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## **Joker's Wild Part 2**

### **Nine in the Blue Falcon Series**

by [J.A. Berger](#)

The small Corellian shuttle slipped gracefully out of hyper and settled into an empty section of space in what looked to be a long dead system. Amid the rubble of unknown worlds, shattered by the death of their unnamed star, drifted the Millennium Falcon. Upon their approach, her carbon scored and deeply scarred hull, mutely reflected what little light she absorbed from the proximity of her sister ship. "Chewie, open a channel to the Falcon." Luke returned to his place at Chewie's shoulder.

Only static greeted the open channel as the comlink established contact with the Corellian freighter rapidly filling their forward screens. Cautiously, they moved closer.

"I'm getting nothing. No running lights, no engine signatures. She's cold. Drifting."

Solante pushed forward. "Life support?"

"On full." Luke acknowledged. "She shows no external damage and no sign of depressurization." Other data flashed on the screen before him and Luke exchanged glances with the Wookiee. "I've got a bad feeling about this."

Chewbacca tapped in a set of figures quickly confirming the young Jedi's data. They both fell silent.

"What is it?"

"Her deflector shields are down; her weapons off-line. Luke confirmed.

"Ours?"

"Don't worry, Doctor." Luke assured him. "Ours are up and fully functional. Chewie, check again."

The Falcon's copilot again called up the defense data on the Corellian vessel; there had been no change."

"What about long range sensors?"

Luke glanced hurriedly over his board. "They're clear. It there's anyone out there interested in her...or us...they're staying well out of sensor range."

"That doesn't mean they're not there," Solante voiced softly.

"No," Luke whispered, "It doesn't. If it's a trap, we're walking right into it." His hands tightened on the arms of his seat as the returning pain caught him unaware. This time, although blinded by its intensity, he immediately rallied the Force to combat and subdue it, no longer needing it to find his bondsman.

"Luke?"

"It's okay." He opened his eyes to the worried expressions of both human and Wookiee, momentarily unable to trust his voice. Fighting down the nausea brought on by the pain, he drew a deep, cleansing breath and released it. "There's no warning; it just comes. I don't understand how..."

"Nor do I," Solante interrupted, mirroring Luke's concern. "None of this makes any sense. But if the pain continues to increase Solo can't hope to survive it."

He glanced at the young Jedi. "We need answers and we need them fast."

"You're right." Luke turned. "Chewie, take us in and lock on for boarding."

Chewbacca moved eager hands to his board, his small, blue eyes transmitting his approval of the young Jedi's decision.

A few moments later, the modified shuttle drifted along side the larger Corellian vessel and docked at portside. All systems switched to auto, pilot and copilot struggled up from their seats.

"Chewie, release the Falcon's hatch; I'll cover you. Doctor, for now, I think it's best if you stay here."

A puzzled woof and Chewbacca tilted his head questioningly at the young Jedi.

"He what?" Luke felt a smarting behind his eyes and blinked back the compassion that had momentarily caught him unaware. "...I didn't know."

"What, I didn't..." Solante moved up behind them.

"He said Han re-coded all security on the Falcon to my voice as well as theirs. I...I didn't realize..." His voice trailed off, then returned under tight control. "You stay here, Doctor. We'll contact you as soon as we know something."

"I understand."

The air lock swished open and Chewbacca moved cautiously into the port side cargo hold, his bowcaster fully charged and activated. Luke followed, the lightsaber in his hand.

Once inside, the two stopped. The Wookiee reached to a control panel only to have his hand stayed by the young Jedi. Luke touched a button on the hilt of his weapon and the saber's bright energy blade flashed brilliantly to life, pushing the darkness into deeper shadows and illuminating the immediate area around them. The hold was full.

Advancing slowly, their weapons at ready, Luke and Chewbacca moved through the cargo hold to the security airlock, which would take them into the living areas of the small freighter.

Reaching the hatch, Luke nodded to the Wookiee. Cautiously, the Falcon's copilot stepped forward, punched in the entry code, then stepped aside. The airlock hissed as the seal between the hold and the interior of the ship stabilized. A moment later, the hatch swished open. Darkened silence greeted them.

Luke stepped in ahead of his tall companion the lightsaber offering them cover as the Wookiee entered and closed the hatch. They paused to listen, then cautiously moved into the narrow corridor. In the eerie silence, the darkness held at bay by the saber's blade, Luke felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise. Reaching inwardly the young Jedi touched the Force, bathed himself in its comforting familiarity, and projected into the surrounding darkness. He found only empty silence. They were alone. Whatever evil had been there was gone.

Shaking himself free of the repugnancy that permeated the darkened corridors, Luke Skywalker deactivated his weapon. "You can turn up the illums, Chewie. It's okay."

A moment later, the darkness receded and the corridor, which had seemed an alien threat in the darkness with its strange décor of corded insulation, tubing, and electrical wiring, became warmly familiar in the ship's full illumination.

Luke motioned the Wookiee forward. "Come on, we've wasted enough time; let's find Han."

Taking a corridor past the ship's head and showers, the two turned their backs to the gallery and headed toward the crew's quarters. Chewbacca reached the cabin first. Satisfied that they were alone, Luke snapped his weapon to his belt and followed Chewbacca into the small, darkened room. Shackled to the bunk and partially blocked from the young Jedi's view by the Wookiee's bulk, lay Han.

"Chewie, wait!" His mouth dry with sudden fear, Luke activated the room's lighting. "If this is a trap, anything we do might..."

Stopped by the sense of the young human's words, the Wookiee dropped his arms helplessly to his sides and moved back, making room for Luke next to him.

There, on the narrow bunk, facing towards them, lay the unconscious Corellian. Bruised and half naked, his dusky lashes strangely dark against the pallor of his features; a mop of unruly hair, dark with perspiration, in wet disarray over his forehead, Han Solo seemed alarmingly peaceful to the young Jedi who, only moment before, had shared his pain.

His face a grim mask, Luke reached for Solo's nearest wrist, chafed and bloody from the binders, and fingered the pulse point. He forced his attention away from the needle tracks, bruised and ugly, in the bend of the Corellian's elbow. Behind him, impatient with rage, Chewbacca moved closer. Luke shifted his hold on Solo's wrist, then nodded; the pulse was there, faint and thready.

"He's alive." Turning, Luke snapped his orders. "Chewie, get the doctor, then check the Falcon. She could be booby trapped or bugged, and until we know, we can't chance moving her...or him."

Bowing to the young Jedi's logic, Chewbacca turned to leave, then glanced back at the still figure on the bunk.

