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## To Wooka

by [Linda Ruth Pfonner](#)

### Part 2

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Chewbacca ate dinner - "shared kill" - with Anenettu that evening. Luke found Han's food case and ate in the hospital room. That night, he slept on the floor beside the smuggler's bed.

The next morning, at an unreasonably early hour, Luke was awakened by something landing hard on his stomach. He jerked awake in surprise: it was Raksha. When she noticed his awareness, she fled. "'Demon' is right," he muttered to himself.

"Kid?" came a weak voice from the bed.

"Han? I'm here." He pulled himself up into the chair beside the bed, yelling.

"Is it dark in here, or is that just me?" Solo's voice was expressionless.

"It's dark," Luke assured him sourly. "That damned cat woke me up."

The smuggler's relief was plain in his voice. "Cat? Where'd you get a cat?" Every spacer was familiar with cats.

Luke snorted. "She's not mine - she's yours."

"Mine? I don't remember ownin' a cat..."

"How much do you remember from the last time you woke up?"

There was a brief moment of silence. "Did I wake up before this?"

"Yes. Last night. It's okay; you weren't too coherent."

"I don't feel very coherent right now," Solo admitted, taking special care to pronounce 'coherent' correctly.

"You're doing better than yesterday. Wait a second. I want to turn on the lights."

"Don't you dare."

The order stopped the boy in mid-motion. "What? Why not?"

"Cause light hurts, kid. Just...leave 'em off."

"All right. How'd you get yourself into this mess, anyway? Can't Chewie and I leave you alone for a week?"

"Shut up," Han ordered painfully. "Damn laser cannon... Did you fly over an installation on your way here? Two prefabs inside a force fence?"

"No. Where is it?"

"I' ... not sure. A couple of kilometers north of where I came down, I think. I flew in to take a closer look, an' couldn't dodge fast enough. Blasted rentals!"

Unnoticed in the darkness, Raksha came out from under the bed. She chose this particular moment to jump up onto Han's stomach. He flinched. "What th' hell...? Oh..." He reached for her; she bumped against his hand, eyes closed and putting loudly. "Sssso, small one," he crooned to her. "My cat, huh? How come she's mine?"

"Damned if I know. Anenettu said she came to you when they brought you in, and she's hardly left you since. That's seven days, today."

"Seven?!? Shee-it! Wait a second - Anenettu, you said? Who's that? I never knew any of Chewie's kin named Anenettu."

"She isn't Chewie's kin. She's from the Clan of the Bear. We're about ten kilometers from where you crashed."

"Is Chewie here?"

"Sure. Did you think I was dumb enough to come alone?" Luke teased.

Han was serious. "Luke, Wookiees have all sorts of feuds an' vendettas between the clans. Chewie might not be safe here."

"Don't worry about him," Luke ordered. "Just worry about getting better. The Bear Kin are in sufficient awe of Chewie's clan not to hurt him. They rescued you, after all."

"What're you talkin' about?"

"I'm told the only reason they pulled you out of the wreck and brought you here is because the hunter who found you found a piece of clanluck you were carrying. He didn't want to offend such a powerful clan, so he had you brought here."

Solo went very still at the mention of the clanluck. "Chewie didn't see it, did he?"

"Chewie told me about it," Luke replied briefly.

"Damn," Han whispered to himself.

Skywalker grinned. "Sentimental," he accused. "Superstitious."

"Smuggling's a chancy business, kid," the Corellian defended, embarrassed. "You need all the luck you can get."

"Uh-huh," Luke agreed, his tone disbelieving.

Suddenly a shaft of white light fell across the bed as the door opened. Han threw up his good arm to block it; he tried to turn his head away from the blinding brilliance. A shaft of equally bright agony shot through his skull. He whimpered involuntarily. Then his sudden movement triggered a reflex, and he began to retch.

The healer who had just entered, Prenenn, moved swiftly, shoving Luke aside. He pulled the convulsing patient onto his stomach so that his head hung over the edge of the bed. Luke could only gape at his quickness.

When the spasms had stopped, Han sagged limply in the healer's grasp, unconscious again. Prenenn laid him on his back again as Luke helped him clean up. It only took a moment; Han had not eaten in a week, though he had occasionally accepted water.

"Prenenn, what happened?" Luke was frightened by the suddenness of the attack. Chewbacca, who had entered behind the healer, moaned with worry.

"He has suffered a severe concussion of his brain. He moved too quickly--the reaction is normal. Why?"

"The light," Luke explained. "He said it bothered him. I thought it might have hurt him."

Prenenn nodded thoughtfully. He checked Han's arm cast, did a few of the obscure things common to the medical profession, and left.

Luke shot his unconscious friend a worried glance. Raksha was standing on the smuggler's chest, looking intently into his still face. She mewed at him and dabbed at his mouth with a tiny, hesitant paw, but he did not move or react.

Luke reached over and picked her up, careful to keep her swinging claws clear of Han's face. "You... Little pest, leave him alone. He's got enough problems right now." He tossed her out of the room gently, but shut the door before she could run back inside.

He seated himself on the floor; Chewbacca joined him. Sitting there in the dark, the Wookiee began to talk, softly, so as not to disturb his captain. "The hunter who found him, Telekka, says that they have known of the laboratory for two years. It has always been isolated. There is a force fence around."

Luke nodded. "Han mentioned it. He called it 'two prefabs inside a force fence.'"

"And a laser cannon," Chewbacca added with a growl.

"Yeah."

"My clan, especially my blood family, now owes the Kin of the Bear for rescuing him. I offered our services to help destroy the laboratory."

"Why do they want it destroyed? Han's no friend of theirs."

"It was built within their territory without their permission. The clan does not know what is done there, but they do not care. They are trespassers." Trespass was one of the most heinous crimes among the Wookiees, especially by offworlders. "They are too few and too poor to get the equipment necessary to destroy it. My clan is bigger and more wealthy. Together, we can do it."

For a long moment, Luke did not reply. "You don't know anything about what's inside the fence?"

Chewbacca shook his head, a human gesture he had picked up from Han long ago. "Only that the fence itself is calibrated against my kind. We cannot go through."

"You can't mount an attack without any data. You have to find out something about your target."

The Wookiee shrugged. |"We cannot get inside. The clan has lost hunters who tried."|

"I'll go," Luke offered without hesitation.

"You must stay here,"| Chewbacca protested.

It was Luke's turn to shrug. "You need inside information, and you need a non-Wookiee to get it. Han certainly can't go, so it'll have to be me. You can stay here with him till I get back, and I can stay with him during the battle."

Chewbacca wanted to argue, but the boy's plan was logical and reasonable. |"All right. But first I must go home and get you the proper equipment."|

"Okay, but hurry. We'd better have this over with before Han recovers enough to care, or he'll want to come along. We can't wait that long."

Chewbacca fervently agreed.

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Luke spent the next two days living in Han's room, sleeping when the smuggler did and trying to wake when he did. After a few hours of listening to Raksha's wailing at the door, the boy relented and let her in. She settled comfortably on Han's stomach and fell asleep. Luke shook his head and sat on the floor to watch and wait in the dark. He had a small hand lamp that he kept shielded while he read.

"Hey, kid?" came a surprisingly strong voice.

Luke woke with a start. "Here, Han. How do you feel?"

"Medium lousy. I wondered if you were around."

"I'll be here," Luke promised grimly.

Either Solo did not notice the tenor of the reply, or he chose to ignore it. He stretched cautiously, flexing muscles stiff from a week's immobility. "Be careful," Luke warned him.

"Don't worry, kid, I ain't movin' my head till this headache goes away."

"That'll be a while. You dented the hell out of the bulkhead you hit."

Han chuckled and reached a shaky hand down to pet the cat on his chest. "Does this objectionable little beast have a name?"

"They call her Raksha." Luke pronounced it carefully, adding the aspirated growl at the end.

