
Nature's Course

by J. David Lubitsch

Marissa took deep breaths, gently stroking the swell of her abdomen in a patient, circular motion. Beside her, Beru hummed over her needle-work, wordless as usual. Marissa suddenly stopped, folding her long white hands over her stomach, and said, "He'll be strong, healthy baby, Beru." The other woman looked up curiously. "I can feel the Force in him already."

Beru frowned slightly. Such talk around her new husband, Owen Lars, could launch a lengthy and abusive tirade these days. Although he was out in the fields, Beru cautiously laid a sun-browned finger across her lips, and whispered, "Shshh, 'Rissa -- Owen doesn't like it when you talk that way." Relaxing a bit, tossing a glance over her shoulder, she asked a little louder, "And how do you know it'll be a boy?"

Marissa smiled, one of those strange, enigmatic smiles she's learned

search of some refreshments.

Instead, she wandered around the relics which lined his rooms. An old chest, crusted with age and memories, stood to one side, and fascinated, she opened it. There, atop piles of memorabilia, glistened Luke's lightsaber, and tears came flooding back at her. Gingerly, she lifted it from its berth, and held it close to her, weeping silently.

"I was afraid to give it to you -- afraid that Owen would destroy it before your son became of age."

She turned, smiling through her tears. "Yes, yes, you were right.

Save it for when Luke is of age." With a twist of her wrist and a nudge of her thumb, she activated the saber, cutting lithely through the air. "A lovely weapon, until it kills. Can Death be so beautiful?" she asked sadly.

"Come, sit down and tell me why you've come."

She replaced the saber, closing the trunk regretfully, and moving to his side.

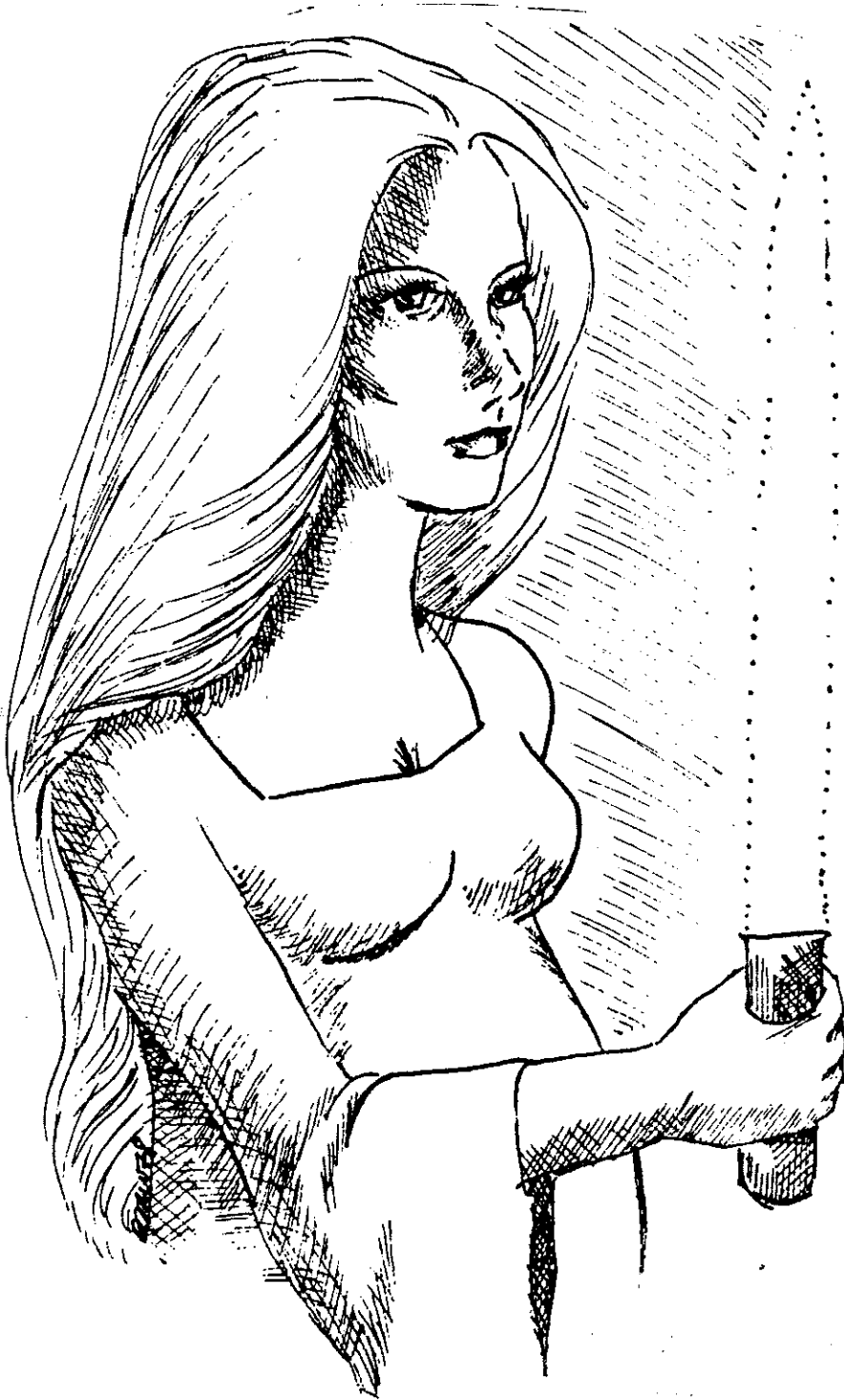
Accepting the glass he offered, she said, "When you and Luke taught me the ways of the Force, I never expected it ... to invade my life as it has ..." she trailed off.

