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## Ghost Part 2

by [Carolyn Golledge](#)

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"So where's Han?"

Annie Kellahen looked beyond the small table for him as Jake drew up a chair and she seated herself opposite Leia. The restaurant was busy, bustling with workers taking their lunch hour.

"He'll be along soon. There were some men killed in an accident at the mine yesterday. They're investigating."

"An accident?" Jake said. "Was Han there at the time?"

"No," Leia let out a relieved breath. "Thank the stars he had already left. They think it was an attack by some kind of space slug."

Annie shuddered. "I hope no one else goes in there then!"

"Not a chance," a deep voice put in from behind them and they turned to see Solo approaching the table. He must have entered via a side door. "The local police have the place under guard."

Leia smiled up at her husband and he bent to kiss her lightly on the cheek before taking his seat at her side. Leia turned back in time to catch a very odd expression on Kellahen's face. All the color had drained from his cheeks, his jaw

was hanging, and his brows were lowered in a fierce frown as he stared across at Solo. It was an almost fearful-looking reaction.

"Jake?" Annie asked, also noticing his shaken appearance. "Are you feeling sick?"

"Uh." He blinked and dragged his eyes from Solo to look at her. "No. I mean. Yeah, actually I do feel kinda queasy. must be that drink I had. you warned me not to mix it with the meds." He smiled weakly then turned and rather warily squinted again at Solo. "Han?" he sounded almost disbelieving.

"Yeah, buddy?" Solo looked up from the electronic menu that flashed across the table top. Then his eyes darkened as he registered Kellahen's expression. He seemed to gather himself, then found a sly grin to ask, "What's wrong? Are you getting cold feet already?"

Suddenly looking very sober, stern, and completely unamused, Kellahen said flatly, "I'm not the one who's feeling cold here."

Solo raised a hand in a warding motion. "Hey! Just a joke! So -- when is the big day, and where?"

They all stared at him.

Leia said carefully, "Han, you already know."

"I do? Dammit -- I don't remember that either."

Leia's frown made a deep crease between her brows. "That's it. You're going to have this checked out by the doctors. You're forgetting too much lately."

He shrugged and looked away toward the bar. "It'll wear off. Maybe a drink would help."

"I don't think so." Jake sounded absolutely certain. His voice held such a strange timbre that Leia turned and blinked at him. He hadn't sounded like that since -- Talisa. "Look at me, Han," he added, still in that unusually commanding tone.

Solo turned back, smiling uncertainly, to say, "I am looking at you."

"No, I mean, look me in the eye."

Solo's smile twisted into a scowl. "What is your problem? Let's just order lunch, I ain't got all day."

Jake looked set to argue, but Annie elbowed him and directed his attention firmly to the menu.

After they had placed their orders on the data pad in the center of the table, Leia asked casually, "So, Han, did you tell the police about the poison gas leak up there yesterday?"

"Ahh, no. I didn't think it was pertinent."

"But it could have been the gas that drove the creature out of hiding."

"Yeah, I guess. I never thought of that."

"Didn't you notice anything unusual while you were there?" Jake probed.

Solo shrugged and turned to take his drink as it popped up from the central delivery chute.

"What did Gloudans tell you?" Jake continued. "Had he seen any traces of life forms?"

"No. Only the usual. We were busy with the leak."

Leia bit her tongue and said nothing of the fact she knew this was not what he had declared in his sworn statement to the police.

"I'm gonna go say hello to the hospital staff who just came in," Jake said suddenly. He got to his feet, said, "You coming, Annie?" His tone of voice made it clear he wanted her company. Looking somewhat mystified, she got to her feet and followed him.

Han and Leia sat in uncomfortable silence for a few long moments, then Annie returned to say to Leia, "I'm going to freshen up -- it's back over there. Come with me?"

"I don't --" Leia began, then seeing the look in Annie's eyes immediately changed her response to "Sure." She got up, said to Han, "Be right back."

"Of course," he said distractedly. "Should I ask them to hold your meal a while, dear?"

Leia stared, but he was studying the entertainment display on the central platform. Dear??? Annie tugged on her arm, and she stumbled after her. They turned into a small hallway and Leia was surprised to find Kellahen standing there shifting from foot to foot, waiting anxiously for them. "All right, you two," she said, eyeing them shrewdly, "What is going on here?"

"Well," Jake began, unable to look her in the face, his gaze wandering everywhere else, "You've noticed Han is acting strangely, right?" She nodded. Suddenly his eyes locked on hers and she felt cold through to the marrow with premonition of danger. "When did it start?"

Leia swallowed against the upsurge of dread, and frowned, thinking back. "Well, I would have said after he took that whack on the head during the attack at the hospital the other day, but the doctors cleared him, and he seemed fine until -- -- last night."

"Aha!" Kellahen exclaimed, turning to Annie, "You see, told ya I was right." He rubbed his chin and added with a frown, "Not that I'm happy about it, mind you."

"About what!?" Leia was rapidly losing patience.

"I don't think those engineers were the only people attacked by something at the mine yesterday," Jake said seriously, regarding her carefully.

Leia let out a heavy sigh. "Yes, I agree. Something happened to Han up there too. He mentioned poison gas. And he doesn't remember things clearly, he just keeps talking about --- how it reminded him of Bepin."

"Did you ask him about Bepin?" Jake said. She nodded. "Did he remember that correctly?"

"No." She rubbed at the bridge of her nose, irritably trying to make sense of it all. "I was surprised -- he didn't remember saying I know --- I mean, Chewie and I have teased him about it so many times."

Jake suddenly reached out and took her hands and she looked up into his eyes. He looked different somehow -- more like the man -- or ghost -- he had been on Talisa. There he'd been a wizard with incredible powers earned by his self-sacrifice in defense of Luke against Hagren.

"Yes," Jake nodded. "You're thinking the same thing I am. This is not tied into the mine -- or at least it goes back further than that. It has to do with what happened to us all on Talisa. Leia, I suspect something much worse has happened to Han. Something I don't know how to explain right now, even to myself." He eyebrows climbed and she shivered a little watching him, hearing the intensity in his words. "All I know for sure is that man out there is not Han. Well, I mean, it's his body, but --"

She nodded and interrupted, saying, "I agree he isn't acting anything like his usual self --"

"I just wanted to warn you," Jake concluded. "Be careful around him until we get this figured."

She stood silent a long moment, then said slowly, "Agreed."

They returned to their table to find Solo looking about for them impatiently, which seemed more like him and had Leia relax a little. They ate, talking about the wedding. Then there was some commotion at the front of the restaurant. Leia who was facing that way, was delighted to see a tall, furry figure heading their way. "Over here, Chewie!" she called, waving an arm to attract his attention.

"I didn't know he was back," Han said.

Leia turned to smile at him. "They got in earlier than expected. He tried to reach you on the com-line but," she shrugged. "I guess the Police were holding your calls. I decided to save it as a surprise. You haven't had a fun few days here, Solo!" She squeezed his arm affectionately and was disconcerted when he pulled away from her a little.

"Yeah. Great," he said, sounding anything other than happy.

Leia shared a worried frown with Jake and Annie. Chewbacca approached, greeted them all cheerfully and proceeded to pat Solo on the head in the teasing manner familiar to them both. Han pulled away abruptly and scowled up at the wookiee, more than a little irritated. Then seeing the hurt that flashed in Chewbacca's eyes, he said gruffly, "I had a little accident. Hit my head. Don't need you adding more bruises."

The tension left Chewbacca and he nodded and whuffed apology. He looked about for a larger size seat and sighed in disappointment. One of the staff, seeing his predicament, hurried over to them and produced some kind of crate from a storage area.

Finally, Chewbacca sat down and asked Solo, "What kind of accident?"

Han chewed his food and grunted noncommittally.

Leia explained the attack at the hospital, using Han's preferred story about the suspected thief.

"And they still have not arrested this person?" Chewbacca asked, turning back to Solo. Leia noted the wookiee's blue eyes were clouded with some unfamiliar expression -- suspicion? "I heard men had been killed at the mine too," he continued.

"Ahh," Solo mumbled, "I'm not sure."

"You're not sure!" Leia said in amazement, "But you were just up there with the investigating party!"

A beep sounded from Solo's pager and he responded to it. "They need me over at the Judiciary," he said briskly. "I gotta go. Sorry."

"I will come with you," Chewbacca said and began to uncurl his massive form from the makeshift seat.

"No!" Han said sharply, "You stay here."

"But --" Chewbacca whuffed, "I knew those men too, and I could --"

"Stay!" Solo snapped. "Do what I tell you, wookiee!"

