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Joker's Wild

From the Blue Falcon Series

by [J.A. Berger](#)

He lay supine, still, cloaked in silence, alone and at peace in the comfort of his surroundings. His heart beat resoundingly loud against the rhythm of his chest rising and falling. The gentle sound of his own breathing only added to his over all contentment and he drew gratefully upon the tranquility. For the moment, nothing more was desired.

He should not be alive. It was the first conscious thought that had attempted to intrude upon his contentment and the hell began.

It started with a shooting pain that flooded his mind with red flashes of uncontrollable agony. For a moment, his mind was totally incapable of thought. Then the pain subsided, leaving him badly shaken, spent from the ordeal, and bathed in the perspiration of his experience. The silence remained, but the peace was gone.

Again he was conscious of the rapid beating of his heart and the audible rasp of his breathing as he attempted to draw badly needed oxygen into a painfully deprived system. When the pain did not return, he cautiously opened his eyes. Only familiar objects greeted his return to the normalcy of his existence.

It could not be!

Forcing himself to remain still while fighting the urge to panic, he cleared his mind of conscious thought and feasted hungry eyes upon the small room where he lay.

It was his bunk. His cabin. His ship. His brow furrowed in puzzlement. Not long ago, there had been another, here, with him. Against his will, he reached for the memory and again, without warning, his thoughts dissolved into mind blinding agony.

He withered in silence under the pain's intensity. His body convulsing uncontrollable with excruciating agony until he could stand it no longer, and then he screamed.

Desperately, he fought to wipe all intelligent thought from his suffering mind. The pain subsided. This time there was no will in him to search for answers; the questions were killing him! It was illogical, but at this point, he reminded himself, he had no wish to dwell on logic, only to avoid the pain.

He closed his eyes and concentrated his thoughts on the sounds of life within him. Immediately, his breathing and heart rate slowed. He moaned in relief. He had to rest, he reasoned, to regain strength badly depleted from the agony he had already endured twice. Would it come again? He panicked and quickly cleared his thoughts, his heartbeat quickening in fearful expectation.

Luke.

The name came unheralded and he stiffened in expectation. Instead of pain, it brought warmth and comfort. He allowed it to stay.

Luke.

"No!" As if in punishment for his insubordination, the pain descended, tripled in its intensity, and he screamed out in agony. "No!"

Mindless, he thrashed about the confines of the small bunk aware now of nothing except the pain, until his body and mind were released into the welcome oblivion of unconsciousness.

* * * *

On the small moon of Kalyyn, in the crowded Mess Hall housed within the ancient walls of an old military base, Luke Skywalker sat alone at a far table watching with interest as the large room filled with more and more uniformed men arriving for the mid day meal. None of them bore the recognizable features of the rogue member of their Order and the man he had come in hopes of finding.

"Would you mind if an old man joined you?"

The young Jedi started at the sound of the familiar voice. Looking up, he smiled and motioned the elderly man in military blue to an empty seat. "Not at all, Doctor, I'd welcome the company."

"It's good to see you again, my boy." Setting down his tray, Doctor B'Lar Solante, Chief of Medicine for the Galactic Order of the Blue Falcons, seated himself across from the blonde youth dressed in black spacer togs. "His faded blue eyes settled intently on the young Jedi. "You seemed heavy in thought when I walked up, any way I can help?"

"It's nothing. I just thought that...well; I thought Han might be here. I guess he decided not to wait." Luke picked up a fork and made a half-hearted pass at the food on his plate. "It's okay, I'll see him when he gets back."

"Don't tell me our wayward Falcon is still running away from Kalyyyn?" The old man ventured softly.

Luke set aside his fork. "Han may not have put all his demons to rest, Doctor, but he's no longer running from them."

"That's good," Solante conceded. "Still, by now, I'd hoped he had made peace with his past."

"Give him time. After Yavin IV, Han's only intentions were to pay off some old debts and return to the smuggling lanes. Remember, he didn't ask for any of this; his return to Kalyyyn or the bonding." Luke's words bore a hint of sadness. "I sometimes wonder if Han doesn't feel he would be better off if I hadn't interfered with those plans."

The old man shook his head in disagreement. "After the Death Star incident, Solo had an Imperial reward on his head and a bounty hunter on his trail, if you hadn't involved yourself, he might not have made it off Tatooine alive."