"Yes, you, like Luke, are very sensitive to its power. It can be a heavy burden."

She hadn't planned to lose control .. there was no sense in that. There was no sense in lonely pain, either. "Burden?" she whispered hoarsely, eyes still glistening with tears. "It's a curse, sometimes. Especially now, I --"

He patted her hand with fatherly affection. Luke had been one of his best pupils, his greatest success now that Vader had gone with the Dark Side. His loss was almost as great as hers. But he sensed an additional sorrow.

She drew a deep breath, settling back against the rough couch and ordering



her emotions. "When Luke died, I felt something ... horrible, wrenching, as though I, too, were dying. It was weeks before you returned, Ben -- I *felt* him dying. And now I carry his son -- not his daughter, but his son -- and I feel the Force in him with such intensity ... sometimes it frightens me, Ben. And now ... I know I'm going to die, Ben. I won't live to raise my son."

Kenobi lowered his head. He had suspected as much. Precognition among the Jedi was rare, except among those far advanced, but Marissa seemed to have a natural tendency toward the Force, and all its mysteries. Kenobi had only begun to use such power, and he knew she was right.

"And?" he said solemnly.

"And I want you to promise that you won't let Owen raise him outside his heritage. He is the son of a Jedi; he too must be a Jedi."

Kenobi smiled, pleased that his efforts to educate Marissa had not been in vain. If only there could be time for her to learn more ... if only the Empire weren't so set on destroying the Jedi... if only banthas could fly, he reminded himself. There was little enough time left, and what there was, he must use wisely.

"Come, I will show you the books of the Jedi," he said at last, taking her hand and leading her back to the ancient chest.

"What do you mean she left with the other landspeeder?" Owen growled fiercely as Beru shoved vegetables into the pot boiling on the stove. "You know she's in no condition to make that journey!"

She was frightened. She's seen him in tantrums before, but she'd never let his only sister -- a pregnant one at that -- travel across the Dune Sea alone. He was so furious, his hands shook.

"She said something about having to see Kenobi -- I couldn't stop her, Owen. You know how she gets. And you checked the 'speeder over yourself just the other day -- it was in perfect condition," she pleaded.

Angrily, he swatted the air and knocked over the pot, splashing scalding liquid on Beru's legs and feet. She knelt down to wipe up the mess, ignoring the pain in her flesh, afraid to let herself cry. Owen knelt down, too, and took her hands in his as gently as he could.

"I'm sorry, Beru," he whispered, a tinge of anger still evident in his gruff voice. "Are you all right?" She nodded, tears stinging her eyes even as the steam rose from the floor.

"Well, there's dinner!" she said, trying to make it into a joke, laughing weakly. Owen smiled, lifting her to her feet. He rarely let himself lapse into moments of tenderness, but the frightened, child-like look on his wife's face moved him as he'd never been moved before. He took her in his arms, and stroked her short brown hair. "It's all right, shssh," he crooned as she began to weep. "Shsh, we'll clean it up and go look for Marissa -- Kenobi wouldn't let anything happen to her, either."

"Yes, Owen," Beru gulped, pulling reluctantly away from him and going off in search of towels. Alone in the kitchen, Owen glared angrily at the slop on the floor, not so much angry at his wife, or his sister, but at the old wizard in the hills, and the boy he'd seduced so long ago.

Marissa was breathing rapidly, trying to keep up the rhythm. She concentrated on a spot on the far wall of Kenobi's hut, as he held her hand tightly, counting off the seconds.

