

[Back To Index](#)

The Message

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"Master? Master Skywalker?"

Luke groaned as the rapping at his door continued, accompanied by the repetition of his name. Glancing resignedly at the chronometer on his bedstand nearby, he grabbed his robe and shrugged into it. Force, he'd only been in bed for two hours! "Okay, I'm coming," he called, forgoing the search for his slippers and padding barefoot to the door.

"Master Skywalker?"

"Yes. Just a moment. I'm coming. What is it?" the Jedi sighed, activating the door's release mechanism.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Master," the young girl enthused as she rushed into the room from the lighted hallway. "I would've gone to Mistress Alcon, but she's at the infirmary with one of the med-techs. I think they're with Shorn. You know he's always overeating and getting a stomachache or headache or something. I keep telling him, but . . ."

Holding up one hand while rubbing at his eyes with the other, Luke stopped the gush of words streaming from the wide-eyed youth before him. "Bolla, it's all right. Now, what's the problem?"

Bolla's large pinkish eyes stared up at him and once more Luke wondered if he'd made the right decision to admit a Moubi to the academy. Their race was renowned, some would say infamously, for their constant speech, quick curiosity, and endless energy. The fact that Luke had discovered one among their number with all the signs of latent Force talent, and that he'd convinced his other graduated students-cum-instructors to allow her entrance to the recently established Jedi school, attested to his growing desperation to find pupils to train. Now, for the thousandth time, he questioned his judgment. Carefully screened against weakness to temptation, tested thoroughly for Dark Side attitudes as each student was, Luke knew that inside Bolla was a good youngster. But her ceaseless chattering had worn even his patient nature to microchip thinness. Perhaps he should have waited to admit her until he and the others had had more experience. Inwardly, he smiled ruefully. How? Gifted Force-users strong enough to pass the initial testings were fewer than he'd imagined possible. No wonder that the original Knighthood had only numbered in the upper hundreds.

". . . and I thought to myself, well, it DID have your name on it, plain as the suns, so why bother Master Corin. After all, he'd just have to come tell you anyway and it IS on my screen . . ."

"What?" Luke blinked, returning to his surroundings and trying to decipher the stream of seeming gibberish the young girl had resumed. Tired and sleepy or not, he would have to concentrate. Moubi could talk for hours without interruption or audience participation, often forgetting whatever it was that had begun the conversation in the first place. "Bolla, slow down," he jumped in. "WHAT'S on your screen? What do you mean, it's for me?"

"Why, Master Skywalker, haven't you been listening, sir? I just said, I was supposed to be in my rooms for my sleep time, but I was restless. You know Moubi don't need sleep like humans do, and I've never understood that. Seems to me everyone should . . ." Her voice trailed off as she caught the growing squint in the older Jedi's eye. He might be the High Master Jedi, building the New Order, but he had far too short a temper to suit Bolla.

With resolved determination, she spoke again. "Anyway, I couldn't rest so I decided to do some old text reading on my compscreen. My Standard's not perfect yet (you could've fooled Luke) and I thought reading some of the old records might help. Well, right in the middle of this really boring Old Republic history, which I don't understand, why is

it history is always dull when I'm sure it must not've been for those who lived it? Or are the records keepers just . . ."

"Bolla, please."

"Why, Master Skywalker, what's wrong? I was just trying to tell you about the message for you. If that's what you'd call it, coming on MY screen in the middle of that old record like that. Are you all right? Maybe I should go find Master Corin or Mistress Alcon after all. She's probably out of the infirmary by now. I mean, how long can Shorn's stomach hurt?"

Luke was tempted to let her go as he groaned aloud, but he stifled the urge. HE was the High Master, difficult as that title could prove at times. Catching the still babbling girl by the arm as she turned to seek fresh victims, he once more broke into her running monologue. "Bolla, why don't we go to your rooms and you can show me the message?"

"That would be fine, Master, except . . . Except you have no slippers and the floor's kinda cold. I wouldn't feel right if you got sick or chilled or anything on account of me. Shouldn't I just go tell . . ."

