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The Lesson
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"No."

"Come on, Han. It'll fit." Luke Skywalker drew a deep breath as the irritated Corellian turned his back to him and the heavy crated machinery that stood patiently before the Falcon's loading ramp.

"I know it'll fit!" Solo whirled to face the Tatooine native, his handsome features masked with determined stubbornness.
"Her Royalness knew it would fit. I'll bet she's got the Falcon's holds measured down to the last centimeter."

"Then what's the problem?"

His short Corellian temper rising at the younger man's obvious innocence, Han swore softly. "Luke, it's not the room!" He waved his arm over the crates. "It's the weight! If we fill the Falcon's holds with all this stuff she'll be 'bout as maneuverable as a garbage scow. And, if we run into any imperials, which has become a habit of ours, we'll be as good as dead!"

A look of helpless frustration crossed Luke's youthful countenance. He groaned. "I didn't think of that."

"Neither did Her Royalness."

"What are we gonna do? we can't just leave half of it sitting here."

A silence fell between the two men as they studied the heavy crates with growing exasperation. They had been loading the equipment for several hours and the mound seemed as massive as before they had started. Within the hold of the small Corellian freighter, they could hear crates being nudged into place and secured for the trip by a Wookiee who had made it known only moments before that the weight allowance was fast approaching the safety factor.

"If we left any, it wouldn't be here when we got back," Luke commented softly.

"You got it right," Han agreed. "This is a backwater world, full of the scum of the galaxy; not even the Imperials are interested in her. Which is why Leia picked Regal II for this drop, remember?"

"At your suggestion," Luke reminded the Corellian, but his words held no blame as he met the hazel-eyed gaze of his tall friend.

"That's right! But I didn't tell her to do this to me!"

"Han, don't blame her. I wouldn't have thought of the weight--"

"No, you wouldn't have," Solo agreed strongly, "But she should have. This is supposed to be her job. I'm just hired to pickup and deliver. And, I like doing it in one piece!"

"What are we gonna do?" Luke asked again, the unease growing as he read the stubborn anger in Solo's expression.

"Well now, kid, I'll tell you what I'm gonna do." Han stripped off his heavy work gloves and handed them to the surprised boy. "I'm going to the first cantina I can find and get a couple of drinks and give this problem all the serious consideration it deserves, which I figure should keep me occupied for several hours."

"What about this? You can't just walk away and--"

"Kid, you're the brains. You work it out."

"But Chewie--"

"Don't worry; he won't let you go over the weight allowance."

"I'll bet," Luke mumbled under his breath, wondering if the Wookiee would get nasty if he attempted to over-load the Falcon, or merely block his access to the ship.

The young Jedi watched helplessly as the tall, arrogant spacer stalked away from the bay and the monumental problem that faced them, his back stiff with an anger Luke was sure centered about the small Alderaani senator who was, by now, awaiting their arrival with her usual impatience. He shook his head slowly once more, he was in the middle without any clear remembrance of how he had gotten there. He could always see both sides of the argument and that was a hard line to hold when he cared for both people involved as much as he did.

In frustration, Luke kicked at the crate before him, but pulled his blow at the last moment, his good sense telling him it would not yield to his anger. Han would be back. It was something he neither questioned or refuted. But the Corellian's leaving solved nothing. The problem would still be here when he returned. Luke knew they would once again go through all the arguments they had just finished. All he could do was hope that Solo's Corellian resourcefulness would turn up a solution.

Han Solo drew a deep breath and slid gratefully into the form fitting seat of the spaceport drinking establishment. He had been here before, though not for some time, and was both comfortable and at ease in its dark surroundings. The only illumination within the cantina came from the circular bar top in the center of the oblong room, leaving the booths and most of the bar's many tables in almost total darkness. It was the kind of environment he liked when forced to drink alone in the outlawed worlds of the galaxy. It suited his temperament especially well at the present--he was a very irritated Corellian.

On the loading ramp of his docking bay stood a very valuable load of highly sophisticated equipment destined for the rebel base several days' journey even by hyperspace standards, if they could achieve enough speed to make the jump with the load he had already allowed into the Falcon's holds. It was going to be touch and go; he could allow no more aboard, nor could he leave it.

He swore softly and poured himself another drink from the half empty bottle before him. He bit contemplatively at the inside of his cheek as he studied the amber liquid in his glass. He was tired from the long trip, a hard day's loading, and damned tired of finding himself constantly at odds with a beautiful, hot-headed slip of a girl who was continually getting under his skin and irritating his Corellian nature. He found his temper rising again and took another healthy swig from the glass.

