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CALL IT A TIE
by ZP Florian

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'I'm sitting on three tons of fournite. Hey Wormie, you're sitting on three tons of fournite. A situation right out of a holoivid. What is Luke Lars of Tatoonine doing here? You've come a long way, farmboy?! See the Galaxy, get a chance to blow up with fancy explosives.'

He brushed the damp hair off his forehead with a grimy hand. Han probably would get a kick out of sitting on these crates, maybe even try to sneak off with one to keep it as a souvenir.

The shuttle came down fast. Luke knew it meant trouble. The pilot talked and he barely heard the words.

"Get going, we have no time. The Imps are scouting the moons on the other side. They might spot us any moment. Get in and we're out of here. The freighter can't wait very long."

"Could we fight them?" Luke asked suddenly.

"The scouts usually have fifty troopers and all the weapons in the world." The pilot was an older man, seasoned and very tired. "If we engaged them and lost, they'd get the crates, plus a few live prisoners. You don't want that, Skywalker. Just get in."

"No. We can't leave these crates here. They were made by the Calamari and the Imps mustn't find them." General Rieekan had made it quite clear what had to be done in case of trouble.

"The Imperials must not have proof of the Calamari helping us." Luke stood up. "Get into the shuttle. Tell the freighter to join the fleet. I'll stay and blow up the crates."

They avoided his eyes, which suited him fine. He was somewhat embarrassed in the double role of Commander and hero. Han would have had a plan of some sort, he thought. The shuttle pilot coughed. "Someone will come back looking for you as soon as it's safe. Just make sure the Imps don't get the idea you're here."

"Get going." Luke felt he sounded authoritative, and liked it. Nobody made a sound, but they obeyed. The shuttle door slid shut after the last man.

Strange, Luke thought, I'm not even worried. He realized he had taken the easy way out. He could've ordered any of the men to stay behind. That would have been a command decision. This ... well, he gave suicide orders to the one that wouldn't come back to haunt his dreams -- himself. I won't be a general! Heroes do things themselves because they're too soft to send others to their death. Who said that? Han? Kenobi? Leia said a hero is someone who gets to the wrong place at the wrong time. Lies. I am doing this because I know I'll survive. They'll come back for me, find me. I have the comlink. Which the Imp sensors might pick up.

Which then must go up with the three tons of founite. He went back into the depot, carefully checking for anything that could be linked to the Calamari. Nothing left.

Good. He walked out, went as far as he could still trust himself to aim properly, and flicked his blaster to the highest setting. I have a blaster, he thought. I have a blaster. And a lightsaber. I fly an X-wing. I am blowing up three tons of founite on a strange, stinky planet, where you have so much moisture, you can drink the air. Luke Lars, Wormie. Look at me.

He noticed his hands were shaking.

Let the Force flow through you. He repeated this, until the blaster pointed steadily at his target. How strange, I am not even thinking of the size of the explosion and the distance between me and those crates. His finger tightened on the trigger

Then light, then nothing.

Something cold touched his face. He smelled smoke and wet fur. His eyes opened. The forest on the far side of the river blazed sky-high with fire. A small, hairy forest creature sniffed at Luke's skin. He moved, scaring it away. It took a while to register everything, to remember what had happened. His uniform was soaking wet, and hot with the heat of the fire that breathed across the wide expanse of oily, muddy water. Creatures swam in it, escaping the blaze.

He lay on the slippery clay of the riverbank. His timepiece registered twelve hours past the explosion.

But I don't know how to swim.

The Force saved me. He hated the idea. I ran from the blast and fire and swam in a real river, and survived, and it was not me, but this mysterious thing. Hokey religions, as Han would say. Dragged across the water, like a puppet? But his body still shivered with the cold of the water, and the exhaustion of a long effort. "Must've done something myself," he mumbled, feeling for the water container on his belt. He got to his knees and drank deeply.

Hate this, hate this, hate this.