"Yeah, she looks like a demon," Solo snorted. His hand almost completely enclosed the tiny feline.

"No, she acts like one."

The smuggler rubbed her throat with a gentle finger, relishing the vibration of her purr. "Where's Chewie? I haven't seen him since he left the 'port. That's - what, three weeks, now?"

"About. He went back home for a few days. He's got some negotiating to do."

"Negotiating? About what?"

"His clan owes this one a debt for saving your life," Luke explained. "Chewie's gone to arrange the payment."

"Damn it," Han growled. "I pay my own debts!"

"Not this one, you won't. At least not directly."

"Where is he? I want to talk to him!"

"He left two days ago," Skywalker replied shortly.

"Damn! Didn't either of you ever thing to ask me?"

"Han, stop it. We didn't know when or even if you were going to wake up. Chewie only did what he thought was best."

"Or even if?" Han repeated wonderingly. He did not feel that bad.

"Yes. You were out for almost a week. You didn't wake up until we moved in the gravity generator from the hoverjet. The heavy gravity was killing you."

The smuggler blinked. "Sonuvabitch," he whispered. "I knew there had to be a reason for all those dreams I was having."

"What dreams?"

"Hell, kid, I forgot Wooka pulls two-and-a-half Gees. I was dreaming about bein' smothered, strangled, buried alive, trampled... then all of a sudden, I was flying, and it felt great."

"It must have. You've woken up three times since we installed it. Never for very long, of course..."

"I'm getting there, kid, I'm getting there. I'm gonna go find that blasted place and use the FALCON's guns on it..."

"No, you're not," Luke contradicted instantly. "Not for a couple of months, at least."

"A couple of MONTHS? I'm not hurt that bad, kid. And I can fly the FALCON with one hand - hell, I can practically fly 'er with one finger --"

"You are so hurt 'that bad,'" Luke interrupted. "You aren't leaving this room for at least a month, or going offworld for another."

"Two blasted months?!?" Han demanded shrilly. *Oh, that hurt!* He continued in a quieter voice. "Do you realize how much I'll owe in docking fees alone? Not to mention what I'll have to pay for failing that run to Allahala? I can't AFFORD two months in bed!" He closed his eyes and concentrated on calming down. Getting angry made his headache worse.

Luke listened to the Corellian's ragged breathing with concern. He had not wanted to upset him, but at least he had successfully diverted Solo from his private plans for revenge. But he had not considered the matter of money.

"I'll tell Chewie when he gets back," Luke offered. "Maybe Anenettu will let you park her here, or someplace close."

"She'd better, or by damn, I'll walk back to 'port! Two months...!"

Luke laughed. "Walk, the man says. He can't even sit up, and he's threatening to walk out on me!"

"Goddammit, kid...!"

"Han, if you move, I swear I'll have you knocked out for a week," Skywalker threatened, afraid he had infuriated the smuggler into attempting to prove his claim or health. Suddenly, he was aware of Roan listening. At first, he was irritated that she had listened without having warned him.

*"But I did, Luke. You just weren't paying attention,"* she reproved gently. After a moment's consideration, he realized that she was right. He had been thoroughly

preoccupied with placating and diverting Han, and had not taken conscious note of her awareness.

"Sorry," he told her, unconsciously speaking aloud.

"S okay, kid," Han replied softly. "So 'm I."

Luke jumped. He had momentarily forgotten Solo's presence. But the room was dark; hopefully, Han had not noticed anything odd. Luke was not certain what the smuggler's reaction to the family-sept would be. He was not anxious to find out.

"Hey, kid, is there anything to eat around here? I'm hungry."

Luke blinked, surprised, and felt Roan withdraw. "Bye," he called. She echoed him, then was gone. "You sure you're ready to?" he asked aloud.

"No doubt. It's been a week, hasn't it?"

"That's true. Let's see what we've got. Shield your eyes." Skywalker flicked on the lamp and rummaged through the food case. "Y' know, this stuff won't last long with both of us eating it."

After a few moments to accustom himself to the light, Han opened his eyes to watch.

"Chewie'll hunt for us. But you better do the cooking." He shuddered in remembrance. "One time I got caught in an engine backflare. Burned my hands and arms and walked around bandaged for a month. Chewie called what he did for me cooking; I lost twenty pounds."

"Accident prone, aren't you?" Luke observed.

"No, just surrounded by incompetence. How long does it take you to make a simple meal?" The shielded light permitted Han vision with a minimum of pain, for which he was grateful. He watched Luke's struggle with interest.

"I'm trying to figure out your blasted cooking equipment!" the boy snarled.

"The directions are engraved on it."

"I know - but I can't read your damned language!"

"Rank incompetence," the smuggler observed amiably. "How do you expect to be a successful smuggler if you can't even speak Corellian? It helps to think in it, too. We don't have words or concepts that get in the way, like 'fair play' or 'property rights.'"

"In the first place," Luke defended as he struggled, "I don't expect to be a successful smuggler. That's your job. And in the second place, when would I have the time to learn another language? Wookiee's hard enough!"

"Dargital s'kol mefinste?"

"Huh? Run that past me once more?"

"I said, 'Do you want to learn?' If I'm going to be stuck here for a month, I've gotta have something to do." Han's voice was commendably free of bitterness.

"Besides, transgal is all very fine, but it lacks flavor. Swearing in Corellian is much more satisfying."

"I wouldn't know," Skywalker answered mildly. "I'm not a connoisseur of profanity like you."

"Flattery will get you nowhere, kid."

After more than a little difficulty and some less than helpful advice from Han, Luke figured out the equipment and prepared a lunch his friend could handle. He did not think - and rightly so - that Han would put up with being fed.

"Kid, if you give me a hand, I think I can sit up long enough to eat. It'll make it easier."

Luke glanced up at him. "You sure? The last time you moved you got awfully sick."

"Yeah." Han moved experimentally. "As long as I don't jar my head, I'm okay."

He was right; it worked. That pleased Luke immensely, for it was the first definite sign that Han was getting better. Han was equally pleased; lying flat on his back was getting on his nerves.

Solo made short work of the meal Luke had prepared - astonishing the boy by proclaiming it fairly decent - and then seemed to wilt. Skywalker caught him and helped him stretch out again. He was asleep before Luke had the blanket arranged.

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Han woke up two more times before Chewbacca returned. Each time, he felt better, and he began to eat ravenously. He was asleep, however, when Chewbacca came to look in on him.

"Hi, Chewie," Luke said quietly, getting to his feet and joining the Wookiee in the corridor.

Chewbacca peered over the boy's head. ["How is he?"]

Luke shut the door and grinned, blinking at the light in the hall. "He's getting better. He'll wake up if we talk in there; he's sleeping lighter and lighter. He's still got a terrific headache, but light doesn't hurt anymore, and he's been sitting up to eat."

["Good! We must hurry, then. I brought some explosives with remote detonators, and found a Kinsman of the Bear who has often spied on the laboratory. He says that the force fence is very carefully calibrated; it excludes only my kind. Animals and humans can pass through with impunity."] He grinned toothily.

Luke was amused. "That'll help," he agreed. "When do we leave?"

["As soon as possible. I do not want to have to explain your extended absence. It should not take long to go in and sabotage the fence."]

"Listen, Chewie. Han was madder than hell when I admitted that your clan was going to pay for saving him, so be ready to placate him. He said he pays his own debts. Oh, yeah, one more thing: he said he can't afford to leave the FALCON docked at the starport until he can travel. Would Anenettu let us keep her here?"

["I will ask. Telekka will take you near the laboratory and wait for you. He will not go closer."]

"That's all right. We don't want to alert them. You said before that the Clan of the Bear lost hunters there. Were they killed trying to penetrate the fence?"

Chewbacca shook his head. ["No. They were captured and taken inside. None has ever returned."]

Luke digested that as they headed outside. Telekka was waiting beside a hoverjet plainly marked with the stylized thunderhead that identified it as belonging to the Clan of the Storm Winds.