"They're coming faster," he announced, wiping her forehead with a cool, damp cloth. "Too fast," he smiled, and she laughed. Yes, this night, her son would be born.

"Beru would be panicking now," she breathed, the contraction sub-

siding. "She's a lovely girl, but so young. Owen will make an old woman of her in a year," she added bitterly.

The old Jedi frowned, releasing her hand and walking over to the stove, where tea-water bubbled in an old, battered pot.

"You know Owen is a good man," he said over his shoulder. "He loves you both; in his own way, he loved Luke, too. You are much too hard on him sometimes."

Marissa looked up, startled. In all Owen's tirades, he'd always been most brutal to Ben. But now, the old man was so kind, so understanding ... "There is much I do not understand about the Force," she said softly. "You, of all people, have the right to hate my brother, yet --"

He sat by her side on the worn cot. "I, of all people, have no right to hate Owen Lars. He is a man caught between destinies -- yet he will have his part to play, and he will play it well. In his own time, he will prove himself, but we must wait. He is confused and he is in pain. *You*, of all people, must *love* him."

She stared into the clear eyes of Ben Kenobi, and tried to understand. Yes, there was so much to learn, and if she could not learn it, then her son must. She was about to speak when they heard the roar of an approaching landspeeder, and the shouts of Owen Lars.

"Kenobi! Kenobi!" he called, and the landspeeder's engines cut out. The sound of gravel crunching underfoot, and finally of the knock on the door brought the outside world once more into Kenobi's home.

Ben opened the door without ceremony, and Lars stormed through, followed by a meek and apologetic Beru. "I'm sorry, Ben," she whispered tugging gently on his robed arm, "he insisted."

Ben nodded, smiling at her, a spark of tenderness growing for this farmer's wife. He closed the door behind her, and turned to hear the sounds of Marissa's rapid breathing once more.

"Don't cause a scene, Lars," he advised, as Beru rushed to her sister-in-law's side. "Your sister is in labor -- it may be a difficult birth."

Owen was silent, pausing only a second to glare at Kenobi, and then fell to one knee beside his wife and sister. "We'll take you home now, 'Rissa," he said softly, finding her hand and clenching it. Her nails bit into his palms, but he ignored the stinging. She looked at him, hatred burning, and spit out, "No, Owen, I won't leave!"

Fury boiled up inside him. He turned to face Kenobi, but Beru's hand caught his arm. "She may die if we move her, Owen. Ben has made her comfortable here, and the birth would be no easier at home."

Marissa smiled slightly, losing track of her breathing and the pain came stronger. So Beru wasn't so weak after all. Yes, she had underestimated a great deal.

Owen's hold grew more tender, and he laid his other, earth-stained hand over the trembling one he held. "Yes, Beru is right. We'll stay here. I'm sorry, 'Rissa."

She blinked in surprise. The pain was subsiding again, and she was able to concentrate more on the people around her.

"Thank you, Owen," she whispered weakly.

Beru smiled, gently applying a towel to Marissa's face. "Perhaps you men could go outside," she suggested, "we can handle things from here."

Kenobi left without a word, and waited in the dimming light for Lars to follow. Grudgingly, he did, and two men faced each other silently.

"She looks very weak," Owen said finally, staring off toward the vast stretch of desert, tracing the lines of faint color striating the sand.

Kenobi clasped his hands before him, saying, "Yes, she is. She

may very well die, wherever her child is born."

Lars turned, sadness lacing his weathered face. One might think that the two men were of an age, so worn was Lars' face in the twilight. But twenty years, or more, separated them.

"I get the feeling she knew she was going to die," he said, a quiet, yet piercing resignation in his voice.

The Force can be a terrible gift, thought Kenobi, his head hung low, his bearded chin pinched between thumb and forefinger.

"Women have an ... intuition about such things," was all he said.

"Hmmpmph!" Owen grunted noncommittally.

The two men gradually settled into a silent truce, Owen leaning wearily against the sun-baked wall of the building, Ben sitting atop a large boulder, nerves tensed, and ears straining. Inside, they could hear the sounds of rapid breathing, tiny moans, and encouraging words, stretches of silence and whispers, as the moment of birth drew closer.

The air turned cool, and the twin suns of Tatooine reached for the horizon. The moons edged up through the sky, and they could hear the howl of the banthas, and the screech of the sandpeople. Owen thought he could see the outline of the great sandworm making its way through the dunes, and thanked his stars he wasn't travelling the desert tonight. Stars blinked on, and a ghostly glow spread across the landscape.

