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RUN BEFORE THE STORM

by Marcia Brin

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It was the dream again. He knew what had set it off, Marka, storming from the Falcon, turning to face him before she left. "You're one selfish bastard, Solo, you know that?" Stung more than he cared to admit, he had pretended indifference.

But that night, the dream had come again. It had been awhile, but he always knew it was lurking out there, waiting for the time to disturb his sleep once more. A shadow in the corner of his eye, an echo in the back of his mind, a hunter he could not, ultimately, avoid.

He was running, heedlessly, blindly, terrified, from a great shape, a darkness that reached out to claim him, that grew ever larger, while the Master floated in the air, pointing his gimmer stick at him and chanting, "Selfish you are. Selfish. Selfish."

Gasping, he awoke and lay shivering, staring at the ceiling, now hidden by darkness. If there were an answer there for him, he did not find it, and his thoughts drifted back to confront that which he had avoided for so long.

His origins were a mystery to him and he often wondered if Master Yoda were privy to them. All remembered of the first few years of his life was sunlit days, laughter and love. Then the fear, as faceless people snatched him away - for a moment he wrestled with the crying child, desperately longing to go home, and with the ache that always came when he recalled the early days. His first clear memories were of those wandering souls with whom he had stayed until he was seven. 'Gypsies' they were called and their origins, too, were unknown, lost in the mists of time, descendents, perhaps, of some long-gone planet bound rovers.

His kidnappers dumped him with the gypsies, apparently with sufficient funds to induce them to take him. Take him, but not accept him. Theirs was an insular society and he was an outsider. He came to know loneliness and he came to know distrust. Then, one day, in a marketplace where they were hawking goods and fortunes, they just walked away from him.

Suddenly, the world was a terrifying place and he would have had them back no matter how much he had hated them. He had run, looking for them, until, exhausted, he had crashed into a furry tree that turned out to be the leg of a Wookiee. Too tired and too lost to care, he had offered no resistance when Kawarrarabba had picked him up and carried him away.

Five very happy ears had followed. Wookiees were very loving and caring and generous. They accepted him into their extended family at once; there could never be enough cublings. He was cosseted and spoiled, as all Wookiee cubs were, yet he was taught stern lessons as well.

And he received his first introduction to the Force. Wookiees had it in abundance, though it was different from the power wielded by the Jedi. It was of Nature, of growing things and gentleness and healing. It was a oneness with the deep woods and living silences. He had realized that he had had instances of Force use, of precognition before, though he had not known what to call it. Had he revealed this talent to the gypsies, he would very likely have been accepted by them, but perversely, by then he had decided that he did not want acceptance, so he had kept silent.

It started on his twelfth birthday which, with great Wookiee pomp and ceremony, arrived several months before the Republic was ripped asunder and the Order purged. He had not known at the time that the People had had a warm and close relationship with the Jedi - the shariawwa or Guardians as the People called them - and they had made contact with an ancient Master to speak of him.

He could never visit any tropical worlds without seeing Dagobah. The feel of moisture-laden air on his skin, the sounds of the jungle, and he was back in the swamps listening to Yoda, sitting so as not to tower over his companion, fascinated as always by the gentle wisdom and wealth of knowledge at the command of the Jedi Master. Though he did not know it at the time, he was also being sheltered. Outside, the Republic had fallen apart and a more ruthless government had risen in its place. The Order had been destroyed; what few survivors there were had been scattered to the winds, which explained why he had seen no one but Yoda all those years.

For himself, he had loved that time - the learning, the growing, the reaching. Until he had reached too far.

And touched the Dark Side.

Even now, the fear stirred by the memory caused him to shiver and break out in a sweat. Yet it was but a pale reflection of what he had felt on that day. It was not that Yoda had never spoken of it - and Han had known that there was a test he had yet to face that would bring him to a place strong with the Dark Side - but talking about it had not truly prepared him for the impact of meeting it head-on.

And the worse part of it was that he recognised that a piece of it dwelt in his own soul, as it probably did in the souls of all beings, a darkness that responded, terrifyingly, to the call of the greater essence. It was the underside of his power. For some reason, he had thought himself immune to the blandishments of evil but, at that moment, he learned better. If he had taken that final test right then, he would have failed it; he was not yet in control.

As he stood facing the darkness, he could see images of himself sweeping all before him, wielding his power like a weapon. In the place of the shadowed Emperor and his dark henchman, would stride a towering figure of blazing light. But the rest of him, his innate strength and goodness, resisted. Would one shining and terrible be better than one dark and terrible?

He stared then into what he had realized was an endless abyss and he understood. The greater the power, the greater the temptation - and the greater the fall. For the first time, he knew an all-encompassing fear. If he failed, his failure would plunge him into endless darkness and, perhaps, take the galaxy with him; Yoda had spoken again and again of how important he would be. Something in him, crying out that he was not ready, not strong enough, turned and fled. He had been running ever since.

He had left Dagobah shortly after, never meeting Yoda's gaze. The fear was something to which he could not admit. Instead, he had shrugged indifferently and informed the Master that he could not see any reason to waste his life trying to help a galaxy that deserved what it had gotten, since everyone was stupid enough to allow it to happen in the first place. Talents such as his could be put to better use (though, in truth, he intended to stay as far away from the Force as he could.) He left with the image of Yoda's saddened eyes and gentle admonishment of selfishness.

He decided to wear that facade; he would rather be thought of as selfish than afraid - especially in the jungle in which he moved. They would not understand the specific nature of his fear; they simply would have assumed him a coward, and that would have meant a life of fighting every two-credit punk that came along.