Stung, Chewbacca could only stare after Solo as the man rapidly made his way through the crowded restaurant and out to his waiting speeder.

"That is not Han," Chewbacca said to his remaining friends.

"He's been acting strangely," Leia said. "I'm worried about him."

"He does not smell the same," Chewbacca went on. "Not the same at all. He has the smell of -- hatred. Tell me more about this accident."

Leia filled in all the details. Chewbacca sighed as she finished and said, "If I did not know better I would say that man is a clone of Solo."

"No, not a clone," Jake said. "But not Han either." They looked to him for further explanation of that cryptic remark and he flushed in embarrassment. "I know it sounds crazy....but have you ever heard of someone being possessed? You know, by demons, or a spirit of the dead? That kind of thing?"

"That's going a little too far," Leia said, but her heart leapt at the thought. It sounded so -- right.

"Maybe. And maybe not."

"The other night," Leia admitted, "the night before last, Han woke from an awful nightmare. He said he thought Hagren was here, had somehow returned from the dead."

"Exactly." Jake nodded. "I didn't want to say it before -- but, when I first saw Han here today -- I didn't see him. I saw Hagren. I saw Hagren's face superimposed over his."

"No wonder you looked sick," Annie said sympathetically.

"Yeah. And even after that image faded, I went on seeing Hagren in Han's eyes. Spooky. I don't like it. And you may have noticed -- he never answered any of Chewie's questions directly -- I don't think he understood a word of Wookiean any more. Which would make sense if -- someone else was inside his head. No wonder he was in a hurry to leave. I think he faked that call on his pager."

There was a long stunned silence as they all considered that.

"Couldn't seeing Hagren be just some kind of repressed memory of Talisa coming back to you?" Annie suggested, squeezing Leia's hand as she read her stricken expression.

"I wish." Jake exhaled heavily. "No, it felt -- real. I think --"

"Yes?"

"Remember how real I was to you all after I was killed on Talisa? I didn't have a physical body, but it made no difference to your perception of me. I was still me -- right?" They nodded. "Then you say these beings, the spirit Elders of Talisa, Echandra's people, had some kind of conference and agreed to let me return to life, to my body, all the way over here on life-support in Gosanna hospital."

"That's true." Leia was ever more uncertain, memories of last night with 'Han' returning to her. He had seemed so unlike himself. Almost another person all together. "Well, there's one person who can read auras and will know for certain."

"Luke?" Chewbacca said.

"Luke. I'll call him and ask him to please return here immediately."

"I think that's best," Jake agreed. "Leia there's one other thing. The Balance. Didn't you say that on Talisa it was all-important? Well, if I was allowed to return to life -- doesn't that mean -- the other side gets the same chance?"

Leia's throat froze in horror as the logic of that argument struck home. It all made sense. She nodded agreement and Jake continued, "I figure Hagren's ghost put his case to the Talisan powers too."

Leia got unsteadily to her feet. "I have to get back to work. I'll tell them I'm leaving early. I want to call Luke from the apartment -- it would be wiser. The calls at the state offices are monitored."

"I will go trail Han -- even if you are right -- it is still his body. And I must protect it," Chewbacca said.

"Be careful," Jake warned.

They made to leave and Chewbacca turned back to pick up a large package he had carried in and then forgotten. He waited until Jake and Annie had gone on ahead a little way then said to Leia, "This is my wedding gift to them. It is the same as the one I gave you and Han. A Wookian fertility spear. Could you take it for me now, please? I don't want to be slowed by it while I am following Han -- "

"Sure, Chewie," Leia tugged at his chest fur affectionately. She took the awkward, heavy bundle. "Whatever has happened to Han -- please -- keep him safe?"

"My Life Debt remains unchanged. I am sworn to protect my Clan Cub, body and spirit."

"Thanks, Chewie."

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Back at the apartment at last, Leia went to the bedroom to change clothes and put Chewbacca's package on the bedside table. She tried to compose herself to make the call to Luke, not knowing how she could possibly explain Jake's theory of demon possession without sounding crazy herself. She recalled standing before this very mirror with Han last night, and shivered -- if it had really been Hagren --- it would certainly explain the rapid change of mind about making love. Had he been afraid that she would have been able to tell it was not Han in the difference in this most intimate form of communication?

Sighing, she decided only Luke could help sort this out once and for all. She got up and went to the main room where the com-console waited. She sat down and was about to activate the code sequence Luke had given her for emergencies, when the machine beeped and informed her she had an incoming message. She supposed she should not have been surprised to find it was from Luke -- he always knew her moods and had no doubt sensed her distress. Indeed, as his face appeared over the vid-plate he looked very, very worried. The Black Jedi tunic he wore only added to the impression of extreme solemnity.

"Luke," Leia tried a shaky smile and let out a relieved breath, "I was just about to call you."

"You know then?" he said, sounding as grave as he looked. His blue eyes were darkly shadowed. "About Han, I mean."

"I'm not sure. He's been acting strangely. And Jake has a --- theory as to why. But only you can prove it for us. I wanted to ask you to please finish up your work as fast as possible and come back to -- talk to Han."

"Leia." He paused, as if searching for the right words, then blurted out, "I just spoke to Han." Leia's eyebrows climbed in hope and surprise. Luke waved a hand which appeared over the plate to forestall her interjection. "I mean, I spoke to him through the Force, in trance. He came to me as I was meditating."

"But, Han can't --"

"Not normally, no. He expended a great deal of energy to reach me, then shortly after, he faded out again, totally exhausted. I haven't been able to find his presence since."

"Did he manage to tell you anything at all? Why would he try to contact you this way rather than --" Leia halted as suddenly she knew why. Because there was no other means available to him.

"He said -- Hagren is back."

Leia swallowed hard against a dry throat. "Back? Where? How?"

"I think you know. He's forced Han's spirit from his body and taken possession of it himself ."

Leia's stomach twisted and she found she had to fight off a surge of nausea. She too had had her nightmares about the Sith Lord and what he might do to Han. When Hagren had been killed by Han on Talisa she thought Han had somehow managed to escape that awful fate. Tortured by fire. Now, perhaps it would come true after all. And the man she'd slept with last night.... She shuddered.

"Leia?" She realized Luke had been calling her name in concern. "Are you --- well, I know this is a shock. It sounds crazy, but you have to believe me."

"No, not crazy. I was afraid to call you because I thought you'd think that when I told you Jake's theory. He said the same thing not an hour ago. We all had lunch together. Jake took me aside to tell me he had seen Hagren's face superimposed over Han's. And Chewie didn't think Han's scent was right. He said it was full of hatred."

Luke closed his eyes and sighed heavily. "Yes, Han said something about The Balance, that that was how Hagren had come back. " He opened his eyes again and she saw fear there -- fear for her. What visions had he seen of hers and Han's possible futures? "I'm aboard ship right now, on my way back. Just stay away from Hagren till I get back."

She nodded. "How long?"

"Twelve hours -- maybe more."

"Why so long?"

"I'm stopping off at Talisa. Maybe the Echandra will have the answers we need."

"Good thinking. But -- how long can Han last? You said he was exhausted. How is he? Where is he? Could I speak to him?"

Luke avoided her gaze. "I'm -- not sure."

"Luke, tell me!"

He sighed. "Han exists now only on the astral plane. His astral body is still tied to the physical, but with Hagren blocking him he can't re-enter. An astral body can normally stay in existence no more than three days."

Leia felt all the blood drain from her face. She gripped the edge of the desk until her knuckles went white.

"But," Luke continued, "if I can bring The Echandra in on our side, maybe that limit can be extended."

"Wh-where," Leia realized her mouth was trembling. She bit her lip then said again, "And Han is where now -- with Hagren?"

"Yes. There is a line of force energy that tethers the astral form to the body whenever the body still breathes. Han contacted me while Hagren was asleep. The Sith had been blocking him before then. Leia, you said Chewie's there. You should probably warn him to stay away from -- Hagren, too."

"Too late. Chewie insisted on tracking him. He says it is his sworn duty to protect Han's body. There were several men torn to pieces at the mine yesterday. They're saying it could only have been a space slug. If Hagren did that --"

"Yes, he'd have that kind of power in a non-physical form. He could draw directly on the Dark Side. Chewie can't stop a Sith Lord. Try to convince him to lie low until I get there. And warn as many others as you think necessary. Tell them anything. I have to go -- Artoo tells me we're set for the next hyperspace jump. I'll call you again on my way back from Talisa."

"Hurry."