He went to the river and looked at it. The water was dark and thick with mud and slime. "Must clean myself," he thought, walk upstream, look for a creek. The geography of watery worlds, he remembered. Streams. Clean water.

He found one, and spent almost an hour washing himself and his clothes. The air was hot and with the light of the

blaze and the black smoke in the sky, it could have been day or night, he didn't know. He hung his clothes up to dry, and went to sleep in the grass. Might be full of poisonous little creatures, he reminded himself. Then: Kraaat, they're never going to find me.

He slept peacefully and for a long time.

"Skywalker is a great asset to us," Leia Organa repeated for the tenth time. "He is the only known Jedi."

Mon Mothma sighed. "A, no one is a Jedi after a few hours of training. B, even if he were, Jedi are notoriously stubborn, disobedient, likely to go their own way, no matter what orders they get. At best a dubious asset, like an erratic computer. I know that it's a great confidence booster to have a Jedi among us: as a symbol, he's very valuable. Yet I am constantly worried about what he is going to do next, whether he is able to cope with his Force-gift at all ... after all, if I remember well, a few months ago he had no idea of his own talent." She smiled at Leia. "You owe him your life, I understand; and you want this debt to be paid. But we can neither spare nor risk any ship or any team to go searching for him now. And he is not the only known Jedi; remember, there is another and his name is Darth Vader."

Leia looked at the other woman, and read something in her eyes. "You think Luke is dead."

Rieekan spoke up finally. "Of course he's dead. He sent up three tons of founite with a hand blaster. Even if he is the best shot In the Galaxy, he must have been too close to the explosion. If it is any comfort to you, he never knew what happened."

"I don't know."

Han Solo toyed with his paper cup, tearing it into little pieces. "I don't know," he said slowly. "The dumb kid wouldn't think of tying the blaster onto the crates, and pulling the trigger with a mile-long cord. Maybe he didn't have a mile long cord anyhow. I guess I agree with Rieekan. He's gone up with the stuff there. Hell, he

should have been shot down over the Death Star. His kind don't last, your Highness. He is your typical little soldier, a brave little guy, or a dumb little guy, coming out of his mommy's stomach to be used and discarded. The right little boy to swallow all your Alliance hype, and choke to death on it."

"That's supposed to be his eulogy?" Leia asked him bitterly

The Corellian shrugged, trying to keep his calm.

"I liked the kid," he said. "But he'd always need someone to save his skin. He was no survivor."

"He was Jedi!"

"Jedi, my foot. A Tatooine farmboy. Maybe with some Jedi blood in him. Maybe Jedi did fool around, contrary to popular belief. Maybe his Mom had eyes for hooded outlaws." Han, having demolished the cup, started to carve lines into the table with his fingernails. "He was a dumb kid, and he had it coming."

"You don't happen to be going near Garin soon?" Leia asked.

"No. I don't. I have to go to Tatooine on urgent business. It's in the opposite direction. Besides, Garin must be crawling with Imperials, investigating the site of a very large explosion. All I need is Imps after the Falcon."

She looked into Han's eyes until he was forced to look back. Then she said, "You could take any of our old freighters."

"Sweetheart, if I am going to stick my neck into a noose, I want my own ship with me, not some patched-up junk." Han stood up, stretching, as if nothing ever bothered him in this world. "But, like I said, I'm going to Tatooine on very urgent business."

Leia kept silent.

"I said I am not going to Garin."

"I never said you would."

"Well, I'm not."

"Good for you."

"Fine! and good night. And goodbye. And good riddance! to you, and to your Alliance, and to all the dumb ignorant stupid puppydog toy soldiers in it, Luke Skywalker included. Kraat of all kraats!"

With this, he stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him so hard, its hinges tore loose. There was tremendous power in the tall, lean Corellian.

Leia slowly picked up the torn pieces of the paper cup. It was her room and it had to be tidy. Then she sat down in the chair that was still warm from Solo's body, and let herself cry.