"I won't leave him," Luke assured him, compassion softened his voice. "Whatever he needs, Chewie, if it's in my power to give, he'll have, I promise."

The vow accepted, Chewbacca turned and disappeared, only to reappear a moment later with Solante. Taking another brief moment to glance again at Han, the Wookiee turned and left the small cabin.

"You found him." Moving quickly to the bedside, Solante pulled a small mediscanner from his bag and started a swift evaluation of the Corellian. His eyes hardened at the sight of the needle tracks. "I guess we don't have to wonder if he's been under interrogation," he observed, his voice tight with ill-concealed anger. "Do you sense any pain?"

Studying the still features of his bondsman, Luke reached to the bonding. "No." He looked up, recognizing both hesitation and uncertainty in the medic. "What's wrong? What is it?"

"I'm not...sure." The old man looked up, slowly shaking his head in puzzlement. "Hell, nothing here makes any sense."

"What do you mean?"

"His blood scan shows a heavy concentration of mind probe drugs, enough to break an ordinary man, but, mind you, not enough to cause serious damage. And," he paused, not enough to endanger his forced controls."

"You mean they put him through MP knowing they would get nothing from him?" Luke asked. His face flushed with anger.

"So it would seem, but..."

"Why?" Luke finished.

Both fell silent. The plates beneath their feet vibrated with powerful awakening of the Falcon's engines as Chewbacca brought them back on line.

Luke started from his thoughts and glanced again at the still form of the Corellian spacer. "Can we remove the binders?"

The old man glanced up. "Oh, I should think so. They're the usual Imperial nonsense. Mind games to intimidate those who found him." Digging into his bag, Solante removed a small laser cutter and handed it to Luke. "They weren't needed to keep him down, the pain was doing that."

Gratefully accepting the small tool, Luke swiftly cut the binders from his friend and tossed them aside, while his mind replayed the information Solante had given him. He returned the cutter to the old man. "You're saying they subjected him to MP knowing they wouldn't get the information he carried, but stopped short of permanently damaging his mind." He repeated in disbelief. "Your sure of that?"

"Yes." Solante held up the small scanner. "I modified this instrument specifically for the identification and value rating of MP drugs; I can tell you to the micron

how much he was given and what he was given. They put him through hell, but they didn't break his controls and they didn't damage his mind."

"After all that, they just turned him loose? That makes less sense than what was done to him." Luke puzzled aloud. "Could he have escaped?"

"In his condition?" Solante shook his head, frowning as the small hand-held instrument continued its electronic evaluation. "From these readings, he couldn't have offered any resistance at all."

"And the pain?" Luke's eyes grew vacant as he again gently probed the link between himself and the Corellian. He slowly shook his head. There was nothing there. "Have you found any reason for it?"

Solante turned back to his patient, carefully avoiding the question and the concern he had seen in the younger man's eyes.

"Doctor?"

"Luke, I won't lie to you." The old man sighed and the lines of age in his roughed features deepened with helplessness. He looked up, meeting the boy's gaze squarely. "From the readings I'm getting, the trauma and shock are increasing as the levels of pain climb. Now, unless I can find some answers quick, before his tolerance is reached, he's going to die."

"No," Luke whispered, denying what he had already sensed through the bonding.

The old man took another sweep with the scanner. "It's not the cuts and bruises or even the drugs. They're all superficial and secondary to the pain. But I can find nothing---absolutely nothing---physically wrong with him to indicate what might be causing the agony he's been forced to endure."

His peace disturbed by the sound of familiar voices, Han Solo stirred. Squinting against the harsh light, the Corellian blinked, then frowned, his blurred vision finding and settling on the slender figure in black.

"Luke?" His voice a soft croak, Solo tried desperately to clear his throat, but had to settle for a brief wetting of his lips with a dry tongue.

"Han?" The young Jedi moved to his friend's shoulder, the light above catching and reflecting from his blonde hair.

Solo drew a weary breath. "Kid...you look...like...an angel." The thought brought pleasure despite the threat of pain and the Corellian forced a weak smile.

"Glad...you could make...it."

"Wouldn't have missed it." Luke touched a gentle hand to the Corellian's forehead; there was no fever.

Lacking the strength to reach out to his bondsman, Solo lay still under the young Jedi's gentle touch, too weary to think past the comfort of his presence.

"Can you remember what happened?"

A puzzled expression drifted across the Corellian's pale features. He frowned, searching for an answer. "He was...here." Instantly, the edge of pain was there to warn him against the memories and he quickly veered away from them. The pain eased and immediately rewarded him with the comfort of non-pain and the warmth of well-being.

Closing his eyes, Solo hurriedly initiated a mental block against what he knew would come and recklessly forged on. "He wanted me..." Again the pain was there, pounding at his weakened defenses; he ignored it. "...To...call...you." His barriers fell and his mind filled with red-hot flashes of agony. His voice trailed off as he fought to shelter Luke from the contact.

Experiencing the residue of blocked pain, Luke glanced quickly toward the Falcon medic.

"His brain waves are showing erratic patterns." The instrument hummed again over the weakened Corellian and the old man's eyes hardened at the readings. "Also, there are massive amounts of pain activity."

"I know." The young Jedi acknowledged grimly. "I can shield myself from it, but with Han blocking the blunt of the pain, I can't help him."

Hazel eyes, bright with pain, opened and settled on Skywalker. "Luke." He swallowed hard, grimaced, then continued slowly, cautiously. "I thought...I was...dreaming." Reality pushed its way through the cobwebs of pain and torment, and the sudden horror of understanding filtered across the Corellian's countenance. "The bonding. He knows! That's why..." The gnawing stopped and the beast took a bite. Solo screamed.

"Han!" Reaching through the bonding in an effort to control the pain, Luke struggled against the Corellian's block helpless and angry. "Tell me! Who did this?"

"No, Luke, stop!" Solante pushed the young Jedi aside to take his place next to Solo as the spacer's body arched upward in mounting pain induced convulsions.

"Solo, listen to me!" Striking the weakened man a stinging blow to first one cheek and then the other in an attempt to reach past the pain, the old doctor swore in

desperation. "You were able to control the pain before...when you first regained consciousness. Whatever you did then, do it again. Now!"

Anger flashed momentarily in the hazel eyes, than understanding. The Corellian closed his eyes and slowly, visibly relaxed. The medi-scanner in the hands of the old man, registered an immediate decrease in pain.

"Good. Good." Solante soothed.

"What happened?" Fear touched Luke's voice as he moved back to the side of his bondsman. "Did I cause that?"