"Will do. Take care. Oh, Leia? Han told me to tell you -- he loves you."

Tears stung Leia's eyes. She nodded and they fell to trickle down her cheeks. The image on the vid-plate winked out. She brushed away the tears and sat there fighting for calm and trying to think who she should call. Chewie first, then Lando. Then call Jake and tell him his fears had been confirmed.

She couldn't reach Chewbacca. Lando did not know where he was and was puzzled when Leia told him to stay well clear of Han. Worried for the wookiee's safety, she tried to call Jake, but he was no longer in his apartment.

Then she heard footsteps in the entryway. She turned to see Han -- Hagren -- walk into the room. He wasn't wearing his blaster, had left it in the hall entry, she assumed. Immediately, she wondered how she could ever have thought this was Han, even if it was the same body. Hagren could not match his easy, cheerful manner, nor his intelligent, warmly smiling eyes. Hagren looked out from within those once shining eyes, making the face alien, ugly. Cold fire burned in the man's gaze; a hungry lust for power, a burning, unquenchable desire for vengeance.

"So -- you know who I am," he said, regarding her carefully. And in those few words his voice altered completely. It fell from Han's rich baritone to a rumbled, incredibly cold, hissing menace. "Well and good. I was growing weary of the charade. Solo is far too submissive. And you and I have some unfinished business, Princess. No --" He smiled and the face lost any resemblance to Solo. A twisted, leering malice played about his mouth. "Not business, pleasure."

Leia had left her blaster in the bedroom, beyond her reach, and she suspected he would have no trouble using the Dark Side to tear it from her grasp regardless. She stood, backed away from the console. Never say die -- it was Han's battle call, and hers now too. She moved toward the bedroom, hitting the nearest security alarm panel in the wall at the same time. Nothing happened.

"You can't reach anyone," Hagren sounded amused. "I have full control of all the electronics in this house."

Leia remembered Chewbacca was following, surely he would be here soon.

Hagren snorted contemptuously and took a pace closer, enjoying her evident fear. "If you're wondering about the Wookiee -- he can't help anyone-- not even himself."

Leia felt a surge of fury take the edge from her terror. "What have you done to him?"

"Well, that would be telling, now wouldn't it? I will say I could easily have killed him outright, but I wanted his death to be slow and agonizing. A shame he

realized I am not Solo, but ahh well, the physical pain he is suffering is some compensation."

"And Han? What did you do to him?" Whilever she kept him talking she had at least some chance of survival. There was a back exit -- though if he had control of all the locks -- don't think of that -- just keep talking, keep moving. She was almost inside the bedroom door now, the blaster was on the table just inside.

"Solo is dead. I enjoyed watching him choke to death. At last The Balance is restored. I wasn't lying about the poison gas up at the mine. But I did lie about the other deaths -- I killed all those men easily, tore them apart. Of course, I needed Solo's body. It is not as strong as mine was, but it has other pleasures." He smiled that sinister, cruel smile again and came closer.

That expression on Han's face made Leia's stomach churn. But her fingers had found the blaster butt, fumbled for it, closed on it. She began lifting it, glad it was set for stun.

"You are about to suffer an unfortunate accident, Your Highness," Hagren was saying, "But not until I have taken my pleasure with you. I did not enjoy having to abstain last night as you clung to me so tenderly. You will die, and Solo, the tragic widower, will become ever more popular, more powerful. He will take your place in the Senate -- to honor your memory."

Leia was actually amused by that image. She snorted, said, "They would all see through you the first day. You're mad."

"Perhaps," he agreed mildly. Then his eyes flared sudden red, and his face contorted with utter hatred. "And if I am, " he hissed, his voice no longer sounded human, "Solo made me that way. Now -- give me the weapon you are hiding."

"Gladly." Leia smiled sweetly, pulled the blaster from hiding and fired a stun shot direct at his chest. Hagren lifted a hand faster than was humanly possible, a blur of speed, and suddenly a force shield appeared before him, dissipating the stun blast in a ripple of fiery sparks. Aghast, Leia set to fire again, but the blaster was torn from her hand to fly to Hagren's grip.

"RUN!"

It was Han's voice, and even as she turned to obey, she wondered how much that effort had cost him. Hagren leapt toward her, flying forward like a mynock, and his arms closed about her waist. She kicked and struggled, flinching further as the mirror exploded and glass shards rained down. But the fragments, impossibly, veered away from her, and all aimed themselves at Hagren's back and face. Out in the hall, she heard a crash as the flower vase toppled and fell and other objects began flying and crashing about the apartment. Han's fury

would know no bounds -- but she feared for him more than for herself. If he drained himself too far ----

Hagren was preoccupied with the glass embedded in his face. Leia wrenched her way clear and made for the back exit. But as she had guessed, the lock was impossible for her to open. And while Han may have fury and blind power enough to cause telekinesis, he did not have the finer training and ability to reprogram the lock to open for her. She circled back around the room, aware that all the faucets in the bathroom were running full. In the steam a shape was forming. Han! It moved to try to block Hagren as he came at her again, wiping blood from his face.

"RUN!" Han repeated.

Leia tried to use him as a shield and dodge past Hagren to the laundry shaft -- if she could dive down there -- But she took no more than another pace and Hagren was on her. He tripped her and she went down heavily. She struggled to her knees and his hand came swooping down, slapping her face so hard that she was momentarily stunned.

The next she knew, she was sprawled on the foot of the bed, and Hagren was climbing atop her, pulling at her clothing, his red eyes ablaze with unnatural fire, insatiable lust. In his rage, he no longer looked anything like Han and she was glad of it.

"Now, where were we?" Hagren leered, leaning down to close his mouth on hers as she flung her head to avoid him..

Leia kicked out at Hagren as he went to his knees beside her on the bed. Her foot connected solidly with his groin and he grunted in shocked pain. Moaning, he doubled over, clutching at himself. Han sent the blaster flying to her grasp and she nodded thanks at the misty form regathering itself in one corner of the room. She fired, and nothing happened. Somehow, Hagren had drained the power pack.

Regaining control, Hagren swatted the weapon from her grasp.. He stood a moment, grinning, enjoying her helplessness. Then he said very calmly, "You caused this body pain, Your Highness, it is only proper you suffer in turn." He closed his fingers into a fist and Leia choked, grabbed at her throat.

Leave her be!

It was Han's voice, setting the room trembling with his outrage.

The glass fragments lifted from the floor and flew again at Hagren's face. He deflected most of them but a few left scratches and oozed blood. The surprise

attack was enough to break his hold over Leia who gasped and collapsed back to sit on the bed, gulping air.

"I don't want you unconscious just yet, Princess," Hagren said. "You must feel every moment as I take pleasure from your body. And Solo is right here -- he will watch, helpless to prevent your rape."

"Han?" Leia blinked back tears of pain and searched blindly for him.

She needed a weapon -- where? Her gaze roved the room, came to the ornamental spear that Chewbacca had given into her charge. Still in its wrapping, she nonetheless knew what it looked like. It would be the same as the one aboard the Falcon, mounted over hers and Han's bed. The spear was carved to resemble a flower, petals closed, a fertility symbol. But the petals could be triggered open to reveal a lethally sharp, barbed blade.

Hagren pinned Leia on her back on the foot of the bed and was fumbling one-handed to open his trousers, the other hand holding Leia's wrists as she struggled. She looked desperately over at the spear now beyond her reach. Its blade was sheathed, but could be activated by depressing a hidden switch and would tear through the wrapping..

Leia shook her head, looked tearfully at the misty figure hovering closer, unable to help. "I don't want to hurt you."

"Of course you don't," Hagren purred.

Do it! Han commanded.

Again she shook her head, as much to avoid Hagren's mouth as anything. She tried to bring her knee up to ram into him again but had her legs trapped by one of his. She pulled an arm free of his grip and landed a hefty punch to the side of his jaw. He lost balance and rolled off her, shaking his head dizzily. Leia kned him hard in the kidney, then sprang to her feet to kick out again at his head. He groaned, then his eyes flared deep scarlet and she knew the Sith was drawing on the power of the Dark Side.

Hagren uncoiled like a serpent making a lethal strike, his pain forgotten as the Dark Side blazed through him, renewing strength. Leia landed a third blow but ineffectively and it glanced off him as he deflected it with an uplifted arm. He slapped her hard and she fell back to the floor, hitting the wall with a solid crash. Dazed, she tried groggily to get up again. Snarling cold rage, lips drawn back from his teeth, Hagren curled his fist and called down a whirling gust of air that lifted her bodily and threw her back to sprawl across the end of the bed. This time the Sith would use the Dark Power to keep her splayed vulnerably beneath him.