"Why's it taking so long?" Owen snorted irritably. He didn't like being left out, especially here with Kenobi. And if his sister really was too weak for the delivery, he wanted to spend every possible moment with her, while there

was still time.

"It's the nature of things, Lars. One cannot rush this sort of thing."

"Ben!!" cut through the air like a lightsaber through flesh.

Both men turned as one toward the doorway, Owen lashing out an arm to block Kenobi, Ben meeting his stare with equal determination. A standoff, until the silence was again broken by the sharp, full-lunged cry of a baby. Owen's face softened, and his arm retreated, as Ben's eyes fluttered shut, and he thanked the Force.

"You can come in now," Beru said dazedly, and they entered to see her carefully washing the infant in a bath of warm water. "It's over - it's a boy!" she said, her voice full of wonder. "A beautiful boy -- he looks so much like Luke!"

Owen smiled, ignoring the scent of blood and sweat that lingered over the room. His crusty face broke into joy as he rushed to his wife's side to see his nephew. Ben fled to Marissa's side, and knelt beside her.

Her face was pale, damp with perspiration, streaked with tears. She was breathing shallowly, with difficulty. The time was growing near, and she knew it. She reached for his hand.

Owen's hand intercepted Ben's arm, and the two men once more locked eyes. Weakly, Marissa looked up to Owen, pleading in her eyes, and he let the old man go. Defeated, he turned back to the child, a



tiny spark of love still lighting his eyes.

"Ben," she croaked, her voice hoarse with effort, "promise me ... you must promise ..."

He nodded, understanding her request. "Yes, my little one, your son will be raised a Jedi. Like his father before him, he will lead the Republic, and he will introduce a new era to the thousand worlds of the Empire. Your place in the scheme of things is great -- you should be proud!" he whispered fervently, gently caressing her forehead.

Fire burned in Owen's eyes. "Proud! Proud to bear the son of a misfit? A pauper? Proud to die in childbirth? Kenobi, you're madder than I thought, you --"

"Owen!" Beru screamed, clutching his arm fearfully. If Owen did not fear Kenobi, she did. And Marissa was not strong enough for such a confrontation, whatever its outcome.

"You, too, must promise, Owen," Marissa whispered, and it was obvious that she was using up her remaining strength very fast -- too fast.

"I'll promise nothing," he growled, and turned away.

Beru wrapped the child in a clean towel, and brought him to rest on his mother's lap. Marissa, with the help of Kenobi and Beru, sat up to hold her son, cooing lovingly over him as she bared her breast.

"He's hungry," she said, smiling, revelling in the touch of his tiny hands and the voracious mouth. Still Owen circled in frustration, stealing over his shoulder a glance at mother and son, but only when he thought no one was looking. At length, the child fell asleep, and she drew her robe back over her shoulder.

"He'll be as bright and beautiful as his father, Ben. That's why we'll call him Luke." Owen sniffed loud enough for everyone to hear. "He has so much to learn!" Her voice was becoming hoarser, fainter, and as she reached for Ben's hand, her grip was frail, almost featherlight. Beru got up and walked over to her husband.

"Owen," she whispered, placing a hand on his shoulder, "she's dying. Make peace -- show her how much you really love her." He turned around and she could see the tears trickled down his swarthy cheeks. He nodded silently, and went slowly to his sister's side.

"He is a beautiful child," he whispered, gently touching the baby's cheek. "Like his mother," He reached for her hand, and Kenobi let his grip fall, and Owen drew her limp hand to his lips, kissing it. "He'll be a fine young man, someday -- like his father." It was an effort to say that, although he knew it to be true -- there had never been a more loyal friend than Luke Skywalker, but to him, there'd never been a greater fool. Marissa looked up at him, the light of the candles Beru had lit reflecting off her cheeks. "You and Beru -- you'll raise him? And you'll let Ben visit? He must be a Jedi, Owen, he --" Her body convulsed, and Beru fell beside her, steadying the baby. Marissa smiled, closing her eyes as pain wracked through her body again. The pain did not last long and soon her breath fell shallow, until she let out a sign, and her chest remained still. Owen lowered his head, a tear falling onto Marissa's face, and Beru lifted the child from his mother's arms.

"You will stay the night," Ben choked, "I will find bedding for you." He left quietly, to grieve in his own way. Both of them lost, Luke and Marissa, the hope of this generation -- but their child remained. And even though he knew Owen would fight him every step of the way, block every attempt, the hope of the Republic remained, sleeping tenderly in Beru's arms.