

[Back To Index](#)

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After Wooka

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Author's Note: This version has been re-edited slightly but not substantially changed from the original fanzine version.

Han and Luke both slept most of the next day, much to Chewbacca's frustration. He wanted to know what was wrong -- or right! -- with his two best human friends. But he could not bring himself to wake them up when they so obviously needed the rest. Instead, he paced, restlessly, all over the compound.

Luke woke up out of a nightmare involving the mindwiper, and, frightened, reached instinctively for the nearest source of comfort: Han. Solo reacted the same way he would have to being physically grabbed. He slapped Luke away and woke up, ready to fight, It was actually so reflexive he did not have time to think until it was all over.

Wide awake, wide-eyed, panting, they stared at one another for a tense moment. Then Han looked away, ashamed. "Sorry," he muttered.

It's okay, Luke said softly. *It takes some getting used to, I know.*

"Yeah..." Solo still could not bring himself to meet Luke's eyes.

"I was scared, or I wouldn't've been so rough," the Tatooinn explained quietly. "I was having a nightmare about the mindwiper, and I wanted to wake up -- very badly."

"That's a pretty lousy way to wake up," Han agreed. He lay back and closed his eyes again.

Luke frowned worriedly. "You okay?"

"Headache," the other answered briefly, without moving.

"That's not news."

"I know."

Does it hurt to talk, or listen?

Not like this, Han admitted reluctantly.

Then we'll just talk this way. You hungry?

Han did not answer with words, but the impression Luke received was one of hunger far outweighed by exhaustion and pain.

Go back to sleep, he urged. *You sound like you need it.*

Uh-huh... Han's mental "voice" faded away as he gave into weariness. Skywalker got up and went to find Chewbacca.

The Wookice was overjoyed to see Luke, at least, mobile, and hugged him enthusiastically.

"Easy!" Luke laughed. "Easy, Chewie! My ribs!"

"I am glad you are well, Walker-in-the-Sky," Chewbacca said earnestly. "How is our Captain?"

Luke's smile vanished. "He's asleep. I'm worried about him, Chewie. He's gotten worse."

The Wookiee moaned, and they went back to check on him. Han was peacefully asleep, but Skywalker was not reassured by it. He sat down on the bed beside his friend, studying him, anxious with the shallowness of his breathing and the paleness of his face.

Roan? he called tentatively.

The presence of the Tactalke woman filled his mind. *Yes, Luke?*

Can I reach someone who's asleep?

You can wake him if you 'shout.' Why?

I don't want to disturb him, but I need to know how badly he's hurt.

Ask him. She obviously did not understand.

He won't tell me!

Then it would be an unwarranted invasion of his privacy for you to insist, she said slowly. *If he wanted you to know, he'd tell you. Is that Han?*

Yes. You're no help, Roan.

She "shrugged." *We have laws, one of which is that no one shares with only one other person. As you well know.*

It's just temporary--I promise. We have to go to Erissen to find Leia.

Very well, but don't delay too long.

All right, all right, I won't. Good-bye!

Good-bye. And don't forget what I told you!

I won't! Good-bye! Luke cut her off rudely, too concerned about Han to really care about what he perceived as mere Tactalke protocol. He laid one hand over his friend's, gingerly. The Corellian's hand was limp and cold. Luke swallowed nervously, but the physical contact had not disturbed Han, so perhaps a different kind of touch -- equally delicate -- would not, either.

Uncertain about exactly what he was doing, Luke closed his eyes and let his consciousness submerge itself into his Otherself. He pushed closer to Han, this time feeling the pain Han had kept strictly hidden during their conscious Sharing. Deep under that, he could feel the fear even Han was only marginally aware of: fear of death, fear that this was a fatal injury, and that his inevitable death would be long, painful, dragged-out and undignified.

Hey...you're not dying... Luke whispered.

Solo woke up, just a little; enough to think, but not enough to talk aloud. *I know...but...*

But nothing. I'll bet it hurts, though.

Han did not reply in words, but instead lowered his barrier and let Luke feel it all.

Skywalker gasped. *Sand and stars!*

Squared, Han agreed as he forced the barrier back into position. The task was nearly beyond him, and Luke lent a subtle hand, though he did not answer. He drew on the Force, then, covering his friend with a thick, insulating blanket of it, numbing his sensitivity to pain. The relief was so great, Han nearly cried out.

My God, Luke!

I don't know how long I can hold this, the Tatooninn admitted. *It's a strain.*

Han shuddered. *I can't take much more of this.*

Well, if you can take control of this blanket, maybe I can fix you.

What? Luke, I don't know how you're doing this, or I'd've done it myself, hours ago!

Just imagine yourself floating in a bacta tank, Luke advised. *Divorce your mind from contact with your body.*

My body doesn't hurt! Han retorted, but he did as suggested, and, slowly -- so as not to overburden his friend's novice skills -- Luke released the blanket.

Han could not hold it quite so thoroughly, and Skywalker heard a strangled gasp as he let go. *Hold it. It's all yours.*

...Yeah...hurry...!

Luke did not share the Corellian's personal doubts about his ability to help. He smoothed out the turmoil in the Force around him and followed the red lightning of Han's agony to its source.

He was dismayed by the damage he found. He did not know the medical or biological terminology to describe it, but he marveled at the sheer strength of will that had kept Solo functioning as long as he had. Then Luke caught himself up sharply: he had to repair this, and quickly, or he might lose his friend altogether. He worked swiftly, using the telekinetic skills that were the beginnings of Force mastery. He used it to move bone fragments and refuse them to the skull, to seal blood vessels and drain away excess fluids.

He completed the task just as Han's strength failed. The numbing blanket vanished and, braced for a plunge back into red-hot agony, Han instead found himself floating in peaceful tranquility.

You... you... did... it... Solo's exhausted tone was awed, and Luke felt constrained to point out that, properly trained, Han could have done it himself. But before he could speak, the smuggler was asleep.

Luke smiled and stood up, tucking the blankets in around his friend, thinking about how far their relationship had come in those few short months since they had met on Tatooine. He was further reassured when, without waking, Han rolled over and curled up comfortably, relaxing into the first normal sleep he had had since the crash.

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Han slept for a full day. When he woke, he was delighted to find that the healing, which he had dreamed over and over again, was real. The only remaining evidence of the crash was his aching, itching shoulder, and that, but for the cast, could be easily ignored.

Did all that really happen? he wondered. He opened his eyes and looked around. "Hi, Chewie."

The Wookiee was at his side instantly, fussing. Han sighed and sat up, shocking his co-pilot.

"Captain!"

"What? I'm all right, Chewie, honest!" He tried moving his thoroughly immobilized arm and sighed again. "Except for this. Where's Luke?"

Outside, learning crossbow from Telekka, Chewie replied, still slightly stunned. *Captain, I...I do not understand!*

Han's smile was shy, which startled the Wookiee nearly as much as his suddenly restored health. "Well, it's kind of hard to explain. Listen, do me a favor?"

"Anything!"

"Go ask Luke to come here? It's gonna take both of us to explain this to you." His co-pilot went willingly, and, a few minutes later, he heard Luke call him.