He waited a moment until her eyes cleared and she was fully aware of her fate as he lay himself atop her.

The spear! If she could not reach it, Han would have to send it to her. It shifted a little on the tabletop. Hagren was no longer blocking Solo's efforts -- all his attention was on Leia, eager to subdue and take her. With a sudden grating upward motion it came free, hovered a moment, then just as Han hit the trigger and the blade snapped open, it crashed to the floor.

That drew Hagren's attention. Panting breathlessly in both arousal and strain, he turned aside to glare at the falling object. Then he dismissed it as Leia got one leg free and began kicking at him. He sat back on his heels beyond her reach and laughed at her, then used the Dark power to slam her legs back to the mattress and spread them wide.

Now! Han pleaded .

Leia saw that he had the spear under control again, it was slowly rising, aimed at Hagren's heart as the Sith leaned back and threw the tangle of clothing aside.

The spear lifted then thrust downward, hard and fast, its trajectory altered slightly at the last moment. It caught Hagren high on the left shoulder, the Force-aided blow driving him backward and ramming him up against the wall at the head of the bed, impaling him there as the spear shaft embedded itself. Hagren's mouth dropped open in a shocked o of agony that rapidly twisted into a grimace. The body jerked and convulsed, fighting to free itself. It was too much for the Sith Lord to bear.

Leia watched dazedly as Hagren's spirit form lifted in a wisp of ethereal mist to exit the body and vanish. "Han?" she asked shakily, looking toward his watery form. Then as she watched, he was drawn back into his body. She would have cheered but instead was terrified. Blood was darkly staining his white shirt, the spear had gouged a ragged hole in his upper shoulder and torn right through to emerge from his back and pin him to the wall.. He must already be exhausted -- how long could he keep the Sith at bay? As soon as the initial shock wore off, Hagren would surely make another bid for the body. He had means at his disposal to heal himself.

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The battle was over for the moment, Leia safe, and Han's ghostly face creased into a smile even though it was his own body that had suffered the damage. Then, almost immediately after Hagren vacated, Han felt his own essence drawn back to the body to which it was tethered. In another moment, his point of view was altered, he was seeing the room, searching for Leia, from within his body,

Then the pain registered. Ferocious, so shocking that it drew all the breath from him a shocked gasp. Leia had called security and was watching him warily, the blaster again in her hands. She had no way of knowing if Han had retained possession or Hagren returned. Certainly the Sith Lord was still close by -- Han could feel his cold presence radiating frustrated hatred. Han felt consciousness slipping from his grasp and made a desperate lunge to hang on. He gulped as the pulsing agony leapt for him once more. She was regarding him, suspicious, torn and he tried to find a wry smile. "Leia, I'm back." His voice, rough with pain still sounded unlike him and she was not sure. "It's me," he gritted out. "Bespin -- I said, I know."

"Han!" she greeted on a choked sob.

"Listen to me," he panted. "You have to send someone to ----- help Chewie. He's wounded, hidden in the Falcon's -- " He gasped for breath, the room graying out about him.

"Smuggling compartment?" Leia finished for him and he nodded gratefully. She moved away and he heard her direct a medical team to the Falcon, telling them to contact Calrissian to open the smuggling compartment.

Then he felt the bed move slightly as she returned and sat carefully at his side, her hands making frantic helpless gestures as she tried to find a means of easing his pain. White-faced, she closed her fist about the spear shaft as if to try to wrench it free. Even that slight touch on the weapon threatened to send Han into unconsciousness.

"No!" he pleaded faintly, "Don't touch -- it. S'okay. Got rid of Hagren for a while. He never could -- take pain."

"A while?" Leia wiped the back of her hand across her mouth and frowned down at him. "You mean?"

Han nodded slightly, teeth gritted over the pain. "Yeah, he'll be back. As soon as I black out again -- that's how he did it ---before, up at the mine." He lifted a hand but made it only half way to her face. She caught his hand and kissed it, still trying to fight back tears. "You gotta keep -- him -- me out cold till Luke gets here. Maybe with him here we can.." He was fading out no matter how hard he resisted, his heart thudding frantically at the shock of the pain.

"We'll stop him," he heard Leia say. "I swear, we'll find a way."

"Know -- you --will." Han forced the words out from beneath a great weight of darkness. And at its edges, waiting, he could feel Hagren's cold presence. The last thing he heard was Jake's startled cry as he came charging into the room, and Leia's command, "Give me that Med kit!"

He hoped she reached for sedation and restraints before she bothered with trying to remove the spear and tend the wound. Then he was passing out fully, drifting up and out from his body, immensely grateful for the release from the terrible pain.

He felt a chill rush of air and was looking down at his bloodied, sheet-draped body, prone on a float stretcher, several people milling about it -- Jake, Annie, Leia, the medical team. They were moving him to a hospital. And he could see Hagen's shadow floating close by.

"Nice try," the Sith mocked, "But I can drive off the drugs eventually. And I will be ready for Skywalker. You've only brought him into my trap!"

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The small hospital isolation room was still and silent but for the single faintly beeping heart monitor keeping track of the patient's condition. Naked, covered only with a sheet drawn up to his waist and the thick pressure bandaged taped to his wounded shoulder, he lay flat on the bed. His eyes were closed, his face pale beneath a tangle of fine brown hair, his arms slack at his sides, the wrists wrapped in soft, white, unbreakable medical restraints, securing him to the lowered bed railing. The lights were dim and shadows fell across the room. General Solo had not been allowed to regain consciousness in the two days since he had undergone emergency surgery to begin repair of the deep wound torn through his upper shoulder.

A white-robed human doctor entered and nodded a resigned greeting the armed guard seated just inside the door. "Any problems?"

"Yeah," the MP sergeant grunted. He rubbed a hand over his florid face and straightened his spine. "I'm bored outa my skull. How long are they gonna keep him like this? It's driving me crazy -- a whole day of watching him sleep. Watching permacrete set would be more exciting."

Checking the monitor readout, the doctor, a dark-skinned, white haired man of late middle age and wrinkled complexion, creased his swarthy face further as he frowned, clearly unamused. "Quit complaining. It's nearly the end of your shift, I'm on duty till tomorrow midday. I hope your partner won't have to watch over a sedated man." The guard cocked a bushy eyebrow in question, and the doctor sighed. "It's not healthy to keep anyone under so heavily so long, especially when they're restrained like this. We aren't even permitted to move him to prevent fluid build up or pressure sores." His voice rose in increasing agitation. "And she won't give permission for bacta tank immersion to mend that shoulder wound! It goes against all my training, not to mention my oath to care for the sick and injured..."

The guard lifted a hand in appeasement, eyebrows climbing further in mild surprise. "Hey, Doc, I'm on your side here." He knew who she was -- one of the most powerful women in the newly organized Alliance Senate. "But I can't do anything about it. My orders came from the highest levels." He stood and looked quickly out into the corridor -- it was empty, but even so he lowered his voice, not wanting the overhead surveillance equipment to pick up his comment. "Solo is a popular man among the ranks, but word is some of the officers weren't happy about his rapid promotion. And some people were already making bets on how long his marriage would last. Between you and me, I'll be glad when Chewbacca recovers -- his loyalty to Solo is unquestioned."

Now it was the doctor's turn to show surprise, his dark gray eyes bright with curiosity and more than a dawning trace of suspicion. "Chewbacca is the wookiee, right? Solo's co-pilot?"

"Yeah, they been friends since way back."

"Are you saying someone else's loyalty is in doubt here, Sergeant?"

The guard flicked a nervous glance to the camera mounted high in a rear corner of the room, then indicated the doctor should join him in stepping out into the corridor. There he resettled the holster at his hip and checked again that there was no one in sight. "I'm not sayin' nothin' on the record, mind," he warned and waited till the doctor nodded acceptance of that condition. "But these are the facts. Senator Organa admitted putting that spear through his shoulder. Then she claims he's been possessed by some dead Sith or gone crazy or something and wants him sedated continuously -- so my question is, when do we get to hear his side of the story? And," he swallowed hard but dared meet the doctor's eyes, "who sounds crazier to you?"

The doctor blinked, looked over his shoulder down the corridor, then back at the sergeant. He sighed heavily and rubbed a hand over his chin. "I have to admit I'd like to hear what Solo has to say for himself too. Organa says she acted in self-defense after he attacked her."

The sergeant rolled his eyes in patent skepticism. "yeah, I heard that too and I ain't buyin' it. I followed the Rebels around from one base to another for a lotta years and I never heard talk of Solo ever being rough with women."