"No, Bolla. I'll be fine. Your rooms are this way, aren't they?" he asked, moving on without waiting for the reply.

Moments later the oddly matched pair arrived at the open door to the young pupil's rooms.

". . . I left in such a hurry, I guess I forgot to close my door, but that's okay, isn't it? I mean, if you can't trust people in a Jedi academy, who can you trust?" She giggled. "I suppose it's okay even if somebody else did see your message. After all, if whoever sent it wanted it private they should've found some other way to send it. But I don't really understand how they sent it anyway. I thought compscreens couldn't receive incoming messages like that, only call up old records and stuff, but this is a new message, I'd bet on it."

They had crossed the small outer room to the lighted display screen. Bolla was right. Something strange WAS going on. Clearly beneath the brighter message, Luke could see the original text, as though the image of the message itself had been superimposed or transmitted on top of the history records. He'd never seen or heard of anything like it.

With fierce concentration, he blocked the incessant sound of Bolla's high-pitched voice from his mind and read the message. It began: HIGH MASTER SKYWALKER. That proved it was a fairly new recording then. Luke had only taken the title of High Master after establishing the academy and bestowing the somewhat inappropriate titles of Master and Mistress on his first few students who now taught with him. That had only been ten Standard years earlier, so the message was younger than that. Still, it did 'feel' recent, very recent. He read on.

HIGH MASTER SKYWALKER:
YOU ARE DESPERATELY NEEDED BY ONE WHO CAN AID YOU IN
RETURN. YOU MUST
HURRY. TIME IS OF A DIRE ESSENCE. COME TO THE INNER WORLD OF
CONATE.
THERE YOU WILL FIND THE MINING COLONY OF ENATH. THE ONE IN
NEED WILL BE
FOUND AT THE LAST SETTLEMENT BEYOND ENATH'S DOME. BEWARE.
CONATE IS
USED FOR GAS MINING. COME WITH PORTABLE LIFE SUPPORT FOR
YOURSELF. COME
ALONE. AND HURRY!

Luke's brow furrowed as he reread the message. "One who can aid you in return." How? A gas mining colony? Life support for himself? Time of the essence? It made no sense. He knew no one on Conate. Had never heard of the planet in fact. Who there could need him? In what way? And how did their call for help come through a closed compscreen?

". . . it's not a very safe place, she says. Full of scrungy old miners and awfully lonely too. Nothing to do and nowhere to go. Mums says I wouldn't like them at all, the gas planets, I mean. But I do remember this one's name 'cause my uncle on my daf's side by his half-sist was called Conna and they sorta sound alike, don't they? Conate and Conna, I mean. So are you gonna go then, really, alone like it says?"

"Bolla," Luke cut in, "please don't touch your compscreen. I'm going back to my rooms and get dressed. I want to get someone over here from Com-Central to see if they can trace this thing or figure out where it came from. All right?"

"Anything you say, of course, Master, but can they do that? I never understood all those tech ways and all. I guess they could if they tried hard. But isn't it looking sorta different already?"

Luke paused in the doorway that he'd reached under Bolla's verbal barrage and returned swiftly to the screen. The Moubi was right again. As he watched, the message faded and the original text returned to normal clarity. Frustrated, Luke tried punching the recall button, only getting the preceding roll for the history study. Excusing himself from her company, he left the still muttering girl and returned to his quarters, wide awake.

"You all know your duties. I'm leaving the academy in capable hands. This trip is not much different than any of the others I've made and I trust you'll keep things going smoothly," Luke addressed the assembled instructors later the next afternoon.

"Master Skywalker," Aleara Alcon said from her chair at the half-circular table where all were seated to face their leader. "I'm not questioning your decision to follow this cryptic message, but I must voice my unease. There is something not right, something peculiar about this whole business."

Luke smiled indulgently as another of his former pupils spoke up in agreement. "Aleara is right, Master. Look at the way you received that call."

Still another joined in. "You do still have enemies left from the Empire, sir. The New Republic has never succeeded in completely ridding the galaxy of those fanatics. This could be an elaborate ploy on their part. Let's face it, a gas mining world could be a dangerous place for an ambush."