'I must know more about this.' The desire was more powerful than his need to be rescued. Nothing is resolved, if I don't know. What is this Force? I control it or it controls me? Kenobi said both. Something made me run faster than I knew how, swim when I didn't know how ... and I don't remember.

Time, I've got. He grinned. All right, then. I'm going to test this Force.

He stood on a slimy cliff over the river. He had walked further upstream the day before, just to do something with himself.

The forest still burned on the other side but the flames were lower, the sky clearer. He had seen the Imperial scout ship, flying low, and blessed his wisdom for blowing up his comlink. Now, he was no different than any scurrying life form in the forest. Probably just hungrier, than the others

Does the Force kick in whenever I am in danger? Does it obey some subconscious voice? Does it have a will of its own, to protect the Jedi? Any Jedi? He looked down. He shrugged and jumped.

He sank into the muddy water like a stone, choking, sputtering. Came up, hands and legs flailing. Went down again, came up coughing. Panicked and sank, with cold dread in his heart. A fish-thing brushed against him. Water rushed into his mouth. He thrashed around and came up again, terrified. Where is the goddamn Force now? He screamed, spitting water and mud.

The memory of supremely calm moments came back to him. When he'd pulled the trigger. When he'd fired the shot over the Death Star. It was silence, peace, singleminded concentration and supernatural ease at the same time. Let the Force flow through you.

It was easy. Suddenly, the smoky sky over him and the cold, dark water under him became tangible sheets of matter, allowing him to find his place between them. He floated. Turning, he tried to propel himself towards the shore.

Calm. That was the whole thing.

He climbed out of the water, wiped the mud out of his eyes and mouth and lay down on his back, staring at the sky. Force. I might get to like it yet. Calm. He dozed, then something began to tug at the edges of his attention, forcing him to sit up and look.

The Imperial scout ship was nowhere to be seen. It was probably quite near though, on the ground, the crew still scanning the site of the explosion. Han'd be a fool to land there.

Han?

He was on his feet, gasping for air. If Han came for me! Like a fool ... like a friend. The grand and cold Corellian again came for me. Holy Breath of Tatoo, he must like me ... and if he does ... am I likable? ... maybe not such a nerd ... a Jedi...and if Han thinks so ... maybe the Princess.

Han came for me. Han.

But beyond the confusion and childish emotions, the man, the Jedi in him knew that the Corellian was indeed foolish to come, and in great danger now.

Dreaming of friendship, glory, and a dark-eyed Princess, wild with those dreams, yet -- in some unfamiliar way -- calm, detached from even his own technicolor visions, Luke Lars-- no, Skywalker, began to run.

"Hamf wmrugha soshyyk maoarhf," Chewie said. when the Falcon landed on Garin.

"Yeah. Toy soldiers, playing with fire. Nice bit of forest burning here. Hm, Chewie? I wonder, by the time the Alliance is finished saving this Galaxy, what'll be left of it worth saving?"

"Urrh sensorqum."

"It's the kraat-ridden heat: the sensors can't pick up lifeforms this way. Imp ships would show up though. Maybe they're already gone."

The Wookiee studied the screen. "Froh hoo Lukhe harworghet?"

"Well, if he kept his comlink, the Imps picked him up already. They home on comlinks easily. On the other hand, if he got rid of it, we'll have a hard time finding him. Unless he had enough sense to get nice and far away from this fire."

"Awghr ii Horfor?" the Wookiee inquired.

Han could not say if the thought Rieekan was right: Luke could not have survived. They came here on a very remote chance. "I've gone soft, Chewie," he said finally. "That's it. I've gone soft on the kid, and I've gone soft on the Princess. And when you go soft, you slip."

As he saw the shape of the Imp scout ship looming ominously on the screen, he just nodded. "See? What'd I tell you?"

The Imperial ship landed right beside them. Chewie wailed, and Han just stood there, staring at his boots, coughed and said, "Sorry, pal. They really got us this time."

As the Imperial Captain stepped out of the ship Han knew that he had been identified. The Captain grinned at him.