"Now, hold on," the doctor continued, "she says it wasn't really him, that someone else has control of his head, some kind of Sith spirit or something. She's called Jedi Skywalker in to help."

"Skywalker?" The sergeant stepped back into the doorway to regard the patient with sympathy. Solo still lay pale and motionless, looking completely helpless. The Sergeant shook his head, his lips turned down in distaste. "Another Mind-

bender. Seems to me that whatever's goin' on here, Solo should have the chance to speak for himself before anyone else can get at him with that Force stuff." He looked back to the doctor and cleared his throat before adding, "There's no one here to make Solo to anything crazy and he's tied down tight too, for ket's sake. Can't you bring him around -- just for a couple of minutes?"

The doctor took a step back in immediate denial. He shook his head and waved a hand in further negation as if wanting to cleanse himself of any of this talk of subversion.

"It aint' fair," Branath said stubbornly, "he should have a chance to speak for himself before that Jedi gets here."

"I thought Skywalker was supposed to be his friend. he wouldn't do anything .."

"Ha! He's also Organa's brother -- or so I've heard."

"Really? I didn't know that." Visibly wavering, the doctor too looked back at the helpless man in the bed. Then he re-entered the room and stood studying Solo, his gaze moving from the restraints to the patient's pale face and wounded shoulder. The guard came in and stood at the foot of the bed.

"Well?" he prompted. "You wouldn't have to remove the restraints to wake him, right?" He tapped a hand to his blaster. "and I've got this set for light stun if he does try.."

The doctor turned sharply to give the military man a piercing glare. "No shooting! He's in bad enough shape as it is!"

"Okay, okay!" Branath lifted his hands and backed off. "I was only saying -- he's no threat to us. So why isn't he being allowed to speak? And consider this too, if some dead Sith Lord really did have possession of him, how come Organa was able to fight him off so easily. There's not a mark on her."

The doctor's mouth dropped open as if in search of an answer. Then he frowned and said slowly, "That's true."

"Damm right, it is!"

The doctor stood silent a long moment then finally let out a gusty sigh and said, "All right, you win. I'll give him a shot that'll counteract the drugs just for a moment." He moved to a cart in the corner of the room and picked up a syringe. "Still -- what do we do if he does say something contrary to Organa's version? There's only you and I to swear to it."

The sergeant's momentary triumph and eagerness settled to abrupt uncertainty. "I hadn't thought of that."

They both turned to again regard Solo, unsure what to do next. The steady beep-beep of the monitor suddenly picked up pace, rapidly became a frantic high-pitched warning.

"Damm!" The doctor moved quickly to the bedside. "I knew the drugs would do this to him!"

"What?" the sergeant sounded panicked.

"He's stopped breathing!" He injected the hypo-infuser's load straight into Solo's throat. "That's the counter-agent to the sedative, and adrenaline. It should bring him out of it." He pulled an oxygen mask from the overhead and placed it over Solo's mouth and nose, began squeezing on an attached pump. Solo drew a gulping breath. The monitors flared danger signals for a few moments then slowly subsided, the alarm falling back to its normal rhythm.

The doctor frowned worriedly down at his patient, then nodded relief as Solo's breathing steadied. He pulled an old-fashioned stethoscope from his coat pocket and bent to place it to Solo's chest.

"I thought the monitor told you all that stuff," Branath said.

"Not everything. I want to hear his lungs for myself."

"Hey, I think he's coming round." Branath sounded pleased.

"Yes," The doctor continued listening but flicked a glance to Solo's face. The General's eyelids were fluttering, his mouth moving. "That's the drug I gave him. It's too dangerous to send him back under now, his lungs are laboring enough as it is. I warned them pneumonia was a possibility. I'll have to sit him up." He hit the pedal beneath the bed and slowly the upper part began to lift.

Solo groaned as his body was raised to a sitting position. His eyelids blinked repeatedly as he shook off the last of the sedation.

"He'll need more drugs to help stave off pneumonia," the doctor concluded, putting away the stethoscope. "Fools! I told them!" He returned to the drug cart and hunted for something, then cursed. "The one I need is not here. I'll go get it." He caught the sergeant's anxious expression. "I'll be right back. Just keep an eye on him and hit that oxygen pump if he starts choking again."

"But --" Branath could only turn and stare helplessly after the departing doctor.

At the guard's back, Solo came fully awake, his eyes snapping open. Rather than being clouded with the after-effects of heavy sedation, his expression revealed instant, sharply intelligent awareness. The eyes narrowed with hatred as he noted the holster at the guard's hip. A malevolent smile twisted Solo's normally generous, wryly amused mouth into something totally alien to him. Hagren drew on the Dark Side and had no trouble snapping the wrist restraints.

Branath turned at the small sound. "What the?" The patient was awake, free and throwing the sheets back to swing his legs from the bed.

Any further words from the guard ended in a gargling choke, his eyes bulging as air was denied his straining mouth. Branath clawed at his constricted throat and watched in horror as Solo's eyes altered color, glowing pure evil red above a snarling, feral grin. Solo raised his hand higher, his fist clenched tighter and Branath's throat tightened further. Doggedly he fought to draw his blaster at the same time staggering toward the alarm call on the wall.

Hagren watched the man's dying struggle with calm amusement. He took two steps and blocked Branath's path to the alarm button. The guard grabbed at Solo's chest, seeking desperate support as his knees folded, his eyes staring in mute appeal. Hagren watched dispassionately as the man finally collapsed and lay still, his face blue and swollen with strangulation.

"This should take care of --"

The doctor lifted his head from the readings on the hypo-infuser he carried, his eyes going wide in shock at the sight before him. Branath lay unmoving and a naked Solo was leering down at the body. Frozen in disbelief, the doctor was easy prey. Hagren's lips twisted in insane pleasure as he confronted his next victim, calling the scalpel from the medical cart. It caught the light, reflecting from its shiny surface as it floated toward the doctor who was mute with terror as he realized only a Sith could do such a thing. Then suddenly the scalpel plunged forward, driven with all the power of the Dark Force to bury itself deep in the doctor's heart. He crumpled and fell, dead before he hit the floor. A small, red stain soaked through the white material, the blood barely visible as it trickled lower and met the red circle insignia of his profession.

Hagren eyed both bodies with great satisfaction. "Double murder charges, Solo," he said to the silent room. "How very awkward for you." Chuckling to himself, he went to the room's small closet. He was annoyed to find Solo's body somewhat weakened by drugs and surgery, but pleased to see a fresh set of clothing --- white shirt and those cursed Bloodstripe pants -- waiting for him. He sat on the bed to awkwardly pull on the trousers, his wounded arm sluggish and heavy. He forced it to move, ignoring the tearing at the wound-seal and using the Force to block the resulting pain.

He lifted his head to regard Solo's spirit form which had appeared moments after Hagren had restored the body to consciousness. Solo had watched the murders in frantic, helpless horror, adding to the Sith's satisfaction. "Go ahead and call your pathetic Jedi friend," he taunted. "It will do you no good. I'll kill anyone who tries to stop me."

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"So," Luke concluded, regarding his friends gravely from the back seat of the ground car in which they had come to meet him at Gosanna Shuttle Port, "all The Echandra and the other Talisan powers could promise me is that they will call an Assembly of the Elders to discuss Hagren's return. She was very angry that he had taken Han's body, but she says matters of the Balance are complex, and will need careful consideration by all who have gone before as well as the present day Assembly."

Leia sighed and shook her head. "To use one of Han's favorite phrases --- He doesn't have time for them to discuss this in committee."

"I know. I told them that -- well, I reminded them at least. They know more than I do about matters of the astral plane. Echandra promised me she would make sure they give us a decision before morning --- Gosanna time."

"A few more hours," Leia leaned back against the seat at Luke's side and turned her head to eye the city lights streaming over the car's curved canopy. "I hope Han can hang on. At least he has full life support available to him in the hospital. Do you intend trying to force Hagren to leave, Luke, or will you wait for --?"

Suddenly, Luke shuddered as if in the grip of a mild seizure. His eyes rolled back, closed, then opened to stare blankly ahead. The pained lines of his face relaxed into a familiar expression of serene meditation.

"What's happen to him?" Jake demanded. Annie, who was driving could only flick him a concerned glance in the rear view mirror.

"I'm not sure," Leia said worriedly. "I think some one, or something, is trying to contact him through the Force."

They watched anxiously until moments later, Luke left his sudden trance and called the one startled, dismayed word, "Han!"