"He almost didn't." The young Jedi dropped his gaze. "After I tracked him down and warned him of the situation, we headed back to the Falcon. A detail of stormtroopers shot their way into the bay while we were preparing to leave. Han took a blaster bolt before we could lift off."

"The leg wound," the old medic added knowingly.

Luke nodded. "If Han hadn't slipped on the Falcon's ramp, he might have been killed."

"But he wasn't." The old man remarked dryly. "The man leads a charmed life." He sighed. "So off world, wounded, and needing a place to hold up, Solo decided to go to Quaylan." Solante sought Luke's gaze and held it. "If he taken your

suggestion and gone to your base, all that followed would never have happened. Remember that, Luke. It was *his* decision to go to Quaylan, not yours."

"It wasn't necessarily a bad decision," Luke defended softly. "Han knew a friend who ran an outlaw bay he'd used many times..." He shrugged. "You know the rest."

"Vader was waiting," Solante finished. Han's friend turned him in for the reward...and the Falcon. Again, I remind you, Luke, Quaylan was Han's decision, not yours." The old man repeated. "You're not to blame for what happened to him there."

"No," Luke agreed, "But later..."

"After the rescue?" Solante interjected, seeing the surprise on the boy's face. "Chewie told me. I also know Solo was in urgent need of medical attention by the time you got him away from Vader and off Quaylan."

Luke nodded. "I tried to control his pain with the Force, but got caught up in his delirium and failed. However, I did obtain a set of coordinates to this place where I sensed he would get the help he needed." Luke's expression darkened with his guilt. "But it was *my* decision---and mine alone---to bring him here...to Kalyyyn, the home world and secret base of the Blue Falcons, a military organization thought to be as dead as the Jedi Masters who once led them."

"It was the right decision, Luke," Solante assured him. "Solo was suffering from blood poisoning and an overdose of mind probe drugs, he could not have made it to your base in time."

"Maybe, but having found the mark of the Blue Falcon on Han and knowing he was somehow connected to the Order, I should have discussed it with Chewie." Luke admitted with regret. "I knew he was against our bringing Han to Kalyyyn, but I didn't give him a chance to explain and I should have. I had not idea that having been brought here as a child and trained through his youth, that Han had left vowing never to return."

"Or that he had been branded a deserter for leaving and a traitor for taking most of the Corellian contingent of the Order with him when he left," Solante nodded his understanding of the younger man's feelings of guilt. "Even with that, I still contend that by bringing Solo back to Kalyyyn, you saved his life."

"As it turned out, yes." Luke sighed. "However, I also unknowingly brought him back to a death sentence. Han tried to warn me, but I wouldn't listen. I was high with the power of the Force I felt growing within me. I felt I could do anything."

"So you went to the Commandant's office," Solante guessed. "And after talking with M'Fe, convinced yourself you could save Han by participating in an ancient ritual performed during the days of the Old Republic which bonded Jedi Masters to members of the Blue Falcons through the power of the Force."

"Something like that," Luke admitted. "Actually, M'Fe told me very little about the ceremony except that if we succeeded the charges against Han would be dropped."

"I witnessed the ceremony," Solante acknowledged with awe. "Through your Sealing with Captain Solo, you did more than merely saving the life of a friend; you breathed new life into this Order."

"Perhaps," Luke turned his gaze away. "But it also mentally linked Han and I...probably forever. Or, at least, until the death of one or both of us."

Luke settled haunted eyes on the old man. "It all seemed so simple at the time. But I'm not a Jedi Master. I don't have the knowledge or the skills to control the Force within myself, much less control the power I sense growing between Han and I. That became all too clear when I sensed his pain during the mind probe resistance training you conducted soon after." [\(1\)](#)

"That was my fault, my boy, not yours." Solante voiced with regret. "If it hadn't been for the unfortunate mistakes and misunderstandings on my part, perhaps..."

"I made mistakes, too." Luke recalled bitterly. "I thought you were purposely subjecting Han to pain that he couldn't resist through the training and I inadvertently allowed my anger to be drawn to the Dark Side. Through our bonding, Han experienced that anger, anger not his own, but mine. I think for the first time, he truly understood the frightening power that binds us and...and my lack of control over it." Luke sighed. "After that session, he took off. I still don't know where he went; he won't talk about it. But when he returned, he seemed a bit more at ease with the bonding." [\(2\)](#)

"He's learned to accept it?" Doctor B'Lar Solante questioned hopefully.

"Acceptance may be stretching the point," Luke answered. "But he has become less reluctant in using it."