Han? What's wrong?

Nothing. Just gonna take both of us to give Chewie an explanation - I don't know how!

No, not that. Why'd you bother sending him for me? All you had to do was call. I'll always hear you.

Well... Han was embarrassed to admit he had not quite dared so presume, but Luke did not press him.

Doesn't matter. This way, I won't have to make up some kind of lie to give Telekka. Be there in a minute.

Luke was relieved to see his friend bright-eyed and bushy-tailed for once, and said so. Han chuckled. "Quit fishing for compliments, kid. You know it's your doing. I wish I knew how you did it."

I'll show you, Skywalker offered quietly. He held out his hand, palm up, and slipped into his Otherself. Hesitantly, Han followed him. *See the bruise?* the Tatooinn asked. *It's from that damned crossbow. Now, cover it with your Otherhand.*

Still hesitant, almost afraid of what he might find, Han obeyed.

What do you feel?

The pain... the broken veins... Zelekhek! Han swore softly, his tone awed. Then he moved surely, repairing the damage.

Luke blinked and flexed his hand. "Nice work."

The smuggler laughed shakily. "I'll be damned!"

"I doubt it," the blond opined. "Have you ever considered becoming a Jedi?"

"JEDI?! Kid, you been sneakin' gralhth or somethin' behind my back? I don't believe in no Force!"

Luke hid his amusement. "It's not a religion; it doesn't require faith. It's a philosophy. It's a learnable skill, too. You could learn it if you wanted."

"And have the Princess chasing me the way she's chasing you? No, thanks. When women chase me, at least I know what they want."

Luke just chuckled. "Leia's female..."

Han cocked his head at the younger man. "Oh? Does she know that?"

"She's fully aware of it." *And so are you.*

Han looked away, embarrassed by the memories recalled, and Luke did not smile. *Stars are pretty far apart*, was the blond's only comment.

"I don't care to discuss my sex life -- or theoretical lack thereof -- with you, kid," Han said stiffly.

"Sure," Luke conceded amiably. "Whatever you say. But we are going straight to Erissen, you know."

"Oh, yeah? Sez who?"

"Sez me," Skywalker stated, unimpressed by the adamant challenge. "You may not miss her unduly, but I do, and I want to invite her into our little family-sept here. If you agree, of course, that is," he added hastily. "If you really object, we'll have to find another girl someplace else, and maybe you've got a girl in every port on this end of the galaxy, but Leia's literally the only woman I know. I can't imagine anyone else as our third."

Han did not answer immediately. When he did, the words came slowly. "Y'know, we haven't really had time to talk about this. I'm not exactly clear on what this 'relationship' of ours exactly entails. Like, what's Sharing got to do with the Force?"

Luke opened his mouth to answer, and realized only then that there were no words. "Uh..."

"Brilliant."

"I... don't know..."

"Has Sharing got anything to do with the Force?"

"Yes!"

"What?"

"It... it... it makes it easier to accept... the concept of telepathy and the mind-touch. Yet the Force is like a... a power-source. Once you know it's there and learn to tap it, you can use it both consciously and semi-consciously. The Sharing makes it possible to show someone else how to find the Force without all the rather tedious mind-expanding exercises." Luke sighed. "You got all the shortcuts, damn you."

"I did?" Han was not offended.

"Yeah. Healing is a Force-function; so is that pain-blanket. You are going to be a Jedi, whether or not you want to be, Han. May as well give up."

Before Solo could come up with a suitable retort, Chewbacca entered. No one knew where he had been, but he was here now, and his growly voice brought the two humans out of their preoccupation with each other.

"You said there was something you wanted to tell me?"

Han sat up again, not at all sorry to be relieved of the problem of answering Luke's last comment.

"Yeah. Um... You know Luke joined that Tactalke family-sept."

"Yes; you mentioned it, though I'm not exactly certain what that means."

Tell him, Luke.

Skywalker explained briefly, telling the Wookiee only the results and none of the means of the Sharing. Chewbacca thought about it for a moment, then nodded.

"All right. What do you have to do with it, Captain?"

"Well... Luke and me... We did it, too."

Chewbacca did not answer immediately, and Han watched him, anxious.

"You mean you can read his mind, and he can read yours?" the Wookiee asked in disbelief.

Luke smiled quickly. "Not quite. But we can talk telepathically."

"And Luke healed me." Han's good hand went to his head.

"So we can get out of here," Skywalker continued, grinning.

"Just 'cause you're tired of the gravity."

"I want out."

"You're going stir crazy."

"So are you."

"I never denied it."

"Stop it!" the Wookiee bellowed.

Whoops. Luke shut up.

Han shook his head, fully understanding -- or believing he did. "Sorry, Chewie. But I can travel, now -- there's nothing wrong with me, 'cept this arm and shoulder, and they won't slow me down. Besides, maybe we can do something about it later. So let's go."

Chewbacca turned slowly toward the door. He stopped and looked back at Han. He did not speak, and when his partner started to say something, Chewie turned away and left the room.

Luke glanced from the doorway to Han, worried. *Uh-oh...*

Han said nothing, but stared after his co-pilot, expression unreadable.

Han?

But the Corellian was completely barricaded, and he stayed that way for the hour it took them to get dressed, move the antigrav unit back into the rented hoverjet, and take their leave of the Clan of the Bear. He went through the formal leave-taking mechanically; the only time he showed any animation was when Anenettu presented him with a small but intricately carved hardwood cage. From within it, they could all hear a familiar wowl of protest.

"Raksha?" Han hazarded, peering inside.

The cat shut up.

Anenettu chuckled. "She has been thoroughly obnoxious since you left," she explained. "We decided she ought to stay with her chosen person."

Han grinned. "Thanks, Anenettu. Each time I see her, I will remember the kindness of you and your Clan. I am forever indebted to you."

"Not so," the matriarch denied. "Through you we have rid ourselves of a blight on our land, as well as established an alliance with a powerful northern clan. All this brings untold good fortune to us. Without you, it would never have been possible."

Han was polite to Anenettu, but once they had left the compound, he withdrew to sit, silent, beside Luke, with the cage on his lap and the cat inside as tensely silent as he. Chewbacca piloted. Luke could not get any kind of response out of him, verbally or mentally, all the way back to the port.

Luke dropped Han and Chewie off at the docking bay while he returned the hoverjet to the rental agency. He hoped that, given some time alone together, the smugglers would work out whatever was so obviously bothering the Wookiee.

Chewbacca's twin cousins were still guarding the MILLENNIUM FALCON, and they were delighted to see their older cousin and his partner. |"We had excitement, too!"| Brennek burred.

Han tensed. "What happened?"

|"We sealed the ship; we were pretending to be in space,"| Nerrek explained, only a little embarrassed. |"Somebody tried to get in."|

"What'd you do?"

|"We used that little belly gun Cousin Chewbacca showed us,"| Brennek preened. |"We told the Port Authority that it was an attempted hijacking, and all they did was take the bodies away."|

|"There were six of them"| Nerrek was still excited, and proud of their kills.