["Good hunting,"] he greeted them. ["What is afoot, Chewbacca?"]

["This is the Walker in the Sky, Telekka. He will kill the fence for us."]

Telekka bared his teeth in a gleeful Wookiee grin. ["The fight will be glorious. I can hardly wait! Come, then, hurry!"]

"Okay, okay, I'm coming!" Luke laughed at the Wookiee's enthusiasm. He turned as Chewbacca put a restraining hand on his shoulder.

Silently, the FALCON's copilot handed him a piece of clanluck.

Luke accepted it solemnly and studied it for a moment. "Thanks, Chewie." He pocketed it and started to climb up into the already-purring hoverjet. Then he stopped and backed out. For a long moment he did not move. Then, slowly, he unclipped his lightsabre from his belt and handed it to his shipmate.

"Here. Take care of this for me." Luke jumped in and closed the door before Chewbacca could react. Telekka sent the hoverjet rocketing straight up. Chewbacca stared at the receding vessel, then slowly went back to the hospital.

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Luke sat quietly in the hoverjet, outwardly relaxed. He felt oddly naked without his lightsabre. He had not been without it since Ben had given it to him, but he did not want to risk losing it, and was too obvious a weapon, improper for him to carry under the circumstances. The slim Corellian stiletto Han had taught him to use would be much more effective, should he need a close-quarters weapon at all. He fervently hoped he would not.

The laboratory was only ten kilometers from the clan compound, but Telekka did not fly the entire distance. He landed the hoverjet beside the wreck of Han's, and set about unpacking the demolitions equipment.

"How does this work?" Luke asked. He had had some training in military strategy, statecraft and demolitions before leaving the rebel base, but he did not recognize these munitions.

Telekka smiled and licked his fangs. "Just lay this near the generator and carry this with you." He held out two items, one a small box with a button on it. "When you want it to explode, push the button."

"Simple enough," Luke mused. The explosives were highly concentrated and formed a package he could easily hang from his belt. "We will not push it until the assault force is ready out here."

The Wookiee nodded. He squirmed, then, and held out something small to Luke. "Here. From my clan."

Luke smiled. Another piece of clanluck. "Thank you," he said earnestly. "I can always use more luck." He checked his blaster's charge and made certain his knife was secure in his boot, then waved to Telekka and disappeared into the woods.

He did not do much planning. He had never seen the laboratory and could not even begin to extrapolate. He took a compass reading as soon as he was out of Telekka's sight, then walked on briskly. The hike was almost three kilometers; the hour it took was mentally, if not physically, relaxing. He thought about Han and Roan and Alike and Leia and the rebellion, and he watched the birds in the trees. The forest was quiet and open, climax vegetation, virgin woods. Wookiees did not allow commercial lumbering on their almost-sacred forest lands, but eventually Luke came to a large artificial clearing.

He could understand the Wookiees' irritation with the trespassers. The clearing had been made by cutting down all the trees over approximately thirty acres. That was quite a lot of wood, and it had not been used to build the base. Luke wondered what had been done with it. He could see the prefabs clearly through the invisible force fence. He could also see the tall spiky poles that generated and delineated it. He circled the installation from within the forest, scouting the layout.

Neither building gave any clue as to which contained the power broadcaster, so Luke walked around again. He had no plans to leave the forest until well after dark, so he found a comfortable spot from which to keep watch and settled down to wait for sunset.

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Han woke up, stretched lazily, and tried to roll over before he remembered his broken arm. The cast effectively prevented him from rolling; he swore mildly. "Hey, kid," he grumbled. "How much longer do I have to wear this damn cast?"

There was no reply. Han was startled. Every other time he had awakened, Luke had been there. "Luke?" Maybe the kid was asleep. Han struggled to the edge of the bed and saw Luke's blankets folded neatly near the wall.

He would have shrugged if he could have done so. Luke must have had something else to do; he would be back. Just as he was about to lie down again, Han caught a glimpse of something lying near the blankets. Something metal, cylindrical...it was Luke's lightsabre!

"Goddamn!" Han whispered to himself, a nameless fear rising. "The kid never goes anywhere without that." Then he kicked himself firmly. Luke might have gone to take a shower. He was overreacting. He had been cooped up too long.

Silently, the door opened; it had not been latched. Han turned his head slowly to see who had entered. He saw no one.

"Hey, cat," he called confidently.

A small black head and two tiny paws were suddenly visible on the edge of the bed. Raksha stared at him questioningly, her light hazel eyes wide.

"Hey, cat," Han repeated. He chirped at her encouragingly; she levitated, feline-fashion, onto the bed. She walked up his body and tucked herself comfortably under his good arm, chin on his shoulder. She began to purr almost immediately; her eyes closed to mere slits.

There was something very warming about the tiny creature's perfect trust. Han was careful not to disturb her as he settled down to sleep again.

Sometime later, when he was drowsing, not really asleep, he heard the door swing farther open, followed by a familiar tread.

"Hi, Chewie. Where'n th' hell've you been?" He felt too groggy to bother opening his eyes, and therefore did not see Chewbacca's guilty start.

"I have been home. You knew that."

"Luke said you were here, an' then went back."

Chewbacca squirmed. "I had to talk to my kin."

"About me."

"Yes," the Wookiee admitted. "This clan did mine a service by caring for you, who are our friend. Therefore, we owe them payment."

"What're you gonna pay 'em with?"

"Munitions. They are a poor clan."

"Details, Chewie: how much am I worth?"

Chewbacca was uneasy. He was not good at lying, especially to Han; he never had been.

"Chewie..." Han opened his eyes and studied his co-pilot intently. Something was definitely bothering the Wookiee. "Chewie, what are you payin' 'em with?"

Chewbacca gave up. "We are going to destroy the laboratory. They are trespassers! The Kin of the Bear lacked only the equipment. We supply that, and my brothers and I go along."

Han could understand why Chewbacca was going: he intended to extract a little personal vengeance. But he could not understand why his partner's brothers

would want to do so. A quotation floated, unbidden, to the surface of his mind:  
*"The brother of my brother..."*

*But...!* "If you get yourself killed, don't come crying to me," he ordered his co-pilot brusquely. "I wanted to blast the thing from orbit. It'd be a hell of a lot safer that way."

Chewbacca grinned. He knew Han did not like to discuss personal loyalties or express gratitude. ["But not as satisfying,"] he pointed out.

Han stretched carefully and yawned. "Where's Luke? He's usually here."

The Wookiee had planned for that question. ["The hunter who found you found you, Telekka --"] Han filed the name away, ["--took him hunting. They will be gone a brace of days."]

Han blinked. "Why'd he leave his lightsabre behind?"

["Because it might betray him."] Chewbacca answered with his own theory before he thought about what he was saying. He shut up fast, but it was too late.

"Betray him to who?" Han demanded. "Damn it, Chewie, where'd he go?"

Chewbacca sighed, wishing, not for the first time, that he knew how to lie. There was no point in trying, now. If he refused to tell him, Han would probably guess. He had been successfully second-guessing opponents and Imperial officials for years, and had gotten quite good at it.

["He went to the laboratory to spy on it for us,"] the Wookiee admitted. He said nothing more. Perhaps that would be enough to satisfy Solo.

He was not that lucky. "Why did he have to go? There's a whole clan of warriors here!"

["No Wookiee can get near the place; the force fence is calibrated against us. He said it would be foolish to attack without some knowledge of what we attacked."]

"Well, at least he showed a little sense. Tell me the rest."

Chewbacca shifted uncomfortably. ["What rest?"] he temporized.

Han was not amused. "Chewie, you're the worst liar on eighteen planets, and you know it! Now, tell me the whole story."]

Chewbacca surrendered, and talked. ["...and Telekka is waiting for him. He should be back late tomorrow night."]

Han began to swear in a low, monotonous voice.