His attention riveted to his problems, his drink and the beautiful young senator, which he was at the moment mentally turning over his knee, he was unaware of two men who watched him from an adjoining booth. Neither was he aware when they glanced again at him before sliding from their seats and left quietly by the back door.

"What do you make of it, Fallon?"

Fallon Daggs halted as the cantina doors whooshed closed behind his Regalian co-pilot, Nontan, leaving the two of them in the familiar comfort of a totally darkened night.

"He's into something big."

"You're guessing."

"How long's it been since you've seen him at Eisley?"

"Some time ... " the Regalian admitted hesitantly. "But that's not unusual. He's never been a creature of habit. None of us can be and live for long in the line of work."

"I saw Jabba the last time we were in Eisley. He asked if we'd seen Solo. I hadn't then--"

"The Hutt was inquiring?" Nontan commented in surprise. "You didn't tell me that!"

"He was looking for someone who could match Solo's time on a Kessel run for a load of spice. Knowing the time the Corellian holds, I didn't bother to inquire about the contract. I guess it just slipped my mind."

"He couldn't find him?" Disbelief pulled the Regalian's attention back to the cantina.

"No." Daggs speculated thoughtfully, "He hadn't been seen at any of the old places--the outlaw bays, back-water runs, not even Mala, where he used to stop in occasionally to see that gal that ran the bay there."

"It's like the guy drops out of nowhere," Nontan agreed. "We've seen him--what? Three, four times in the last few months? He's always loaded or making contact, never looking for work like in the old days."

"I talked with Feebus last stop over in Eisley. Solo's made no contracts with any of the outlaw trade in several months. Jabba's upset. Solo has

always been one of his top smugglers. He's losing money--and ships. Not every man cares to tackle the loads Solo would take."

"He was always hurting enough financially to take a contract when the Hutt needed him," Nontan answered thoughtfully.

"Yeah," Fallon mumbled. "Every credit that quick-shooting Corellian can get his hands on goes into that freighter of his. It's always worked to the Hutt's advantage--Solo's aggressive recklessness in the smuggling lanes and his obvious liking for the dangerous loads. His ship was always in need of repair and Solo was always short of ready cash. Jabba got to counting on him for that Kessel run." Daggs glanced back toward the cantina with mounting curiosity. "Now we go for months before he turns up somewhere. He's made no move to contact any of the outlaw trade, frequents few of his old haunts, and he's always heeled and the freighter never grounded for repairs."

"Yeah, that ship of his looks like a garbage barge and performs like an Imperial interceptor," Nontan commented dryly. "And, I'd be willing to bet she's rigged with some of the finest equipment that can be obtained legally or otherwise."

"How do you figure that?"

"Because of the freight she's been hauling," the Regalian reminded his partner. "You saw that load she's picking up here. Even crated, you can see that's computer equipment and major installation apparatus. Any two pieces of that load could buy a ship like ours. That spells credits--and lots of it."

Fallon grunted then glanced quickly about the darkened streets. "He's into something big and, if Solo's in, you can be damned sure it's illegal."

The Regalian shrugged disinterested shoulders. "That applies to all of us."

"But there are degrees. The Empire has a warrant out for Solo's head. I've seen it."

"There's warrants out on most of us. The only difference is they know his name and face." A smile pulled at the being's wide mouth. "That's fine with me. Keeps the heat off us."

"There's something here I don't like." Fallon frowned as he touched the ugly scar that had almost taken the sight of his left eye. "Something's so obvious we're overlooking it."

Nontan smiled unpleasantly. "I say we ask him."

An amused chuckle escaped Fallon's humorless expression. "The last time I got overly curious about Solo I almost lost an eye, remember?" "Sure. I also remember he had a blaster on his hip and a Wookiee at his side. Tonight--"

"He's only got the blaster," Fallon finished for him. "Which makes him a very dangerous man. I've seen him use that gun of his. There's few men who can match him with it."

"In a stand up fight, you're right," the Regalian admitted. "But who says we're gonna give him a fair chance to fry us? It's not much of a life, but I enjoy living it."

A silence fell over the darkened alley as both men pondered their building thoughts formulating into a workable plan.

"What about the Wookiee?" Fallon voiced thoughtfully.

"Once we've got Solo, he'll be no trouble. He won't do anything that might endanger the Corellian's life."