Jake twisted about in the front seat, his face pale and strained as he watched the Jedi. He and Annie had sat with Leia at the hospital, worried for Chewbacca who had come very close to bleeding to death after being shot by the Sith and shoved into the smuggling hold. Too, they were concerned for Solo's injury, and had endured the guards' and medical staff's sometimes suspicious regard. It had

been a relief to leave the hospital and head to the shuttle port for Luke. Leia did not dare tell the medical staff the full story of Hagren's possession of Solo -- they were already giving her looks that said they doubted her mental stability. And indeed she was barely keeping frantic fear and fury at bay as the reality of the situation fully registered. She'd still been in partial shock most of the day before .

"Luke?" she prompted urgently. "Tell us."

His blue eyes cleared to reveal grave sorrow and he sighed heavily. He took her hand, watching her carefully as he said, "Hagren has escaped the hospital." Leia flinched and paled then was further sickened as Luke admitted the Sith had killed both the guard and the doctor.

"And Han?" Leia asked simply, knowing Jake and Annie were hanging on every word.

"Whilever Hagren's consciously in control of the body, Han's spirit is compelled to follow." Luke managed a faint smile. "That's the good news, Leia. Han is alive, he never did die. Hagren lied about that. If he were truly dead he would no longer be tethered to the body. If Hagren had killed him he would have had great difficulty re-animating the body and then too he'd have lost the satisfaction of forcing Han to watch whatever he does in his place."

"So where is Han now?" Jake wanted to know. "Can he tell us what Hagren is doing, where he is?"

"Yes and no." Luke turned to regard the pilot. "Han is not exactly practiced at this."

Jake snorted. "I know the feeling! It took me quite a while to get used to being a ghost!"

Annie spared him a curious glance over her driving. "I thought you said you couldn't remember anything that happened after you were -- hurt -- on Talisa?"

Jake blinked, then his mouth dropped open a little. "I didn't until just now." He shivered. "Yech. I liked not knowing better."

Luke smiled. "You saved my life again."

Jake found a wan smile. "There is that! I was quite the hero!" He jolted up a little as if the ground car had hit a sudden eddy, but it was traveling smoothly. The others eyed him with surprise.

Annie asked, "Are you all right?"

"It's Han," Jake said, sounding disbelieving nonetheless. "He's coming through to me loud and clear -- and he's not a happy man, er, ghost."

"Good," Luke said relievedly. "I'm only getting vague impressions from him. But you're The Talisman here." Jake groaned and Luke smiled sympathetically. "Your abilities will have been reawakened as soon as your Dark Side opponent was reactivated. It makes sense. So, tell us, where is Hagren now?"

"Heading south along the coast in a ground car."

"South?" Annie reset the car's navigation console. "I'm on it."

"That leads to the industrial area about the sea-docks, doesn't it?" Leia brought up a map on her hand data-pad. "Yes, there are several bulk carriers and trawlers moored there. They take on and deliver cargo from the smelters and factories." She lifted her head and frowned at Luke. "Why would Hagren be running there? I thought he'd head for the spaceport."

Luke shrugged. "Me too, but so much the better for us if we can keep him away from crowds there might be less -- casualties."

"No," Leia whispered, "I have a bad feeling about -- about the sea."

Jake, not hearing that, said, "He'd meet too much opposition from the local police at the spaceport. Han says the hospital staff alerted security and they have teams on the look out for him. They thought he'd head for space first too. Han is not happy with being labeled a double murderer."

Leia covered her eyes with her hand. "Two more. They found the engineering team torn to pieces up at the mine too. I hope there are no more deaths."

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The docks were an abandoned, silent maze, everyone had been warned to get clear. Luke could see no sign of Hagren -- Han. It was a disquieting sensation to be seeking the familiar form of his friend yet expecting a lethal-level Dark Side attack. At least he'd finally managed to convince Jake and Leia to wait for him at the rear of the Dock Authority buildings. Annie had taken a hire-car back to the hospital after they'd been told Chewbacca was awake and threatening to leave despite his weekend state. She could at least keep him informed.

Luke bent and whispered into his wrist comm. "I can't see him anywhere, but there are dozens of places he could be hiding."

Jake's voice came through louder than he'd intended and Luke adjusted the volume. He knew his Shields should keep Hagren unaware of his position and

darkness was an added cloak. Best not to give it all away with untoward noise. Luke did not need light to see his way -- his Jedi senses were at full stretch. But the Shield that protected him also made it impossible for direct communication with Solo's spirit. Thank the Force Han was able to contact Jake.

"Han says Hagren is climbing, but from his limited viewpoint he can't make out exactly where. It's a loader-crane, but exactly which one he's not sure."

"Tell him thanks," Luke said. He would not reveal any details of his intended counter-attack. Hagren could just possibly picky it up if Jake passed it on to Solo.

The Sith Lord had chosen his position well. From atop a crane he could see anyone approaching -- that is anyone who needed light. Then too, maybe Hagren was unaware how effectively Luke could Shield his own aura. Nevertheless, Luke knew he would eventually have to give away his location. As soon as he launched his attack, Hagren would be on him. Luke wanted to drive Hagren into unconsciousness and hopefully force the Sith Lord's spirit from Solo's body. Leia had told him what Han had said about Hagren's intolerance of pain, but Luke hoped he did not have to resort to any physically damaging means since Solo would ultimately pay the price. On the other hand, Han may well have only a few hours left. No one seemed certain if the time his body had been kept on support machines in hospital would aid him or not. And how was Luke to render Hagren unconscious without causing damage -- especially if the Sith Lord had placed himself somewhere where he would fall from a height?

Luke sighed and continued silently moving along the connecting walkways, some of them out over open ocean, a network giving access to the fishing trawlers and cargo vessels moored here.

Light suddenly blazed forth, illuminating that entire section of shipyard almost as bright as day. Luke cursed and ducked back beneath and overhanging fishing cradle. Hagren had found the spotlight mounted atop the cranes for night work.

"Luke?" Jake's voice came tinnily from the communicator, "Han says stay under cover. He's going to try to pull out the power cable."

Luke clicked the on/off button to indicate he'd received the message. He sat in the shadows, frowning and wondering exactly how a disembodied Solo thought he could achieve that. But Leia had said Han had hurled that spear at Hagren. It seemed Solo was learning up close and personal about "mystical energy fields". Luke smiled grimly and hoped he could later tease Solo about that. He made his way carefully toward the next cross-junction, all under cover, but from there, if he tried to close in further on the cranes, Hagren must surely spot him. Unless ---

Luke eyed the murky sea water. He could hold his breath far longer than normal, but there were carnivores in these waters.

Suddenly the spotlight was doused, and pitch blackness settled again about him in a protective cloak as dark as his own clothing. Luke grinned and spoke softly into the communicator, "Tell him well done, but don't get cocky!"

Jake snorted in response. "Will do."

Luke moved swiftly across the exposed area, coming up under what was about the third crane in a line of ten or so. He lowered his shield to probe for the Sith Lord's presence -- it was time to attack. Luke traced him quickly, not far off, hiding atop crane number 6. Luke stood and hurled a massive lightning bolt at the midway point to the crane arm and it shook and trembled like a leaf in a storm.

Taken by surprise, Hagren was thrown from the crane capsule. Somehow he managed to grab its edge, his legs swinging over a perilous drop. The wounded shoulder gave out, the right hand losing its grip, and Hagren hung by only one arm.

Seeing Han's body dangling precariously by his fingertips from atop a twenty meter crane with a fall to either solid permacrete or dangerous water below sent Luke's heart racing. He was glad he'd finally managed to convince Leia to stay back and wait. This wasn't quite what he'd intended for his attack. He must stun Hagren, not fatally injure Solo.

But he need not have worried. Hagren drew on the Force and easily turned a somersault to land gracefully back in the crane canopy. Immediately, he released a fireball that exploded barely an arm-length from Luke. He too flipped backward, taking partial cover and shaking his head against the after-shock. Flames sprang up as the timber wharf caught fire. Luke's ears rang and he could not make out Jake's message though he could see the communicator light winking out of the firelit gloom.

Moving clear of the flames, Luke extended an arm, going all out to hurl a massive gust of wind at the white-shirted figure atop the crane. Hagren would not allow himself to fall -- and if need be Luke could catch Solo's body if the Sith did let it go. He hoped. The gust almost tore the canopy from its mountings. With an ear-splitting screech, the rivets tore free along one side and Hagren half fell, half leapt clear. Luke lost sight of him as the Sith descended into the darkness on the far side of a trawler, the fire from the burning walkway no longer aiding his sight.