"Who were they?" Han growled, worried that the twins might have been a little hasty.

|"We don't know. But anybody who tries to use a laser torch on the hatchlock deserves whatever he gets!"|

Han relaxed. "You did good, kids," he told them, smiling at the way his approval straightened their backs and squared their shoulders. "You did right. Nobody gave you any hassle? When did all this happen?"

|"Day before yesterday,"| was the response. |"No, the Authority was very understanding."|

"Well, that's a first!"

Chewbacca returned from his inspection of the ship and battlefield then, and told the kids to beat it.

|"You owe us money!"| Nerrek refused to budge, and Han laughed out loud.

"Very good! You kids'll be mercenary enough for space, soon." He paid them exactly the sum they had agreed upon for the original week, waiting for them to count it and protest. They did, and, chuckling, Han upped the ante. Then, he dropped a half-kilo titanium ingot on top of the credit notes. The twins' eyes got very round.

|"What's that for, Captain?"| Brennek gasped.

"Kill bonus."

|"Thank you, Captain!"|

"Aw, g'wan. Get outta here!"

They scampered for the door, laughing.

Alone, finally, in the suddenly-silent ship, Han turned to face his co-pilot. "It bothers you, doesn't it?" he asked quietly cutting directly to the heart of the matter.

|"What?"| Chewie murmured, avoiding his gaze.

"Quit trying to evade the question. It bothers you that Luke and I are soul-touched." The phrase was translated from the Wookiee word for blood-brother. "You and I have been partners for years, and it bothers you that I'd do that with him after only a few months."

Chewie did not want to answer, but he could not avoid Han's steady gaze.

|"Yes."|

"I don't blame you. It wasn't planned. Neither of us started out liking or wanting it. But... well..." Han shivered, remembering that sensation of utter desolation. "It was necessary at the time."

|"Why?"| Chewbacca demanded bluntly.|"And necessary for who? You or him?"|

"Me."

That flat monosyllable shocked the Wookiee. He had never heard Han Solo admit to needing anything or anybody before.|"YOU?"|

"Yes, me. Chewie, do you know how many friends I have?"

The Wookiee bared his teeth.|"Hundreds. You know everybody."|

The human shook his head. "No. Two. You and Luke."

Chewbacca's expression was one of disbelief.

"Really. You and Luke are the only two people I would turn my back on and trust you not to bury a knife in me."

"As I trusted you!"

Han felt that shock clear to his bootsoles. "You think I've betrayed you?"

The Wookiee turned away. "I do not care to be considered fefrekerek. Find another co-pilot." He headed for the hatch, but Han got there first.

"Who said you were ex-friend?" he snarled, blocking Chewbacca's path. "I'll Share with you, too, if that's what you want."

Chewie froze. Then he made an angry gesture. "You have consulted with the Walker-in-the-Sky, of course."

Han shook his head violently. "No. I couldn't Share with Luke's family-sept of Tactalke; there're too many of 'em. It made my skin crawl. I just Shared with Luke. So I don't See any reason why I shouldn't be able to do it just with you."

Chewbacca wanted to maintain his outrage, but his sense of curiosity was more powerful. "How is it done?"

The human laughed. "Y'got me there. It just works. Do you want to?"

The Wookiee did not respond immediately; when he did, his tone was very uncertain. "Do you think it will work? We are very different..."

"Won't know unless we try, will we?"

Han? What's going on?

Stay out of this, kid! Solo snapped back. He ignored Luke's bewilderment and told his partner to sit down. "I don't know if it's necessary to do everything exactly the way we did, but let's try it."

Chewbacca just shrugged and followed Han's instructions. They sat on opposite ends of the lounge; Han leaned his good elbow and cast on the gameboard for a moment, caught in pensive thought. Then -- albeit a little awkwardly -- he held his hands out toward his co-pilot, about a hand's width apart. "Can you see my Otherself?"

"What does it look like?" Chewie asked, reasonably enough, he thought.

"Start with the fact that my Otherhands are touching in between here. See them. There's not a lot of detail, and they glow, kinda. Green."

The Wookiee stared until his eyes watered. "I... I think so..."

Han looked up then, and, with his eyes strangely out of focus, looked steadily at his co-pilot. "I'll be damned, Chewie. Yours is... wavery. Indistinct, like... like blood swirled through milk. I can't see any shape to it. Can you see it at all?"

|"Yes. I think so, anyway."|

"Okay. Now, the Otherself follows your will just like your body does -- it just takes more conscious effort on your part." Han extended his Otherself, wryly amused at being the leader under such esoteric conditions. He tried to catch Chewie's thoughts, remembering how Luke had hardly spoken aloud during or before the process. But, while he could feel the Wookiee's presence, he could not Share it. Han pushed closer, trying to find a barrier so he could breach it, but there was nothing there.

"Chewie, can you feel me? I can't find you."

|"I... I know you are there..."| Chewbacca's tone was bewildered.

Han could tell there was another Otherpresence, but it evaded all contact. He fought to get closer.

Luke got back to the FALCON in time to see the Corellian slip, without consciously realizing it, into a much deeper trance. Frowning, Skywalker approached.

Han's never done this before, he worried privately. I hope he's all right...

Chewbacca seemed to be a furry statue, when Luke tore his attention away from Han long enough to notice. His big blue eyes were glassy; he was breathing so shallowly at first, Skywalker wondered if he was breathing at all.

He sat down beside the Corellian, who was completely unaware of him. He could tell Han was trying very hard to establish the initial contact; he was panting and sweating like a marathon finisher. Suddenly Solo reached forward and grabbed the Wookiee's wrist.

The touch startled Chewie out of his paralysis, and he reflexively flinched away, face wrinkling into a snarl. Han wilted bonelessly when the contact broke, and Luke caught him with a cry of fear.

"Han? Han!!"

|"Captain?"|

The blond youth cradled his older friend, frightened, and sought the Wookiee's attention. "Chewie, did you two ever make true contact?"

The Wookiee shook his furry head vigorously. |"No. He said he could not find me. What is wrong? He looks much like you did...after that machine..."|

"Much the same," Luke explained shortly. "You were his only anchor; he must've cut himself loose so he could use every ounce of power to find and link with you. Here -- take him."

Chewbacca picked his captain up out of Luke's arms, and, at the youth's direction, laid his partner on the monitoring couch.

"Now, don't touch either one of us, Chewie. You'll just distract us, and that mustn't happen."

The Wookiee whimpered wordlessly and ostentaciously stepped away.

Luke was too worried about Han to be concerned with his co-pilot at the moment. He took a deep breath and plunged in, shouting.

Han! Han, damn you, where are you?!

His words seemed to roll away an incredible distance like echoing thunder, but there was no answer, no hint of another being's presence. Luke pushed himself outward, travelling those immense distances, shouting as loud as he could, grateful that this "voice" could not become hoarse.

Han! Dammit, I know you're out here somewhere! Answer me! Han!

Far off in the distance, there came a very faint call. *Chewie?*

No, Luke. Han, where are you?

Chewie? The Corellian had not heard him, and Skywalker got even more frightened. He threw himself toward that faint and fading call.

Han, you can't Share with Chewie; he's not here. Reach for me, quick, before I lose you altogether!