"We control Solo, we control the Wookiee."

"Exactly. And, there are two of us."

"It may not come to anything like that," Fallon speculated hopefully. "He may tell us willingly and cut us in. After all, he's getting loads he can barely handle. He may welcome help."

"You believe that and we can forget this right now," Nontan warned. "He's Corellian. Have you known one of them to cooperate where a load's concerned?"

"No," Fallon admitted reluctantly. "I haven't."

"Then don't get optimistic now--or careless--or we'll both end up dead."

"How about sharing some of that. Gees, I'm tired."

Solo slid the bottle towards the blonde Jedi as Luke Skywalker stretched out in the comfort of the booth. He set down the empty glass he had brought with him from the bar and filled it from the bottle.

"You didn't leave that load alone, did you?" Han asked as his hazel eyes met the younger man's blue ones.

"No. Chewie's taking care of the final arrangements."

An amused look touched the Corellian's gaze as he slid back, his shoulders resting easily against the booth. He studied Luke closely. "It would seem you've worked out our problems."

A pleasant but noticeably weary smile pulled at Skywalker's lips. He took a sip from the glass, made a face, then pushed the beverage away. "Sure. I just asked myself what a certain, uninhibited, very distrustful, overly suspicious Corellian smuggler would do if faced with the same problem. I arrived at the foregone conclusion that there was an answer to it." Luke shrugged his shoulders. "I've started things rolling with Chewie's blessings. I came to make sure we were thinking along the same lines."

The lopsided smile pulled at Solo's lips as he gazed at the young rebel. "okay, let's see how much you've learned shipping with me."

"No Corellian smuggler would leave part of a load at an empty docking bay, so the first thing I did was have it stored. Chewie's doing that now." Luke paused as Solo took another drink and nodded his approval. "I also remembered what you said about this place, which means someone has to stay with the load--no problems--there are three of us."

"Kid, I take it all back. You have all the makings of a first rate smuggler. You can ship out with me any time."

Luke's smile broadened at Solo's compliment. "Chewie's about ready for liftoff. I figure the sooner you can leave the sooner you can get back for me."

Solo sat up, his hazel eyes hardening noticeably at the Jedi's softly spoken words. "Now, who's decided that?"

"What?" Luke's blue eyes widened in puzzlement.

"That you would be staying?"

Luke shrugged. "I'm the logical choice."

"You're wrong."

"You're going to have to explain that."

Solo leaned forward, his elbows on the table. He locked glances with the Tatooine native. "Men have walked out of this place in broad daylight and never been seen again. Ships have landed here with one crew and lifted off with another. I've seen bodies stepped over in the streets, ignored as if they were of no concern to anyone--and here they're not!" Han swore under his breath at the rebel's innocence. "You're not staying here alone."

"If it's that bad, neither are you," Luke commented softly.

"I can take care of myself," Han snapped.

"Still no problem," Luke voiced confidently. "Chewie's rechecked the Falcon's weight allowance against what's already loaded. She's under the safety factor; she'll make hyper. We fed the ratios into the navicomputer and the trip back will take three standard days. Chewie assures me there's no problem that he couldn't handle--I agree with him."

"What you're saying," Solo accused hotly, "is that Chewie can handle a two-man freighter, over-loaded, in a three-day hyperspace trip better than I can handle a week's stay on this backwater hell hole alone."

"Yes," Luke agreed honestly.

"Ah, kid, and I thought you knew me--"

"I do." Luke grinned sheepishly. "That's why I'm staying if you stay."

Solo groaned helplessly as he studied the determination in the Jedi's youthful countenance. "I'm not going to be able to talk you out of this, am I?"

"NO." Luke's smile broadened at the spacer's exasperation.

"One of us should be with Chewie. That's a hell of a trip."

"We've completely checked all systems. The Falcon's in top condition. He's set the coordinates to cut into normal space just outside the base and we sent A.T. by scrambler which has been received and confirmed.

Everything's been taken care of." Luke's blue eyes sparkled at Solo's unease. "Give in, Han. Look at this as a well-earned vacation."

"In the garden spot of the galaxy," Solo finished sarcastically. He drew a deep breath and gave in. "Okay, we'll do it your way. You get back and tell Chewie to get clearance and get the hell out of here. The sooner he's off, the sooner he can get back for us." Solo grumbled in ill temper. "Check that storage and get a computer voice lock on it. I'll meet you there as soon as I settle up here."