"No, of course not." Solante reassured him, waving it aside as unimportant. "Nor could you have prevented it. I think I know what's happening." An almost unperceivable anger darkened Solante's eyes. He turned back to the Corellian.

"Captain Solo, at the moment, it seems you have at least some control over the pain. Concentrate on that and just listen."

Han nodded, his attention focused on the old man and the young Jedi at his side. Satisfied, Solante continued. "From what we've seen, I'm guessing that any attempt on your part to convey what occurred during your capture brings on increasing amounts of pain. The more you strive to remember, the more intense the pain. Is that correct?"

Solo grimaced, drew a ragged breath and nodded. The needle on the medi-scanner quivered.

"That's enough. Relax." Solante rechecked his findings. "Someone has been very, very clever."

Sensing the doctor's anger, Luke turned. "What is it? What did you find?"

"Nothing good, my boy, nothing good." He turned back to the Corellian. "Solo, listen to me. I want you to concentrate on whatever it takes to keep the pain at bay. I need you to buy us some time, while we think how best to help you." He watched Solo's features closely. "Do you understand?"

Nodding, the Corellian settled his gaze on his bondsman. A deep sigh and the spacer's features relaxed.

"Doctor?"

"Luke, his mind was left intact so he could call you."

A flicker of anger touched the Corellian's hazel eyes and he involuntarily stiffened.

"No! Solo, listen to me. This does NOT concern you." Solante activated the scanner and passed it over the spacer. "Clear your mind! Now!"

"It *does* concern...me..." There was stubborn refusal in Solo's voice and the scanner's needle jumped.

Solante reached into his bag and quickly filled a hypo. Before the Corellian could grasp his intentions, he shoved the needle deep into Solo's biceps as the first signs of returning pain registered in the hazel eyes. A moment later, they closed and the Corellian relaxed.

Luke reached for his bondsman's mind, only to be stopped by a gentle hand on his arm. "It's only a mild sedative. I dare give him nothing stronger, he's too weak. But it'll allow him to sleep for a few minutes while we talk."

"The pain, it was returning, I felt it." Luke quizzed gently.

"Yes, and it was going to get worse. With every question put to him, every demand on his memory, the level rises." Solante swore under his breath in anger. "Someone doesn't want him to remember and has used a mind block to prevent it. Someone old enough to remember the Clone Wars when such brutal devices were used and skilled enough in the Dark Side to modify one to his own needs."

"Vader," Luke voiced the name with conviction. "It was his presence I sensed when we first came aboard." He studied the old medic closely. "A mind block? Are you sure?"

"It's been many, many years since I've seen one used, but it's not something one easily forgets. I'm sure."

"But, why? It makes no sense..."

"It does if Vader knows about the bonding," Solante suggested, watching Luke closely. "Think about it. The only relief Solo gets from the pain is when he completely clears his mind of all thought or..." he paused for emphasis, his gaze locked on the young Jedi, "He thinks of you. He calls your name and the pain decreases. I saw the proof of that on my scanner."

Luke Skywalker remained silent, but his eyes reflected a growing fear.

Solante pressed on. "Filled with mind probe drugs, mentally confused and weakened by pain, it wouldn't take much to suggest that Solo channel his thoughts to you. And when he does..."

Luke paled. "He transmits through the bonding."

Solante's voice grew cold. "It's a trap, Luke, and Solo's the bait. It's my guess that Vader has used a mind block and programmed it to force Han to call you." Solante's anger rose. "That's what he was trying to tell us. Vader knows of the bonding. How, I don't know. But if he thought there was a Jedi...a Master...who had survived the purge..."

"A Master?" Luke interrupted.

"He was Jedi, Luke." Solante reminded him. "He would know that only Masters sought the bonding of Jedi to Falcon."

Luke returned his attention to the unconscious figure on the bunk, his memory spiraling backward to the battle over Kashyyyk. Shot down by an Imperial armada, Han had been surprised by Bashu Finn, a bounty hunter hired by Vader. Luke, himself, had flown to the Corellian's rescue and together they had captured Finn. Then, at Han's insistence, they had sent the bounty hunter back to Vader as a sign of the dark lord's failure.\*

A cold hand of guilt tightened about the young Jedi's throat. Unknown to the Corellian, he had sent something back as well. And, what he had sent would have been all the proof of a bonding the Sith Lord would have needed. "Then all this...is my fault." Luke's voice filled with agonizing regret.

Solante looked up in disbelief. "How?"

"After Han and I were bonded, M'Fe gave me a pendent. A...a Jedi talisman." Luke's blue eyes mirrored his pain. "M'Fe said it was the Falcon pledge given to the Jedi upon completion of a Sealing. I...I sent the pendent...with Finn knowing that it would be found. No," Luke admitted softly. "I *wanted* it to be found." He stumbled to a halt, unable to continue. His gaze locked with regret on the peaceful countenance of his friend and bondsman.

"You knew if touched by an other than yourself...even Vader...that the talisman's Force properties would cause it to morph and than return to you."

"Yes." Luke admitted. "I...I wanted Vader to see it. I *wanted* him to know the truth! That despite everything that he's done, members of your Order...and mine...has survived." Luke paused, allowing the silence to fall heavy on his admission.

The old man sighed. "We know Vader found the mark of the Falcon order and the Circle of Completion on Solo during the Quaylan interrogation, showing Han to be Falcon bred and trained, but he was too young to have been active before the purge. But once Vader saw the talisman, the symbol of a bonding and linked it to Solo," it's not too hard to figure his next move. Get Solo and he has the means of finding the Jedi."

## LAIR OF THE BLUE FALCON

"If I hadn't sent the pendent, none of this would have happened." Luke whispered.

Solante settled a disapproving gaze on the young Jedi. "What you did was foolish and dangerous, made worse by not considering the possible consequences of your actions to both yourself and your bondsman." He admonished sternly, then turned back to his patient. "Regardless of all that, what's done is done. You made a mistake...a bad one...learn from it."

Giving in to the old man's logic, Luke moved closer to the Corellian and sent a soft apology through the bonding. To Solante he voiced a question. "You called the mind block a device, would you explain?"

Solante nodded. "Under normal circumstances, a verbal block placed by a dark knight would have been enough." Solante sighed. "However, Vader must have learned...as most of us have...that more was needed to bend our headstrong Corellian to his will."

"So, you think even under the influence of the drugs, Han was able to fight back?" Luke's expression was one of disbelief.

"I think so, yes," Solante acknowledged. "From what I've witnessed of the contact between you and Solo, I'd be willing to bet that when this first started, Han was successfully blocking both you *and* the pain until he could escape into unconsciousness. How he did it, I don't know." The old man spared a quick glance to the figure on the bunk. "At that point, I think Vader realized that if he was going to get the Jedi, he was going to have to try something else."