The indefinable something that was Solo seemed to turn in surprise. *Luke? What're you doing here?*

Looking for you. Have you tried to get back yet?

No. I haven't found Chewie.

You can't. He's not here.

Whattaya mean, he's not here? Han challenged, angry. *I almost had him, once!*

You couldn't've, Luke stated flatly. *He's not on this plane. Please, you've got to come back with me right now!*

No. He's out here. I just have to find him. There was no yielding in Han's tone, and Luke began to feel desperate.

Han, please!

You're just pissed off 'cause I tried it without you, Solo snarled, pulling away. *He's here, and I'll find him!*

Han, the Sharing's broken, and so is your connection to your body. You've got to come back right away! You can try to Share with Chewie again later--please, come back now. You're scaring him...

'Scaring him?' Han wavered in his resolve.

Yes. He says your body looks like mine did after the mindwiper. You've got to return to it, and fast! Try it!

Han tried to return, found that direction was meaningless and, therefore, his Direct-Sense useless. He nearly panicked.

Luke felt his distress and moved in quickly. *I'm still here, and I can lead you back. Don't worry about that.*

I...I'm okay. I'm just not used to not knowing which way is which...

For the first time, Luke heard actual uncertainty in his friend, and grinned.

Direction doesn't mean anything here, anyway. Don't worry about it. We've got to return.

Okay. You'll have to lead, though.

No problem.

The retreat was easy. Pulling out of the body was like travelling upstream, against some kind of current. Returning, the natural flow was downstream, and the currents of energy swept them back at dizzying speed.

Luke hardly spared any attention to appreciate the dizzying sensation of speed. He was too concerned with not losing his friend. He knew they were very close,

and then, with the suddenness of an eye-blink, he was back in his own body, kneeling on the deck beside Han. He stood up, a little clumsy, and blinked.

Solo's body was sprawled limply on the couch, his every muscle slack. There was a respirator strapped over his nose and mouth, and Luke went cold with fear. "Han?"

There was no answer.

Han! he nearly screamed.

Huh? Wha'...? That mental mumble had definite direction.

Luke heaved a sigh of relief. *You okay?*

I... I...dunno...

Concentrate on breathing. Feel your lungs working...feel the blood flowing... He saw the Corellian's breathing steady down and gradually turned the respirator down, and finally off. He loosened the straps and pulled it away. "You feel okay, now?"

Han blinked open eyes that focused with visible reluctance, and smiled weakly. "Yeah. Thanks."

"You take it easy for a few minutes. Then I'll yell at you."

Solo closed his eyes wearily. "You go to hell, kid."

It was then that Chewbacca approached, hesitant. ["Captain? Are you all right?"]

"Chewie? Chewie, I'm sorry. I tried! I really did!" Han apologized desperately. "Listen, we can try again -- just give me a few minutes..."

["No!"] the Wookiee barked. ["No. It will not work, and it is not worth the risk. You... you stopped breathing!"] his voice faltered.

Han was surprised. "I did?" He had to force himself not to reach for Luke for confirmation. "I wasn't aware of it."

["That is the most frightening part! I do not wish this badly enough to risk your death, Captain! I cannot do this thing; that is plain to me. So we will forget about it."]

"Can we, Chewie?" his partner whispered painfully. "Can we?"

"We will because we must!" Chewbacca snarled. "I will not be the cause of your death!"

"Hey, hey, both of you -- calm down," Luke advised softly. "We're all friends here, aren't we?" He did not wait for an answer. "You're jealous of my bond to Han, aren't you, Chewie?"

The Wookiee shrugged. "I was, when I thought I had merely been forgotten, shoved aside. But I cannot do this thing you do, so it cannot be a slight. We are both his brothers--by different paths, as we ourselves are so different."

Luke nodded. "And differences enrich us," he said soberly. "Thank you, Chewie."

Everyone was silently solemn for a moment. Then Han chuckled and struggled to his feet. "C 'mon. Let's space."

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"General, I'm worried."

Rieekan turned and faced Princess Leia. "What about, specifically?"

"Han and Luke," she answered, wringing her hands. "No one's seen the MILLENNIUM FALCON for weeks."

"Where were they last reported?"

"Quarlu."

Rieekan frowned. "Quarlu? What happened?"

Leia shrugged. "I don't know. They aren't there now, or the local cell would've found them. According to port records, they left a month ago, destination unspecified. No one's seen them since."

"Quarlu's a black planet," was all the general said.

Leia paled. "Black" was Alliance shorthand for a world where the rebels in residence had been discovered. It usually meant the loss of the entire rebel mission. "Do you have any details yet?" she asked, not realizing how frightened she looked.

Rieekan shook his head. "No. We don't know who survived, who was captured, or even a hint as to how their security was breached."

"Find out," she ordered brusquely. She rose nervously and left.

What if Han and Luke were captured, too? she wondered. *Luke's loyalty to the Cause is unquestionable, but he's never been under formal interrogation. Han? I don't question his honor...but we have no idea how he would react to capture and interrogation... Besides, dammit, they're my friends!*

She forced herself not to dwell on the possibility of their capture and interrogation. The mental image of Luke or Han being questioned by the Empire with regard to their rebel connections was too painful to consider for more than a few seconds.

No... No, it couldn't be...

But, as more time went by, and no one heard from the MILLENNIUM FALCON, the possibility that they had been captured -- possibly in space off Quarlu -- grew to be an almost-confirmed probability. The Imperials were establishing a powerful military presence in the Peves Sector, centering on Quarlu because of the reputed Alliance presence in that area.

Then, after nearly two weeks of unbearable suspense, news came from Quarlu in the form of a nervous, trembling, skinny child -- the twelve-year-old son of the Quarlu rebellion's intelligence chief. The child had been completely shattered by the Imperial raid on their hidden base, and all he was sure of was that they had been somehow betrayed, and everyone had known that the Imps had arrested several shipmasters in the system, holding them and interrogating them for subversive information.

For Leia, it was all the confirmation she needed. Han may have been a lot of things -- irritating, conceited, supercilious, superior, fascinating -- but his integrity was not open to doubt. If he was late for their planned rendezvous on Dyloot for an information drop -- and he was, nearly three weeks late -- it was because something had prevented him from making it.

They were captured, Leia told herself dully. *I'll never see them again. All I can do is pray that they died or went mad before they cracked. It's too late, now...* She shuddered, forcing her personal feelings under cover again, and squared her shoulders. *The Rebellion goes on, despite any setbacks,* she reminded herself firmly. *And I will take my revenge in blood on Impera itself!*

That decision made, she went to order the evacuation of Erissin Base.

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The MILLENNIUM FALCON dropped out of hyperspace over Dyport on Dyloot; Luke frowned. "Han, I just realized something. We don't have a cargo to sell here. What're we gonna use for a cover?"

Han grinned, playing the controls one-handed. They had decided not to heal his shoulder, because Force-healing left no traces whatsoever, not even on bone, and they knew they would need to justify how late they were. Han's accident would suffice.

"We're a charter. You're a rich playboy with a taste for slumming, and you hired me to ferry you around. So it'll be nobody's business, really, and I'll drop the line casually. Just play your wide-eyed farm boy, and you'll pass."

