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## The Long Way Home

by [Marcia Brin](#)

How could he have been so wrong? He had chased that damn ship for nothing! Skywalker was not on board. That Corellian -- what was his name? --Solo, had radioed that there were three on board: himself, his vlookiee co-pilot and a 'lady friend'. The Princess, he assumed. No Skywalker.

Angrily, he paced the room, his eyes on the vidscreen showing the Bospin landing pad on which the Corellian's ship had settled. Force readings. He had gotten strong Force readings. From what? Or, rather, whom?

Not the Princess. A mild Force-sensitive, at most. Nor the Wookiee. He had never known one to actually use the Force, though they did have an affinity for it. Yes! An affinity. A Wookiee would be drawn to a Force-user, even an unconscious one.

The Corellian.

He strode to the screen, staring at the figures now exiting the ship. Come out, damn you. Further, into the light. He hit the telescopic button and the image zoomed closer. Frozen, his hand poised over the button, he gazed blindly at the face displayed on the screen.

Hannell!

He saw the mother in the boy's face. For the merest instant, the years slipped away and he was back in the sunlit days. But it was nothing more than a long-dead image, with no power to touch him and no importance in his life, and it faded like mist on a summer morning.

Yes, this could work to his advantage. very nicely. The emperor knew about Skywalker; it would be difficult to use Harl's whelp for his own purposes. But Hannell...first, he would have to get Skywalker. He could use Hannell for that --a friend, in trouble, sending, unconsciously, through the Force for help. Pain should do that, though he would have to be very careful not to harm Hannell.

After that, the boy was his. A small charade, to keep Palpatine from guessing Hannell's importance, and he would be free to move toward his own goal.

Satisfied now, he moved purposefully to the door.

That the person he so casually decided to torture and use was his son was of no more import to him than the decor of the room.

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The ship waited, unmoving and silent, in the shadow of the planet's moon. A sinister reputation it had, far out of proportion to its size. It was, in truth, its occupant around whom the reputation had grown, and he was generally given a wide berth. Intelligent, cunning, ruthless and cruel, he had brought a new dimension to bounty hunting.

Right now, he waited patiently for the Executor to arrive. He had just finished checking his 'cargo' , still safely ensconced in carbon-freeze. It would not do to return Lord Vader's prize to him in a damaged condition.

He was unconcerned about the Hut. Boba Fett worked for no one but himself; he was not in Jabba's employ. If he did not 'find' Han Solo for the Hut, that was not his problem.

There were few things in the galaxy that Boba Fett was afraid of. Darth Vader was one of them.

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Pain was the first thing he became aware of, a single lightning stab that blazed through him, and was gone. His body shuddered in its wake, as his sluggish, strangely wayward mind struggled to identify it. Then he remembered: the carbon-freeze! The searing pain that had started through him before he was lost in that endless limbo had completed its journey.

Water; he needed water. He couldn't remember ever being this thirsty before. He tried to moisten his lips, but did not succeed. He wondered idly if he should open his eyes. Why? he decided. I'd probably only find myself staring into Jabba's ugly, gloating face. In my condition, it'd probably kill me.

After a few minutes, he realized that, like it or not, he was going to have to take a peek. Cautiously, he opened his eyes, and quickly shut them again. Wrong move. Weren't ceilings supposed to stay in one place?

"Well, well, how are we feeling?" a voice asked cheerfully.

Who the hell was that? It didn't sound like anyone Jabba would have working for him.

"Why don't we open our eyes and see how we feel?"

"We already know how we feel," he snapped. "Lousy."

"Maybe this will help." (Why did that damn joker have to sound so relentlessly cheerful?)

There was a sudden stab at his arm, and the hiss of a discharging syringe. He yelped, more from surprise than pain. Before he could say anything, a pair of hands helped him to a sitting position.

"Come, come now. Let's open our eyes. We'll feel much better."

"And what if we fall down?" he grumped, but slowly opened his eyes. Pleased that the room stayed put, he sought the source of the voice. The man looked like a kindly uncle.