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When darkness fell, Luke stood up and stretched. It was not quite dark enough for him to begin, but soon it would be. He took out his knife and tested the edge against his thumb. He studied the blade as he sucked on the tiny drop of blood oozing across the ball of his thumb.

The blade was as long as his hand and as wide as one of his fingers, a long, slim, almost delicate shaft of dark blue Corellian steel. The hilt was of some blackened hardwood; the tang and rivets were blue, like the blade. It was a thoroughly wicked toy; Han had not smiled when he had gifted it to him. He had only said that it had been christened properly and would serve him well.

Luke, in his omnivorous and voracious reading, had discovered, deep in Corellian tradition, the belief that personal weapons acquired, with proper use, a small measure of awareness and a capacity for loyalty to an owner who treated them well. Luke knew that Han respected weapons and weapons-skill as he respected almost nothing else; the giving of the knife had impressed him.

"We'll see, Han," he now said to himself. He sheathed the blade in his boot and advanced on the fence. It was pitch-dark, now. He could see puddles of light at regular intervals around the building, poured out by spotlights mounted on the eaves. It would be easy to avoid them; none could be moved or aimed, as far as Luke could tell.

He had seen some Wookiees inside the buildings, armed with bowcasters and apparently free to move about in the compound, but the place was deserted now. Everything inside was dark. Luke kept to the shadows and avoided silhouetting himself against any windows as he sneaked silently into the camp. He found himself concentrating very hard on being invisible, unsmellable, unhearable, untouchable. *Very odd*, he thought. *Is this how Ben managed to find the DEATH STAR's tractor beam controls without alerting security?*

Luke dismissed the thought. He needed to concentrate on finding the power broadcaster. Silently, he glided up to the side of the nearer building and peeked into a darkened window. An office. He went down the line of windows slowly and cautiously, finding one laboratory inside four contiguous windows and the rest, offices and storerooms.

He walked far around the two buildings to approach the other from the direction of the forest. This one contained mostly living quarters, private rooms for humans, a bunkroom for four Wookiees, a kitchen and a lounge. Luke continued around the second building, memorizing all he could. Eventually he found the broadcaster.

The weather was balmy, late spring, so many of the windows were open. They had nothing to fear on this planet with the force fence up, so had no reason to seal the base. Luke climbed inside.

The room was dark, but Luke's eyes were well adjusted to darkness, now. The room was filled with the broadcaster itself, the generator that supplied its power, and two very large transport-class hoverjets. Luke slid his tiny bomb under the generator. Just as he straightened, he heard voices through the door to the inner corridor. He hid behind the broadcaster and waited.

"What did Frerrekke say?" a human voice demanded querulously.

The second voice was patient, perhaps overly so. "He said there's an intruder on the base. He smelled him."

Luke thought obscene and foul thoughts - all words he had learned from Han. *I guess I need more practice.*

"Why doesn't he let the Wookiee hunt him down, then?" the first speaker grumbled as he opened the door and stepped inside.

"You know," the other replied from out in the corridor, "that the Coordinator doesn't let them out at night."

The first man poked around the generator; Luke's hand hovered over the butt of his blaster. He abruptly changed his mind and silently drew his knife. Eventually, inevitably, his efficient search of the room led the man to investigate the powercaster. A darker piece of shadow materialized before him and opened his stomach in one firm stroke as a hand clamped itself over his mouth, stifling a shriek of agony.

Luke gasped as the guard's blood gushed out over his hand. He pushed the body away, shuddering. Killing with a knife was so... close. So personal... graphic... His hand shook as he remembered the shock of the blade going in, cutting so effortlessly... But the guard had died silently. Luke sneaked to the wall beside the door to await the reaction of the other guard.

"Bari?"

Luke tensed, waiting, the double-edged blade held low. The second guard entered slowly, warily, reaching right into Luke's face as he sought a lightswitch the Rebel had not noticed. He reacted the same moment Skywalker did, bringing up his gun and squeezing the trigger as the boy thrust out viciously.

Luke never knew if he had struck his target or not. The stunbeam caught him squarely; he crumpled, the bloody knife falling to the floor with a clatter.

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Luke woke slowly, conscious only of pain, at first. Then his head cleared and he realized that he was tied hand and foot. *Damn!* He had screwed up a perfectly simple job and gotten caught. He could hear no sound, so he figured he was alone. He opened his eyes.

He stared up at a living skull with mild blue eyes that considered him as if he was something less than intelligent.

"Well, I must say it's about time, young man," the skull-face said. "Come, come, don't be sullen. It's all a game." The voice suddenly chilled. "A game you seem to have lost."

Luke did not reply. He was too riveted by the dry, mummy-like voice that rasped from the death's-head.

"Now, one must maintain the proprieties, even with one's enemies. I am Seye Tarkin, Coordinator of this Imperial Research Base. Who are you?"

*Tarkin!* The name sent a glacier dripping down Luke's spine. Leia's captor had been a Tarkin, the Grand Moff, head of the family. This one fitted the description Leia had given Luke so perfectly, he must have been a close relative. *A Tarkin on Wooka...!*

"Your name, boy," Tarkin snapped, all amiability gone. Luke stared past him to the two armed Wookiees guarding the room's single door. He made no effort to respond. The Imperial eyed him speculatively. "We found these in your pocket." He held up the Wookiee talismans Luke had been given. "What are they?"

"Clanluck."

"They're different," Tarkin observed, turning them over and over.

"Two clans," Luke said briefly. Maybe he could make Tarkin nervous. He must have feared the Wookiees, or he wouldn't have gone to the expense of that fence.

"Two? You claim kinship with two clans of the beasts?"

*Beasts? Uh-oh. Racism rears its ugly head...* "No. They claim it of me."

Tarkin dropped the clanluck onto the floor and ostentatiously wiped his hands on his pants. "Why are you here?" he snapped.

"The clans want to know what you're doing here," Luke answered readily. "You built on their land without asking permission." Perhaps the Coordinator would think of him only as a spy and not a saboteur.

"Ask? I, a Tarkin, should ask permission of a litter of beasts? You sicken me, boy."

Luke tried to shrug. "Turn your head away, then. I'm uncomfortable enough without you vomiting all over me."

Tarkin slapped him. Luke grinned faintly. "Feel better?"

"Why did they send you?" the Imperial snarled. "Why didn't they just send their hunters to storm us?"

"They're not fools. They knew your force fence is calibrated against them. It'd be suicide."

"That is what I had in mind. Why did they wait this long to send a spy?"

"I'm a spacer. I've been away for years. I can't live here; neither the clans nor I can afford to antigrav an entire compound. I only visit when I happen by, and don't stay for long. I just arrived."

"What ship?"

"You go to hell." Sometimes, listening to Han swear had its advantages. Uncle Owen had never used or allowed foul language.

Tarkin rose. He was even shorter than he had appeared. Luke guessed he was no taller than Leia. "You say you came to find out what we do here. I think I'll show you. Ferrekke, bring him."

The huge brown Wookiee obeyed listlessly and slung Luke over his shoulder. It was an extremely uncomfortable position, but it gave Luke a close look at the Wookiee's bowcaster. It was repeatedly imprinted with the conventionalized snarling mask of the Bear Kin.

*Looted weaponry?*

The Wookiee followed Tarkin into the laboratory. Luke wished that Telekka was nearer than Han's wrecked flyer. If he had been waiting in the woods, the Wookiee might have seen Luke in captivity, and could have alerted the clan. As it was, they would not even suspect anything was amiss until he failed to appear tomorrow.

Luke consoled himself with the thought that there was really nothing the clans could have done to help, anyway. If he was going to escape, he would have to do it himself.

In the lab, Frerrekke dumped him unceremoniously on the floor. Tarkin went to a bank of dials and toggles and flipped a long series of switches. "I've never had a human subject before," he said. "The machinery is calibrated for Wookiee mentality, so I'll probably have to intensify the beam. Not too much, though, for one who claims kinship with the beasts."