Suddenly everyone had an opinion and the room was soon filled with the cacophony of their voiced concerns. Luke listened patiently a few long moments before raising a hand for silence. It was granted immediately. With a gentle smile, Luke surveyed the face of each seated instructor. Each had undergone a great deal of trial and error and sacrifice to reach their current stations and he was proud of them all. Their unending enthusiasm and energies had often buried his own doubts over his ability to rebuild the Knighthood in his lifetime, giving support wordlessly and unstintingly. Their care for his well-being warmed his heart.

"I appreciate your concerns and I know your worries. You'll have to trust my judgment on this matter. I know of no way to ease your cares." He paused to gather his thoughts. "I've considered the possibility of a trap, for whatever reasons. I realize that this summons arrived in a rather unorthodox method, but I sense its sincerity. I cannot ignore a call for help. It's not the way of the Jedi."

"But must we answer every such call, even to the point of ignoring our own safety?"

"Yes, Corin," Luke responded, "we must. The Knighthood serves those in need of our aid, not itself. I am not unprepared. My safety is as well-provided for as is possible, but even were it not, I cannot ignore the Jedi directive to help where I'm needed, when I'm needed."

Reminded so abruptly of their own sworn conduct, the former students felt ashamed, dropping their gazes and reflecting on their mentor's words. Luke allowed them time to absorb the lesson, marveling that even those who taught must continue to learn. At last he laughed softly, easing the somber mood the chamber had assumed.

"Now, I must go," he explained. "Please don't return to our pupils looking so grim. The ways of the Force, of the New Order, are not a chain so ponderous as to warrant such solemn expressions."

The tension eased as his followers and friends rose to wish him safe journey and success.

The planet of Conate was lovely as one approached through the darkness of space, glowing with the pale green gases that gave it its worth. Once on-planet, however, the eerie color of the atmosphere that never changed, the swirling clouds of ground level gas proved discomforting and oppressive.

The community of Enath found relief in the protective double dome that shielded it from the lethal gases, providing heat, light, housing, and communal businesses to serve the miners and their families. To this select city, Luke made his way, laboriously plodding the silty surface of the planet from his landing site to the entrance of the dome. Luckily it was not far. He wore the thick, uncomfortable suit designed for gas protection and used by miners on all such worlds.

Once through the exterior door and mechanically freed of any lingering gas vapors, the Jedi advanced to the interior entry. There was a rather emaciated pale-skinned male in an ill-fitting uniform standing lone sentry at the portal. His eyes were large, dominated by massive pupils, and sparkling with interest as Luke drew nearer.

"Master Skywalker?" he inquired in a surprisingly deep vibrato.

"Yes," Luke replied, stopping at the waist-high bar of metal that separated the two males.

"The nav boys said to admit you, so that's fine by me, but what in the heavens brings a Jedi to this Force-forsaken rock? Or is it impolite to ask?"

Luke laughed. "No, not impolite. I need a good meal, a cool drink, and some directions. Perhaps you can help?"

Now it was the other man's turn to laugh. "Well, the cool drink's no problem. Gas mining's dry work, so there's plenty of bars to quench your thirst near any mine. Good food's a little harder to come by, but there's a place not far into the dome that ain't half bad."

The sentry proved he was given to understatement a half hour later as Luke spooned the last of the stew into his mouth. He'd passed enough cantinas and bars to accept the first part of the guard's welcome, but the food had turned out to be quite delicious and very satisfying.

After leaving the eatery, carrying his protective suit in its case beneath his arm, Luke made his way to the local enforcers quarters. Mining was back-breaking labor and usually boasted more than its share of rough and ready fighting males who played as hard as they worked. Rules were lax and real trouble rarely occurred, but when it did or when it was deemed necessary to allow someone to cool off, enforcers had proven essential members of every mining colony. They usually knew more about their communities than anyone else, too. Thus, Luke had opted to enlist their aid in decoding his mysterious message.

The quarters were located in a short, one-story square building of unknown material. On entering, the Jedi immediately recognized the reason Enath had the mild reputation he'd read of when researching the city's history prior to his arrival. It was unusual for a mine colony to have such a clean record. Here he discovered why.