"Okay," Luke shrugged. "You're the Captain."

"And don't you forget it!"

[How long are we going to stay here?] Chewbacca wanted to know.

Han grinned wickedly. "We're so late now, we could stay here for a few days and it wouldn't make much difference." He knew how anxious Luke was to get back to Erissin.

"No!" Skywalker snapped. "We've got to return as quickly as possible. Have a little compassion, Han. Everybody at Erissin Base must think we're dead or captured by now!"

"You could care less about 'everybody at Erissin base,'" Solo accused. "You care only about one particular body there."

Luke glared at the Corellian, trying to stay furious. Then he gave up and chuckled. "So do you, you closet sentimentalist."

Chewbacca was mystified. They were obviously conversing verbally -- they didn't use the mind speech casually -- but, though their words made sense, the meanings of the statements were evidently escaping him. Most shocking of all, Chewie decided, was his partner's dreamy expression...!

"One more thing we have in common, kid," Han admitted cheerfully. "A common lust."

"It's not lust!" Luke denied hotly; then, he shriveled under Han's calm scrutiny. "All right, all right, it is -- but that's not all it is."

"Conceded," the smuggler agreed complacently.

"We need another Sharing," the Tatooinn growled. *"We shouldn't be sniping like this!"*

Presently, presently...

Luke didn't try to comment; Han was busy with their approach.

"Shit!" the pilot said softly. Skywalker started to ask what was the matter when he saw what Han had seen.

There were two Star Destroyers in synchronous orbit over the port. There was a swarm of TIEs surrounding the motherships; Han had little attention to spare as he tried to thread through the obstacle course this formed.

The comlink crackled to life. "Unidentified freighter approaching Dyport. Heave to and identify yourself."

Han whistled soundlessly. From the strength of that signal, the call was from one of the Destroyers. He activated the comlink. "This is the free trader GOLDEN DAWN out of Byalpar on a tourist charter," he said carefully. "To whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?"

"*To whom?*" Luke nearly choked, trying not to laugh aloud. "*And 'pleasure?'*"

"*Quiet!*" Han ordered shortly.

"This is the Imperial Star Destroyer DICTATOR," the military voice said smoothly. "Your business on Dyloot?"

"Pleasure trip, sir. Tourist charter out of Quarlu."

"When did you leave Quarlu, GOLDEN DAWN?"

"About eight hundred and fifty hours, DICTATOR. We took the scenic route." Han's voice was nonchalant, but his expression was not. If this Imperial got suspicious, he would have to make a break for hyperspace while dodging dozens of TIES which were wandering the area. His hand hovered over the accelerator.

"Pass free, GOLDEN DAWN," the Imperial finally decided.

Han acknowledged the clearance politely and headed straight for Dyport. No one relaxed until they had settled the temporarily renamed FALCON into her berth.

"Whew! Luke went very limp in his seat. "That was awful!"

"I know." Solo was still taut and wary; he relaxed more slowly than Skywalker, uncertain if they were secure. "Listen, kid: I think we'd better stick around her for a few days and act like tourists. If there're that many Imps on orbital patrol, there'll be more on the surface. We can't afford to attract their attention."

Luke did not want to agree, but that was irrelevant, and he knew it. They had reported in as tourists, and Imperials, while not the most original of beasts, nor the most intelligent, were famous for noticing the slightest discrepancies in the fabric of their surroundings. They would be noticed, and they must appear to be what they said they were - at least until they were beyond the Empire's reach.

"I suppose so," he agreed, sounding dismal. "I've had all the brushes with Imperial Destroyers I care to."

"Squared and cubed!" Han agreed emphatically. "Especially if I have to fly one-handed!"

+++

Their contact was a food wholesaler who specialized in supplying starships. Han and Luke went together. It was not out of character; Luke's persona was one of a slumming dilettante. He wanted to learn every detail of a free trader's existence, and this was a major one. Besides, neither one wanted the other to go off alone, despite their instantaneous communications: the port was crawling with stormtroopers.

As usual, their furry co-pilot -- who was unusually memorable in most places, being a rare and exotic type of alien -- stayed with the ship.

The foodseller was an alien himself, a Tonamhleck native, with trilateral symmetry, orange fur, and a brilliant yellow crest. Han acted very bored, ordering the basics of survival. Luke leafed through the catalog wistfully. "You don't have any Cheekken scaled apples?" he inquired without much hope.

The foodseller -- whose name was Raroch -- stiffened his crest in surprise. That was the recognition code for the information pickup, which was supposed to have taken place nearly three weeks ago. He was out of communication with Erissin Base; there had been too many Imperial ships in the system to risk contact.

Luke smiled slowly, understanding the alien's misgivings. "We know we're late -- we're sorry about that. But we had a slight problem." He nodded significantly toward Han, who shrugged one shoulder but did not speak.

Raroch could not decide if he believed them or not. If they were Imperial plants and he gave them the countersign, it would be enough to convict him of treason.

Han's shoulder ached and itched under the cast, and he was, as a result, more than a little grumpy. He snarled at the Tonamhlackan. "Dammit, either give us your signal or call the Imps and have us arrested," he growled as he paced restlessly.

Raroch shuddered. "I sell everything, gentles. But Cheekken scaled apples rebel against such rough handling as hyperspace travel, and they are seldom seen so far from Cheekke."

"All right. What've you got for us?"

Raroch made a face; neither human could interpret the expression thus displayed. "It's a tape. Wait here. When you didn't come and didn't come, I stashed it." Without waiting for a response, he turned and vanished into the back room.

Luke looked around nervously. "What if he calls the stormtroopers?"

Han shrugged his good shoulder. "We'll have to fight, won't we?"

Startled, Skywalker chuckled. *All right! All right!*

Han grinned, but did not speak, for Raroch was returning, fingering a small tape disc. He seemed hesitant about turning it over to them, glancing from it to them and back again. Luke felt Han's impatient irritation and spoke up quickly.

"Is that it? Thanks, Raroch. We want to get back to base as fast as we can. We don't want to worry them any more than is absolutely necessary." He took the disc from the other being before he could protest. They were gone before Raroch had regained sufficient control of his voice to speak intergal as opposed to swearing in his native tongue.

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The MILLENNIUM FALCON arrived in Erissin system only four days later. They expected to be challenged immediately, but the entire system seemed unnaturally quiet. Frowning, Han extended the ship's sensors to their maximum. "There's not a ship awing in the whole system!" he marvelled.

Luke whistled. The FALCON had a sensor suite that would have been impressive on a military ship twice her size. Nothing larger than a stratoboat could hide from her in the same system.

They did not need to speak. Han sent the FALCON down, swooping like the huntress that was her namesake for the rebel base on the planet's southern continent.

"There."

They knew where the base was, and so it was detectable from the air. It was empty.

"Deserted...!"

"They're gone!" Luke was stunned, a horrible, hollow feeling growing inside him. "They've abandoned this base!"

"But why? We've only been gone for a few weeks. We should've heard if anything was seriously wrong." Han kept the FALCON circling a kilometer up. He could not quite bring himself to land; the situation was too puzzling.

