her features pale.

"Oh, hell." He started forward.

"No." Leia stopped him with a gentle, but firm hand. "He's right, Han. We can't help. This he must do alone."

Solo started to object, then slowly shook his head. He didn't understand, but then, he reasoned, he had understood little what had happened since he'd climbed down from the Endor tree to greet the new day and a new Republic. Giving in, he took a seat on the overhang; Leia sat beside him, and they waited.

Luke heard their voices, but forced them from him as he stepped carefully among the heavy roots that overhung the cave's opening and peered into its darkened depths. The heavy scent of wet, rotting vegetation rose putrid and dark from the hole. He hesitated, then carefully eased himself through the small opening and dropped in to the cave. Immediately, he was surrounded by the heavy darkness he had experience only once before, but would carry the memory forever in his nightmares. He shuddered and took another step into the surrounding darkness. As before, he found the darkness closing in around him, hushed and foreboding as he entered the dwelling place of the Dark Side.

Above him, slimy, dripping strands of vegetation brushed at his face. He ignored them and moved on. The soggy cave floor silencing his footsteps as he continued toward the corridor he knew lay ahead. This time, without a glowing saber to light his way, he stumbled. Disoriented, he reached out and steadied himself against something large and wet. It growled in warning before quickly scrambling away from his touch. Startled, he drew back and the brooding darkness moved closer. From within himself or without...he wasn't sure...but he heard a voice, a familiar voice, speaking familiar words. It was his voice, his words. 'What's in there?' And his question was answered by another; now gone. 'Only what you take with you.'

Closing his eyes to the unseen dangers around him, Luke focused his thoughts, his mind, his being, to the power within and summoned the Force. Immediately, vivid pictures assailed his mind, pictures and events of another time, another place. He saw again the unlit antechamber aboard the uncompleted Death Star. In silence, he watched himself climb the grated stairs and stand again before the throne. At his side, dressed in black, stood the masked and armored figure of his father. The picture dissolved and another took its place.

It was a battle of brilliantly lighted sabers, a battle between father and son. Standing at the top of the staircase, he watched the Sith Lord lose his footing and tumble to his knees. He experienced again the seductive and powerful qualities of the Dark Side and felt its fever filling him with a lust so overpowering that he totally obliterated all other considerations.

The pictures dissolved into nothingness, leaving him reeling from their intensity. Only the unspoken promise remained, the promise of that seductive power. It was here! Waiting for him! He had only to embrace it, to feel again its awesome promise of invulnerability.

He slowed his breathing, reached deeper, and fought the power and the promise of the Dark Side. From his memories he brought forth memories of his own. He saw himself make the final cut that severed the hand from the dark knight's arm. He saw the exposed wires and immediately looked down where under synthetic skin, bionic parts, similar circuitry directed the movements of his own gloved right hand. The darkness drew even closer.

On his chosen course, consumed by hate and the dark side, he had felt the desire to kill...to destroy. His enemy had lain at his feet, at his mercy. He had only to strike him down. He heard again the urging of the Emperor, driving his anger, promising him a place at his side. Vader's place. His father's place. It was then he had remembered the cave...this cave...and his failure. He saw again the broken helmet and his own face within, and all had become frighteningly clear. The future had been foretold. If he took the easy path, the dark path, he would be forever consumed by the Dark Side and would live his life, as his father had lived his...forever surrounded by darkness.

Luke Skywalker, last of the Jedi Knights, opened his eyes to the cave's darkness and put the darkness from him. Drawing on the Force, he calmed the tides of fear and anger that had attempted to control him and started forward, stepping confidently into the now familiar nightmare of the cave's corridor, his way lighted by his trust in the Force. He traversed the blackened corridor without misstep or fear and moved on as the corridor widened. There he stopped.

Taking a warrior's stance, his hands empty at his side, his palms forward, he summoned the demon. The winds of the Dark Side swirled around him, but he remained unshaken before its might, his eyes closed, his mind at peace. Calm. Passive.

The winds died and before him, darkness against darkness, stood a robed figure, its face hidden in the depths of a cowl, bony hands barely visible below the long sleeves of the dark robe.

"Jedi Skywalker," the leering voice whispered, "Embrace the power of the Dark Side. Stand at my side and together we shall rule the Universe."