Reading the look of anticipation in the old man's expression, the young Jedi continued. "A while back, he and Leia made a forced landing on a world heavily mined by the Empire. Han used the bonding to transmit their coordinates. It enabled Chewie and I to pick them up before they could be traced to the downed craft." [\(3\)](#)

"Another time, I was able to distract an enemy until Han could overcome and disable him. (2) Then again, while we were on an assignment, he was able to contact and warn me of an attempt that was going to be made on a shipment we were guarding. ⁽⁴⁾

"I see. And right now, while we're talking, is the link between the two of you open? Can you tell me where Han's at?" The old man probed. "What he's doing?"

"No." Reading the disappointment in the old man's eyes, Luke drew a deep breath and slowly let it out. "It's what I've been trying to explain, Doctor. It's too soon. Han needs time; I need time."

"But you're missing so much," the old man held Luke's gaze with sincerity and sadness. "Through the bonding, you and Solo could be sharing and exchanging information, data, even personal experiences."

"Doctor, you're remembering the bonding as it was between Jedi Masters and their Falcon counterparts." Luke reminded the old man gently. "There's still so much Han and I must learn, how to control what passes between us, how to share knowledge, thoughts, and personal feelings without infringing on the individual privacy of the other. I have to believe that when we're ready and the time is right, the Force will guide us."

"Still," Solante begrudgingly admitted, "I had hoped Solo had grown beyond using it merely as a form of telepathy." He picked up a spoon and made an angry pass at his soup. "By using it only when it's beneficial to himself, he's shutting you out."

"I know that's how it must seem, but for now it's more important that trust be established between us." Maturity and wisdom touched the younger man's voice. "It's true, Han is using it as a telepathic link. But he *is* using it." Luke explained patiently. "And every time he uses it, we both learn something from the contact."

"You're right, of course." Solante smiled. "Please, forgive an old man his impatience." He reached a hand to the boy's shoulder. "I've no doubt that one day, you and Solo will be a formidable team."

Luke returned the smile meeting Solante's directness with respect and a growing friendship with the old man who had lived through the Clone Wars training the fighting men of the legendary Blue Falcons and counseling Masters of the Jedi during the last reigning years of the Old Republic.

Solante broke the silence. "Do you project to Solo or wait for him to contact you?" The mess hall now empty echoed softly with the resonance of his voice.

"Of course I use the link." Luke defended. "It's important that we both know how...and when...to use it. But if I get the least hint that I'm intruding, I go no further."

"How is he handling these...inquiries?"

"It's getting better," Luke voiced with satisfaction. "As his trust in the bonding grows, so does his faith that I won't use it to make unreasonable demands of him." Luke met the old man's stern gaze. "It *is* getting better."

Freezing suddenly in place, the young Jedi grabbed at his head. His hands pressed tightly to his temples, he lurched forward and would have fallen, had not the old man instantly appeared at his side to steady him.

"Don't give in to it, Luke. Whatever it is, you can control it." His face deeply etched with concern, Solante watched helplessly as the young Jedi continued to wither in pain. "Boy, remember your training!"

A moment passed, then two. Slowly, the color returned to Skywalker's features. Solante nodded in relieved satisfaction. "Good. Now, when you can, tell me what happened."

Nodding, Luke drew several ragged breaths than glanced up at the worried countenance of the old man. A sudden realization forced a startled gasp from his lips. "It was..."

"I know." Pulling his chair away from the table, the old man seated himself next to the young Jedi. "What happened?"

"Han. He called me twice..." Fear and uncertainty flashed in the youth's eyes. "But after he called and before the link between us dissolved, there was pain. Intense pain. Then nothing. It was like...like..." Luke fumbled helplessly. "Like cutting power to a transmitter with a flick of a switch."

The old man nodded in grim understanding.

"Han's in trouble!" Luke started up from the table only to be stopped by a hand on his arm forcing back to his seat.

"So it would seem." The old doctor acknowledged grimly. "He's off base, huh, running supplies for the Alliance, isn't he?"

"Yes, but..." Luke forced himself to his feet. "I'm sorry, Doctor, I can't sit here, not if he needs me."

"Hold on, Luke. There's time. If we are to help him, we must stay in control of the situation. Have you heard from Solo since he left on this assignment?"

"No."

"Just now, did you get any mental feedback or images that might clue you to his whereabouts? Think carefully. When he called you, did you 'see' anything through the link?"