"Right." Luke got to his feet.

Han's hand reached out and stopped him. "It's dark out there. Stay out of alleys--"

"I'll be careful." Luke frowned at Solo's obvious unease. "You've taught me what to do and what to watch for."

Solo's hand dropped from the Jedi's arm in way of apology. "Yeah, I have. But I just didn't want you getting careless," he mumbled.

"I'll see you at the bay in a few minutes."

Han Solo nodded absently, toying with his empty glass as he watched the youth leave the darkened establishment. The familiar smile pulled again at the Corellian's mouth. The kid was right. He had learned a lot. But not all of what he was becoming had been any of Solo's teachings. There was a lot to the boy he had learned not to question. It was a combination of these qualities that was making Luke Skywalker into a man the Corellian was pleased to have at his side. Yes, he grudgingly admitted, the kid did think a lot like he did. And he was damned glad the kid had chosen to stay with him. It could prove to be a very interesting week.

Solo accepted his change, pocketed it and pushed his way cautiously through the crowded establishment. Those beings who recognized him were quick to remove themselves from his path, drifting into the deeper shadows as they pointedly avoided his sight and the reach of the deadly blaster that rode his narrow hips.

Han pushed the door-open control and exited the grimy cantina. Outside he paused, allowing his eyes to adjust to the minor changes of illumination between the dimly lighted bar and the complete darkness of the moonless planet.

His hand shifted until his fingers lightly brushed the butt of the holstered weapon. It was an old habit. Darkness was a protection to his kind, but it could also be a danger. He accepted both probabilities as routine to a man of his profession then forgot it. He was not a careless man. Reckless and foolhardy had been attached to his name, but no man called him careless, and he was no fool. Young Corellians who got careless did not live to become old Corellians. Solo already had his future planned and it didn't include an early grave on Regal II.

He drew a deep breath of the night air, trying to ignore the smells of the lifeforms' excretions which polluted the atmosphere about the inhabited areas, tainting it until one grew accustomed to it, ignored it, or accepted the discomfort of a breath filter. His thoughts drifted toward the world's poor excuse of a spaceport and the young Jedi who would be awaiting his return.

He bent his pathway towards the freighter's docking bay, shaking his head in disbelief. He was actually looking forward to spending the week away from the base with the youthful Tatooine Jedi.

He turned the side of a small oblong building, then hesitated. Ahead of him, he thought he had seen movement. His hand unconsciously released the strap from the blaster as his hazel eyes searched for a darker form in the blackness against the buildings before him. His body rigid with suspicion, he moved cautiously forward, his hand steady on the holstered weapon.

The darkness about him seemed undisturbed, the sounds both familiar and alien, but belonging to the surroundings in which he found himself. Still he refused to relax, his Corellian senses screaming a warning he could not ignore. They had saved his life too many times. It came. His sensitive hearing caught the small scraping of a boot on gravel behind him. He dropped into a gunman's crouch and spun. The blaster was in his hand before he had completed the turn, his draw fast, smooth but already too late. He had been set up. A hard, cold muzzle bore into the area between his shoulder blades and he stiffened.

"Drop it, Solo, real slow, real easy. Any sudden moves and I'm going to take them as hostile. This blaster's on kill and, at this range, I couldn't miss. I think even a Corellian would have to admit you ain't got a chance."

Han's hand tightened on his blaster, his Corellian temper hot with longings of mayhem. His good sense prevailed and he dropped the blaster as he realized the futility of his situation. He knew somewhere unseen in

the darkness ahead of him, there was another armed being. They had him in a crossfire and totally at their advantage. He relaxed as he gave in the unavoidable. "Fallon, is that you?"

"Good guess, Corellian. You can turn around, but I want your hands up shoulder level where I can see them before you move. Good."

Solo raised his hands until they complied with instructions before he cautiously turned to face the man who held the blaster on him. "You tired of living, Daggs?"

"Uh-uh, Solo. That's why I've got the blaster."

"And Nontan's got another one on my back," Solo finished as he heard the scraping noise behind him. "You'd better learn to walk a little softer, Regalian, if you plan on making a habit of this ambushing business. I almost fried you a moment ago."

Nontan grunted as he watched the seemingly helpless being before his weapon. He stooped to retrieve the dropped blaster and the Corellian stiffened.

"Stand real still, Solo. I mean it," Daggs warned softly. "I'll fry you if you make a wrong move."