Behind a huge metal desk, massive legs propped on one corner, sat a member of Solo's copilot's race. A great mass of deep brown fur,

darker than Chewbacca's own coat, rose and fell with the heavy breathing of the Wookiee enforcer. Knowing it was unwise, even for a Jedi, to startle one of this race, Luke backed out the door and knocked loudly.

A resounding thump and a mumbled Wookiee curse told Luke it was now safe to re-enter. The giant being was now fully alert and poised very business-like behind the desk as Luke came in. The enforcer nodded and rumbled a welcome in his native tongue. To his surprise, he was answered correctly in almost perfect Wookieese with only a trace of wrongness to the accent. His eyes widened in stunned surprise moments later when he spotted the lightsaber hanging casually from the human's hip belt.

You must be the Jedi, Skywalker, he thundered, rising from his chair and crossing to gently shake Luke's hand.

"Yes. Did the nav team tell you I was here?"

No, I have better sources than that, the Wookiee chortled. *Chewbacca has described you often. There are few others that could match so closely.*

"You know Chewbacca, then?"

Of course! He is a distant cousin, the enforcer explained.

It had become Luke's understanding that nearly all Wookiees were, or claimed to be, distant cousins, but he made no mention of his knowledge. "I could use your help," he said.

Any way I can be of assistance to you, I will gladly serve. My name is Hawforkin. What can I do?

Luke then told the gentle giant about the strange message he'd received and the request for help. He concluded, "Would you have any idea who sent it? Or where I might find them?"

Hmmm. You say it referred to 'the last settlement beyond Enath's dome'?

Luke nodded.

Well, then, it could only be the Old One.

"Who?"

Sorry, Hawforkin said. *There is an aged, rundown homestead several klics outside the dome. It has been there as long as most remember. A strange old hermit lives there, only coming into Enath on rare occasions for rations. It has been some time since his last visit, though, and I was not aware he had any communication systems out there.*

"What is his name?" Luke asked.

I don't think I ever knew it. Around here the few who mention him simply call him 'Old One'. He's peculiar, but fairly harmless, I'd say. I can't imagine that he would have need for a Jedi High Master. Still, I can think of none other that the message could refer to. If you're ready, I can run you out to his place now.

"Thank you. I appreciate your offer, but the message was clear that I must come alone."

Hawforkin made the Wookiee equivalent of a frown.

"It's all right," Luke assured him. "I can take care of myself. Is there somewhere that I can rent a land-ship? I don't relish the thought of walking that far."

You wouldn't make it if you could. Gas filters protect you so much and even Jedi are mortal. Take my personal vehicle, please. The controls are side mounted on the steer stick so your size should be no problem. You'll be navigating by grid instead of sight anyway.

"That would be fine. Thank you again."

Jedi Skywalker, you must be cautious. Outside the dome, it's very easy to lose direction, even by grid control. Do not look into the gases. They will confuse you. If you stray off course too long or too far, you could become disoriented, lost. It's a physical phenomenon common to gas planets known as 'vapor bliss' and very dangerous.

"I'll be careful. It's harder to lose me than you might think." Luke smiled.

The Force?

 the Wookiee rumbled.

"Only partially," the Jedi answered. "I was raised on Tatooine, a desert world. Without an inner compass, I wouldn't have survived long."

Of course. My land-ship is this way, then. I'll feed the coordinates into the computer for you. It shouldn't take you more than an hour to reach the Old One's place.

They parted company in the vehicle hangar, Hawforkin telling Luke that if he'd not returned within the next eighteen hours, the Wookiee would be out to investigate. Grateful to have the giant on his side, Luke assured him once more that he would be fine.

The Jedi found looking through the enclosed vehicle's bubble roof made him slightly queasy, as Hawforkin had warned, so he concentrated on the mechanics of the Wookiee's transport. The swirling eddy of the gaseous green clouds made by the passage of the land-ship could prove hypnotic and Luke could well understand the dangers of 'vapor bliss'. Although feeling a little like a child in an adult's world, Luke found the oversized vehicle comfortable and easy to maneuver.