"There wasn't time. A split second was all I had. But the pain..." Luke's eyes registered his concern. "It was his, Doctor, terrible, terrible pain. But before I could lock on it dissolved as if someone cut the transmission."

"I suspect someone did."

"Han?"

Frowning, the old man nodded. "Strange. If he called you, why then would he block your attempt to reach him?"

Puzzled, Luke shook his head. "I don't know. I heard my name twice. That's all. Then the pain." He shrugged. "After that...nothing."

The old man rubbed his jaw in thought. "Pain of the intensity you described, should have come through the bonding regardless of his efforts to block."

"What if...?" In fearful expectation, Luke turned to leave, "I've got to find him!" Again, he was stopped by the old medic's reassuring hand.

"He's not dead." Solante assured the young Jedi, his voice reflected Skywalker's concern. "I have seen..." An ancient sadness touched the old man's faded eyes. He shrugged it off. "He's not dead. However, I don't understand the lack of contact between you. Are you getting anything at all through the bonding?" He looked questioningly into the drawn features of the young man beside him.

"Nothing."

"With your abilities and the strength of the bonding, you should be in contact with him right now and, if necessary, helping him control the pain." Solante frowned. "Wait a moment or two, then try again."

Luke shook his head. "I can't stay here, Doctor, in the hopes that he'll be able to contact me again."

"My boy, until we know more, I don't know what else you can do."

"I'm going to find Chewie." Luke stumbled away from the table and started for the door, "Then M'Fe should be told. Will you come?"

"I wouldn't miss it." Solante got stiffly to his feet. "If Solo's involved, it's sure to prove interesting."

* * * *

The russet coated first mate and copilot of the Millennium Falcon studied the unfamiliar panel of the small, unmarked Corellian shuttle briefly, hit a couple of buttons, then throttled up. The small craft came to life, her heavily modified engines softly purring in their eagerness to be off.

"When you're ready, Chewie, let's take her up."

Under the watchful eyes of the young Jedi and the old Doctor seated in the jump seat behind him, the Wookiee throttled back and the small craft lifted from the airstrip.

Igniting her retros, the Wookiee gently trimmed her thrusters and the sleek, bullet-shaped craft rose from among the fighting fleet of the Blue Falcons and edged gracefully skyward. Above them, the base's sheltering dome parted and the stars of the Kashyyyk system welcomed them as they pulled free of Kallyyy'n's gravitational influence and left behind the security of the old base.

"Luke, try the link again." Solante edged forward.

Closing his eyes, the young Jedi drew a deep breath and reached inward to the thread that connected him to his bondsman.

"Anything?"

Blinking away his disappointment, Luke shook his head.

"I'm afraid, my boy, without Solo's help, I'm at a loss at how you and Chewbacca hope to find our wayward Falcon. Even knowing his headings and destination, the chances of us stumbling onto him are...are..."

"Astronomical?" Luke finished, then smiled. "I'm hoping our chances are a little better than that."

Interested, the old medic pushed to the edge of his seat. "What have you got in mind?"

"Something you said in the mess hall." Luke reminded him. "Even if Han is attempting to block me, he shouldn't be able to block the pain. Not completely."

"Yes, the pain will open the link" Solante replied in excitement. "And, if it's open long enough, you might be able to obtain coordinates or, at least, some hint of where he's at." He sobered, his faded eyes losing their enthusiasm. "You realize, of course, that you will be subjected to the pain as well; pain which you will have to endure or chance closing the link to Solo."

Luke turned to meet the old man's concerned gaze. "And, if the pain's as bad as I received before, it's also possible that Han and I, both, may need you before this is over..." His voice trailed off.

"I understand."

"There's something else," Luke hesitated. "If I find Han it'll be due to the pain we share, not his call for help. I think he's doing everything he can to block me out. To protect me." He glanced across to the Wookiee who met his gaze with his own suspicion. "There has to be a reason."

"You think it's a trap."

M'Fe and I discussed that possibility, yes." He turned back to the old man.

"Go on, what is it?"

"I was thinking of you. If this is a trap and we're caught..."

Solante chuckled at the anguish in the younger man's voice. "You're wondering what Solo's enemies would make of an old man bearing the emblem of the Blue Falcons and the Circle of Completion." He laid a comforting hand on the young Jedi's shoulder. "I think they might find it amusing, but not much else."