He didn't trust kindly uncles.

Glancing around, he could see that he was in a large and well-equipped medcenter. He couldn't remember Jabba having anything this extensive at his headquarters. A sudden flash of white outside the door on the other side of the room caught his eye.

Storm troopers!

Where the hell was he?

Reading the question in his eyes, the man beamed cherubically. "You're on the Executor."

Executor? THE Executor? Vader's ship? Damn, he knew the son-of-a-bitch looked too friendly! He gauged his chances of making a break. Less than zero, he decided glumly.

The doctor patted his shoulder. "Now you just sit there while finish my examination."

This was all very confusing. "What's the point?"

The man seemed surprised. "You've been through quite an ordeal," he replied. "If there have been any ill effects, well, we're (back to that damn plural again, he thought savagely) here to see you make a complete recovery."

"Why" he asked harshly. "so I'll be fit for more of Vader's hospitality?"

From the blank expression on the doctor's face, he realized that the man did not know what he was talking about. Well, it had Lken place on Bespin. He knew that doctors on Imperial cruisers also served other purposes than merely healing, and wondered if the man were really as kindly as he appeared. Or was he just afraid of harming Vader's special 'guest'?

Hours later, lying on his bed in the darkened room, he still had not puzzled it out. Though the door was now closed and he could no longer see them, he knew they were still there, his faceless, armored guards. He was definitely not free to go. Yet -- us far, anyway --he had been treated very well.

Why? What was Vader up to? If the Imperial wanted him, why give him to Fett in the first place? Why the whole charade? And Vader meant to send him to Jabba, why was he here?

Jabba. He knew that Jabba would have taken him apart, inch by leisurely inch, and while he was no more fond of pain than anyone else, some part of him desperately wished the Hut had him now. In the end, all the outlaw would have had from him was his life. Vader wanted the people he loved. And, maybe, something more.

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The passage of two days had not made things any clearer. He had been well cared for, but left pretty much alone. He knew, though, that he would find out something soon; they had come for him at last, a small detail of interchangeable white figures. Where they were taking him, he had no idea.

It seemed they had been walking forever. Damn, this was one big ship! Finally, they stopped before a closed door and the sergeant in charge pressed a small buzzer to one side.

"Enter," the deep, familiar (much too familiar) voice rumbled over the 'com, even as the door slid open, revealing a small dining table, set for two, with the massive black figure seated at the far end.

His stomach tightened and a shudder went through him. Bespin, over again. He hadn't gotten to eat, that time; they'd gone on to...other things instead. A swell of panic, born in the memory of that pain, threatened to overwhelm him.

Damn you! Not in front of that bastard! It wasn't easy, but he fought it down. With a fair stab at his old insouciant air he strolled in casually and stood in front of the other set place, directly opposite the Dark Lord.

"For me? You shouldn't have."

"Oh, it was no trouble at all, Captain," Vader said, more than a hint of amusement in his voice. Han had the feeling the Sith knew very well that his stomach bore a great resemblance to jelly. Well, hell, never being afraid was insanity, not courage. Shaken or not, he'd never let it rule his life. He'd always faced his fears down, and he would do it again now.

Vader inclined his head toward the seat and Solo took it for the command that it was. As soon as he was seated, the sergeant bowed and indicated that he and his men would wait right outside. That surprised him somewhat, though he was sure that Vader felt pretty secure.

Almost immediately, a servo-droid scooted over and filled both his glass and his plate. The food both looked and smelled delicious, but he eyed it suspiciously. Vader wanted something from him, and there was no telling what was in it.

"I assure you, Captain," Vader rumbled suddenly, causing him to jump, "there's nothing in there but food."

He flushed at the amused and indulgent tone, feeling like a foolish child. Somehow, though, he was inclined to believe the Sith Lord. Putting an I-always-intended-to-eat-it expression on his face, he dove into the food.