"You rule nothing, Palpatine." Luke addressed the specter. "You are nothing but vapor, a puff of evil smoke, that will be blown away by the winds of change. Your time has passed."

"No!" The dark specter denied. "You have witnessed only the destruction of my worldly body, frail, old, I now stand before you, a spiritual being, my power no longer held in check by a body that could not contain the full essence of that power. Even as we speak, faithful followers stand awaiting my contact to clone a body worthy of my powers."

"A lie." Luke answered calmly, without feeling. "There is only one body you seek, Demon. Mine."

The reedy voice deepened with impatience. "I offer you, the last of the Jedi, a place of ultimate power!"

"No." Luke disagreed, serenely. "You offer me servitude."

"I offer you a chance to rule!"

"No, another lie." Luke felt the heavy pressure of the darkness reaching ruthlessly for his mind. "You destroyed my father with your promises and lies, you will not destroy his son."

"You failed before, young Jedi." The evilness reminded him. "Here where you failed once, you will fail again. And when you fall, I shall take both your human form and the power within you." He gloated. "I offer you one last chance to join me...or die!"

"I will never join you." Luke whispered, his voice soft, confident, passive.

"Then you will die!" The arms raised and streaks of blue lightning blazed from the bony fingers and reached with electrically charged death toward the unprotected body of the young Jedi Knight.

From long habit, Luke reached for the silver tube at his side. His hand fell away empty as the first bolts struck him. He cried out in surprise, his mind reeling from the unbelievable reality of the pain. Another bolt struck him, taking him to the ground where he withered in agony. How could this be! Deadly bolts sent by a specter, their devastating pain as intense and deadly as before. His mind reeled with uncertainty and disbelief. Ben! Yoda! His mind cried out. More lies? More deceptions? More uncertainty and a sense of betrayal enveloped the young knight and the darkness took him.

"No! Luke, no!" Leia stumbled to her feet and moved toward the tree, but stopped short of the black hole, her eyes vacant, her breathing hard and fast.

"Leia, what is it?" Han hurried to her side and reached out to her, but she remained rigid, her face pale, her flesh clammy to his touch. "Hon, you're scaring the hell out of me." He pulled her to him, but there was no sign of recognition in the eyes of the woman he loved.

"Leia!" For a brief moment, she returned to him. He saw it in her eyes. But then, a soft moan and she relaxed, going limp in his arms.

Scooping her up, Solo hurried over to the high, dry ground beside the overhang and lay her gently down. Kneeling at her side, his jaw line hard, he reached for a pulse point. It was there, but faint and thready. "Leia!" She remained still. Unmoving.

In desperation, Solo struggled to his feet and hurried to the opening beneath the tree. "Luke! Damn it! Get out of there! It's Leia! Something's wrong with her! Luke!" Only silence greeted his despair. Swearing, he turned from the tree and hurried back to the silent figure on the ground.

"No! Leia!" Above the crackle of the electrically charged bolts that continued to strike at his defenseless body, his strength failing, Luke fought to keep his twin from joining his struggle. His mind reeled as he realized his mistake and he heard the cold, reedy laughter of the specter.

"Ahhh, in the last moments of your life, Jedi," Palpatine taunted, "You have given up your last and most precious secret. A sister!"

Another, greater bolt struck him and Luke screamed out in agony.

"Now you will die, Jedi. But another will live to except my power." Another, crueller, laugh followed, "Reach out, Jedi, and see your ultimate failure! See the last of the Skywalkers in my power and my victory will be complete!"

In a flash of blue lightning, Luke saw the still, seemingly lifeless body of his sister and the Corellian kneeling helplessly at her side. Her mind caught and held in limbo between his weakened protection and the dark might of the demon specter.

"Noooo!" He screamed, his mind in chaos, his soul dark with dread, Luke Skywalker desperately weathered another assault from the powerful specter.

She was slipping from him. Solo read the reality of it in the thready pulse under his fingertips and in the fear ridden depths of his heart. He stumbled to his feet and returned to the tree. If Leia was down and Luke had not rushed to her aid, he reasoned, things had to be going badly for the young Jedi inside the tree. He turned and looked again at the still form on the ground under the overhang.