A sparkle touched the boy's blue eyes. "I'm sure Han could tell them otherwise." He sobered instantly. "But, if this has anything to do with Vader, Doctor, I can assure you questions will be asked regardless of your age."

"My boy, this old body of mine would give out long before the Imperials could pry any useful information from my poor, over-trained mind." Solante reassured him grimly, his eyes reflected his promise of commitment and determination. "While I concede it's a valid risk under the present circumstances it's one that must be taken. Commandant M'Fe and I discussed this while you and Chewbacca were making arrangements for this..." He made a sweeping gesture of the cockpit with his arm, "...unmarked, somewhat unconventional, spacecraft. Who would have ever thought of putting hyper-drive on a ship-to-shore shuttle?"

Luke grinned, exchanging a conspiratorial glance with the Falcon's copilot who returned it with a wink.

"Anyway, as I was saying," Solante continued, unaware of the exchange. "M'Fe knew...as did I...that you would go regardless of the danger. Just as he knew, as a doctor with an oath, which binds my actions as surely as the Force binds yours, that I, too, would go. However, he was concerned with your decision against scrambling a squadron for this trip." He turned a questioning gaze on the young Jedi. "Would you care to enlighten me?"

"It would have taken too long," Luke explained. "The pain I received through the bonding was terrifying in its intensity. Han can't withstand it for long. No man could. If it continues..." His voice trailed off. "Besides, if this is a trap, Han wouldn't want the Falcons pulled into it. And neither do I."

* * * *

The Corellian slowly opened his eyes to find the lethargy gone. The fog, which had clouded his mind, was dissipating, his vision clearing. He drew a deep, ragged breath and studied the confines of the small cabin. He was tired. Drained, with no memory of why. Yet something at the edge of reason bothered him. The silence around him was unbroken, eerie, with no feeling of motion and, most puzzling of all, no sound of engines. He drew another deep breath. The life supports were working and the air he breathed was filtered and recycled, he was off world? Drifting?!

An experienced spacer, his concerns attempted to bring him up, but the binders at wrists and ankles along with the threat of returning vertigo kept him down. He pulled weakly at the short chains that bound him to each corner of the bunk; there was no give and no surprise. Something had happened, leaving him bound alone and adrift, but what?

He was alone and on the Millennium Falcon. He waited. But the knowledge left him at peace with no threat of pain. He stiffened, remembering his awakening the first time and the devastating agony that had accompanied his thoughts. He breathed a thankful sigh when his silent inquiry brought no pain. Had there been other times? Times he couldn't remember; still no pain. Slowly, carefully, he started a probing, hesitant evaluation of his circumstances.

Unheralded thoughts of Luke drifted into his mind and his breathing quickened in fearful expectation. Again, he waited, but the thought of his bondsman brought only comfort. Silently, he longed for the young Jedi and somewhere, at the edge of reason, he was reminded of his ability to call the boy to his side. All he had to do was open his mind and the powers of the Force would guide Luke to him. It would be so easy. He could just lie here and wait. Luke would come. Luke would stop the pain.

"NO!" The exclamation voiced aloud brought the first sharp bite of returning agony that Solo had expected along with the same gut wrenching certainty that the danger he feared, might await Skywalker if the kid were to come to his aid.

Swiftly, he erased all thought from his sluggish mind and gave his theory another test, forcing his thoughts, his memory, backwards.

He had left Chewie on Kashyyyk to visit his family and Luke on Kalyyyn to chat with Solante and M'Fe, while he made a brief side trip and supply run for the Alliance. He had concluded his business quickly and returned to his ship. He hesitated in fearful anticipation of the pain. Feeling none, he forged recklessly ahead.

He had not made it back to the Falcon. Instead, he had been skillfully set upon and expertly captured by a detail of Imperials whose existence had not been suspected on the small Ag world sympathetic to the rebel cause. There was no pain. He frowned, but then understanding pushed past expectation. There was no pain because that was *not* what had happened. He *had* made it back to the Falcon. He remembered coding in the hatch-open sequence.

The throbbing began at his temples and behind his eyes, quickly warning him of further pain should he persist. The Corellian set his jaw in defiance of the threat and pressed on. He had *not* been alone. Someone had been waiting.

A white-hot bolt of pure agony crossed his mind and he screamed. Involuntarily, he released his thoughts and the pain subsided.

Solo swore weakly and hurriedly washing all thought momentarily from his mind. Then drawing a ragged breath, he waited to be released from the remaining threads of intense discomfort.