"So he programmed the pain, how?" Luke whispered.

"Yes, by surgically implanting a device to reinforce his verbal suggestion."

"Surgically implanted?"

Solante slowly reached out a closed hand and opened it, revealing a tiny metallic sliver resting in the palm of his hand. "I found it on the deck next to the bunk when I reached for my bag."

Taking the small surgical needle from the doctor, Skywalker studied it closely. "Then if it's an implant, it can be removed." Hope touched his voice.

"Perhaps," Solante hedged, remembering all the unknowns associated with the ancient devices. "But I'd rather not have to do it here. It's a touchy procedure with a lot of variables." He swore, grabbing the edge of the small bunk as the Falcon reeled from a heavy blow to her starboard flank, followed by a muffled explosion. The room's illumination dimmed, then brightened. "But then again...I may not have a choice."

"Stay with Han!" Shouting over his shoulder, Luke sprinted from the cabin.

Reaching the cockpit, he leapt into the pilot's seat. A quick glance at his board and the young Jedi smiled. The Falcon's systems were up, her powerful shields successfully absorbing the first volleys. "You've been busy." He spared a quick glance toward the Wookiee at the copilot's station next to him, then to the front canopy where he was rewarded with the sight of two Imperial Star Destroyers moving directly towards them.

Grabbing the yoke, Luke hit a switch releasing the shuttle from the freighter's airlock then rolled the Falcon towards her, keeping the small ship nestled close. "Target her, Chewie, but wait for my signal! Hurry!"

\*She's a fine ship, Small One. \* Chewie grumbled, watching the shuttle bump harmlessly against their protective shields. \*Our bondsman...\*

"It's the shuttle or the Falcon," Luke interrupted, his attention on the job at hand. "He'll understand."

Without further comment, the Wookiee placed the small shuttle expertly in the center of his computer's crosshairs, then looked up, silently awaiting Luke's next command.

Luke slid the Falcon into a spiraling roll, quickly putting the freighter between the shuttle and the two advancing warships, momentarily hiding the sleek Corellian vessel from Imperial eyes. Eagerly, the gun-ships advanced on the shabby freighter. If they saw the small ship nestled off her port bow, they ignored it. The small shuttle drifted along side, the Falcon's shields holding her safely at bay.

"Get ready!" Without further warning, Luke took the Falcon into a death drop and rolled under the bellies of the destroyers, leaving only the shuttle visible. "Now!"

Chewie regretfully pressed the firing button and the sleek vessel disintegrated, her fiery demise flowering into a massive explosion much larger than the Imperials would have expected from a ship her size. Her ruptured, oversized fuel tanks throwing the remains of the craft into the forward screens and conning

tower of the foremost destroyer, bathing the arrow shaped giant in a gigantic wall of flame.

Momentarily blinded, the Star Destroyer banked clumsily away from the fireball and side slipped into the path of her sister ship. Shields sparked, flaring in blue-white brilliance from the heavy drain over the areas of contact.

"Damage report!"

Chewbacca touched a button than leaned forward to better read the small screen on his console. He turned a toothy grin on his human pilot and reported his findings.

"Good shooting." Luke smiled. "With the conning tower down, communications will be, too; and that side slip into the other ship is sure to have damaged the shields of both. We have a chance, but I've got to get to the main guns."

Stumbling to his feet, Luke grabbed the back of the pilot's chair as another volley hit the Falcon. Her shields weakened, Chewbacca rolled the shabby freighter in between the two mighty warships trying desperately to avoid another kaleidoscope of deadly fire. The Falcon rallied and her shields stabilized.

Another shot over her port bow and Chewie banked the freighter again, narrowly missing another hit, too busy 'staying alive' to notice Luke still in the cockpit. Another glancing blow and the Falcon shuddered again. Roaring, the Wookiee reached to his board and sent a spray of laser fire across the nearest destroyer, the energy bolts sparkling harmlessly against the great ship's protective mantle.

"They're playing with us," Luke whispered. He stared at the great ships riding in open space before them.

Momentarily distracted, Chewbacca glanced back in surprise. Another strafing across their bow and the Wookiee hurriedly rolled away from the attack, roaring his anger both at the narrow corridor left open to him and the young Jedi still in the cockpit.

"Chewie, did you find anything when you searched the Falcon?"

The Wookiee, busy trying to keep them away from the heavy tracings of laser fire, vigorously shook his head.

"They want us to run," Luke reasoned. "It's the only thing that makes any sense. They could have put a tractor beam on us, and they haven't. Every time we blunder too close, a corridor suddenly opens, giving us ample room to make jump speed. Which means," Luke sobered, his pale blue eyes hooded with suspicion. "They think they can track us."

\*There are no Imperial ears on my ship, Small One.\* Chewbacca grumbled, unable to fully concentrate on the boy's words and the intricate maneuvers necessary to keep the freighter one step ahead of the great Imperial warships.

Luke smiled grimly. "Seems I remember someone else saying that after we escaped from the Death Star." He held up a hand, silencing the Falcon's copilot before the Wookiee could come to the Corellian's defense. "It's okay, Chewie, we'll just have to find a way to buy us more time to look for it." He returned to the pilot's seat.

Grumbling angrily under his breath, Chewbacca shifted his forward deflectors to full and banked the Falcon directly into the path of the great ships.

"Chewie, what....!?"

Both destroyers wrenched hard away to avoid colliding with the small Corellian freighter. They drew only minimal fire. The Wookiee exchanged looks with the young Jedi who had grown surprisingly pale during the encounter. Chewie shrugged. He had no better answer; they should have been quite dead.

Luke drew a deep breath, swallowing hard. "Well, that was one way of testing my theory," he managed, his heart still tapping an urgent beat somewhere between his throat and his chest. "Although, not one I, personally, would have recommended."

Chewbacca grinned, but there was no humor in his deep-set eyes. \*What now, Small One? We cannot risk returning to base...yours or ours.\*

"What we need most is what we're running out of...time." Luke replied, watching the Imperial ships regroup far enough away to give them ample room to jump. "We can pick a place...far from home...then jump, buying us time to find the bug while we're in hyper or we can hang around here until they get suspicious and decide to end the game."

\*And what of our bondsman?\* Chewie asked, naked concern in his eyes. \*Does he not require medical attention?\*

Luke closed his eyes reaching for the security of the bond between himself and the Corellian; there was nothing. He opened his eyes to find the Wookiee watching him closely. "There's no pain." Luke assured him closely. "Doctor Solante's with him and, at least, for now, I don't think there's anyone...at either of our bases...who could help him more."