Solo relaxed, his hardened gaze reading the sincerity of the man's words in the bate-filled eyes behind the leveled blaster. "What's all this about, Daggs? You and I settled our differences a long time back. In fact, I thought we had arrived at a mutual agreement, you stay out of my way and my business, and I'd let you continue living."

Fallon Daggs stiffened under Solo's sharp words. "You're so damned arrogant, Corellian. I have half a mind to--"

"Fallon, later--" Nontan warned. "Let's get into that deserted storage bunker before we continue this discussion."

The Regalian tucked Solo's blaster into his belt, reached to the side of his weapon's belt, secured a set of binders then holstered his own weapon. He reached up and snapped one onto Solo's right wrist and jerked it roughly behind the Corellian's back before doing the same with the tall smuggler's left.

Han stiffened but made no move to object as Daggs's blaster moved threateningly close to his breastbone.

"Straight ahead, Solo, to that prefab at the corner, take a left and push the door inward."

Han Solo, jawline set with an anger he was helpless to voice, followed the directions. A moment later, the door closed behind him and the two men, a light flared and he got his first good look at the deserted building. It did nothing to revive his faltering hopes that this had all been some kind of a rough joke.

"Okay, Daggs, what's this all about? You and I haven't crossed paths since our little agreement some years back."

"That's a little of what we're gonna talk about, Corellian. Where have you been since we saw you at Eisley after that last Kessel run you made for the Hutt just before the Imperial base was fully activated on Tatooine?"

"I'm a smuggler," Solo spat contemptuously, his hazel eyes afire with barely contained anger. "I've been smuggling. And trying to keep alive and out of imperial gun sights." It was an honest reply and Solo found no reason to expound further.

"Where have you been between runs?" Nontan asked quietly, his small blue eyes leveled carefully on the bound Corellian. "You haven't been seen at any of the outlaw techs in months."

"It's a big galaxy," Solo hissed, as he attempted to keep his temper in check. "And the blasted Imperials are everywhere. A guy has to keep moving to stay alive--and well."

"Who are you hauling for, Solo?" Fallon asked as the blaster again prodded the tall spacer's chest.

"No one you know, Fallon. And back off with that blaster before I make you eat it." Solo's words were softly voiced but the coldness in them was not to be taken lightly. Fallon backed off.

"We saw that load you're set to lift off with. It's worth a fortune--more than an average haul."

Solo silently swore at a certain Alderaani senator again as he realized the danger in which she had inadvertently placed him with the size and value of the load he had contracted to deliver.

"It spells a wealthy contractor, Solo; we want in on it, that's all. I would say, from watching your loading operations this afternoon, that you can use some help." The blaster advanced again, but stopped short of

touching the Corellian as Solo tilted his head in warning, his hazel eyes hooded with a deadly light. "Who are you contracted to?"

"You wouldn't have the guts to haul for the people I work for, Fallon." Daggs swore. The blaster shifted slightly with his anger then, without warning, smashed across the side of the Corellian's face, the weapon's sight ruthlessly digging into the spacer's cheek and drawing blood. The blow sent Solo reeling backwards. His hands bound helplessly behind him, he fell.

"Damn it, Solo," Daggs hissed through tightly-clenched teeth as he watched the bloodied smuggler struggle to his knees. "Who are you contracted to?"

Ban shook the cobwebs from his senses, his cheek and jaw numb from the blow. The bloodied lips moved into a lopsided smile as he met Daggs's anger. "You wouldn't want to know, believe me," he whispered, his eyes dark with a fury that sparkled with an almost maddening light.

Fallon shifted the blaster nervously as he recognized the danger he faced in the bound man. Han Solo was a dangerous man. He wet suddenly dry lips and turned to his co-pilot. "He ain't gonna tell us nothing."

"You really didn't expect him to--willingly, did you?" the Regalian commented softly, his eyes hard on the kneeling Corellian. "You're a stubborn man, Solo, like most of your race. You could cooperate, tell us what we want to know and let us share in that load you over-contracted for. We could all leave here wealthy and, in your case, alive."

He moved forward until he faced the bound man. "or, we can hijack that load and hock it. We know what's in those crates; it's worth a fortune anywhere on fifty worlds I could name without having to stop to draw breath"

Solo chuckled mirthlessly. "A couple of real losers, Nontan. Neither one of you could get past my co-pilot on his day off. With a ship and an expensive load to protect, you wouldn't have a chance of getting your hands on that load."