Again, Luke understood without a word being spoken. "Now what do we do?"

"Secondary contact on Calcadine," Han reminded him with forced cheer. He aimed the ship skyward.

"You don't think they were discovered."

"No. There's no sign of a fight -- no debris either at the base or in space. They wouldn't give up without a fight. I think this was a precaution -- though I'm constantly amazed at how casually they abandon bases."

"If it wasn't necessary, they can always come back," Luke commented as he turned to the navicomputer to figure their jump coordinates. "I still can't figure out what could've made them nervous enough to run, though."

Covertly, Han watched the boy work, but did not interfere. Luke needed the practice.

"I still don't figure what could've happened!"

"Would the disappearance of one of their courier ships in a heavily Imperial sector be enough?" Chewbacca asked placidly.

"I suppose... us?!" Luke gasped as it registered.

Han nodded. "Could be. They haven't heard from us since Quarlu; they'd expect the worst, which would be us getting picked up."

"Then we've got to hurry back!"

"We are hurrying."

"Here -- coordinates for hyper."

Solo made no move to take them. Luke was officially the navigator, but Han was captain and pilot. "Did you check those?"

"Han, We've got to get back!"

The Corellian was unperturbed by the boy's agitation. "I know. I'd like to get there in one piece and in this century. You check those."

Luke growled wordlessly and redid the computations as a check. He got a different answer. He swore.

"I heard that," Han commented mildly.

"You were intended to," Skywalker snapped as he started yet again. Han held his peace until Luke finished, and had two answers that agreed: the first and the third. "See? I told you I was right."

"And now we know." Han scanned the results swiftly, accepted the coordinates and entered them into the hyperdrive. When they had enough speed, he shoved the control levers forward. The stars blurred and disappeared.

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It took them another three days to get to Calcadine, and Luke fidgeted the whole way.

"Will you relax?" Han finally pleaded with him. "You're making me jumpy, and it's uncomfortable."

Luke glanced at him, furtively. *Sorry. I didn't mean to -- honest!*

Han smiled back, almost shyly. *That's okay. Neither of us is used to this.*

I should learn to shield better. We live too close together to let our emotions bleed over like that. You're better, though. I can't hear you at all unless you call to me.

Han just shrugged. *I've been building emotional armor for thirty years, kid. You're not going to get through it in thirty days.*

I guess not.

A light flashed on the monitor console, and Solo glanced at it. "Calcadine. Right on time." He stood up and headed for the bridge. Luke followed.

Calcadine, it turned out, was reassuringly busy for an officially uninhabited system. Han grinned and keyed the con. "This is the MILLENNIUM FALCON, to Calcadine Base. Tag. You're it."

There was no immediate response, and when it finally came, it was stuffy and official-sounding. "Say again, MILLENNIUM FALCON?"

Han sighed. "Never mind -- it's not worth it. This is the MILLENNIUM FALCON requesting a landing assignment. We've got nothing but good news."

Once again, the response was slow in coming, and they could hear voices in the background. "Very well, MILLENNIUM FALCON. Assignment: Bay 24, ring alpha."

"Thanks, Control. FALCON out."

"No sense of humor," Chewbacca commented.

"Stuffed shirt," Han agreed. He landed the battered little freighter, and they all tumbled out, eager to share their experiences. As soon as they were clear of the ship, they were cut down by automatic stunners mounted in the landing bay.

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Luke struggled back to consciousness to find himself strapped to a chair with a brilliant light shining in his eyes. Through the hangover of a stunblast, he fought to think clearly. His first conscious thought was a weak one.

Anybody out there? he called hopefully. He did not get the answer he sought.

I'm here, Luke, came Roan's concerned tones. *What's wrong? What happened?*

Roan? I can't hear Han.

He's probably still unconscious, then, she soothed him. *You've been unconscious for hours. What happened?*

I'm not sure, yet. You'd better stay clear of this, though: you aren't really a Rebel.

All right. But if you need me, you call - okay?

Sure, Ro'. I promise.

Okay.

He felt her presence receded and mentally squared his shoulders.

Han! he shouted. *Han!*

The moan he heard was physically audible. Shocked, Luke forced his eyes open. The blinding light was just a naked glowtube on the ceiling above him. After a moment's conscious effort, his eyes focused. He gasped at what he saw.

Han was tied to a chair across the room. What horrified the student Jedi was not the fact that Han's hands were tied tightly behind him -- just as Luke's were -- but that the heavy plaster cast the Wookiee medic had applied to keep the smashed shoulder immobile was gone. The resultant pain was evident on Solo's face, even though he was still only semi-conscious.

Han?

...Luke...?

Even his thoughts were weak and pain-filled. *Wha'... Wha'... happ'n'd?*

We've been taken prisoner, it looks like to me. He made no attempt to disguise his bitterness.

Pris'n'r? But...

Yeah. By the Rebellion. Our own Rebellion!

Han tried to move, and nearly sobbed as pain roared through his shoulder like flame, unexpected. Luke felt it, too.

Don't! Don't move! They took the cast off - you move, and you'll re-break those bones! Don't!

...Oh... God...

Take it easy, Han, please. I'll see what I can find out.

...okay...

In the meantime, practice that pain blanket I taught you.

Solo smiled weakly. *Oh, yeah. Forgot about that.*

Idiot. Luke smiled back, then looked around the room for the first time.

It was a small cubicle with gray walls, a gray floor, and a dingy white ceiling. The chairs to which they were tied were straight-backed, made of steel, and would have been uncomfortable under the most favorable of conditions. It was only then Luke realized they were not alone. Standing in the doorway -- which he

could see only peripherally -- was a high-ranking rebel, recognizable only by his uniform.

"Is this any way to treat a blue dove?" Skywalker snarled, using the most common rebel recognition code.

The man showed no reaction. He entered the room slowly, studying the furious youth dispassionately. Luke struggled against his bonds, briefly, then gave it up as hopeless. "Dammit, why are we being held like this? And where's Chewbacca?"

Han was listening, and that question -- as well as the fact that their captor did not answer it -- frightened him. *Damn them - if they've hurt Chewie...!*

Luke agreed -- and Han knew it -- but neither of them commented any further on it. "We're rebel couriers and recruiters -- we have a right to know why we're being held prisoner by our own people!"

The man - a major in Security by his badges -- finally spoke. "You were last reported on Quarlu, nearly two months ago. At approximately the time you officially departed -- according to port records -- every ranking member of the Quarlu mission was either arrested or killed."

Luke's eyes widened in horror, and he heard Han gasp. He shivered, suddenly. This major looked quite implacable. "We didn't know. we had nothing to do with it."

"Where did you go from Quarlu? You filed no flight plan."

"We never do," Luke explained, with a glance at his friend, who seemed oblivious. "We went to Wooka; Chewbacca wanted to visit his Clan, and Han found a cargo to get us there."

The major glanced at the Corellian, who still seemed to be unconscious. "What sort of cargo?"

"Medical supplies."

Don't mention the Tactalke! Han warned urgently. *Most everybody's afraid of telepaths, and there was a secrecy clause in the contract I signed.*

The major cocked a doubtful eyebrow. "'Medical supplies?' What kind of medical supplies?"