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In the small cabin, Solante braced himself against the buck and roll of the Falcon, desperately attempting to monitor Solo's vitals. The medication was dissipating and the scanner registered the first signs of the spacer's return to consciousness. Swearing aloud, Solante leaned over the edge of the bunk as Solo's eyes fluttered open.

"What...?" Solo weakly struggled up, anxiety in his hazel eyes as the ship rocked from another hard blow to her bow.

"We're under attack." Solante pushed the befuddled Corellian down gently, but firmly. "You can't do anything about it, so relax."

Solo stiffened, his bruised and battered features reflecting his concern as the Falcon rocked under the numerous blows of enemy fire; but there was no sign of pain.

Solante smiled. Solo no longer thought of Vader nor feared for Luke Skywalker; he thought only of his ship, and it was keeping him pain free.

Under them, the Falcon banked sharply, then shuddered as she sustained another glancing blow. Solo swore again, relaxing only when he heard the sharp crackle of laser fire coming from the forward guns.

"What are they...thinking? Luke should be...on the upper...guns. They're gonna need me..." Again he struggled up, only to be stopped by both his own weakness and the firm hand of the medic.

"The best way you can help them, Captain, is to lie still and let me do what has to be done. The Falcon's in good hands, but as you can tell, we may be a bit pressed for time, so let's not waste it."

With little strength left to argue, Han Solo reluctantly gave in.

Standing at the head of the bunk, Solante leaned over his patient and carefully parted the thick mop of unruly hair with his fingers, then, inch by inch, gently inspected the Corellian's scalp. Finished and having found nothing, he painstakingly repeated the procedure, then frowned.

"Solante," Solo demanded weakly. "What are you looking for?"

"An implant," the old man mumbled, not allowing his attention to wander from the job at hand.

"An implant?" Solo mulled that over. "For what?"

"I think you know."

"To force me to call Luke." The Corellian's hazel eyes hardened with barely suppressed anger. "The sheltering thought of his bondsman kept the pain at bay.

"I suspect you held out as long as you could, with more success than expected, and an implant had to be used to reinforce the suggestion." He gave the Corellian a quick, speculating glance, his faded blue eyes touched with humor. "I have some questions on how you were able to do that, Captain, but under the circumstances they can wait."

Reaching into his bag, the old medic pulled out a small scalpel and set it aside.

The action did not go unnoticed and the hazel eyes of the Corellian settled on the knife. "I hope you're planning on finding something *before* you use that thing."

"I'm going to forget you said that," Solante snapped in irritation. "In the past, you and I have had our differences, Captain, but I don't think you truly believe I would ever intentionally put your life in jeopardy."

"Maybe not," Solo hedged. "But I strongly suspect you've enjoyed making it, shall we say, a bit of a challenge, now and then."

A touch of a smile pulled at the corner of the old man's mouth at Han's all too accurate evaluation. "That, my friend, you have always been more than capable of doing with little or no help from me."

"You're probably right," Solo begrudgingly admitted. His voice softened. "Anyway, thanks for coming for me...I just wish you hadn't brought Luke."

The gazes of the two men met and, for the first time in many years, a look of understanding and trust was exchanged. "We couldn't have found you without him." Solante hesitated, unable to offer further assurances. "Now, rest easy. There's work to be done."

Moving his fingers lightly along Solo's hairline, Solante cautiously felt his way down the sides of the Corellian's face and neck, then paused. In the depression behind the right earlobe, his fingers encountered a small lump. He probed gently. Solo screamed, his body going rigid under the medic's touch. Solante jerked his hand away. "Captain, quickly, center your thoughts on Luke. You can bring him no harm now. Concentrate on your bondsman!"

Desperately, Solo held to the edges of the bunk, the veins in his arms standing out like twisted coils of rope as he fought to control the pain. The ugly welts in the bend of his elbow rose in grotesque knots as his body convulsed from the agony. Through clinched teeth, Solo swore weakly. "I...can't...stop it!" He screamed again. Dark, venal blood oozed from the needle tracks as he continued to thrash.

The screen on the small scanner registered his rising vulnerability to the increasing pain.

Swearing, the old man grabbed for his bag, than quickly discarded it. He could chance no more drugs. In desperation, he turned to his last resort. Balling a fist and putting the strength of his aged shoulders behind the blow, the old medic took a short, powerful swing at the jaw of the helpless spacer. He watched in relief as Solo's eyes rolled upward. The Corellian went limp, freed at last from the unbearable pain.

"Just when I thought we might have a chance at resolving our differences." Sighing in both relief and disappointment, Solante tenderly rubbed his bruised knuckles, than reached for the scalpel. "He's never going to believe I did that to save his life."

\* \* \* \*

With the ship safely in hyper, Luke was on his way to the cabin when Solo's scream, followed by the return of his pain, sent the young Jedi to his knees. Chewbacca, close at his heels, pulled him to his feet steadying him until Luke could rally his controls. A shared glance and they hurried to the small cabin.

"Doctor, the pain..." Luke stopped. His first glance centered on the motionless figure of his bondsman, his second on the old man with a scalpel poised at the neck of the Corellian.

"Wait!"

"There's no time!" The scalpel moved closer.

Roaring the Wookiee rushed past Skywalker and jerked the small knife from the medic's hand. *\*Young Jedi said wait!\** Flames of accusation and anger danced dangerously in his small deep-set eyes.

Solante swore, puzzled and angry at the staying of his hand. "Luke, I found it! The implant. It triggers the pain. I've got to get it out! Now! It's killing him!"

"I...know." Luke stammered, half sick from the intensity of the pain he had shared with his bondsman. Swiftly pulling the cloak of the Force about him, he cleared his mind, swallowed hard and tried again. "The pain was worse, much worse. Why?"

The question stopped the old man. Frowning, he turned to face Luke and the angry Wookiee at his side. "What do you mean?"

"Han called me through the bonding, but this time the pain didn't go away; instead it got stronger. Han couldn't stop it. Then...nothing." Luke watched the old medic closely. "How did you stop it?"

"With too many drugs already in his system, I was forced to hit him hard enough to knock him out." Solante admitted. "For the moment, he's pain free. But if that implant isn't removed before he regains consciousness..." He swore again in frustrated impatience. "I shouldn't have to tell you this, you felt it! We're wasting time! Time Solo doesn't have! Chewie give me the scalpel." Solante reached for the knife.

"No!" Again Luke stopped him. "As you once told me, we'll make time."