Just prior to the passing of one hour, the Jedi caught the telltale blip on the land-ship's forward scanning probe screen, indicating a change in the terrain ahead. Risking a glance through the whirling mists, he could barely discern the darker shape of a crude shelter.

Drawing closer, he slowed the vehicle to a stop and studied the residence. It was decidedly unkempt, as Hawforkin had told him. Beneath the protective blister necessary to all gas planet abodes, large or small, the structure inside stood forlornly bleak and uninviting. It was small, of a substance similar to adobe, unpainted and dirty. There was only one small window and that looked opaque with crusted silt. The dual entryway appeared deserted. The blond Jedi could see no sign of life.

Easing the land-ship inside the narrow shield between dome and atmosphere, Luke noted that the occupant had deliberately built his home so as to discourage visitors. The vehicle barely fit behind the shoddy bulk of the owner's own transport. Leaving the enforcer's ship securely anchored, Luke passed through the home's adjoining filter tunnel and came to the unmarked door of the house.

Soundlessly the panel slid open as Luke crossed the threshold warily. The interior was sparsely lit by the controlled fire of the cook

hearth on the opposite wall. Furnishings were old and in disrepair. A charred pot still sat beside the cleansing oven. A battered wooden table, bare of covering, had been positioned near the fire for warmth and light. Two rickety chairs were pulled up to it.

Seated in one of them was an elderly woman, smiling at the Jedi's questioning gaze. "Come in, please. Excuse our appearance. My husband has been ill. Have a seat, won't you?"

Luke moved slowly to the table, a dozen thoughts vying for answers in his mind. The woman was of an indeterminate age, perhaps eighty or one hundred eighty years old. Her hair was as white as the snow of Hoth, her eyes the color of a cloudy sky. Her skin was parchment thin and pale, giving added fragility to her small frame. She wore a simple dress of homemade cloth, a light lacy shawl across her slender shoulders.

"Who . . ." Luke began, but the woman interrupted.

"High Master Skywalker, I sent you the message. I thank you for coming so quickly. Your reputation seems well deserved."

"How can I help you?"

"Master Sky..."

"Please, call me Luke."

She smiled softly. "Very well --- Luke. As I said, my husband is gravely ill. He is dying."

The Jedi's eyes lowered in sadness before he spoke. "I'm afraid you may have been misinformed," he said quietly. "I cannot heal your husband. I'm sorry."

"YOU may be surprised, Luke." She paused. "I do not expect you to prolong his life. I sent for you to save his spirit, not his body. He is grieved and troubled beyond most beings' ability to understand. You are his last hope."

"What can I do?" puzzled the Jedi.

"First, I must tell you a story. It is not a very happy one, I'm afraid, but it is a true one. Are you familiar with the Old Jedi Order's celebration known as Leodees?"

A painful band encircled Luke's chest as he nodded. His limited knowledge of the ancient rite had been gleaned slowly and sorrowfully from the records unearthed in the destroyed Imperial capitol of Setee. Records he'd discovered concerning the infamous purge of the Knighthood under Palpatine's reign of terror.

"The Jedi planet of Mylon," the woman spoke soothingly, studying Luke's stricken face, "was the site, for generations, of the celebration. Leodees, the Days of Light, was a four day gathering of the Knights. The ceremonies were their yearly rebonding to their vows to serve the Light. Nearly every Knight across the galaxy would be there. It was a joyous time of reunion with old friends and much fellowship and laughter. Families attended and shared in their Jedi members' participations. There was food and drink and gaiety.

"Until . . . until it ended. Brutally. Cruelly. The last Leodees was nearly forty years ago. The Days of Light were forever darkened with the spill of blood, murdered by the Emperor. On that horrible day, one of those present, a Jedi Knight of nearly fifty-five years, found himself in the midst of madness. Separated from his dear wife and partner of a lifetime, he ran in panic and horror to find her, dodging the falling debris of the bombed buildings, ignoring the cries of his brethren.

"He reached her at last, in the deep food cellars where she'd been organizing the menu for the farewell feast. But as they embraced in numbed relief and shared shock, the kitchen housing above the cellars shuddered and collapsed, trapping them in darkness.