Luke refused to be insulted. "What does it do?"

Tarkin frowned. The boy was showing no sign of nervousness or fear. "It's a mindwiper, but a new design. It's much more powerful than the old one. It completely erases all motivations and desires, making the subject totally amenable to command, as Frerrekke and his friends discovered. They were captured just outside the fence, and were my first test subjects. It works perfectly. Frerrekke killed his hunting companion at my order, after only three hours under it."

Luke swallowed hard. If Tarkin mindwiped him, he would betray Leia and the Alliance! He squirmed, trying to reach the bomb switch, which was still fastened to his belt. He could not.

Tarkin did not notice his movement, and ordered the Wookiee to place Luke on the slab and tie him down. "Now, then," he said cheerfully as he flipped the final switch.

Luke froze. He tried to marshal the Force around him as a shield, but the beam cut through. He could feel his own terror weakening the effectiveness of the barrier he tried to rebuild. But without perfect confidence, the Forcewall was vulnerable. Once more, it crumbled. The beam ate inward...

Finally, desperate, Luke screamed. "*Roan! Alike! HELP!*"

Immediately, he was surrounded and engulfed by his family-sept's love and concern. "*What's wrong?*" Alike demanded.

Luke gasped out his terror. Tarkin frowned as the dials indicated a sudden jump in the prisoner's resistance.

*"We can help, Luke."* Roan's voice was soothing. Luke found himself relaxing despite his fears. *"Just forget your body altogether and send your Self to us. They can't hurt your body, and you can return to it later, when the machine has been turned off."*

*"Roan, what if--" Alike started to protest, but his mate cut him off.*

*"It's the only way. Would you rather see one of us a mindwiped slave?" She ignored Alike after that, turning her full attention to Luke. "Come to me, Luke. Forget your body. Just pull yourself away and come to me here."*

It was an odd sensation, but Skywalker tried it and it worked. Actual location was suddenly meaningless. He was within the family-sept, in the middle of a Sharing. He fit right in; there was a place reserved for him, and all were quite delighted to find him there. It was a warm homecoming, to feel all those familiar people once again: Alike, Megh, Bever, Laric, Etew, Nten, Roan...

Tarkin frowned, confused. The resistance meter suddenly dropped to zero. The EEG showed only autonomic functions at minimum operating levels. The cerebral cortex seemed undamaged, but it was not working. The boy was completely limp, his eyes half-closed, his face slack. The Imperial deactivated the beam.

"Perhaps I turned it up too high," he mused, "and erased everything. I'll have to be more careful next time. Ah, well." He turned away without another thought. "I'll check him in the morning," he yawned to himself. "Frerrekke! Back to bed." The Wookiee shuffled away. Tarkin followed, yawning.

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Han spent an irritated night and an anxious day awaiting word. Luke was good - even Han admitted that privately - but walking around inside an installation like that alone was crazy!

At sundown, the Corellian began to worry actively. He choked down the meal Chewbacca hesitantly prepared for him. It was hours past midnight when Han, irritated and frightened, ignored his partner's presence and got out of bed to pace, albeit shakily.

"Captain!" the Wookiee admonished in dismay.

"Shut up. I'm all right." Solo refused to admit that his head hurt fiercely, and walked around the room twice, determined. He had gotten up before, but never moved around quite this much. There had been no need.

"Damn it, Chewie, where is he? He should have been back hours ago!" He dropped to sit on the bed with his chin in his hand. It was a good act, but Chewbacca saw through it.

"You are better, but you are not yet well, and I will not allow you to go after him! I will not lose both of you!"

"How're you gonna stop me?" Han challenged.

Chewbacca grinned. ["I will not give you any clothes."] He knew that would slow Han down a bit. It did, but not much.

"Damn it, Chewie, we've gotta do somethin'!"

["We are. We are waiting for Telekka to bring him back. Go to sleep. I will wake you when they return."]

Solo sat with his back against the wall, refusing to give in to his own discomfort. "Something's wrong," he stated flatly. "They could've walked back by now."

["Maybe he tried and got lost."]

The argument continued until gradually, Han slumped lower and lower and was supine once more. He was drowsing restlessly and Chewbacca was asleep when they were both alerted by the sound of a hoverjet coming in. The tiny cubicle had no windows, but something in the air changes at dawn, so they were aware of the time.

Han started to push the blankets aside to get up, but Chewbacca pushed him down, firmly. ["You wait! I shall meet him."]

The Corellian regarded him furiously. "That's mutiny!"

["We are in my territory. You wait!"]

"Well? Don't just stand there. Tell him to drag his lazy ass in here so I can chew him out!"

["Yes, Leader!"] Chewbacca saluted sarcastically and fled.

Han waited, fidgeting. He sat up abruptly as two subdued Wookiees entered his room. "Where's Luke?" he demanded.

Telekka shrugged helplessly. ["He never came back."]

Solo stared at him for a long moment. Telekka returned his gaze, unflinching. Han nodded. "Chewie, get me my clothes. I'm goin' in."

["You cannot! You are injured,"] came the predictable protest.

"What the hell do you expect me to do, lie here in bed?!" Han was furious; Chewbacca fell silent. "Besides, Chewie, you can't help. You need a human, an' I'm a lot closer to human than you are."

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"I don't understand it. I just don't understand it." Seye Tarkin stood over the motionless body of his prisoner, hands on hips, head shaking. "I didn't have the intensity set that high. It shouldn't have vegetized him."

One of his chief researchers was playing with the equipment. "Perhaps..."

"Find out what happened!" Tarkin snarled. "If this mindwiper is usable only on Wookiees, it's next to useless!"

"But Coordinator, you understood that we weren't ready to treat humans, yet! Wookiees have a simpler brain--!"

"I don't care! Just find out what happened!"

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Han put the rest of the day to good use: he slept. However, he first locked the door so no one could get in. He trusted Chewbacca farther than he trusted anyone else in the galaxy, but he was darkly suspicious of his partner's easy surrender. In his opinion, Chewbacca was overly concerned about his condition. No sense in tempting fate. The Wookiee might take it into his head to drug Han until the clans could rescue Luke. "Or try to," he muttered to himself. "Wookiees never invented strategy..."

He awoke several hours later and got dressed. Putting his boots on with one hand was difficult, but he persevered and emerged well-shod and with a pounding headache he ignored. He buckled on his blaster with a satisfied sigh. It was exhilarating to be back on his feet again.

*Watch out, galaxy; Han Solo's comin' back at ya!*

He opened the door and stepped into a completely strange corridor. Only then did he realize he had no idea where he was. His Direct-sense spun like a top. The MILLENNIUM FALCON was over that way an unconscionable distance, the hoverjet had crashed over there...

*Whew!*

He let go of the wall and headed down the corridor, where he could hear voices. "Hi, Chewie. What's going on?"

"Hello. You look terrible," his partner responded bluntly.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence. When do we leave?"

|"Now."| As they walked, Han noticed with irritation that both Wookiees were walking more slowly than was their wont. Chewbacca briefed him on what Luke had expected to find and what he had intended to accomplish. |"This time, we are bringing an army. When we hear you blow the power plant, we will attack. I will find you, then, and the Walker in the Sky."|

"Sounds okay. Have you got a detonator turned to the frequency Luke was using?"

|"Yes."|

"Give me that one, too. Might come in handy."

|"What if he still carries the explosive?"|

"Would you leave explosives on a prisoner?"

The Wookiee's bewildered worry became comprehension. |"Oh! I see."|

Han shook his head. Wookiees were good people, but sometimes they just did not think things through.

Later, Solo stood just outside the darkness beneath the trees. If anyone had swung a light in his direction, he would have been quite visible, but no one did. He had been watching the base for well over an hour; when the darkness was full, he headed in.