"Come on, Solo, you must take us for fools. We know what you mean to that walking fur coat. We've seen him save your hide too many times. if he's faced with losing you or that load, we both know the choice he would make, don't we?"

"You have everything worked out, don't you?" Solo ran his tongue along the edges of his mouth, sucking at the salty wetness of his own blood.

"It'll work, Solo, and you know it. So quit stalling and make it easy on yourself."

A calculating light flickered in the hazel depths of the Corellian's eyes as temptation bit hard. He really shouldn't do it, he told himself, as his tongue again encountered the blood at the corner of his mouth. He already knew he would give in to the temptation. His only doubts were the amount of pain he would have to endure to attract the attention of the Force-conscious Jedi.

"Come on, Solo, what's it going to be?"

"You boys are a little too late to be talking hi-jacking. The Falcon lifted off at 0200, her holds full."

Fallon swore hotly as he reached out and savagely swung at the helplessly bound man. The blaster contacted solidly. Solo, making no attempt to avoid the expected move, once again fell. This time he remained still.

"Fallon, back off, damn it!" Nontan pushed himself between the angry spacer and the prone man at his feet. "He could be bluffing!"

"Bluffing! Nontan, you're a fool if you believe that! Corellians don't bluff worth a damn. He wasn't joking; he meant it. He strung us along just long enough to let that ship get off. We were that close. We could have had it all. Now we have nothing!" He advanced on the unconscious man. "I'll kill him with my bare hands for that."

"No." Nontan stopped him. "We lost part, maybe all, of that load. That's a rotten break, I agree, but that wasn't part of our plans anyway. Where that load is headed, there'll be demands for others. We've still got him and he's still got the information we want. Sooner or later, the Wookiee'll be back for him. Patience, Fallon. Our cards are good ones. We'll stand pat and play them."

Luke watched the silver hulled freighter lift gracefully above the small world, cut in her main thrusters and leave the heavy influence of Regal II's atmosphere. She became a bead of light, then flashed out as Chewbacca took her hyper.

Skywalker turned and glanced about the empty bay, drew a deep breath and walked to the antigrav loader and sat down. He stretched weary legs, crossed his arms over his chest and gazed contentedly at the star field above the

quiet, darkened bay as he luxuriated in the stillness. He yawned, leaned his head back, increasing his vision of the night sky, absently attempting to pick out the star systems through which the Falcon would be racing. Chewie had not wanted to leave them behind but had given in to the impossibility of their situation. While he had not wanted either of them to stay, Luke knew he had been somewhat placated with his offer to remain close to the hot-headed Corellian.

They had both been surprised when Solo had not joined them prior to lift-off. Luke had reassured the shaggy co-pilot that Solo had no doubt been detained because of the crowded conditions of the bar and had probably had difficulty finding anyone to settle up with in the short time he had been given. He had hurried Chewie on his way with earnest promises to watch over the arrogant Corellian until he returned for them.

The humor of the situation pulled the young Jedi's lips into a weary grin. He was going to keep Han Solo out of trouble for what amounted to a week. He sighed. It made him tired just thinking of the possibilities of trouble Solo could find to get into an the outlawed world. He relished the stillness. He would rest while he could. He had an inbred feeling growing that he would need it. It was going to be along eventful week.

Solo suppressed a desire to groan as he attempted to settle his reeling senses into some kind of order, his head splitting with a pain he was sure would increase when he opened his eyes. He had not been unconscious long, he was sure, and he had little difficulty remembering his particular problems prior to the nap he had been forced to take.

His Corellian temper had hit its peak and now begged for revenge. He slowly correlated his thoughts as he eagerly focused his attention around the discomfort of his bruised cheek, split lips and excruciating headache. They thought the Wookiee had been a problem, he thought gleefully. Wait until they faced the righteous indignity of a half-grown Jedi Knight.

He moaned aloud as if recovering from the first drags of awakening pain.

"All right, Solo, snap out of it. We have some questions and you have the answers."

Luke sat upright, his hand drifting subconsciously to the innocent-seeming tube snapped to the left side of his utility belt.

He blinked the dregs of sleep from his eyes as he shivered from something he could not immediately identify.

The evening was comfortable. It had not been a personal discomfort that had awakened him. Luke glanced at his chronometer-- it was 0330 --then swiftly looked about the deserted bay. He was still very much alone.