"By the time they had recovered and assured each other of their safety, the dust had settled. Finding an old lantern and activating its light-giving fuel, they despaired of escape. The stairwell entrance was choked with rock and wood, but the sounds of ground battle still sifted down to them in their pre-mature burial spot.

"The man, his name was Aldwin, pulled at that unnatural blockade, crying and screaming until he was hoarse, working until his hands bled. His wife worked beside him and together, slowly, they made headway against the cave-in. Yet soon, their age betrayed them. They collapsed onto the stones, exhausted and in pain, chests heaving, backs aching.

"When their ragged breathing at last returned to normal, they became aware of the eerie silence. The sounds of fighting were gone, replaced by the quiet of the grave. They looked to one another, confirming with that short, baleful contact their mutual fears. With

strength renewed by panicked terror, they resumed their frantic clawing at the stubborn stones.

"They were not young, both in their late sixties, and it took them a long time to free themselves from their prison. They began to take turns, spelling each other to utilize all their meager strength, supporting one another by look or word.

"Eventually a pale light filtered down and they knew they were close. The faint breeze that stirred the stale air of the cellar brought no relief to the dirty, bleeding, frightened old couple. With the last of their combined energies, they fought their way up, over the sliding, treacherous remains of the cave-in.

"Debilitated by their final scramble to the surface, they fell face forward into the dust and debris of the kitchen building's remains. They lay gasping like water-dwellers in a desert, too spent to lift their heads.

"When the shaking had left their limbs and breathing became easier, they instinctively reached for one another's hands. Helping his wife to her feet, Aldwin led them from the rubble. Their clothing was torn, their hair full of dust, their vision blurred by the natural light after the lantern's artificial glow.

"What met their bleary eyes was a nightmare from all the hells of all the stars. Not a single building of the Jedi city remained intact. Some stood with only two walls leaning against each other, propped up by the scrapped remnants of their neighbors. Others lay in unrecognizable heaps of stone, wood, and metal. The air seemed to still carry the dust of their collapse.

"And then they saw them. The bodies. The ground was littered with them, and with pieces of them. Here was an arm, still clutching lifelessly to its owner's lightsaber. There was a leg, yet wearing a once shiny black boot. The earth itself seemed forever stained, no longer the pale tan of Mylon, but now the sickening rust color of death and old blood.

"The unnaturally hush that shrouded the scene made every scrape of their feet as they walked seem sacrilegious, unholy. In shock, numb to the core of their souls, they walked and walked, circling the profaned remains of all they'd known, hoping, praying to find someone, anyone alive.

"They could not speak, could not cry, could not shout. They stumbled and tripped, fell and rose to stumble on, their only solid grasp the iron grip of their clenched handhold on each other. They went on that way for hours, their eyes beholding monstrosities not meant for mortal minds to comprehend, their movements as mechanical and unresponsive as a droid's.

"Then it happened. After all they'd seen, after all the heart-stopping grotesque images had failed to reach their dazed and blunted consciences, the woman screamed. She screamed and screamed and screamed, until her lungs burned. Aldwin held her close, squeezing her body to his, his own soul crying with her.

"After all they'd been suffered to witness, the ultimate evil, the perverse and twisted malevolence they could not ignore stretched before them on the outskirts of the ruined city. It was more than a soul could bear, for there, before their trembling bodies, laid out in terrible patterns where they'd fallen, were the swelling bodies of the children --- dozens of them. Every child of Leodees, from those blossoming into adulthood to babes still wrapped in obscenely bloodied blankets, lay lifeless before the old, childless couple."

The woman ceased to speak, her eyes looking back to horrors no eyes should see. Luke sat rigid, his stomach churning with sick anger, his eyes burning with unshed tears.

After a long, unbroken silence, the woman resumed her tale. "It took them a long time to gather the bodies, build the pyres, and free the Jedi and their families of their mortal shells. It was a ghastly labor, but one they felt honor-bound to finish. A Jedi joins the Force, becomes one with it entirely, but when a Jedi dies a violent, useless death, his mortal body remains, sometimes for days or weeks, sometimes forever. Aldwin was a Jedi Knight, old, tired, but a Jedi nonetheless. He could do little else for his people.