Besides, he was ashamed of it himself, and consumed by guilt at walking out on a great responsibility it had been his duty to assume. Together these feelings dictated the stratum of society in which he had chosen to live. The former, because his shame made him feel unworthy; the latter, because it enabled him to assuage, in some small measure, his guilt by opposing the Empire, but doing it as an ordinary man. To that end, he had wanted to know better the mind of his enemy, so he joined the Imperial Academy. After a few years of Imperial reign, many of the former Republic troopers and officers had left, finding little stomach for Imperial tastes. For a period of time, the Academy was taking anyone who looked as if they might have any potential for flying - or war. No questions asked.

After almost three years, having learned of their procedures and thought processes, he had carefully arranged to have himself cashiered out. He did not want them hunting him for desertion, but it could not be an executing offence either. He successfully played the irrepressible scoundrel - and found that he could carry that guise over to civilian life.

When organized resistance to the Empire arose, he avoided it. It would have reminded him constantly of the responsibility from which he had run. And there was always the possibility that someone might ... recognise something in him, something he wanted to forget. They were believers in the old ways, were the rebels.

He took a perverse pleasure in becoming quite good at smuggling, though there was the nagging feeling that his Force-talent was bypassing his conscious mind and drawing on the power to help him. But he had been travelling alone. He had been avoiding a partner, avoiding anyone who might get too close. Then he had arrived on Kreeel and found his Companion. He hated Kreeel; it carried the smell of slavery. And it always reminded him of his failure; in the Republic, such a world would not have been tolerated.

As he strode across the Kreeel port, cargo, of a sort, was being unloaded from an ominous-looking vessel. A line of Wookiees wearing slave-collars - electronic deterrents to escape - and chains. Wookiees! His people! In later years, when he had gained experience and with Chewie by his side, he would disrupt slavers' plans whenever and wherever he could. Back then, though, he walked more lightly.

But not for this. These were his people, the only family he remembered, though these were Wookiees he had never seen before. He did not hesitate to put a plan into action, outnumbered as he was. It had never been death he had feared.

One of the Wookiees freed that day had been Chewbacca, and he had become Han's kreeshahka, Companion-Protector. Han had the distinct feeling that Chewie knew who he was. That, in fact, all of the Wookiee did. But it was never mentioned. Chewie simply became a source of strength and boundless love. Which is not to say he did not treat his Captain occasionally as if Han were a recalcitrant cub in dire need of a scolding. And he pretended not to notice when Han, in the midst of playing the complete rogue, would step on the Empire's toes or stop to help someone, all the time giving mercenary and self-serving reasons for his actions.

He sighed, still seeking answers on his cabin ceiling, feeling somewhat calmer. A new fear had surfaced of late. Had he run so long, denied so long, claimed so long to be selfish and a mercenary that his outside was beginning to color his inner core? Moving alone for so long, was he forgetting how to relate to people as individuals? Hardening of the heart? And, deep inside, was he becoming tired of the guilt and shame - was something growing that demanded he take up his fallen gauntlet?

He had known for some time that the day was coming when he would have his final choice; to risk losing his soul to the Dark, or to continue as he had been, and risk losing his humanity.

Somehow, lying in the darkness, in the silent Falcon, he had the discomfiting feeling that he would reach those crossroads sooner than he had believed.

* * *

Chewie had left earlier to seek the cool dimness of a cantina,. Of jungle origin, he was not entirely comfortable with Tatooine's remorseless suns and shadeless landscape.

Han carefully secured the Falcon and stepped out into the heat. It struck him like a physical blow. Never had it felt so oppressive, so stifling. He gasped, finding it difficult to breathe. Strangely, it felt more like moist steam than the dry heat of the desert.

The air of unreality expanded. He glanced around at the low-slung buildings sandwiched between the ceilings of cloudless blue and a floor of orange-gold sands. The colors shifted before his eyes, the orange deepening, the blue darkening. He shook his head but the change continued, turning the whole world into a swirl of orange and blue. Something was happening in the rolling colors, something important, something cloaked by the shifting orange and blue, blue and orange, and the hiss of steam.

Then it was again Tatooine and the sun-baked streets of Mos Eisley. Unaccountably, he felt cold, frozen, beneath the twin suns. Then that, too, faded and, with a shiver, he sought out the cantina. Perhaps there, in the familiar surge of life, he could shake the glimmer of foreboding.

The instant he entered, he knew he had been wrong. Though he could see the cantina patrons engaged in their usual activities, he could hear them only dimly, as if from a great distance, and a shimmering haze blurred their images. Only one tableau stood out in sharp relief; Chewbacca seated at a table with an old man and a wide-eyed boy. There was an aura of power at the table; he could see it hovering and shifting around them.

Then, for an instant, the image changed like a holoslide show. A flickering picture that moved to take the place of the one before it. The old man and the boy still sat there, but now, at the former's shoulder stood a hooded figure, a presentiment of Death, and Han knew the elder traveller would soon make one last journey. The boy leaned forward eagerly, all unaware, while tendrils of Shadow reached out to curl about him and Han cried out, desperately, Beware!

And he knew the moment of decision was upon him. The fear rose to meet him but, angrily, he shoved it aside. He had spent fifteen years running and he would run no more. Perhaps then he had been too young to bear such a burden alone, but he was a child no longer. He would step on the path and follow it to where it led, and he would keep his humanity and regain his honor. He would remain hidden, though, like Yoda; more could be accomplished that way in the end. The old mask would serve well, though the game had changed.

With a determined stride, he walked toward the table, while the figures around him came into sharp focus and their sounds returned to normal, and sat down. Chewie barked at him.

"Han Solo, here. Chewie tells me you're looking for a ship."

Softly, a familiar, but long-unheard, ancient laugh whispered in his ears, and the room was filled with the smell of Dagobah.

And the distant rumble of the coming storm.

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