"Then you do it at his expense," Solante turned to the young Jedi in angered frustration. "You've seen his agony. By the gods, you've FELT it! He can't stand much more of this, Luke. I've got to remove the implant now! Solante turned again to the Wookiee. "Chewbacca, *give* me the scalpel! Now."

"Doctor, please..."

Solante hesitated; it had not been a request.

"All the time I was in the cockpit, Han was pain free. I sensed his concern for the Falcon, for us, but no pain. His thoughts were safely on us when the pain hit. What happened?" Luke inquired softly.

"It's the implant," Solante snapped, impatiently. "The pain started when I found it."

"He could control it before," Luke pressed. "Why not this time?"

"I don't know." Solante glanced urgently at the still figure on the small bunk, then back to the young Jedi. "But I don't have to tell you what it's doing to him. If he regains consciousness to the levels of pain he just experienced and still can't control it..." He allowed the unfinished sentence to hang ominously between them. "We have no choice, Luke, *he* has not choice. It's got to be to removed *now*."

"One more question, Doctor," Luke voiced carefully. "If contact with the implant brought on the intensified pain we both just witnessed, what will it do to Han if an attempt is made to remove it?"

The question took the old man by surprise. "What?"

"Could an attempt to remove the implant kill him?"

"But why would Vader do that?" Solante puzzled aloud. "Solo's no good to him dead."

"But is it possible?" Luke pressed. "Can one of these devices be programmed to kill?"

"Of course. Originally, they were developed and used by the Shocktroopers for advancement through assassination." Solante frowned. "The implant could be injected swiftly and painlessly, even while the intended victim slept. Later, the subject died from agonizing pain that no healer could find or ease, and the implant would self destruct within the body, erasing all evidence of itself as the cause of death."

"Then it kills the victim by increasing the pain to unbearable levels."

"Yes, yes, of course. Any attempt to remove it and..." Solante's expression reflected the first sign of fearful realization. He blanched. The devices could be programmed to kill if attempts were made to remove them. "But surely they wouldn't..." But there was no longer any certainty in his voice only failing hope and defeat. "If you're right, I don't dare attempt to remove it."

"And, if you don't," Luke voiced with anger. "The pain will continue to increase until it kills him." Luke met the old doctor's gaze. "You're right, our only chance...Han's only chance...is to remove the implant before the pain gets any worse."

"Luke, it may already be too late." The age lines in the old man's features deepened. "I can use no more drugs on him and with the increased levels of pain, my emergency anesthetic is not likely to stand up under the probing necessary to remove the implant."

"Then I'll control it with the Force."

Solante studied the innocent determination in the features of the young Jedi. "The Force is strong in you, my boy, but you don't know what you're taking on here. You've been able to protect yourself from Solo's pain, but to hold it at bay while I probe for the implant, you're going to have to protect Solo as well as yourself." Solante hesitated, then continued. "With each touch to the implant the pain is likely to double, even triple. You will have to endure it all, alone, until I can remove and deactivate the device." His voice softened. "If you fail, it could conceivably kill you both, which is probably what Vader may have intended from the start."

The prone figure on the bunk moved. A groan issued from the Corellian.

"We're out of time," Luke replied, his decision made. "You get the damned thing out of him, Doctor, I'll deal with the pain." Luke hurried to Solo's side, already feeling the first sharp tracings of discomfort through the bonding. "Chewie, give the doctor his scalpel, than get busy. It's up to you to find that Imperial bug...and hurry!"

Tapping into the tides of power ebbing and flowing within, Luke threw his mind open to his bondsman's pain and recklessly beckoned it to him. Immediately, flashes of pure agony consumed him, driving hard against his controls and forcing him to his knees.

Staggered by its intensity, Luke frantically reached deeper. The Corellian fully conscious and showing the first signs of discomfort, cried out silently through the bonding. The young Jedi hurriedly channeled the Force's protection through the link to his bondsman and willingly accepted still more of the pain. The figure on the bunk relaxed and lay still.

Solante poised the tip of the blade above the implant. "Solo, if you can hear me, listen closely. After I make the first cut, I will extract the implant as quickly as I can, but you must lie still." With that, the tip of the scalpel bit into the soft tissue covering the small, deadly device.

Immediately upon the knife's insertion, Luke felt the increase in pain and hurriedly rallied the Force to meet it. The figure on the bunk gasped and stiffened; the knife paused.

"Solo, don't move!" Solante warned, sparing a quick glance to the young Jedi. "Luke, you've got to hold it off!"

Drawing on his limited knowledge, Luke willed himself to remain calm. Already on his knees, he slowly eased himself to the deck, put his back to the bunk, and frantically channeled more of his Force protection through the bonding in a desperate attempt to damper the pain to his bondsman.

Recognizing the first signs of distress in the vacant eyes and the fine film of perspiration bathing the young Jedi's pale features, Solante whispered a silent prayer. "Hang in there, Luke, I need...a few...more...minutes."

Deep within the essence of the Force, Luke heard and understood; reaching out again he met the pain, encircled it with the power of the Force, and waited.

"Good." The knife tip made another swift shallow cut. The small wound filled with blood. No longer able to see the implant, Solante moved quickly to stench the flow, inadvertently making contact with the implant. The small devise responded.

Immediately, Luke felt the tidal wave of pain rushing towards him. Unaware of the cause, he intercepted the pain before it could reach the brain centers of its helpless host and frantically drew it to him.

Shuttering under the malignancy of its dark powers, Luke realized this was no ordinary pain, but a manifestation of the Dark. He fought to hold it to him and away from his bondsman. For a brief moment, it was drawn into his Force field and rendered powerless. But then, as if sensing its danger, the pain suddenly rebounded.

Surprised, the young Jedi faltered, momentarily losing control. Freed, the pain reversed itself and sped back through the link towards its intended victim. Desperately, Luke rallied his controls and recalled the pain before it could reach Solo, encircled it and bound it to him.

Another touch of the swab needed to expose the implant and again, the device triggered its programming, launching another wave of pain intended for its host; and again, it was met and drawn into the young Jedi and dampened by the power of the Force.

Suddenly, as if directed by a mind able to learn from past mistakes, the pain rebounded before Luke could trap it within the Force. Again it backwashed through the link, sped to its host, and immediately fulfilled the portion of its programming left unhindered by the Force. Solo screamed out in pain.

"Luke!" Solante called out in desperation.

The Corellian clung desperately to the edges of the bunk in a futile effort to withstand the agony.