He stopped just outside the fenceposts. Maybe they were not calibrated to exclude only Wookiees. Maybe this was as far as Luke had gotten... He shook himself. *Maybe. Maybe.* Han reached a hand through the energy field. A strange tingling, tickling sensation... He stepped confidently through and dropped to his knees as a hot knife of pain shot through his head. But it was momentary; the pain was gone by the time he struggled to his feet. He continued, his progress shaky.

Chewbacca stood up, concerned when he saw his partner fall, but lay down again beside Telekka. Han was inside the fence and beyond any assistance either Wookiee might have offered.

Solo leaned gratefully against the wall of the nearer building. He would never have admitted it to anyone, but he really was not up to this, yet. But then, he had no real choice. Only a human *or near human*, he reminded himself wryly, could get inside that field.

It took him longer to find the powercaster than it had taken Luke, though he eventually succeeded. He did not try to climb into the room, merely tossed the bomb on the floor. It skidded to a halt just short of the 'caster.

"Close enough," he whispered to himself, knowing the explosive's power. He then went hunting for Luke.

When he found the laboratory, it was deserted, save for the motionless figure on the slab. Han paled and climbed in awkwardly, hampered by the cast on his arm.

"Luke!" he hissed. "Luke!"

There was no response. The boy's body looked...empty. His face was slack; when Han shook him, he moved like a rag doll. Han swore atrociously and detonated the explosives. He needed help.

With two bombs going off together, the powercaster was effectively atomized, as was half the building and the men outside it. At this signal, a howling roar began to grow. The fighting hunters of two clans charged.

Han paid no attention to the battle. He stood beside Luke, his back to the wall where he could watch both the window and the door. He had no intention of being shot accidentally by an over-excited Wookiee hunter, nor any of the base personnel.

"Captain?"

"Yeah, Chewie. In here."

Chewbacca had more trouble climbing through the window than Han, but eventually, he made it. "What is the matter with him?" he demanded, seeing Luke.

"I don't know. I don't know what they did to him. But if I ever find out..." Han's tone promised unspeakable vengeance.

"Captain, look." Chewbacca had found Luke's knife. Han smiled as he took it; it was caked with blood from tip to pommel.

"At least they paid a price."

The Wookiee turned back to the machinery. "I wonder what it does?"

Han growled and gestured at Luke, fiercely. "THAT's what it does!"

The battle was short, for the base personnel had never expected an attack. Han sent Chewbacca to get a prisoner, preferably one of the scientists, though even a stormtrooper would do. The base was too small to keep secrets, after all. The Wookiee never found one. The clans were angry; by the time he started searching, it was too late.

The four Wookiees who had been on the base attacked and were killed by Chewbacca's kin. A blood feud had almost been declared when the dead were identified as four of the Bear Clan's lost kinsmen. Anenettu managed to calm all concerned. Chewbacca explained what little he knew of the machine. He was not sure of its actual purpose, though he suspected it worked against minds. Therefore, to his way of thinking, the four could not be held responsible for their actions.

With the enemy wiped out, there was nothing for Han and Chewie to do but load Luke onto the hoverjet and take him back to the compound. Chewbacca did all the work, for which Han was privately glad. It had been a long and exhausting day; for the first time, he was looking forward to getting back to bed.

He climbed into the hoverjet slowly, not wanting to jar his head. It hurt as if he had been hit again. But Chewbacca was rather over-anxious about the take-off, and, without an internal antigrav field, the sudden acceleration hit Han like a hammer blow. He slumped against the bulkhead, fighting to remain conscious, wanting to subdue the pain and recover before the Wookiee noticed. It was no use.

"Captain!" Chewbacca realized what he had done instantly, and leveled off, slowing to minimum cruising speed. "Captain? Are you all right?"

"...Fine... I'm... okay..." he gasped. The agony expanded and blotted out the world. He collapsed against the side of the cockpit.

Chewbacca moaned worriedly. He could do nothing for Han in the air, so he headed for the Bear Clan compound. He would have flown faster, but feared the consequences.

When they arrived, there was a vidcom call waiting for Solo. Chewbacca ignored the summons. He saw Han and Luke safely into bed, then went to answer it.

It was Roan. "Where's Captain Solo? I must talk to him, right away!"

Chewbacca did not recognize her. "What about?" he growled, irritated by the disturbance.

For a moment, the woman looked confused, obviously not understanding. Suddenly she did. "It's about Luke. Hurry, every second counts!"

Chewbacca did not want to bother his partner, but Luke's condition was so baffling, he decided it was worth the risk. |"He is hurt, but I will bring him. Who are you?"|

"Roan, of Tacta. Tell him I am Alike's wife."

Chewie left. If this turned out to be a "Run for your life, my husband's found out!" call, he would be sorely tempted to do something rash.

|"Captain? Captain, wake up."| He shook the Corellian gently, but gentleness meant one thing to Wookiees and something else to smaller species. Han groaned, but did not even try to rouse. |"Captain, wake up,"| Chewbacca insisted. |"There is a female on the com. She says she must talk to you immediately about the Walker in the Sky."|

"Who...who is it?" Han asked. Painfully, he thought that if it was Leia, he was going to roast her ears, even if he had to do it later, when he had the strength.

|"Her name is Roan. Her mate's name is Alike, from Tacta."| The proper names were hard for the Wookiee to pronounce; they came out garbled.

It took a moment for the significance of the names to register. "Wait a minute. Alike of Tacta?"

|"Yes; his mate. Who is she?"|

Han struggled out of bed, in too much of a hurry to object to Chewbacca's help. "Remember the Tactalke family-sept we sold those drugs to? They adopted Luke. Maybe she knows what happened to him." Upon reaching the proper room, Han dropped into the seat before the com screen.

Roan was relieved. "Captain Solo, you've got to help us!"

"Help you?" he demanded. "What about Luke?"

"That's just it. He's --shut up, Luke! I'm trying!" She appeared ready to burst into tears.

"Luke's there?" The kid's body had looked abandoned, but this was wild!

"Yes. That machine you found his body on...the...mindwiper?" She waited a second as if for confirmation, and continued before Han could open his mouth to reply. "It erases the will. They used it to make slaves of Wookiees; Commander Tarkin used it on Luke. He couldn't fight it, so we helped him leave his body to protect himself. He can't get back now." She started to cry, but was totally ignoring her own tears: a very odd sight.

"Whaddaya mean, 'he can't get back?'" Han was getting angry from confusion.

"His SELF is here, in the part of the family-sept that is Shared by all. He's listening to us now...and he's talking too much!" she snapped. "I can't talk to both of you at one, Luke. Shut up!"

"Luke, shut up and let her talk!" the smuggler found himself ordering.

Roan smiled. "He says he's sorry. But he's scared, Captain. You are so, Luke! He's been out-of-body far too long for his first time. He's lost. He doesn't know where to look for his body, and hasn't the vaguest notion where to start. If he's gone from it too long, his body will...grow accustomed to being untenanted. He won't be able to rejoin with it."

Her face and tone changed; Solo thought he could see Luke and hear him beg, "Help me, Han, please!" Then she shuddered, and the illusion - if illusion it was - was gone.

"How can I help?" The Corellian sounded helpless.

"You've got to pull him away from us. He's been totally immersed in Sharing for too long. His individuality is drowning in US. I'm the only one permitted direct contact with him now for fear he'll be utterly swamped. We've got to get him out of here!"

"HOW?!" Han almost screamed his frustration.

"You're the only human friend he has on this planet. You have to lead him back. Reach for his mind with yours and call him to you."

"I can't do that! I'm not a telepath."

"You don't have to be," she assured him. "He is, now, and he'll be listening for you. If you pull and I push, I think it'll work. It's the only chance he's got." She broke the connection before Solo could reply.

Han sat motionless before the silent screen, staring into nothingness, his mind awhirl. Slowly, he rose and shuffled back to his room. He did not notice that Chewbacca had gone.