The dinner was conducted in silence, which puzzled him. When the hell was Vader going to get to the point? Even when he cheerfully accepted the second helping the servo-droid offered him --he really was very hungry --the Dark Lord made no comment.

As he finished eating, he felt unspoken amusement in the air and looked up. "You have quite an appetite, Captain."

It was the last thing he had expected, and he found himself suppressing a grin. Shrugging, he spoke nonchalantly. "Purely a defense mechanism. It helps me to keep a balance with my metabolism."

His concern was growing along with his confusion. Vader was going out of his way to be pleasant and it made him as suspicious -- and worried --as hell. There

was a sudden sound of fingers tapping on the far side of the table, which ended as abruptly as it had begun. Pleasantries were over; business was about to begin.

"We have much to discuss, you and I, Captain," the Dark Lord said at last.

He nodded. "I'll say. Where're Leia and Chewie?"

The Sith seemed to be considering his answer carefully. Then, with an air of reluctance, he said, "I do not have them."

"Why did you tell me?" he asked, curious at the admission.

Vader shrugged. "In the end, you would have demanded to see them face to face, and I could not produce them. I do nothing that does not advance my purpose."

"That's the point, isn't it? You do have a purpose. I might as well tell you that, whatever it is, I won't go along with it."

"I would prefer your...cooperation, Captain," Vader said coolly, "but I don't need it."

Han continued leaning back in his chair casually, an unperturbed smile on his face, but something inside tightened briefly at the words. There was no doubt that Vader meant exactly what he said, or that he could do it. Given enough time, the Empire could break anyone. The thought of suicide flashed across his mind; he pushed it away, but a part of him wondered if, before long and as he was pushed closer to betraying everyone he loved, the idea would not become more attractive.

He sought to forestall Vader actually getting to his point. "Luke?" he asked. "What happened to Luke?"

"He, too, escaped. Somewhat the worse for wear, I'm afraid," the Sith answered, sounding anything but.

A sigh escaped him. They were all safe, all of them. He had always refused to believe in something he could not see or touch, but he found himself giving a silent prayer to whatever gods --or Force --that be, for their escape. Her image rose, unbidden, before his eyes. He had that, no matter what Vader did to him or took from him, he had that. And nothing, nothing, would make him betray her.

"Skywalker suffered, among other things, a bit of a shock," the Dark Lord went on. "I informed him that I was his father."

Startled, he almost lost his balance. "I...you're not ... are you?"

"Of course not. I'm yours."

He was too stunned to even move, staring blankly at the Sith. Then he leaned back and began to laugh.

"You're crazy!"

"I am many things; insane is not one of them."

"Do you think I believe you? YOU lied to Luke."

"True, but it served my purpose. Whether you believe it or not, I am not lying now."

No matter how hard he tried, Han couldn't think of anything to say. Feeling totally at a loss for the first time in his life, he stared at his plate, trying to organize his thoughts. Vader? His father? It didn't even make sense. There was no point in trying to remember; his memory started from the time when he was about ten (he really wasn't sure of his age, actually) .Laver Solo, the man who had taken him in and cared for him from the time he lost his memory until Laver's death when Han was about fifteen, had never told him anything, partly because Laver actually knew very little and partly because the doctors had advised against revealing even what he did know, in light of the fact that the child had erected that mental barrier precisely to keep the past, and what- ever event had disturbed him so badly, away.

He had a terrible feeling that he knew now what he had hidden behind that wall.

"Assuming that what you say is true --and I'm not saying I believe you --what is it you want? I have my doubts that you're motivated by any surge of paternal affection."

"Quite correct, Hannell--"

"Is that my name?" he asked, torn between his curiosity about his hidden past and his reluctance to play Vader's game.

"It was my father's name. Your middle name is your maternal family name: Kenobi."

He hadn't thought anything the Dark Lord had left to say could stun him as much as the previous declaration of parenthood had, but he had been wrong. In disbelief, he stared across the table at the Sith.

"Kenobi?" he whispered, trying to assimilate this latest shock.