"So, you're quite a catch, Corellian. The Tatooine Territorial Authority is very much interested in you. What's more, the Imperial Special Branch noted that you are a double-A priority prisoner." He nodded to his men. "High security. Use the new binders on him. And keep an eye on the beast as well. These are intelligent."

Han made a face, and kept quiet. Somewhere, someone will make a wrong move, and then... "Eih amoram," he said to Chewie.

"Is that Corellian Solo?," the Imperial Captain exclaimed. "Just keep to Standard, Solo, or we will be forced to use discipline. No secret discussions."

"Sorry," Han said. "Won't happen again. Uhh ... excuse me. Where are you taking me?"

"Right now, nowhere. You'll stay in the ship. We have a little investigation to finish here. Besides, we are not an interrogating unit." He seemed to regret this somewhat. "I am to present you hale and sound to the Special Branch. Don't worry, though: you'll be there in a fiveday."

"Please," Han could sound quite humble, if necessary. "Is the Wookiee under arrest, too?"

"Well, I am not sure; he is not on the list. They may let him go."

"Why don't you?"

"Because I am not sure. Look, we're not here to make small talk. Take him away."

Luke made his way swiftly among the smoldering trees. The ground was hot; the heat burned his feet even through his boots. Heavy smoke hung in the air; it made him lightheaded. The dying forest was silent. He walked noiselessly; the thick layer of ash muffled his steps. It rose in puffs as he went.

What am I hoping for? He's been arrested for sure. If I couldn't fight the scouts when my men were here with weapons, how could I fight them now?

But he was ready to take them on barehanded, for Han.

My lightsaber!

I lost it! Idiot! He stopped, fighting for breath, hating himself. How could I? Now it's gone. Maybe in the river ... lost, forever lost...my lightsaber! Overwhelming sense of loss filled him, unbearable misery. It meant so much! He longed to hold the cool metal shaft. No blaster ever gave him the same feeling. With the saber, he was a man armed. Kenobi gave it to him. His father's weapon. His link to the mysterious Jedi warriors. His confidence embodied in a dangerous beam of charged particles. My, lightsaber!

The pain of his loss and longing filled his whole being.

And the slim metal cylinder filled his palm. It was there. He held it. It came to me!

Impossible!

Staring at the lightsaber, he feared for his sanity. But the weapon was no hallucination. Hard, cold, smooth, it warmed in his grip, and came to life with the familiar hum and brightness.

Jedi.

"Who are you? You know that the Special Branch is already coming to get you? They don't want to wait a second longer." The talkative Imperial guard was dying of curiosity.

Han glared at him through the bars of his holding cell. "Just a smuggler," he shrugged. "I've done a couple of illegal things, yeah. Blasted out of Mos Eisley. Local trouble. Don't know what the Special Whatever wants of me."

"Maybe just information. Maybe you know something. No problem. You'll be truth-drugged, that's all. Doesn't even hurt." The guard sounded like someone who had a lot of admiration for the skills of the Special Branch. "Anyhow, they're coming. Those guys are fast. They're the first to get the best ships."

The Corellian gritted his teeth. "Where is the Wookiee? Are they taking him, too?"

"Looks like."

The guard kept talking, but Han was not paying attention. There would be a few good seconds while they were being transferred from this hold to the Special Branch's ship. On a speeder, or a small shuttle. How many guards would they bring? Doesn't matter; that would be the only chance to escape. Going down fighting, would be better than being truth drugged. The things that'd come out! The rescue on the Death Star, his performance at the end of the battle, and more...old, very old stories. That blasted Lord Vader would really like some of them!

"Uh, when are they going to get here?"

"Before the morning."

"What time is it now?"

"Local? Halfnight. Four standard hours before sunrise."

Han lay back on his bunk, trying to rest.