A bed had been brought in for Luke's body - he could not call that empty husk Luke any more. He sat on his own bed and looked at it for a while.

Well, if he did not try, he would never know if he could do it.

"*Luke?*" he called hesitantly, feeling quite foolish. "*Luke, can you hear me?*"

From far, far away, he heard a faint cry. *"Han?"*

His own relief was no less than Luke's. *"Luke! Drag your lazy ass over here, right now!"*

*"Where?"* came the plaintive cry.

*"How the hell should I know where? Right here."*

*"You're a lot of help."* Skywalker almost whimpered. *"I can't find you!"*

The smuggler's tone was gentler when he replied. The kid was obviously upset. *"S okay, kid, I'm right here, an' I'm not moving. Just follow my voice. You'll run into me, sooner or later."*

*"Roan, help me! I don't know where to go!"*

Han was surprised when he heard her answer, almost as if her voice had been superimposed over Luke's. *"I AM helping, Luke. I'm blocking your retreat. You must find Captain Solo."*

*"But he's not here!"* Luke's wail was fainter. He seemed to be moving away.

*"I am, too!"* Solo yelled stridently, wishing he knew what he was doing. *"Damn it, Luke, I am here, and you can find me! Just get off your butt and try! Did you bust yourself free from that farm just to end up like this? Did you rescue the princess and blow up the DEATH STAR to end up lost in this fog?"*

*"You helped,"* Luke said hesitantly.

*"All I ever do is help,"* Han snarled. *"You're the be-damned hero, kid, and this's no place for a hero to end up!"*

*"Keep talking, Han. I think I know where to look for you, now."* For the first time, the boy sounded excited.

*"Keep talking, he says! Luke, that base is gone. Totally. No escapes, no survivors, no prisoners. It was quite a sight."*

*"You saw it?"* Luke was closer; his tone showed his concern. *"You okay?"*

*"I'm fine, kid, but you've gotta get back. I ain't had a decent meal since you left."*

Han could hear him laughing, and the sound was reassuring. He seemed even closer, although distance was meaningless here. Wherever here was. *"If you're well enough to attend battles, you can cook your own meals,"* Luke chuckled.

*"All I did was walk in and blow the power plant."*

Suddenly, Luke was very near; the smuggler could feel him. *"Han?"* came the timid question. *"Is this you?"*

Afterwards, neither of them could explain what happened. Luke had found his friend, and his relief was so tremendous, he flung himself at the unsuspecting Corellian. Automatically and without understanding what he did, Han blocked him and threw him back. It was a reflexive defense of Han's individuality. Luke was not supposed to join with him, but use his location as a guide to rejoining his own body. When Solo rejected him, it was emotional and, in a sense, physical. Luke was hurt and frightened by the denial and fled instinctively back to the family-sept. But Roan stood blocking that retreat; she, too, repelled him. He oscillated, almost bouncing, between Roan and Han, tortured and crying with frustration and helplessness.

Then suddenly, a haven appeared. It had been there all along, of course, but he had not recognized it before. He dove in frantically, searching for an anchor, and found himself back where he belonged.

Luke opened his eyes with utter delight. He could see again! He had ears again! He had hands again! He flexed his fingers with relief and rolled over. It was hard; he felt as if he had not moved in weeks. He lifted his head and looked across the cubicle toward Han's bed. His breath caught.

The smuggler was lying on the bed, his back against the wall, his face buried in the curve of his good arm. There was something about his position that gave Luke the impression of a cornered animal, ready and willing to fight to the death, but preferring to have nothing to do with whatever frightened him.

"Han?" he inquired. "Are you all right?"

Solo's voice was muffled; he did not raise his head to answer. "You're askin' me?" His voice shook. Luke had never heard him use that tone.

"What's the matter? I'm okay now. What's wrong?"

Han looked up, then, and stared at the far wall over Luke's head. Skywalker saw terror in his eyes. "Is that what it's like?" the Corellian whispered faintly. "Is that what it's like all the time?"

Luke did not understand. "I don't know. I don't know what happened to you. But I owe you my sanity. Thank you."

Han did not respond. He shivered and buried his face again. Luke was becoming frightened. *"Roan!"* he screamed. *"What happened? What's the matter with him?"*

*"He heard us. He came in and Shared; you were the link between us. He Shared with us for just a moment, and then ran away. We hurt him, Luke. Somehow, we HURT him! How can Sharing hurt?!"* Her voice was anguished.

"I don't know. Han? That was Sharing you felt. We don't understand how it can hurt."

The smuggler flinched at Luke's use of the plural pronoun. "Sharing?" he almost moaned. "Sharing? That's... that's DYING!"

"What? Han, I don't understand."

The words did not come easily. Han did not even know why he was explaining this, except that his utter desolation made him long for someone to help him escape before it swallowed him up completely. "I've been on my own for as long as I can remember, Luke. I learned early not to trust anyone, not to let anyone see how much they could hurt me. I learned it 'cause I had to. I trust Chewie, and I trust you. I can't think of anyone else. It never mattered before. I was happy... I thought I was, anyway, which is practically the same thing. But now..."

"Now you've tasted Sharing. Others who live with others, helping them." Luke was beginning to understand.

"I trust Chewie with my ship. I'd trust you both with my life. But... But I can't trust...all those people... with my... my soul!" He stopped again, for a long, long moment. "And I wanted to! I've been alone, and I never thought it could hurt this much. But I can't do that! I can't!" Again, he buried his face in the blankets.

For a horrified moment, Luke thought his friend might be crying, and his world trembled. Han was the pillar of strength, always confident; he was indestructible and indefatigable, always ready with a wisecrack. Luke was perplexed; it took him a few moments to think of something he could do.

*"Han?"* he called hesitantly. He was not certain he would be heard.

Solo jerked as if shot.

*"Han, you don't have to if you don't want to."*

"Wh-what did you say?"

"You heard me." *"There's only one of me, Han."*

"But you're part of the Tactalke, now."

Luke shrugged. "Yes. But I'm also just me. I am not 'we.' It's kind of hard to explain. There are..." he paused briefly.

*"A hundred and seventy-three,"* Roan supplied.

"...a hundred and seventy-three members of this family-sept. A lot of them are also members of other septs. I haven't touched them all; I probably never will. 'We' can just mean two, you and I."

The smuggler did not speak or move. Luke waited for him to respond. When he did not, Luke continued, worried. *"Han, I owe you everything. All I can offer you in return is a promise: you'll never have to be that lonely again."* "Of course," he added aloud, "I'm going to Share with Leia as soon as I can, if I can. Then there'll be three of us."

Han looked up, doubtful. "You an' the princess... an' me?" He made himself sound like an unnecessary and unwanted excrement.

Luke grinned. At least he was getting answers, now. "Nope. You and me and Leia."

The Corellian shook his head. "I don't think I could," he said in a low voice.

"We can try. Sharing doesn't hurt; that was your paranoia. You should be able to consciously control that."

"What about...them?" Han could still feel the multitudes who had surrounded him before, and shuddered.

"I'll send them away, block them. You know how effective that is. You blocked me before, and sent me spinning all the way back to Roan."

"I did?" Solo sounded surprised. He thought about it. "Is that what I did?"

"Uh-huh. Hold on a second." *"Roan? You and the other have to go away for a while. You frighten him: you're too many."*

"All right. Good luck." Roan's almost ever-present touch faded, and they were alone.

"They're gone, Han." *"This is me. Can you see me?"*

The smuggler stared, his eyes blank. "Yeah..." Luke's Otherself was the same color as his lightsabre's blade: a white so pure it showed a tinge of blue.

*"And I see you here with me."*

Han became aware that he had an Otherself, too; bluer than Luke's, with a touch of green, but, much to his astonishment, no less brilliant.

*"Now we share space between us, here."* Luke's Otherself expanded slowly across the gap dividing the two.

Han had to concentrate to keep his reflexes from tearing him away.