He frowned. He had received waves of pain, anger and helplessness. Solo wasn't here because he had been forcibly detained. There were several possibilities that occurred to him. Regardless of the reason, Luke was aware of one interesting bit of information. Han Solo was in trouble. And it had happened before the Falcon had managed to hit hyperspace. He sighed wearily. Chewie had been right. It was going to be a long week.

Solo closed his eyes as he forced himself to wait, reminding himself of the sweetness of his revenge if he played the two men carefully.

"Solo, believe me, we can keep this up much longer than you can endure it."

Han drew a deep breath and winced involuntarily. He had taken several painful body blows which he had managed to roll into enough to lessen their total effectiveness, but he was still painfully aware of the truth of Fallon's words. His lips were swollen, his cheek smarting under the blow he had taken from the blaster and he hardened his reserves.

"I'm doing--this--for your--own--good," he stammered weakly, fawning a pain within him that was not there. "You don't want--anything--to do with--"

"Let us be the judge of that--"

There was a mild hiss and Solo stiffened as he attempted to hide his acknowledged recognition at the sound of the activated laser knife. He had played them about as long as he dared. He had no intention of allowing them to start carving in earnest on his Corellian hide.

"Okay, okay--no more--" he whined, allowing fear to touch his glance as he focused on the gleaming blade in Nontan's hand. "No load's--worth--dying for--"

"I knew we would reach that good Corellian sense of self-preservation if we persisted."

The knife moved closer. Hazel eyes narrowed but the Corellian forced himself to cringe away from the weapon.

"Who is your contact?"

"The boy."

Fallon Daggs glanced at his partner and both men's faces registered their total disbelief.

"Don't hurt the kid--"

"That kid at the docking bay this morning? What's he got to do with this?"

"He has half the load stored under his voice control--he's just a kid--that the load--but don't hurt him--"

"Who are you working for?"

"I don't know. I get all--my orders--from the boy. He knows. But he's just a kid--don't hurt him."

'Fallon, stay with Solo.' The Regalian turned from the bound man. "I think you can handle him now." He spat contemptuously at the seemingly broken Corellian. "I'm going after that kid."

Han Solo allowed his head to fall forward as if unable to withstand the weakness of his injuries; in fact, he fought to mask the smile that had pulled at the corner of his mouth.

Luke Skywalker dismounted from the hauler and glanced expectantly about the empty bay. He smiled as the essence of the foolhardy Corellian touched his sensitive controls. He would be ready, he promised Solo.

He moved until he blended into the heavy darkness of the bay and the bulk of the hauler, his eyes centered on the bay's entrance.

A maturity beyond his years touched the boy's features, resculpting them into a mask which reflected the power that ebbed and flowed within him. Soundlessly, the metal tube appeared, grasped in a double-handed hold at waist level. At ease, ready, he waited.

Fallon Daggs was an overly confident man as he studied the battered Corellian before him. Absent-mindedly, he traced the path of the ugly scar below his eye, his expression hardening as he feasted angry, resentful

eyes on the bound man. "I've waited a long time for this, Solo. I'm going to accomplish a great deal tonight, taking a load from the almighty Han Solo. I haven't decided yet, but we might just wait around until that co-pilot of yours returns. I'd enjoy blasting him down when he steps off that freighter." A look of envy touched the smuggler's eyes. "The freighter. Why the hell not? I've taken your load, might as well take your ship. After what we've done tonight, we both know we can't just turn you loose. You and that Wookiee are too damned dangerous."

Solo remained wisely silent as he attempted to fawn weakness and faltering consciousness. Daggs moved arrogantly forward, confident in his control of the situation. It proved to be his first mistake.

A booted toe contacted with the startled man's right wrist. There was a sharp snap as the bone gave under the solid blow and the blaster flew from Fallon's powerless grip. He screamed his pain and surprise.

Fallon's second mistake quickly followed the first--he allowed Solo to gain his feet. The Corellian lunged at the startled man, lowered his head and rammed the man hard. Daggs crumbled under the viciousness of Solo's attack.

His third mistake was attempting to get up while the infuriated Corellian stood over him. A hard boot contacted smartly with the side of his head; he quivered and lay still.

Solo drew a deep breath as he forced his mind away from further mayhem. He yanked at the binders which held his hands behind his back. It was an action of frustration. He knew they would hold; they didn't disappoint him.

He forced his hands as far apart as the binder chain would allow. He estimated he had about 6-8 inches of chain. He grunted happily. He had a chance. With maneuvers that would have done justice to a contortionist, he worked his hands downward until he could step backward and over the chain; his hands were now shackled in front of him.