"When the last fires had burned out, Aldwin turned his grieving mind to escape. Mylon had become a haunted planet, a place of deepest evil and darkness. Escape was his only plan. To where or what he would do beyond, he could not think. To occupy his mind, keep the nightmares away, was all he had thoughts for.

"He found a disabled space transport and spent weeks scavenging for parts to repair its engine. When it was finished, he and his wife gathered some food and left Mylon, never looking back. They still had no destination, however, and their fuel supply was limited. They had little

money or possessions of worth and their inherent intelligence told them it was unsafe for them to return where they were known.

"The massacre had been too thorough, too hideous. There was little doubt in either of their minds that the mad President Palpatine was behind it. The Jedi had watched him climb to that office with growing discomfort dividing their ranks, but none had dreamed he would dare attack the Order.

"Perhaps that was their undoing. Whatever the reason, it was done and Aldwin and his wife were alone. Although she was not a Jedi or gifted with Force capability, his wife knew her husband. His refusal to confide in her, to free his anguish, troubled her.

"They set course for the last and safest haven their ship could possibly reach --- the gas world of Conate. No one knew them there and Palpatine was unlikely to do more than exploit the planet's resources. Aldwin knew of its city, Enath, because of his previous interest in the dome technology that allowed its existence.

"They landed with no fuel left, no future and little hope. With Aldwin's knowledge and parts from the ship and planet's surface, he constructed this house. Using the Force and the last of the gas filters on board the ship, he journeyed to Enath where he traded parts from the ship's superior comp-systems for food and the dome to protect his homestead.

"Here he has remained, Luke. He is alone and he is dying. He has been dying ever since that awful day so long ago. Not one day has passed, not one hour, that he has not tortured his soul for not dying that day, too. Somehow he's never been able to forgive himself for living, as though his life was a shame, a disgrace to his fellow Knights. He has relived that day endlessly, blaming himself for a failure that doesn't exist.

"Now he's truly dying. He needs you, Luke. He needs you desperately. Help him, help him to understand that he is guiltless. Help him find the peace that has eluded him all these long years."

Luke's eyes met those of the woman's. There was pride shining through her tears, giving her an even more frail, vulnerable appearance. His heart ached for her suffering, held apart from the man she so obviously had loved all her life, by a nightmare neither one of them could ever hope to forget.

Tenderly, he asked, "What is your name?"

Through her sadness she found a smile for the man before her. "My name is Orenda."

"I will do all I can for your Aldwin, Orenda," Luke assured her, rising and moving toward the second room of the small residence. At the doorway he turned and nodded to the brave old woman seated so delicately at the scarred table, the firelight behind her adding a warm aura to her pale flesh.

The second room was even smaller than the common room. A large double bed dominated its darkened interior, an antique illumer unlit on the empty crate that served as bedstand. Lying in the center of the rumpled sheets and blankets, his head propped up by two large pillows was the emaciated, nearly skeletal body of a very old man.

The room already held the putrid sweetness of approaching death as Luke entered. Nearing the bed's side, the Jedi looked down on the sleeping man. Quietly, he lit the illumer. Here was the first of his own kind that Luke had met from the Old Order since the passing of his father and Ben Kenobi. There was so much he wanted to know, needed to know. There was so little time to act. He must reach out, put aside his own desires, and touch the tortured soul of the aged Knight before him.

As if reacting to his presence, the old man groaned and turned toward Luke. His head was nearly bald, a few stray strands of grey hair covering his age-spotted scalp. His skin was yellowed and flushed from fever, beads of sweat dotting his sunken lips. His eyelids began to flutter and twitch, as though he were struggling to surface from a great depth.

Luke slid a wobbly three-legged stool beside the bed and sat down on it. Whispering at first so as not to startle the old man, he introduced himself. "Jedi Aldwin, my name is Luke Skywalker. Someone who cares a great deal for you has asked me to meet with you and help you."