"Amusing, isn't it?" Vader rumbled. "I'm quite sure he must have recognized you; I did, with no trouble. "

"But...why didn't he say anything?"

The Sith shrugged. "Concern, no doubt. Fear of breaking your barrier and forcing you to confront that which made you put it there in the first place. He did not wish to hurt you. "

"You, of course, have no such worries."

"None at all. In fact, I consider it essential, before I can open you to the Force."

Suddenly, Han was desperately afraid. That barrier had been a sanity-saving defense for him, and he cringed at the thought of disturbing it. He did not want to know, to live again the events that had led to the wall's construction. Somewhere, in a corner of his soul, a small echo from his past, weeping mournfully, whispered in his mind and was gone.

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He came out of the dream screaming, a sound that dropped to a steady whimpering as he reached full awareness. He realized that he was rocking from side to side in the bed, his cover lying tangled on the floor where he had tossed it. It had been this way the past three nights, ever since...

He sat up abruptly, shivering. Damn that bastard! Damn him. He didn't care what he destroyed to get what he wanted. Why couldn't he have left it alone, his past? He certainly hadn't needed it; he hadn't wanted to remember.

The Sith had not cared. What he wanted was all that mattered. Solo had barely had the chance to assimilate what he had heard before the attack came. Things had become hazy after that. He remembered falling, endlessly falling, down a great darkness, the years slipping swiftly away. There, before his plummeting figure, stood his barrier, twenty-two years strong. Yet he could see it cracking in front of his mind's eye, crumbling before the Force.

The pain. He remembered the blinding pain that followed in the wake of that searing attack. Seemingly detached from his body, he watched himself writhing on the floor and then, later, huddling against the wall, curled into a ball, whimpering softly.

Whirling, racing, dancing, the memories had returned, playing out his past like a holovid, trailing behind them an aching sense of loss. Good years. They had



been good years, 'til the end. Loving, learning years. He had barely been able to contain his wonder at how fortunate a child he had been, surrounded by an adoring family and raised in the incredible and challenging environment of a Jedi enclave. How rich his life had been then. A sudden bitterness welled up inside him. It had almost been as rich again, before his...father had destroyed it. Twice. He owed his father twice for wrecking his life.

The images rose before him again. His mother, gentle and loving, but strong. His coloring, a halfway point between his mother's quiet browns and his father's flaming red hair and emerald eyes. And his grandfather. Gods, how he had worshipped that man! It hurt to think that he had met his grandfather again and had not known him. Worse, in his ignorance, he had insulted and laughed at him. A spasm of pain went through him. He hoped his grandfather had understood.

The Force. Han Solo had sneered at the thought, but the child he had been had known better. Had those terrible events not occurred, he would have started formal training in a few years. Talent, he had had. Both his grandfather and his...father (Strange. He had no trouble accepting everything else, now that the barrier had been removed, but that he constantly stumbled over.) had agreed on that. His mother --somewhat surprisingly, as both her parents had been Jedi masters --was only a mild Force-sensitive, but he had taken after his father and grandparents.

Could he touch it again, now? Or had all those years of rejection somehow put a barrier between them? He hesitated momentarily, Han Solo reluctant, Hannell Vader eager, then crossed his legs and leaned back against the wall. Closing his eyes, he tried to blank his mind. Relax. Relax. Float free. Reach out.

For several minutes, nothing happened. Then, as he was beginning to feel foolish, he felt a sudden, distant hitch, as if the Universe had rolled over a bump, and he was soaring outward, racing along glowing lines of the Force. Dazzled by its beauty, awed by its vast power, he danced along its shimmering spheres, the signposts of the Force-sensitive, himself a ball of flaming magnificence. Its music, now soft and haunting, now roaringly powerful, seemed to fill his being, and he was becoming drunk in its glory. He wished never to leave.

Then a voice called his name.

It came from everywhere and nowhere, surrounding him and vibrating in the recesses of his mind. And he had heard it before.

Hannell.