The amber glow of the smoldering trees illuminated the clearing. It was still unbearably hot, the very earth exuding the heat. Perspiration ran down Luke's chest under his damp clothes. He still didn't know what he wanted to do. The explosion created a veritable crater where the depot used to stand. The Falcon was there, on the other side, a long flat shadow. Nearby, the scout ship screamed darkly. Nobody moved. The Imperials were sleeping. Most of them, at least. Luke found that if he really concentrated on them, he could sense what they were doing. A sleepy guard on duty ... two men doing something illegal, probably gambling, or drinking in secret. Han. dozing and scheming. Chewie, tense and impatient, worrying, about his human cub.

More of them Where.?

He sensed the oncoming ship and some ten Imperials on it. Coming, here.

Surveying the clearing, he saw that no ship could possibly land there; the Falcon and the scout ship took all the available space. Wherever they land, they'll come here on speeders or bikes.

For Han?

Concentrate. Relax.

Han sat bolt upright. Luke? Luke was here? The Tatoon... He could almost touch the boy. Weird mind! Weird powers, damn the old wizard, screwing up a decent kid like this. The Corellian shuddered thinking what he would feel if someone suddenly declared that he had "powers." What does the kid want? Was he also captured? Can anyone talk with their minds? Damn fool kid. But it was good to have him close by. Han had to admit, the kid had done fine on the Death Star, and after, with the gun...Damn fool farmer has guts. He grinned. Hope they don't drive him crazy with all that crap about Jedi knights.

Luke saw the scout ship lowering its ramp. Two Imperials came out, both yawning. "Not enough that this planet hopping gives me a permanent case of spacelag," one said. "Now we have to capture some stray smuggler the Special Branch wants in the wee hours of the morning. Those guys never sleep or what?"

"I'll go get the man. Maybe we can still go back to bed for a few hours," the other sighed.

Now there was only one Imperial on the ramp. Luke edged closer, gripping his lightsaber. Gods, if they bring out Han and Chewie before the other imps get here! All we need is a few seconds.

Bootsteps. Han was led out in binders, then Chewie. Luke saw them exchanging glances. The Corellian looked into the reddish darkness, as if he was searching for someone.

He knows I'm here, Luke thought.

Now.

He charged. How well the saber kills! Luke suddenly realized.

Chewie howled and took off towards the Falcon. Han dropped to his knees, fumbling for the control of his binders at the belt of the fallen Imperial. In a minute, he was free, bounding after the Wookiee with his long-legged run.

Luke felt his own heart beating, like a drum. So this is how it feels to be terrified.

Chewie palming the Falcon's lock open. Han stumbling in after him. Four surprised and half-dressed scouts running down the ramp of their ship.

Five men zooming in from nowhere, on a prisoner transfer shuttle.

Luke stood frozen, half-way between the Falcon and the scout ship, trying to decide what to do: run for the smuggler's ship, or stay and cover Han. Kill more? This

was a different kill; the blaster did its own job, clean and distant, but the saber was a part of his body, and he had to get close enough to look his victims in the eye. Jedi: rebel: killer: how many died on the Death Star? Mustn't think!

"Run, you idiot!" The Corellian's voice broke the trance.

Luke turned, and flew towards the Falcon. Something pushed him forward, hard, and he was in, the ramp slamming shut, shoving him inside; then the ship tilted and he slid helplessly back, banging his head on the wall. Dizzy, he scrambled to get to the gun turret, falling rather than climbing down.

But they had time. Valuable seconds, stretching to a minute or two. The scout ship was slow taking off, and the Special Branch people needed explanations before they got moving. Han had no trouble shaking off the scouts, and by the time the SB ship started to chase them, the Falcon was in hyperspace.

"About the Jedi," Leia started, "I don't think Luke would be ... erratic. General Kenobi--"

Rieekan interrupted. "General Kenobi stirred up a lot of trouble in his own time, then disappeared for years. Now you are telling me that he died in a duel with Darth Vader. And Luke has what, a few hours of training ... The first thing he needs is military discipline. If he is alive at all."

"He is remarkably disciplined," argued Leia.