At last, pain free, he slowly relaxed, struggling weakly for what little strength the episode had left him. But, being Corellian, as long as there were questions, he was going to press for answers. Grimly, he prepared for the worst and dug deeper.

The next few moments were filled with more pain than Solo thought it humanly possible to endure, still he persisted until his mind found and clung to what the pain had attempted to block. Vader! He remembered!

He had been captured, but not broken. No need. Vader knew! The Bonding of Jedi to Falcon! Damn him, Vader knew! And he would use it to get what he wanted....to get Luke Skywalker!

The pain hit hard and fast. Its red-hot tentacles encircled and brutally probed sensitive nerves already raw from their torment. But this time with more mind-

blinding severity than the Corellian could ever remember experiencing. He screamed in agony.

Desperately, he rallied his weakened controls and cleared his mind. His breathing and heart rate slowed and the pain subsided, but Han felt the damage done. He could not soon face it again and hope to retain his sanity. Already, he had forced it further than good sense cautioned. He would have to rest or he would not survive.

Luke.

It would be so easy to open to his bondsman, to throw his mental barriers rudely aside and allow the Jedi to focus on him...to find him...to help him control the pain, while he remembered. Luke could do it; alone, he could not. Internal alarms sounded and he hurriedly erected a desperate block against thoughts of his bondsman and cleared his mind.

Running his tongue around the inside of his mouth, the Corellian tasted a familiar metallic residue and smiled weakly. With the Imperials there were always drugs. But with his controls strengthened from recent training, both Falcon ⁽¹⁾ and Felarian ⁽²⁾, he had managed to protect his secrets and still block his ordeal from his bondsman. Had the Imperials gone any further, they would have killed him or, at best, destroyed his mind. "Do your worst, Vader, but I'm not giving you Luke." Solo weakly forced through clinched teeth, gripping the chains at his wrists in anticipation of what his belligerency would cost. He didn't have long to wait. The pain struck in quick retaliation to his disobedience.

Securely bound to the bunk, his body arched in the throes of the agonizing pain. Solo fought bravely, struggling to deny it a victory he could ill afford. "It's a trap! I will...not call him!" With that last thought of sheer desperation, his systems overloaded and gratefully shut down, releasing the Corellian once more into the restful oblivion of unconsciousness. Han Solo remembered nothing more.

* * * *

Luke Skywalker cut in the sub light engines and the small, Corellian ship slipped gracefully out of hyper and into the silence of an unfamiliar system. "Reversion complete. Chewie, check our coordinates."

Chewbacca ran a large, furred hand expertly over the keyboard of the navicomputer, pulled up the star charts for the Satori System and keyed in their coordinates. Immediately, their location appeared on the screen.

"There she is." Leaning over, Luke pointed to a small, ugly world in an unstable orbit around an ancient and dying sun at the outer edge of the system. "If Han..."

His eyes strangely vacant, Luke pales, then grabbed at the edge of the control board while reaching blindly for the arm of his chair.

Springing from his seat, Solante moved into the narrow aisle between the pilot and copilot's stations. He steadied the young Jedi, then guided Luke to his seat, reaching for his wrist. Watching the younger man closely, the old doctor counted the beats, but made no attempt to neither break the silence nor invade Skywalker's self imposed trance.

"It's gone." Luke drew a deep breath, then blinked. "Han blocked the pain again before I could lock on."

Satisfied with the young Jedi's condition, Solante released him and eased back into his seat. "You saw nothing?"

"No. I was expecting the same blinding pain as before, but this time it was just a quick, sharp stab." He looked into Chewbacca's worried gaze and shrugged. "I'm sorry, Chewie. There wasn't enough time to get anything more."

His hands balled into tight fists, the Wookiee roared an angry suggestion to the young Jedi and centered his gaze on the ugly world before them.

"He wants to know if we should go in or stay outside planet defenses and look for Solo?" Solante translated.

"That's not quit what he said, Doctor." Luke smiled across at the angry Wookiee. "I don't think scanning for Imperials and leveling the planet will help Han much at this point, Chewie, but I'll keep the suggestion in mind."

Surprise raised the old man's brows. "How...?"