Somewhere in the back of his consciousness, Luke felt the deck under him vibrate, shutter, and then settle. They were out of hyper. Soon, very soon, his Force alarms warned, those who followed would come for them. There was little time left. Frantically, the young Jedi reached out and beckoned the total sum of the pain to him. The figure on the bunk relaxed.

Solante hurriedly bent to his task. Forceps in one hand gently pressing the tissue aside in an effort to get under the exposed implant, the Falcon medic quickly swabbed the wound clean with the other. There was no longer any way of avoiding contact with the device, and again, the small implant tapped into its deadly program.

This time there was no holding the intensified pain. Once it encountered Luke's Force blocks, it registered the danger, reversed itself, and returned to the Corellian. No longer sheltered by his bondsman, Solo screamed out. With his

patient convulsing under the excruciating pain, Solante lost his precarious hold on the tiny implant and reeled away from the bunk.

Too late, Luke realized the danger. He had the power to call the pain from Solo, but lacked the knowledge needed to hold it. Desperately, he called out. 'Ben...please...I need you...please!' Only emptiness answered his plea, encircled and held by the cold darkness of intense evil.

In frantic desperation, Luke rallied his controls and again called the pain to him. It came. And again, it escaped.

Solos screamed out. It had returned to the Corellian. Han was dying and there was nothing he could do. 'Ben! Help me...please. I...can't...do it...alone.'

Then, as if in answer to his plea, something touched the link, flexed its power, and sent waves of mental energy against the advancing pain. Luke started.

Turned back by the alien power, the pain rushed back towards Luke in a mighty tidal wave of death. Urgently, the young Jedi cloaked himself against its malignancy, met it, and recklessly pulled it to him. This time it stayed, beating its deadly wings against his weakening controls. Whatever had joined them, within the bonding, had turned the pain from Solo. Luke could sense the pain's anger, its power, if it escaped... 'Han?!'

Struggling to hold the pain at bay, Luke reached out to his bondsman. Instead, he touched the alien presence. Almost losing his precarious hold on the rioting pain, he backed away. 'Han!!'

'Luke...'

There was no time to answer his bondsman's weak acknowledgement or to dwell on the panic that arose at the sense of another's presence within the link as the pain again drove itself against his defenses.

'Luke...I'm all right.'

Solo's assurance brought new hope. The young Jedi turned his attention to the fight at hand. Whatever had joined them within the link had made no attempt to come between he and his bondsman, only to bar the pain's return to Solo. But who was it? What was it? Weakened from his efforts, Luke gave the remainder of his strength to the Force and surrendered himself to its protection.

Sensing its impending failure with the increased power radiating from the young Jedi and unable to complete its programming, the pain pounded at Luke's defenses with renewed effort. How much longer could he withstand its assault?

The figure on the bunk relaxed.

Unaware of the silent battle that raged within the Tatooine youth at his feet, Solante pushed the forceps under the tiny implant, forced it to the surface, and drew it carefully from the wound. "I have it!"

Luke slumped against the bunk spent. His mind at last free of the pain, free of the panic and free from the fear for...Han!" He reached for his bondsman and touched the...other. It gently backed off, clearing Luke's way to the Corellian. He sensed warmth, caring concern, and something more...love? 'Han?'

*My Beloved sleeps.*

Beloved? 'Who are you?' Luke sensed the other's desire to withdraw. He reached to hold it briefly.

*A friend. Hurry now, others come...for you...for Beloved.'* The presence pulled away.

'No...please, wait...'

It was gone. 'Thank you.' He whispered.

"Luke, Luke, did you hear me?" Solante stood over the young Jedi holding the devise still clamped tightly in the forceps. Turning it to the cabin light, the implant flashed a small red light. He swore. "The damned thing is a tracer!"

"Deactivate it and hurry!"

The medic's hand tightened on the forceps and the touch of light winked out. "Done."

Struggling to his feet, Luke Skywalker stumbled against the bunk in his eagerness to reach the comlink to the cockpit. Once there, he opened a channel. "Chewie, we've found the bug. Plot a course for home and get us out of here! Quick! Company's coming."

There was an immediate surge of power as the small freighter kicked in her powerful thrusters and hit the afterburners. A sharp jolt and she rolled to port then righted herself and spun into a death spiral, leveled out and charged into hyper space. A moment later, she settled again into the safety of non-space.

"You did it, my boy." Solante smiled. In the palm of his bloody hand lay a tiny, metallic chip. "And here's the cause of all our problems."

"Luke, are you...?"

The young Jedi turned away from the old man and returned to the side of the bunk, smiling at the concern reflected in the weary gaze of his friend and bondsman. "I'm fine. How are you?"

"Tired. Very, very tired." The Corellian's eyes closed and his respiration slowed. "The...the implant?"

"It's out." Luke reassured him.

"The Falcon?"

"She fine," Luke assured him softly. "Now, you get some rest...we're headed home."

"I...think...I can...do...that." Solo's voice drifted off and he slowly relaxed.

'Sleep now,' Luke whispered through the bonding. 'But you've got some explaining to do when you awake...Beloved.'

\* \* \* \*

"I can't believe it." Solo eased himself up against the headboard of the small bunk in the medical facilities on Kalyynn. "The Falcon was under some pretty heavy fire when the doc pout my lights out and you're telling me they just let you jump, without trying to stop you?"

Luke nodded, fingering the small devise Solante had removed from the Corellian. "None of the shots were disabling. They were playing with us. They wanted us to run."

Solo frowned. "That's a switch. Usually they're only interested in reducing us to space dust."

"If they'd shot us down or disabled us," Luke explained patiently, "They couldn't have tracked us to base."

"Oh, no, not this time." Solo denied confidently. "There's no Imperial tracer made that Chewie can't find. We've gotten real good at tracking those things since the Death Star."

"They didn't bug the Falcon."

"What?" Solo frowned. "Now you've lost me. Let's back up a minute." A puzzled grin pulled at the corner of the Corellian's mouth. "I was set adrift with my brain intact and instructed to call you. If I refused or attempted to block the suggestion, the implant triggered varying levels of increasing pain, which transmitted through

the bonding to you. Vader knew you would come running, using the pain to find me." Solo swore angrily. "It makes me damned uncomfortable when slime like that can call our moves."

"You're right," Luke agreed. "It was a foolproof plan. But, in the end, Vader got greedy and ended up losing it all."

Silence fell over the small room.

"Are you gonna tell me or make me ask?" Solo settled reproachful eyes on his young friend.

"When Solante knocked you out..."

"*That*, I remember." Solo interrupted, touching the darkening bruise along one side of his jaw. "Just when I thought me and that ol' man had patched things up. I owe him..."