"He obeys you, Princess Organa, and that is an entirely different matter. Extraordinary circumstances breed heroic acts, but a war is mostly week-a-day, and ordering banalities. Jedi or not, Skywalker will be treated just like any alliance personnel. It is better for him, too. Hero status is hard to handle."

Rieekan spoke firmly, and not without warmth, yet Leia felt resentment in the man. "You don't like him?"

"Well, he is ... He has an attitude problem. Like changing his name. What kind of choice is that? Skywalker? That's an ancient name: the family is full of lords ... The boy had a decent everyday name, and he goes and picks this ... uhh, high placed, big-sounding thing Skywalker. Whatever gave him the idea?"

"General Kenobi told him that his father was a Jedi Skywalker, a pilot."

"Oh," Rieekan was embarrassed. "That's different. He didn't know his father's name? Don't you think it's rather strange?"

"No, I don't think so. After the extermination of the Jedi? Someone wanted to protect the child by raising him in secret. Not unusual at all." She thought of her own upbringing. "Actually, the same thing happened in my family."

"All right then, I apologize." Rieekan smiled. . "Still, I believe that Luke, umm, Skywalker, does need military training."

"He never denied this. Doesn't he work twice as hard than any other young man?"

"Yes, and he was promoted for it."

Leia sighed. It was useless to argue any longer.

"Where is the kid?" Han wondered. "I know he made it in."

"Amw hauro?"

"Wounded? I sure hope not. He's never been wounded in his whole life, though, maybe he needs the experience."

"Afga Hor," Chewie growled.

"He is no baby." Han stood up, stretching, then walked down the corridor, to check on Luke. He found the boy in

the gun turret, slumped over the controls. A large burnt and bloodied patch showed on his back.

"Kraat," Han cursed. "Chewie, get in here with the medkit."

The Wookiee appeared fast; he scooped Luke's inert body out of the cramped space, and laid him on the floor.

"Graawffh," he said, relieved.

"He musta been too far for the shot to go through him. It's just a surface bum. Pity it is on his back, huh? Girls like scars up front."

"Ifoham garr houmba!"

"Oh, shut up. I haven't touched a houmba since ... since this stupid adventure started." Han peeled the burnt shirt off Luke's back, and sprayed the wound with sharp-smelling disinfectant. Luke whimpered, and opened his eyes. "We made it, kid. Hey, how many times do I have to rescue you?"

"I rescued you this time," Luke gasped.

"Mhrom tiedor," Chewie suggested amiably.

"He says we should call it a tie," Han translated with a grin. "Get on your feet, this is just a scrape. Don't behave like you're dying or something."

Luke held onto Chewie's arm, and found that he could stand. "What is it? I never felt anything."

"Kid, when you are running for your sweet life, nothing hurts. They got you in the back. A surface blaster burn. Fortunately you were far enough away not to get killed. Big and ugly, but not serious." Han squirted another load of the disinfectant onto the wound.

"Ow! That hurts!"

"Sure, what do you expect, an orgasm? Oh, don't start to blush on me! When are you going to get off the farm and start living?"

"My saber!"

"Is still in your hand. Unlock your fingers. Cool off now, will you? I forgive you for now because this is your first real battle-scar, but next time I don't want all this whimpering."

"Shoorah iffn?" Chewie inquired.

"FurFace here wants to know, if the baby is hungry," Han said.

Luke was not offended. "Very hungry," he smiled at the Wookiee. "Thanks."

The Corellian sank into his chair and yawned. "Her Worship will be glad to see you alive."

"Was she ... worried about me?"

"Don't get any ideas. She was worried about her pet Jedi, you know; just because she considers you a symbol of the good old times."

"Are you jealous or something?"

Han yawned again. "Kid, there ain't nothing to be jealous of. Besides, it is not like I think she is such a hot number Not for me. anyways. I like them, uh, larger, you know what I mean, rounded..." He made a gesture. "More womanish. Hm, have you ever seen one with six tits?"

At this point, Chewbacca returned with a few cold foodpockets, and threw them on the table, saving a very uncomfortable Luke from answering.

END

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