Tell him 'staysline' -- it's an illegal narcotic, but it has psychiatric uses.

"Staysline," Luke answered, with the right amount of defensiveness.

The major did not react visibly. "Why didn't you reappear until now?"

"We sold the staysline right away, and Chewie went to visit his family. When Han and I had the ship ready and a cargo lined up, we had two weeks clear. We rented a hoverjet and tried to fly out to his Clan's territory. The hoverjet crashed; that's when Han broke his shoulder. Why'd you take the cast off? He's gotta be hurting, Major. When did the Rebellion stoop to torture?"

The major ignored Luke's questions and asked one of his own. "Why did you crash?"

"We were shot down by a small Imperial outpost," Luke snapped. "It was a research base, working on a new and improved mindprobe. They called it a mindwiper. Their experimental model had already been tested on several Wookiee warriors. Our hoverjet crashed, and the Clan controlling that area took us in, primarily because we were obviously enemies of the Empire. In return for their care for us, Chewbacca's Clan -- which was much larger and more powerful -- offered munitions and manpower to help destroy the outpost. We assaulted that base and eliminated it. All the Imperials were killed, including the base administrator -- Seye Tarkin."

The major asked, "Is that your whole story?"

Skywalker tracked the time thus accounted for and shook his head. "No. We stayed there for another two weeks. Han was in no condition to do any serious work, and we'd already failed that cargo run. So we stayed for the Clans' celebrations and then went to Erissin. There wasn't anyone there, so we came here."

"That's all?"

Luke shrugged. "We stopped at Dyport to pick up the data tape."

The major turned to study Han. "Do you agree, Captain?"

Han was watching, his eyes dull with pain and the effort of holding the Force blanket in place. When addressed, he focused on the major with some difficulty, but did not otherwise move.

"Yeah," he said hoarsely. "That's right."

"Nothing to add? To change?"

"No..." His voice betrayed the strain he was under, and Luke got angry all over again.

"Dammit, Major, he's in agony, bound like that. When did the rebellion stoop to torturing innocent people?"

"Your innocence has yet to be established," the major said mildly. With no other word, he left them alone.

"Han, you okay?"

Solo looked up and grinned, albeit a little wanly. "Sure, kid. I'm tough."

"Yeah, I've noticed." *Can you hold that blanket all right by yourself?*

Yeah, he was assured. *Lots o' practice*. He relaxed carefully, and Luke left him alone.

A few minutes later, several common Rebel soldiers came in. Two of them freed Luke from the chair; they pulled him to his feet and then re-cuffed his hands behind him. They held him while the other two tried to do the same with Han.

The Corellian could not stand without help; when the soldier grabbed him by the right arm to help support him, he reeled in agony and fell to his knees, his face white. They gave him time to recover; then the man on his left helped him up. With his assistance, Han managed to walk where he was shoved. Luke was half-dragged along behind him, and kept his fears to himself.

When Skywalker realized where they were headed, he cheered up a little. *This is Sick Bay!* he called.

I hate doctors, was the smuggler's disgusted response.

Luke grinned. *Yeah, but...*

Yeah...

They were separated then, but neither worried very much about physical proximity anymore. Luke was propelled into a small cubicle and fastened down to a bed by wrist and ankle cuffs, and a locking bed belt.

"What the--! Hey!" He tried to struggle, but there was no way; he was outnumbered. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

No one answered him. Then, a medical technician came forward with a breath mask; Luke felt a thrill of fear. "What's that?" he gasped.

"Veridine," the tech said shortly. "Just relax and breathe normally."

"Dammit--!" His protests were cut off as the mask was fitted over his nose and mouth and strapped on like a respirator. He tried to hold his breath but could not. He inhaled and shuddered as his stomach roiled in response. *Han! I'm being drugged!*

So'm I... came the groggy response. Reflexively, he pulled himself free of his body, and the grogginess fell away with the entirety of physical sensation. *Hey, Luke - come out here with me!*

Luke was slipping under fast, but the happy shout pulled him free.

Hey, this is great!

Yeah. I'm just as glad not to have to feel that. Shudder. What did they call that stuff?

Veridine. I never heard of it.

Fury. It's a goddamned truth drug, Luke! They don't believe us!

What?!

Yeah. Wicked snicker. I hope they have fun trying to interrogate us, now!

Slow smile: Yeah, that's right. It must frustrate the hell out of them.

Yeah. What say we stay out here for a while? I'm not really enamored of that junk - especially on an empty stomach.

It'd be worse on a full one - it's awful!

I'll go along with that.

How do you feel, otherwise?

That's a stupid question. Out here, I feel fine.

How's your shoulder?

Rotten.

Worried: Do you think you rebroke any bones?

Couldn't differentiate the pain enough to judge, and didn't have the concentration to spare to probe it. It's pretty bad, though.

You don't sound too worried...

Shrug. Can't feel it from here; can't do anything about it. So why worry?

You're incorrigible!

Modestly: I try.

You're very trying!

The two stayed secure in their Sharing for a long time, not always bothering to speak, but simply Sharing one another's company. Eventually, they decided to see what was going on "down below."

Better let me go first. The pain from that shoulder may be a little hard to take.

Do you hear me arguing?

Luke just chuckled and went sliding back toward his body. He opened his eyes and looked around. *Hey, Han?*

Yeah?

I can't see you, and I'm still tied down to this cot. I guess...

Solo sighed, resigned. *Sure. Okay. Talk to you in a minute.*

Okay. Luke waited tensely for the reply, worrying about his friend all the while. It seemed to take a long time for Han to answer.

Luke?

Yeah! How goes it?

Han's "voice" was tense and strained. *Not... too... good...*

What? Are they still there with you?

No... I'm not... in there... any... more...

Where are you? Skywalker demanded, frightened.

About... a klick... east... and... two floors... lower. It's a cell...

I can hardly hear you!

...Wait... There was a moment of tense silence, then Han's voice returned, stronger. *That's better.*

What?

I had to take time to set up that blanket. I'm in a cell in a basement, I guess. There's just bars to the corridor and between the cells. I'm on the floor; I think they just tossed me in here, and I landed on my shoulder.

What?!

Han chuckled softly. *Take it easy, Luke. As long as I can hold this blanket, I'll be okay.*

Yeah, but how long can you hold it? Luke asked, his voice bleak.

I don't know, Solo admitted realistically. *What's with you, kid?*

Nothing. No, wait--they're coming in.

It was Han's turn to wait, enduring the suspense of not knowing what was happening to his friend. He waited much longer than Luke had, and was becoming seriously worried when he heard the sounds of scuffling feet. He lifted

his head from where he lay on the floor of his cell, exhausted, and grinned as he saw the blond shoved into the cell beside him.

Luke tumbled to the floor and swore when he hit his elbow on the cold stone. The guards slammed the cell door, ostentatiously locked it, and disappeared. Luke climbed to his feet and went to the bars separating their cells.

Han grinned. "How're you feeling? You look kinda green around the gills."

Luke's smile became a little wan. "Not too excellent. I'm sick to my stomach."