Cautiously, Luke began edging closer. No sooner had he cleared cover, then something solid struck him an agonizing blow to the right shoulder. It felt heavy enough to have been an anchor and it made a sharp metallic clang as it impacted the ship's hull behind him. He blinked back tears of pain and was compelled to call some Force-power to partially block the agony leaving him light-headed. He was fairly certain the collar bone had snapped.

More debris came hissing and whirring through the still night and he ducked and weaved, finally throwing himself into back flips, ignoring his limp, useless right arm. Even as he retreated, he saw Hagren closing on him, heard him too --- the Sith was laughing in a terribly distorted version of Solo's tone.

Luke spotted a coil of rope and sent it unraveling in a counter-attack that took the Sith about the ankles. He tripped and it coiled again and again until it had also pinned his arms to his sides.

Staggering, Luke hurried closer, needing to be close enough to put a stun bolt into Solo's body. He noted with alarm that Solo's shoulder was bleeding steadily, the wound torn open again with the Sith's exertions.

But even with his arms pinned, Hagren was able to lift a hand and the blaster was torn from Luke's left hand. The Sith snapped the ropes with an outraged roar and leapt to his feet. Luke took a moment to blink in shock -- never had he imagined such an expression of utter hatred and ferocity aimed at him from Solo's eyes.

The surprise was almost his undoing. Hagren threw another fireball and Luke's only defense was to dive for the sea water. It was cold and oily, closing over his head. Now he was underwater, he decided, he might as well stay there. He could hold his breath and swim around to the other side of the walkway behind Hagren. But his broken shoulder --even with the aid of the pain block -- made swimming against the swift current almost impossible. Luke was ready to abandon that plan -- down here he was also out of touch with Jake -- when the surface suddenly seemed to slam down upon him. Hagren had toppled one of the cargo haulers carrying a load of sheet metal. Frantically, Luke tried to swim clear, but an edge clipped his boot .

He could hold his breath no longer. He needed all his power to prevent more falling metal trapping him. His head cleared the surface, coming up very near a pylon beneath the walkway, and he caught a glimpse of Solo-Hagren's snarling face. The Sith was on his knees, leaning over the side, right over the spot where Luke had surfaced. Solo's hand came down to push him back under water.

Luke wondered that the Sith would resort to such a basic, physical assault. But as he too reached for the Force in defense and found it answered him only very faintly, he knew the reason why. Had the Echandra and her companions finally decided to join the battle? Were they blocking the Force powers of both opponents in a bid to keep the Balance? Would they do no more to assist Solo reclaim his life? That thought angered Luke a little and he fought for control.

Hagren too, it seemed, was aware of the extra Presence and near to draining his Force strength. Luke reached up his left hand and grabbed Solo's wrist, twisting as he struggled to break free. He got clear long enough to see Solo's teeth bared

in fury and again was taken aback by the startling transformation of the once familiar face. Grunting with the effort, Hagren leaned aside and used his torn shoulder to push a sealed barrel atop Luke.

Desperately, Luke summoned barely enough Force power to deflect it. Blood streamed from a gash high on Luke's brow, and he realized belatedly that one of the toppling barrel must have caught him a glancing blow. Then Luke saw it. A dark shape, topped by a curving dorsal fin. It arched at him through the dark water. Shark!

Luke got a hand clear of the debris, dragged at Hagren's downward-pushing arm, and succeeded in pulling him into the water. Startled, Hagren released his hold, and Luke swam clear then laboriously climbed up on to the walkway. Beneath it, the shark swept by, raising a phosphorescent bow wave. Luke leaned down and searched frantically for Hagren -- it would do Han little good if Luke managed to get his body torn apart by sea-carnivores.

But Hagren too had struggled clear and was climbing on to the walkway closer to the seaward end of the dock.. Luke could read his expression by the firelight -- he was just as unnerved by the disappearance of his powers. And just as physically weary, staggering a little, his white shirt stained red about the shoulder.

Dripping water, Solo-Hagren confronted him. Luke held his right arm to his body and let his gaze sweep over the objects strewn along the docks. He hoped Hagren would pass out from blood loss, but the soaking in sea-water must be making the wound appear to bleed more heavily than it actually was. It looked like Luke would have to physically beat Hagren into unconsciousness -- with one hand. Hagren smiled, a twisted, cruel, smile, realizing his advantage. He began closing slowly and warily on Luke, then halted unexpectedly, staring dismayed at something beyond Luke's back.

"It's okay, kid," Han's voice said in Luke's ear, "We can take him."

"Han?"

"Right here -- looks like he doesn't like spooks. Come on, coward! Try taking me now you don't have your magic to back you up!"

"How?" Luke turned just enough to see Solo's ghostly outline shimmering in the firelit night. Further back, Jake and Leia were sprinting toward them. Luke blinked -- Jake was glowing with a bright blue aura of power and Leia wore her Talisman medallion protectively about her neck. It too emitted a pulsing green-blue glow, shielding her from any psychic attack.

Hagren knew when he was out-numbered. He cocked his head as if to listen to a voice Luke could not hear. Then he bellowed outraged denial, his "NO!" echoing out over the silken black swirl of the sea.

The sharks gathered, churning the dark water, their sleek shapes painted by the reflected flames of the fire making the scene all the more savage. Hagren suddenly calmed and turned to regard them, his eyes gleaming cunning. "If I can't have this body, no one will," he said with hissing threat.

Deliberately, he put his booted foot into the loop of a cargo chain. He waved a hand to send a faint bolt of power to fuse its link about his ankles, then stepped off the pier --directly into the path of the waiting sharks. Solo's spirit abruptly vanished, drawn back into the body as Hagren emerged from it in a ghostly puff of foggy yellow-grey light.

"No!" Leia screamed. Han had reflexively been drawn back to his flesh by the astral tether, sucked back into the body only to drown or be eaten alive. She charged forward, ready to dive after her husband.

"Here!" Luke called. Her head swiveled toward him, eyes wide with anguish, then blinking in faint relief as she saw what he was about. He tugged his lightsaber clear of its clip and sent it flying to land safely in her outstretched hand. She nodded thanks, turned and arced arrow straight into the hellishly red and black, frothing sea.

"Watch your back!" Jake called warning. Free of the limits of the flesh, the Sith Lord could far more easily call Dark Power to aid him.

Luke was suddenly engulfed in lighting bolts, slammed back to land with a bone-jarring thud that knocked all the breath from him. Gasping, only semi-conscious, he struggled to get to his feet, shaking his head to clear his vision. But he was not attacked again. Relieved, but also surprised, he propped himself up peer toward the sea-end of the wharf. Jake, Luke's Talisman, had somehow gotten between him and Hagren's malevolently writhing spirit, just as he had done all those weeks ago on Talisa. Their auras clashed in a blinding bursts of blue-gold light mixed with eddies of black-red.

Jake seemed to be holding his ground well enough. Luke was more worried for Leia and Han. He turned hopefully to search the dark water for some sign of them. He had no idea exactly how long it had been since Solo's body had been wieghted down for the sharks. But surely too long for him to hold his breath -- if he were even conscious enough to know to hold his breath. Nothing. Only the firelight played on the rippling black surface.

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One moment Han was guarding Luke's back, aware that Leia and Jake's arrival had summoned the Talisans to turn the tide of battle. The next he knew, Hagren had thrown his body to the sharks, and with or without his volition, Han was drawn back into the flesh. The sensory overload was dizzying, hopelessly disorienting. Red-black water spun about him, the sea salt churned to foaming white eddies by the sharks' frantic hunt for blood. He gasped with the shock of re-entry to the body, pain assailing him. Instead of air, sea water flooded his mouth, acrid, tasting of oil and salt.. His eyes stung, his vision blurred. He fought desperately to keep track of the circling carnivores, the heavy weight of his body dragging him every deeper. His wounded shoulder blazed pain and his left arm was useless. He struck out for the surface with his good arm, tried kicking out with his feet -- and found them trapped.

Horror grabbed at him, colder than the icy sea. Hagren had made sure of no easy escape.

Flaring, clashing explosions of light from above the surface illumined the sea monsters, circling stealthily, they seemed to be waiting for him to drown, to drift lifelessly to the gritty ocean floor. Jake, Luke and presumably Hagren's spirit waged battle above. Han could hear none of it, only the ever more frantic beat of his pulse thudded in his ears.. Silhouetted against that intermittent glow , the sharks circled. Then, picking up on the scent of his blood, they came angling down, no longer prepared to wait. He ducked down and began tugging at the solid chain twisted about his boots. It was welded together by Hagren's power, immovable. Han's lungs were straining, begging for release -- he'd lost half his air in that first reflexive gasp. The sharks closed on him. It was a race between them and the sea -- drown or be torn apart.