Skywalker stopped at the halfway point. *"This is a Sharing. You participate; you aren't acted upon. You must help. I can't engulf you; I can't do all the work. You join with me in the center, here."*

Tentatively, shyly, the Corellian reached across the gap and stopped just short of Luke. He could not bring himself to move any closer.

*"One more step, Han...can't you feel it?"* There was tension apparent in Luke's voice; tension and anxiety. He could feel it, too, building...growing... a tautness and expectancy that was inside himself and stretched across the void. *"One more step. One step,"* Luke urged him.

Han moved to meet him and walked into glory.

*Friendship/love/ little-brother-I-never-had/trust you/I'm older, I'm more experienced/You don't know what you're getting into, kid/ but I'll help/ if I can/if you let me/if you want me to...fear: I want to help/will not be rejected/again! / Friendships are just sources of pain--don't/*

*awe/hero-worship/mentor, second class /nobody is in Ben's class!// I always wanted to be free--no one I ever knew is as free as you/take me with you: teach me!*

*Teach you? What can I teach you? How to fear? How to fight? You don't need to know how to live my kind of life--you don't belong down here with me, scraping out a living from what's left after the Empire and the Companies are finished.*

*That! Indomitability /refusal to surrender your honor!*

*Honor!/scorn*

*Yes! Old word/out of fashion in Empire - old truth!*

*Can't eat honor, kid, and you've ever starved on a strange planet where you got dumped because you wouldn't help the cargomaster cheat the captain/ Corellians don't have ideas about peoples' natural rights. No one has any rights/ there's no such thing/ there're only the privileges you or your ancestors earned, and the duties that go with them/ that's Corelli, and that's why I left. There's duties for everyone and damn few privileges for most, and no room in the structure for someone to earn himself into the privileged classes anymore. I wanted to make my own way...*

*That's an extremely depressing concept...*

*No one ever said life was fun, kid/ pain/terror-of-being-alone/wordless image of a nine-year-old child living by his wits in a tenement only minutes from the city's spaceport, and surviving to escape on one of the ships at fifteen-*

*shock/horror/astonishment/admiration/ How can anyone survive like that? How can anyone that young live alone for six years?*

*I was smarter than some, and luckier than most/ No friends, first off; my older brother told me that just before he died. He was knifed by his best friend in a fight over a girl they both wanted to pair. He couldn't understand why his friend had done it...never did. I did, even then: Sedre did it because he believed he could, and saw no reason not to; Jes/time-dulled grief/thought Sedre loved him as much as he loved Sedre. That's a mistake I never made./*

*Hopelessness/despair/...and I want to be your friend, more than anything I ever wanted before. I owe you too much to ever impose on you/I want to be like you/ I don't know how/I want to stay with you so I can learn/ wild/free/independent/resourceful/so good at flying/ fighting/everything you do/all this I want to learn!*

*Hell, kid, you fight as well as me right now/ inarticulate concept of a Knight, imbued with*

magical Force, fearlessly taking on all comers  
and always succeeding. He could not fail, for  
his victories were pre-ordained, inescapable/

*Stars around us! That's not me--that's Ben!*

*It's you/not right now, maybe/ I don't understand  
the Force/whatever it is/whatever it does/it works  
for you/maybe you and Vader are the only two  
people left who use it/ordinary people like me can't  
understand it/*

*"Can't?" Don't be silly. You've been using the Force  
for as long as I've known you/*

*???/Luke belonged to an ancient tradition/  
thousands of years old/Jedi Knights from the  
Dawn of the Republic/famous in military and  
political history/destined for greatness in the  
Rebellion/obviously destined for fight and  
inevitably defeat Darth Vader and restore the  
Republic/Use the Force? Me? I don't even  
believe it exists!*

*You know it exists/ you use it whenever you play a  
hunch, or your hands react faster than your brain,  
like in your draw/even with the Force actively helping  
me, I can't draw and fire a blaster as fast or as  
accurately as you.*

*That just takes practice, kid. Anyone can learn that  
if they have the physical coordination/self-image of  
an unlettered roughneck who scorned all homes and  
histories but secretly wanted one desperately, to give  
himself a perspective against which to measure  
himself/sensation of discomfort around those who had  
homes/families/places-to-belong/Corelli is not such a  
place/years of searching the stars for one/*

*No one who can argue like you should consider  
himself unlettered/you managed to talk your way  
out of trouble more than once/your tongue's almost  
as fast as your sidearm and as sharp as that blade  
in your boot/And you have found a home, whether  
or not you realize it. You're a Rebel officer, now, and*

*you belong with us/*

*Officer?/Incredulity/*

*Sure. You're our Chief Scout. Leia proposed it, I  
seconded it, and the High Command approved it/*

*????/A place to belong?/I don't trust idealists/  
the Princess proposed it?/I thought she didn't/  
like me/echoes of shimmery erotic fantasies |and  
embarrassment that Luke was seeing them| about  
that delicate and autocratic young Senator/*

*You didn't dream any differently than I did/images  
based first on the hologram, only later on the flesh-  
and-blood reality/boy, I wish I had your imagination;  
I'd've never thought of that one!/*

*Embarrassment/Stop it/I thought she didn't like  
me/she's a princess and a Senator and a Rebel  
important enough to attract Darth Vader's  
personal attention |shudder!|/self-image of an  
untutored gutter brat/just a hired pilot versus  
the young Knight who rescued her in the nick of  
time/then saves the entire Rebellion in that same  
nick/*

*You frightened me, then/*

*???/How could I scare you?*

*I was afraid of the competition you represent |carefully  
present tense| /You're larger than life, a hero out of  
nowhere.../*

*No, that was you/*

*Not from where I stood, then/*

*Then?/*

*Now that we've Shared |yes, that's what this is|/After  
Sharing, anyone else's companionship is less/ I got that  
personal "reward" you were thinking of earlier/but we've*

*Shared more fully than she and I did then/I'm closer to  
you than I am to her/*

bewilderment/cynical curiosity about why Luke  
was so rewarded and not him/

*She was afraid you'd laugh at her/reject her/mock her/  
your obviously greater experience in everything  
|including love| made her feel like a child in comparison/  
she wouldn't risk your laughing at her/she wanted to  
keep your respect/*

*???!!!/She cared that much for what I thought of  
her?!/?That's... that's not real!/Don't use "love" as  
a synonym for casual sex, Luke--it's not right/love  
is something special/I don't think I'll ever love  
anyone the way you love her/*

*No? How much do you love her?*

*What?!*

*gentle laughter/I can tell. It's in every shade of your  
voice when you talk about her/think about her/  
dream about her/*

*Yeah, well...*

*We're going back to Erissin as soon as you can travel,  
and we're going to ask Leia to join this tiny family-sept  
of ours with all the details the two of us can think up  
between now and then/*

*You... are... out... of... your... mind!/  
Complete sincerity/*

*Possibly/but I'm also in yours, so it's okay. You're the  
sanest man I know/*

Chewbacca found the door closed when he returned to check on his captain and his shipmate, and decided Han had gone to sleep. Rather than risk waking him, the Wookiee found other things with which to keep himself busy. But several hours later, after hearing nothing from inside the room for what he considered an unreasonable amount of time, he opened the door to check on them.

Han and Luke were lying on their beds, facing one another. Both were quite still, and did not seem to be breathing.

"Not both of them!" Chewie wailed, bewildered.

Luke looked up blearily. "You... Wookiee. Shut up. I've already got a headache."

Chewbacca was delighted. Luke was conscious again! He turned eagerly to his partner, then stopped. Han had not moved.

"Captain?" he called. "Captain?"

Han stirred. He lifted his head and tried to focus on his co-pilot. It was hard; he had been deep in the Sharing when Chewbacca interrupted. "'T's okay, Chewie," he murmured reassuringly. "Ev'rything's jus' grand." *"Thanks, kid."*

*"Any time."*

=====

the end

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