Grandfather?

Yes.

I-I don't understand. I saw my -he stumbled over the word -father cut you down.

Only my physical form, Hannell. As he had grown over the last twenty years, so had I. At the instant of his blow, I joined the Force.

There was silence for a moment.

You knew who I was?

Yes. Had there been more time...but I feared to challenge your barrier so quickly. Your vehement rejection of the Force --an echo of the horrors you knew on that last day. And you could not be taught until you believed again. No one can be brought to the Force unwillingly.

I'm sorry, Grandfather, for the way I acted. For the things I said. There is no need, Hannell. You had no way of knowing; your path has travelled a different landscape. By your lights, I was a crazy old man. I have long owed you an apology.

Me?

I could not find you that night, the night of the Purge. Part of me has always been angry that I did not stay. My only excuse is Luke. I had promised his mother, as she lay dying, that I would take care of him.

I understand, Grandfather. In the end, it all worked out: both Luke and I survived. If you had stayed, perhaps all three of us would have been lost. His tone grew wistful and childlike. All those years lost, wasted. I could have learned so much.

You did! Force-training you lost, true. But that is only part of what a Jedi learns, and is mostly learned by actual experience in the company of older Jedis. More time was spent teaching the disciplines that a Force-user would need before he or she could be trusted with so great a power. They are the disciplines of a warrior also, and those you have gained over the years. Many never learned them and became teachers or healers, rather than knights. As you already know them, your Force-training should be easy. Especially with your Enclave background.

Han hesitated.

Yes, yes! Listen to Obi-wan, youngling. Knows he does.

Who--? Master Yoda! He remembered seeing the great Master at an Enclave ceremony. Awed by the presence of a Jedi master, he gave the mental equivalent of a bow. But, Master, I am too old.

No, no. To start from the beginning, yes. But told you already Obi-wan has, warrior discipline you already have. And an Enclave child were you. You lived surrounded by the Force. Understand it you do. Only in its use have you lost time. Ahead of your friend, are you.

Luke? Yes, yes. No patience, that one. Always it cannot be done. Does not really believe. Thinks he does, but he does not. Grew up with it you did. You believe. He wants to, but came to it too late. Doubts has he. They cripple him. Maybe now he has learned. Hope so I do. All worse it will be if we lose him to Vader.

We won't, Han said firmly. As for me, though, what can I do? I'm trapped here.

Teach you we will. This way, through the Force. There will be times when you are alone, youngling. Learn enough, you can, to use Vader's absences to escape. Then we will finish your training.

Won't he know? vNo, Hannell. A Force-sensitive can always detect another. Even get a feel for how powerful the other is. But, unless it is being directed at them or is being broadcast in a widespread or uncontrolled manner, they cannot tell when i t. is being used. As long as we maintain a closed circuit among us, and are careful--Hannell!

What's wrong? vl-I'm tired, I think. Go now, youngling. Pushed too hard, you have, for a first time. Next time, we begin.

There was a moment of disorientation, then he was back in his body, sitting on his bed, his back against the wall. He felt utterably weary in every muscle, every bone, but his soul was exultant. The magnificence he had touched still echoed inside him. And the knowledge that he was not alone gave him comfort.

Too tired to even lie down, he closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep, a smile still playing across his lips.

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The sweat poured down his brow and into his eyes, partially blinding him. Slowly giving ground before Vader's strokes, he reached back with his right foot --only to have it slip out from under him, and he went down, breathing heavily.

It was his fourth session with a lightsabre in the five weeks he had been on the Executor. They weren't training sessions; that was not their purpose. Not that he hadn't learned~ he had. But it had been because of his own conditioning, his finely-honed reflexes, superb instincts and natural fighting abilities --and instruction through the Force from his grandfather, who had been a superb and elegant swordsman. In the actual sessions, though, Vader was using the Force against him, deliberately, and with no effort to hide what he was doing.