"I'm not sure." Luke reached forward and flipped their defense mantle to full shields as the Wookiee trimmed their thrusters and put the small shuttle on a course parallel to the planet that had been Solo's intended destination. "It started when I met Chewie and Butaka, Chewie's uncle, at that outlaw bay on Quaylan, right after Vader captured Han. * I knew with Chewie's understanding of basic, he could translate our conversations to Butaka, but I didn't know how we could formulate a workable plan to rescue Han if, on the other hand, I couldn't understand anything either of them might offer." He slowly shook his head. "It was strange, but with Butaka's opening questions, I found I could pick out first words, then phrases. And before long, I could understand every thing he said. It's been harder with Chewie, but now," he shrugged. "It's like I've known the language my whole life."

"Interesting." Something akin to amazement touched the old man's eyes. "Very interesting indeed."

Luke turned back to his board. "Chewie, as we approach the landing corridor for the northern hemisphere, check for the Falcon's signature."

The Wookiee flipped several more switches and, a moment later, the hi-tech defensive tracking system displayed the energy bi-particles left by recent ships approaching or departing the planet.

* LAIR OF THE BLUE FALCON

Coding in the patterns for the Falcon, Chewie touched another button and the computer sorted and correlated the data. When it had finished, two tracks were left on the screen; the Falcon had come and gone.

Luke sighed. "Why should this to be easy?"

"Then he's already jumped." Solante stated unnecessarily, putting into words their disappointment.

"Maybe. Maybe not." Luke stood up and from over Chewie's shoulder, studied the screen. "The data merely says he's been in and out on this trajectory." He tapped the departure trail. "Chewie, enlarge the field to show the whole system. Let's see what it can tell us."

Chewbacca cleared the screen and called up the desired information. The display was clean. Disappointed, the Wookiee looked up, reading the same despair in the young Jedi.

"It was worth a try."

Without warning, Luke stumbled into Chewie, than reeled backward, his hands again at his temples. Desperately, he fought for the strength to control while unseen hands guided him to a seat and pressed him into it.

"Luke, don't try to hold the pain until you can control it!" Again the old man reached for the young Jedi's wrist, his eyes dark with concern.

Momentarily blinded by the sudden burst of agony, Luke rallied his control of the Force and directed it to the seat of his discomfort. Blocking the blunt of the pain, he reached out to his bondsman and cautiously opened the link. A flash of pure agony and, for a moment, he saw Solo's small, untidy cabin. And then, it was gone; and with it the contact he had made with his bondsman. Disappointed, Luke drew a deep breath and relaxed.

Solante's grip on Luke's wrist eased. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." Luke breathed softly. "I'm fine."

"And Han? Did you pick up anything?"

Luke glanced at Chewbacca, his expression mirroring his disappointment. "Not as much as I'd hoped," he admitted. "Han's on the Falcon. In his cabin." He hesitated. "I sensed no one else on-board. But that's all I got before the pain was blocked again."

Satisfied that the young Jedi was unharmed, Solante released Luke's wrist. "You saw Solo's cabin, in detail?"

"Yes, he was..." Luke stopped, forced brutally against the back of his seat by the suddenness of the next attack. Anticipating another wave, he hurriedly cloaked himself in the Force and dropped his barriers.

"Luke, block it first, then control!"

"No!" Luke forced through clenched teeth. "I...need it...to see." Struggling against the pain he would not release, the young Jedi's pulse quickened alarmingly.

Frantically, Solante monitored Luke's vitals. "Luke, listen to me! It's too much, block it!"

Unmindful of the doctor's warning, the young Jedi struggled to hold the link through the building and only partially controlled pain.

Enough! Chewbacca roared. Rising from his seat, his small, blue eyes registering his own concern, the Wookiee pushed the old man aside and struck the young human a resounding blow, breaking Luke's concentration and his link to the Corellian.

Awareness returned slowly to the young Jedi's eyes, quickly followed by hurt disappointment. "Chewie...why? I...needed the pain...to find Han."

I, too, am bound to him, Small One, by blood, the strongest of all bonds, Chewbacca roared, snapping his great fangs. *And I would give my life gladly to save his, but your death, will not help him. You MUST listen to the Old One if we are to reach him in time. *

Sighing in relief, Solante moved behind Skywalker and dropped into a seat. "That was too close, my boy, way too close. I had no idea the pain you spoke of was that severe."

"It wasn't. It's gotten worse." Luke turned weakly to the shuttle's first mate. "Chewie, I have the coordinates." Moving to his board, Luke snapped on the navi-computer with an unsteady hand.

Solante studied Luke with new respect. "The Force is strong in you, young Skywalker." He whispered softly. "But take care, my boy, take care."

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