"...Your life." Luke interjected softly. "And mine. And...probably the whole Kalyynn base."

"What are you talking about?" Solo frowned.

Luke handed the small device to his bondsman. "By removing this."

Solo fingered the small device stained with his own blood. "My mind's clear, right?" He implored, motioning the young Jedi to a seat next to him on the narrow bunk. "And you haven't let Solante anywhere near me with any more of his training concoctions, right?"

Luke grinned. "No, I swear, whatever's going through your mind is all yours."

"Okay. Suspiciously, Solo glanced at the grinning youth. "I think. Anyway, humor me, *was* the Falcon bugged?"

"No."

"Luke, don't do this to me." Solo implored.

"Okay, I'm sorry." Luke gave in, smiling at the impatience in the Corellian. "The Falcon wasn't bugged, you were."

"Me?!"

"I suspected they had bugged us because of the lack of damage we had sustained and the distances they were allowing us, giving us plenty of room to

jump. I couldn't chance leading them here and we needed time to find the bug. So we picked a spot and jumped..."

"To?" Solo pressed impatiently.

"A place well away from either of our bases, yet not so far that a reasonable jump couldn't bring us back to Kalyynn should you have required medical attention Solante couldn't provide; a place called Passover. Chewie said you had mentioned it a time or two," Luke paused, missing the roguish smile that had broadened on the Corellian's face.

Erecting a gentle block to the link between them, Han Solo hurriedly stifled the wanton passions that had arisen unheralded with the thoughts of a beautiful Felarian telepath; Thoughts, memories, and undeniable desires that overwhelmed him at the mere mention of her home world. Luke was watching him closely.

"Are you going to tell me?"

Solo visibly stiffened. "Tell you...what?" A look of roguish innocence crossed the Corellian's handsome features.

"Who it was that saved your life...and probably mine as well."

"Who'd she say she was?" Solo fenced cautiously.

"A friend."

"Well, there you have it. I'd say we were pretty lucky."

"Yes, very." Luke agreed. A flash of mischief touched his pale, blue eyes. "Beloved."

The lopsided smile flashed and Solo chuckled softly, but made no comment.

"Come on, Han," Luke pleaded. "Please, tell me."

Solo's hazel eyes twinkled and his smile broadened. "Maybe. Someday." He teased. "When you're old enough."

"Old enough?" Luke chuckled, knowing he would get no more from his bondsman. Unwillingly, he gave in to Solo's wishes. "Okay, you win. Beloved. But one day I'm going to hold you to that promise."

"Deal. Now will you finish telling me what happened," Solo pressed. "You're driving me crazy!"

"Chewie and I were holding off the Imperials, while Solante was looking for the implant..."

"Yeah." Solo interrupted. "I remember him finding it. It almost killed me!"

Luke nodded. "We didn't know it at the time, but when he touched the implant, he activated a program designed to increase the pain to killing levels."

Understanding touched the Corellian's features. "I get it. If the damned thing were found the jig was up and, if the jig was up, they didn't need me." The room filled with hot Corellian execrations.

"That's our guess," Luke agreed. "Vader must have realized that if the implant was found, they would lose not only you, but their chances at me, along with whatever information we carried. But Vader had another trick up his sleeve, one more card to play."

Solo nodded, already putting the missing pieces in place. "He programmed the damned thing as a tracer."

"Yes." Luke verified. "We had completed reversion and the Imperials were right behind us when, with your friend's help, Solante was able to extract the implant. Realized it was giving off a signal, he deactivated it. It was close, but Chewie was able to evade them long enough to program and jump for base. You know the rest."

Solo's eyes sparkled with a barely controlled anger. "Dead or alive, Vader knew you would take me back to base."

"And the devise would have led Vader to Kalyyyn. After all these years, the Blue Falcons might have at last fallen to the Empire."

Solo shifted uncomfortably on the narrow bed, his hand unconsciously fingering the small bandage behind his right ear. "That's the second time Vader's bugged me or mine, he's getting too damned good at it."

Luke grinned. "But also the second time he's failed to get what he wanted. When you think about it, most of his failures have been because of Doctor Solante. We owe him a lot." Luke met the restless gaze of the uneasy Corellian.

"Yeah, okay, I'll thank him, but it ain't gonna be easy." Solo admitted begrudgingly. "I *should* knock his block off for letting you come after me in the first place." The anger died in the expressive hazel eyes of the Corellian. "And, you shouldn't have come." It was a softly voiced statement filled with the concern and caring of a tightly forged friendship.

"I *had* to come." Luke answered simply. "Vader knew that." He reached for the arm of the Corellian, grasping it as he had during the ceremony of Sealing. Solo completed the bonding and their grips tightened, their eyes meeting in total attunement.

A look of puzzlement drifted across the Corellian's face. "There's still one thing that bothers me. During the interrogations, Vader kept pressing for the name of the Jedi Master. Why would he think I'm bonded to someone like Kenobi?"

"The history behind the Order and its bonded Jedi would lead one in that direction, wouldn't it?" Luke hedged.

"Maybe, but there are no more Masters."

"We can't be sure of that, Han." Luke cautioned. "And neither can Vader. Obi-Won was missed in the purge and, because of that, I don't think Vader can take the chance of there being others. He's playing the cards he has and, while he's lost a couple of games, he's been getting some pretty good hands."

The Corellian's lips pulled into a lopsided smile; his hazel eyes alight with angry promise. "Yeah, and one of these days he's gonna call the we're gonna beat him."

"What?" Luke frowned.

Wearily, the Corellian closed his eyes, his hand still locked around the arm of the young Jedi. "Someday," he finished softly. "Vader is in for a big surprise." Solo slowly relaxed and his grip on Luke's arm slowly eased.

Gently, the young Jedi pulled away from his bondsman and stood. The Corellian's chest rose and fell in gentle slumber as Luke turned and quietly let himself out.

Drowsy from his ordeal and too much talk, Han Solo drifted on the outer fringes of sleep, his thoughts dwelling on the young Jedi. Luke was becoming a man, learning and maturing in the ways of the mysterious power within him, enhanced and tempered by the gentle goodness within the youth himself. Luke Skywalker was the Joker in the game, a powerful hold card, and all he needed was time. Time, he, Han Solo, would continue buying for the young Jedi for as long as he could. With the natural inbred instincts of a gambler, he would know how long to hold the wild card and when to play it.

He sighed, giving in willingly to the heavy pull of slumber; his last conscious thought was a promise...to himself. The first hand had been dealt...but the game was far from over...together, he and his bondsman, held the winning hand and one day...soon...they would play the Joker.

***THE END***

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