"Sometimes the best defense is a good Corellian diversion." He mumbled grimly and reached for the blaster. Drawing the weapon from its holster, he trained it on the side of the huge tree, down close to its wide base and fired.

In the final thralls of his despair, a small ray of light penetrated the darkness above the young Jedi and through the agony of another brutal attack that had taken him to the ground; Luke centered his desperation on that bean of light and rallied his senses. His mind momentarily centered on the light and away from the pain, away from his fear, he heard the voice of a friend. 'Remember your lessons, save you they will.' And another voice... 'Release your fear, Luke.'

Under the lashing of the blue lightning, Luke Skywalker relaxed. He willed his thoughts inwardly and touched that tiny flame that still burned and fanned it to life. He drew the power to him, concentrated on it, than willed his mind to peace. His body lay still, open to the attack.

"Noooo!" The reedy voice screamed and the attack grew desperate, but the blue bolts no longer touched the body of the young Jedi, but dissipated in the darkness short of reaching him.

Weakly, Luke climbed to his feet and again took the warrior's stance before the ominous being. "Your time is over, Palpatine." He voiced the words calmly, his mind again at peace. "I *am* the last of the Jedi, but given time there will be others."

"Nooo!" Again the blue bolts shot forward. And again they crackled harmlessly short of the blonde Jedi.

The specter shimmered, then steadied. "You cannot stand before the power of the Dark Side. You will fall as did your father." It started forward, its arms out, evil red eyes glowing from the darkness of the cowl.

Luke remained impassive and unmoving before the advancing evil. Again it shimmered, lost more definition, than struggled forward.

"You're losing your hold on this world...and on me." Luke spoke softly. "Soon, Palpatine, you will be gone and with you the evilness that has dwelled too long in this place."

"Noooo!" The voice weakened still more in its denial, the robed figure struggling to hold its form.

Another muffled blast from outside and another ray of defused light from above penetrated the darkness and with it the soft glow of unearthly light sounded the young Jedi and from its softness three forms took their place passively at his

side. He smiled in wordless greeting as the shimmering forms of Anakin Skywalker, Ben Kenobi, and Yoda pushed back the darkness.

"Be gone, Palpatine. A new dawn comes and there's no room for you or your kind." The

Three spoke as one and a deafening roar filled the cave as the ground beneath the young Jedi bucked and rolled.

A whirlwind burst forth at the feet of the demon, enveloped the figure and bore it down into its vortex. With a last cry from its dissolving lungs, the specter was gone.

Luke closed his eyes and shielded his face from the violence of the whirlwind, while his mind held his sister in the calm center of his being where they lay in the protection of the Force. A moment later, it was over.

Opening his eyes, Luke Skywalker stood alone in the cave, but no longer in darkness. The tree above was gone and the welcoming light from the outside world filled the cave where darkness had once ruled. The evil was gone.

"Leia!" Turning, the young Jedi rushed to the opening and pulled himself out. At the overhang stood the tall Corellian, a slender figure wrapped protectively within his embrace. "Han, is she...?"

Solo turned smiling and the figure of the young Senator stepped from his arms and ran toward her brother.

"Leia." He drew her to him. "It's over. At least...it's over."

"I know." She whispered, her eyes bright with understanding. They stood close, the brother and the sister.

"About damn time, too," the Corellian voice in mock anger.

"Han." Luke pulled loose from his sister's arms, and met his friend with a smile. "Thanks...again."

"Oh," the eyebrows over the expressive hazel eyes rose. "You mean that?" He pointed back to the smoking remains of the old tree.

Luke turned and, in the smoke above the old tree, he thought he saw again the faint outlines of those who had given all to see him and his sister into the life that now stretched before them. He whispered a silent prayer of thanks and turned back to his friend. "Yes, that! I couldn't have done it without you...both of you."

Placing a brotherly arm around the shoulders of his friend and the other around his woman, Han Solo turned away from the old tree. "Well, I always did say hokey religions and ancient weapons were no match for a good blaster at your side." Having had the last word, he smiled down at the young Jedi, placed a loving kiss on the lips of his woman, and opened a comlink to his ship. "Chewie, center on our coordinates for pick up. We're ready to go home."

THE END

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