Then he saw another much smaller, more shapely figure, swimming steeply toward him. Leia had come after him, her eyes wide with fear as they locked with his upturned gaze.

Han waved his good arm, indicating she should leave him -- what could she do but be attacked herself? Then there was a flare of bright blue light, seemingly erupting from her outstretched hand.

Luke's light-saber! It hissed and roared loud warning to Solo's would-be killers, and they veered away, their pectoral fins brushing brusily at his shoulder and hip..

Han gave Leia a thumbs up and she swooped down to his side, her expression still grave and terrified as she sought the length of chain between his booted ankles. She lowered the tip of the saber and Han fought to keep still, steadying himself on some metallic debris anchored in the gritty sand. But he was out of time. He could no longer restrain the pressure in his lungs.. Consciousness receded.

Vaguely he thought he felt the chain snap and Leia's small but strong hand clamped on his arm . The dark sea filled his mouth and flooded into his straining lungs. He knew no more.

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Luke stumbled to the edge of the pier, ready to go to the aid of his sister and friend, when he saw Leia break the surface. She tugged and Solo's body floated up beside her, unconscious, face down. She flipped him onto his back and stroked for the walkway. Luke reached a helping hand. Behind them, Luke saw a dorsal fin knifing through the sea. Frantically, hoping, he drew on all his reserves and sent a Force push toward the creature.

The Force flooded back into his veins so powerfully that it very nearly knocked him down at the same time as it repelled the sea creature . He stared at his own hand in relieved wonderment. Then, arm outstretched, he closed his eyes concentrated. and levitated Solo and Leia from the water.

Water streaming from her disarrayed hair and sodden clothing, Leia gave him a bare nod of recognition, all her attention centered on reviving Solo. Luke could sense the life aura still strong about the man, and knew she would have no difficulty getting him breathing again. About the scene, the flaring coruscating battle lights faded away.

Alarmed, Luke turned quickly back to aid Kellahen and was amazed to see both his and Hagren's auras subdued, silent, engulfed and held in some kind of cloud-white stasis-field. Luke's power could not penetrate that orb of other-worldly energy. The last time he had seen anything like it had been on Talisa, in the Vale of the Echandra. The Battle for The Balance.

"Yes," the priestess' lyrical voice said softly in his head. "We have come to restore the Balance."

Luke's heart plummeted as he wondered if that meant Jake must also return to death.

"They are deciding what is best."

Luke nodded, and aware he could do nothing to influence them one way or the other -- at least no more than his visit had done already -- he staggered back to where Leia was tending Solo. Half way there, he heard Echandra exclaim, "It is done!"

The orb of light expanded, blindingly brilliant, casting the sea wharfs into stark shadows, then abruptly winked out. Luke squinted against the after-glow, desperately hoping --

Yes, Kellahen was still there.

And very much alive, dazed, but grinning triumphantly.

Luke glanced back, saw Leia embrace her sodden, bleeding husband who was sitting up and coughing. Luke went to clasp Jake's shoulder and shake him in hearty congratulations. "Good work! You called them here?"

"No," Jake smiled up at him, weary but his eyes alight with pride. "I think Hagren did. He broke the Balance when he took Han's body."

Luke frowned. "But --"

"My body was kept alive by the machines in the hospital. I didn't have to steal another one to come back. Hagren did -- and he had no permission to do so." He straightened and dusted himself off. "Come on, let's go see how Han likes being alive again. He looks kinda the worse for wear to me. Hmm," he frowned and eyed Luke keenly, "Come to think of it - so do you!"

Chuckling, he took a step forward, then staggered and crumpled suddenly to his knees. Luke's heart went to his throat....had the Talisans changed their mind? He bent to help Kellahen, asking urgently, "Jake, are you okay?"

The Corellian blinked at him a moment, then said, "What happened? Hey, where did you come from? I thought you were still off-world. Where's Hagren?"

Luke's jaw dropped. "You just told me -- wait a second. What's the last thing you remember?"

"I was -- we were -- going to Gosanna spaceport to meet you ."

Solo and Leia approached, he leaning on her for balance. Jake looked up at him dazedly and said, "Han? You're back?"

"Yeah," he wheezed. "Thanks to --you three."

Jake seemed to do some tallying, then said, "Two. I didn't do anything. But I take it we won? How did I get here? And where's Hagren now?"

Solo stared at him, then looked wearily at Luke. "Not again."

"Right." Luke shook his head. "He doesn't remember."

"What happened?" Jake repeated querulously.. He got to his feet, swaying a little, then regarded them impatiently. "I was obviously taken out early in the the

fight. Musta hit my head. So, are you going to tell me how you got rid of the Sith Slime, or not?"

"Not," Solo said succinctly.

Leia smiled and hugged him closer, her arm about his waist. "You need a medic, Solo. You're bleeding all over me." She reached a gentle hand to his wounded shoulder. "You just had to use that spear didn't you?"

"Fertility symbol," he corrected with a wink, then lowered his head to kiss her.

"Spear?" Jake asked, then clicked his fingers, "Oh, yeah! I remember that part! Well, not that I was there at the time." He put out a hand to assist Skywalker who stumbled wearily. "Your shoulder doesn't look right either, Luke," he observed, peering at it. "Not as spectacular as Solo's, of course, but still, twisted kinda funny."

Overhearing, Leia lifted her head and looked anxiously back at her brother. "Luke? Are you hurt?"

"Yeah," he blew out his breath in a weary sigh. "Shoulder's broken."

"And I think you're burned in a few places too, buddy." Jake touched fingers to a charred spot on Luke's sodden black tunic. "Neat trick as wet as you are. Did everybody take a swim but me? Sharks in there, y'know. Yech." He shuddered. "Annie's gonna have her work cut out for her! Come on, lean on me. Let's go home --unless you'd rather go to the hospital?"

"No hospitals!" Solo declared at the same moment as Luke said loudly, "No!" They grinned wryly at one another, and Solo waved an arm for Luke to proceed him.

Han took the opportunity to turn and give Leia another lengthy kiss. Then they followed on, Solo limping tiredly, and both of them leaving a trail of sea-water "Hey," he asked, suddenly remembering, "Am I going to be arrested for murder when I show my face back there?"

"No," Leia told him. "We have a witness."

"We do?"

"Yes. Sergeant Branath survived. The doctors got him breathing again before there was any damage. He has already given testimony as to the means by which he was strangled. The old Vader technique -- only a Sith lord could have tried that. And you, Solo, are many things, but Sith lord is not one of them."

He shuddered dramatically. "You got that right! And my body ain't for rent!"

"Well," she smiled coyly up at him, "There are parts of it that are quite attractive."

"And which parts would those be?"

"I'll tell you all about it when I tuck you into bed aboard The Falcon."

"The Falcon," he sighed wistfully. "Sounds good. But what about --"

"Chewie should be released from hospital tomorrow. If not sooner -- he was threatening to leave last we heard. He wanted to join the fight to get you back. We sent Annie back to keep him company."

He nodded. "I need to see him. The last I saw of him -- well, it's something I'll see in nightmares for quite some time."

"No more nightmares! No more Hagren!"

"Hmm." They had caught up to Luke who was being assisted into the back of the ground car. "Do you think he's gone for good?" Han asked, holding Skywalker's gaze intently as their eyes met.

"Yes," Luke said firmly. "The Echandra says he will never again be permitted to leave The Vale. He will be allowed to resume a semblance of life there, in correction to the Balance. But as punishment for what he did to you, he will be given a spirit form only, as Jake once was. If he tries to leave, he will cease to exist all together."

"Good," Solo lowered himself wearily to the cushioned seat at Luke's side then took Leia's hand as she climbed into the ground car next to him. Kellahen closed the passenger door, then went round to get into the driver's seat.

"Take us home, Jake," Han said. "We have a wedding to organize."

"Someone getting married?" Kellahen turned to look at them with wide-eyed innocence. At their expressions of horror, he spluttered a laugh and said, "Only kidding! "

Solo fought a grin. "Luke, strangle him or something for me will ya? I'm too tired."

"He's the only one who can drive," Luke pointed out. "I'll strangle him later, unless you want Leia to drive."

Solo smirked. "No, I have other plans for her."

Luke rolled his eyes, then shared a victorious grin with Jake, "That's Han, all right. He's definitely back!"

THE END

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