The lids opened, revealing two rheumy bloodshot hazel eyes. Aldwin blinked, as if to clear his faulty vision, then licked his dry lips. Luke hastily grabbed a glass from the upright crate and poured

some water from the capped pitcher on the floor. He held the tumbler to the old Jedi's mouth while he drank thirstily.

"Enough?" Luke asked.

"Thank you," croaked the raspy voice. "You are the new High Master." It was not a question. "What do you want?"

"Only to help," Luke answered. "You are dying, Jedi Aldwin."

"Don't call me that!" the old man gasped, trying to rise.

Luke firmly restrained him. "Okay, all right. Please lie still. You're very weak."

"I know what I am. Better than you could." He quit resisting and fell back deeper into the pillows. After a moment's silence in which his breathing was the only sound, the old man turned to Luke once more. "I don't deserve the name anymore. I cannot be a Jedi."

"You can be nothing else," Luke replied. "You may choose to turn yourself into a recluse, separate from your fellow beings. You may have had no choice, once. But you have the Force. You can ignore it, refuse its comfort, but the Force is still a part of you, just as you are a part of it.

"What happened, so long ago, cannot be changed. You HAVE to accept this. You, alone, could not have stopped the slaughter of your friends, the massacre of their children. Do you believe, honestly believe in your heart, that they could hold you anything but blameless? You, who've suffered even more by your own hand than they did at Palpatine's?"

Perhaps because he knew he was dying or perhaps because after all the long, lonely years he had begun to doubt his self-martyred existence, Aldwin's resistance softened. Maybe in his weakened state, Luke had reached the old man easier than he would have been able to at another time. Whatever the cause, Luke knew that Aldwin was ready to be freed of his own curse.

"Open yourself. Now. Free your mind of these lies you've lived. Allow the Force to wash over you, feel its warmth, rejoice with me in its Light. It is your right, your heritage, from all those who died that day. Accept it. Take my hand. Join with the Force."

Luke's fingers closed over the bony hand of the old Jedi. He closed his eyes and felt the instant serenity of the Force seize his spirit. Then he was no longer alone. Beside him, in the warm glow of the Force's Light, stood the shadow of the man on the bed. He was strong and proud and peace flowed from him.

Suddenly Luke felt a shift, the words 'not yet' reaching his ears. Opening his eyes and returning to the tiny room, he leaned close to the form of the man atop the bed. Putting his ear to the dying man's lips, he listened carefully.

"Under the bed. Papers. Help you. Wrote long ago. Names. Jedi. Jedi children. Not there. On Mylon. May still be . . ."

"I understand," Luke told him, his own pulse jumping. A list, a list of those he might still find. It was more than he'd ever had. Here was the aid the message had promised for him. He felt renewed hope for the Knighthood.

But the old Jedi demanded his attention once more. Leaning close again, Luke listened to the dying man's question.

"How . . . how did you . . . find me?"

"I received a message --- from your wife, from Orenda. She asked me to come to you. She loves you very much."

The aged man jerked violently. "Orenda? Not possible! Orenda."

"Shall I get her?" Luke asked quickly, alarmed by the man's reaction.

"Not . . . possible. Orenda died. Right after I built this place." His voice faded away on the last word as his body and spirit parted.

Was it the Old One who sent for you? Hawforkin asked Luke as the Jedi came to return his land-ship. *Were you able to help him?*

"Yes, and no. He is one with the Force now, but he is at last at peace," Luke answered. "Thank you for your help. May the Force be with you."

Safely aboard his own ship once more and freed of the cumbersome gas protection suit, Luke readied his transport for the return to his academy. He was anxious to run some preliminary comp-checks on the list of names he'd found beneath Aldwin's bed. The list was quite impressive and would surely lead Luke to at least a dozen or more direct descendants from the Old Order. Excitement and hope lighted his face.

As he took his last look at the swirling green clouds of Conate's surface, Luke smiled broadly. Impulsively, he waved farewell. Vapor illusion or Force vision, beyond his viewscreen the High Master saw and waved goodbye to the man and woman reflected among the gases. Luke was especially touched to see they were holding hands.

END

[Back To Index](#)