"I wish that was all I had to worry about." The Corellian fought to maintain his outer serenity as he struggled to his feet. His left shoulder, bared where his shirt had been cut away to leave room for the cast, looked badly bruised and crumpled. He had tucked his right hand into his belt and used the other to lean on the wall to walk to the bars separating them. When he got there, he slid down them and panted, his head down and hair matted with sweat.

Luke knelt beside him and reached through the bars to touch him. "Hi."

Han did not answer immediately, but smiled and slumped down a little farther. *Hi.*

"You okay?"

Ninety percent.

"You don't look it. Or act it."

I'm okay. It doesn't hurt.

"You're not okay. Hold still." Luke went deep into trance. He did not speak for a long time; Han fell asleep where he sat, slumped against the bars. Skywalker felt the pain blanket slip away as his friend's conscious control failed, and took over smoothly while most of his attention was devoted to selectively healing the worst of Han's pain without completely repairing the damage -- much as he wanted to -- since that would arouse a good deal of suspicion which they could not afford now.

When he was finished, Luke reached through the bars and laid the smuggler flat on the floor. He held the Force blanket as long as he could so Han could rest, then released it slowly, hoping that, if he did it gradually enough, he would sleep through the transition.

He woke abruptly to an indistinct whimper of protest from the Corellian. He reached for his friend, both physically and mentally, and realized only then that Han was dreaming.

Nightmare, in fact, he remarked when he saw the gist of it. Han, it's okay. You're not alone. I'm here, and I'll always be with you. I'll always be here.

Han did not wake up, just settled back into a calmer, deeper sleep. Luke kept a faint contact so he would hear sooner if his companion had another nightmare, and went back to sleep.

+++

They were awakened by guards, hustled roughly out of their cells and back upstairs to Medical, where they were again drugged. This time, they waited only until they were sure what was going to happen, then fled together into a Sharing. They Shared a certain amount of satisfaction over their captors' consternation.

Y'know, I just realized something.

What?

We're immune to interrogation! Do you realize how valuable a tool this could be to the Alliance?

Hold it.

Why? Stars like sand, Han, this is fantastic!

Take it easy, kid. In the first place, we aren't immune - just unaffected by truth drugs.

So?

If they were serious about breaking our wills, they might still be able to, contingent on whether they understood our method of resistance.

How could they possibly figure that out?

That's not important. We could be

*faced with an alternative: either
knuckle under or let our bodies go.
If they started using physical torture,
we'd have to decide whether or not
we were going to let them slowly and
progressively destroy our bodies.
Could you still resist if you knew
that, one of the rare times you went
back, it'd be dead? How long can
Sharing sustain our consciousness
after our bodies die?*

Long pause. *I...I don't know.*

*We aren't immune to coercion, then,
just highly resistant. I wonder how
long it'll be before they give up on
the drugs and start using more
physical methods?*

Leia wouldn't let them!

*Cynically: you think she's letting
them to this?*

Stunned silence.

*She's probably not even on the planet,
kid. Much as she'd hate it, she was
probably the first person they evacked
off Erissin, and this was our second
scheduled contact point. Rieekan and
Dodonna wouldn't let her risk herself.
She's probably on of of the other
bases, or someplace else, on board the
CRUSADER.*

But we need her!

No. Smilingly: We want her.

Over the next three days, they spent most of their time either asleep or deep in Sharing to avoid the veridine that was administered daily. They did not realize

that they had not had anything to eat or drink since their capture; they worried about Chewbacca and exulted in their growing union.

On the fourth day, when they returned to physical reality, Luke got violently ill. Han, too groggy from the cumulative effects of the drugs to move much, could only watch in aching sympathy. Finally, Luke collapsed, and Solo did not disturb him. He dragged himself to the bars between their cells and stretched out carefully on the linens he had dragged there from the cot on the far wall days before. He did not know why Skywalker was so sick, though he did not feel very good, either. His shoulder throbbed in time with his heart, but he hardly had to work to block the pain, now. It was so omnipresent, he was becoming accustomed to the effort required to stop it.

Han drowsed on his makeshift bed for time he could not -- and did not bother to -- estimate. Eventually, their jailers brought them food. Luke was still unconscious, and the Corellian was too miserable to eat.

When neither prisoner showed any interest in eating -- despite the fact they had not done so in a week -- their guard called in a medic. The man who responded was a Ngangan who taught emergency medical skills to all Rebel personnel, Rami Toboral. He was still settling in from his recent transfer from Erissin, where Luke had been one of his students. He was horrified to find the Tatooinn commander in a cell.

"What the hell?!"

Han heard the voice and recognized it; he had audited the course as a refresher. "Rami?"

The medic whirled. "Captain Solo?" When Han did not try to get up, the medic came to his side and knelt, anxious. "What's wrong? Are you hurt, or sick?"

Solo grinned faintly without bothering to open his eyes. "Both. Got anything for veridine poisoning?"

Rami shook his head. "No. It'll wear off fast -- and it won't kill you. Is that what's wrong with Luke?"

"As far as we know."

"Okay. What's wrong with you -- besides veridine?"

Han chuckled painfully. "Shoulder. All smashed. It was a hoverjet crash about... a month ago? I dunno anymore. But the major.. he had 'em take the cast off. I land on it a lot. It's worse'n it was."

Rami was visibly horrified. His skilled fingers carefully probed the injury. The Corellian withstood it for a few moments, closing his eyes and clenching his teeth; but then, the medic got a little too rough, and he flinched away, reflexively fleeing to the other plane.

Rami was frightened when Solo's body sagged and his pulse and respiration dropped so alarmingly. He went immediately to the officer in charge of the cell block and demanded hospitalization for the injured smuggler.

The major was coldly polite, and denied him just as coldly.

"Are you trying to kill him?" Rami demanded. "If that shoulder of his isn't set properly and immobilized, it's going to kill him!"

"You have no jurisdiction here, medic," the major said evenly. "You were permitted inside only to diagnose and recommend..."

"And I recommend immediate medical attention!"

"The prisoner in question is undergoing routine interrogation."

"He can't be interrogated if he's dead!" Rami shouted frantically. "The bones in his shoulder have to be set -- and it'll take surgery now, thanks to the way you've mistreated him!"

"That will be all, medic. Dismissed."

Rami stared at the major in complete amazement, then turned on his heel and left. Fifteen minutes later, he was in Communications.

On board the Alliance flagship CRUSADER, Princess Leia received a small, innocuous-looking message-flimsy. She opened it, read it once, hurriedly, and again in utter horror. She then stormed out to find the ship's captain. An hour later, the CRUSADER's fastest launch detached itself from the mothership and streaked toward Calcadine.

Leia arrived on Calcadine four days later. Rami met her at the landing bay.

"You're the medic who sent me that message?" she demanded, ignoring all greetings.

"Yes, ma 'am -- Rami Toboral."

"How are they?" She knew she did not need to explain who she meant.

"I don't know for sure. Worse, I suppose. I haven't been allowed back to see."

"Show me," was all she said.

Rami took one look at her set expression and saluted respectfully. "Yes, ma'am!"

end part 1

[Continue To Part 2](#)

[Back To Index](#)