He moved to the dropped blaster, checked the setting and expertly angled it toward the chain farthest from his right wrist, forcing his left out of range. Awkwardly, he pulled the trigger. An energy bolt parted the chain, burning his left wrist as it dropped from him. He grunted in pain. Holstering the blaster, he rubbed at the injured wrist, his eyes hard on the unconscious figure at his feet. "He didn't want much, damn him!" he swore hotly. "Just my load, ship and co-pilot. Daggs, you're one damned greedy man. Too bad you ain't getting the lesson in benevolence your

partner is about to. I would have loved to have seen you go up against the kid."

Nontan moved cautiously into the empty bay, his smuggling senses alive to a danger his other senses were as yet unaware of. He glanced warily about him. He froze abruptly, transfixed at the sight that had suddenly appeared before him.

It was the boy. He stood, his legs shoulder-width apart, his hands locked about the hilt of a strange weapon, its glowing blade hissing with a meter of energy-charged death.

Nontan raised his blaster until he covered the slight figure who remained unmoved before him, his eyes strangely blank in the radiant glow of the sword. The Regalian wet suddenly dry lips as he estimated the boy's reach with the deadly weapon. "Put it down, kid, before I fry you."

The boy remained as before, the blue-white blade glowing with a seemingly intensified brilliance at the smuggler's warning.

"I ain't dumb enough to get within reach of that thing. If you want to live to see your next birthday, put it down!"

The youth made no move to comply with the Regalian's orders, nor did he give any indication that he had heard the being's words.

Nontan swore uneasily, the darkness and the boy's strange attitude pulling his finger taunt on the trigger of the blaster in his tight-fisted grip. The boy had the information they needed; he must not be killed. The Regalian flipped the weapon's toggle to heavy stun. "You asked for it, kid." He leveled the blaster at the youth and squeezed off his shot.

The energy bolt sped towards the boy, was met, engaged and parried by the blue-white blade of his strange weapon. Nontan fired again and still again as he backed steadily away from the advancing youth who strolled leisurely toward him, expertly deflecting each shot.

His nerve broke. Nontan dropped the blaster, turned and ran towards the bay's exit. He slid to a stop as the dark, familiar form of Han Solo moved out of the darkness, a leveled blaster in his fist. "On behalf of the Rebel Alliance, Nontan, I commandeer you and your ship for a one-way trip to the bright side of the galaxy. Welcome aboard."

Solo settled himself happily behind the yoke of the strange smuggling vessel as he snapped the co-ordinates of the rebel base into the navicomputer and took them expertly into hyperspace. "How're our passengers doing?" he asked Luke as the young Jedi dropped into the co-pilot's seat beside him.

"A little uncomfortable, a bit uneasy and a whole lot worried," Luke chuckled good-naturedly. "I don't think they're overly eager to join our cause."

Solo snorted. "Fine. I'm sure the Alliance can continue to struggle along without them, too."

"That worked out beautifully." Luke glanced at the handsome, if somewhat battered features of his Corellian friend. "Tell me again how you coerced them into this?"

"Not much to tell. They just wanted in the action." Solo shrugged wide shoulders. "I'm a generous man. I figured they deserve a taste of the easy life you and I lead." The lopsided smile appeared again on the Corellian's swollen lips. "If I had a couple of Alliance uniforms, and knew where Vader was, I would be sorely tempted to drop them off for a tour of duty in one of the Dark Lord's detention cells."

Luke laughed. "I don't think that'll be necessary. They've had all they want of you and your line of endeavors. Fallon admitted you were out of their league." Luke glanced at Solo, his growing attunement to the Corellian easy between them. "He said whatever you've got, he figures you paid the price for. He wants no part of it."

"Good." Solo met the boy's blue-eyed gaze. "Cause I ain't a sharing man. Come on, let's drop them off at the next hell hole and head for home. I'm tired and I want to have it out with a certain Alderaani princess before I mellow and forget why I'm mad at her."

Luke sighed contentedly and stretched out in the co-pilot's seat. "A mellow Corellian. That's an interesting thought. Is it humanly possible?" His eyes remained closed as he awaited Solo's reply.

"No," Solo grinned, "but don't tell her that. She wouldn't have anything to look forward to in our growing relationship."

Han glanced at the young Jedi, his grin broadening. Luke was asleep. He sighed and relaxed. It would be a long trip, but it sure beat the hell out a week on Regal II.

End

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