No, these outings were to keep him off-balance, to humiliate him in an effort to break his resistance. Grimly, he set his jaw. It would not have worked even without the support he was getting from his grandfather and Master Yoda. Vader did not know just how stubborn Corellians were --even those who came to the designation late, as he had. Heritage notwithstanding, he was infinitely more Corellian than he was sith, though not a drop of Corellian blood flowed in his veins.

As he recovered his breath, he eyed his father, who stood silently observing him. Vader expected him to be winded; so he was, though his intense training had progressed to the point where he could easily have drawn on the Force to provide him with all the strength and energy he needed. But he was carefully shielding his growing skill and power from the Sith Lord.

Vader had said enough for him to get an idea of how the Imperial intended to use him, and it had sent shivers down his soul. A walking, talking, breathing food tray. He had always known that Vader had never intended to fully train him in the Force, to raise up a potential rival; he had come to realize that the Dark Lord merely desired to open him to the Force, so that Vader could use him to amplify the Sith's own not inconsiderable powers. A vessel to pull the Force through.

Not for ordinary occasions, either. No, the Dark Lord was ambitious. Vader had nothing left to him but power~ he had thrown everything else away. Now he maneuvered for the Empire itself. And the Sith needed help to tackle Palpatine. For this, he would use his son.

His son! A hardness flared in the Corellian's --he would keep that allegiance~ it meant much to him --eyes. To plan to use one of your own in this fashion...the word 'son' meant nothing to the figure before him. When he looked at Vader, he no longer saw him as the others did. Now he saw through the eyes of the Force, and the Sith was a monstrous darkness, a massive shadow that twisted the glowing lines of the Force into agonized shapes. A great and enormous evil.

He had made one attempt at suicide. It had come early, within the first four days of his dinner with Vader. Despite the reassurance of his contact with his grandfather and Master Yoda, he had, in the face of his father's enormous power, given in to a moment of despair. If he were the only one in jeopardy, he would never have considered it; not while he was alive and well, and capable of still fighting. But he wasn't. Vader wanted to use him against the people he loved. Not again.

One traitor in the Vader family was enough.

The Sith had been very careful, though. Han was being housed in a relatively luxurious suite, but nothing had been left behind that he might have used on himself. And one trooper was always positioned inside the suite.

His chance came, however, in the form of an arrogant young lieutenant, new to the Executor. Unfortunately for the Imperial, he was not going to get any older in his position. He had been astounded to find a prisoner, and a rebel one at that -- not to mention a Corellian -- treated so well. Unfamiliar with Vader, and cutting the sergeant's explanation off with an impatient wave of his hand, he let his antagonism toward the other guide his actions.

Picking up on this, Han realized that he might be able to goad the lieutenant into doing what the storm troopers had prevented him from doing. He went to work, using his sharp tongue and sardonic wit, watching as the Imperial's temper quickly reached flashpoint.

It came at last, the final straw. The lieutenant, a scion of an aristocratic Imperial family, pampered and kow-towed to from birth, would not let some piece of Corellian vermin treat him in this fashion. The gun came up swiftly, taking deadly aim on the prisoner.

Time seemed to slow down. Every instinct screamed for him to take cover, and it took all of his determination and strength to stand there, closing his mind to the thought of the laser blast slamming into him, slicing through muscle and bone. Even as the lieutenant's finger tightened on the trigger, the gun flew out of his hand, the shot going wild: even as the weapon clattered against the wall, the lieutenant staggered, clutching his throat. It was over in a few minutes and Vader calmly stepped over the fallen figure, unemotionally advising Admiral Piett, who stood behind him, to see that there was no repeat of the incident.

For a moment they faced each other silently. Then the Sith spoke quietly. "A valiant effort, Hannel. It took courage and determination. But futile. I will not allow you to harm yourself. Remember that."

Turning on his heel, Vader strode from the room. The body had already been removed. When the door closed behind the Dark Lord, only Han and a single trooper were left.

He remained staring intently at the door. You don't have to worry, he thought, I won't try it again. The casual unconcerned murder of the lieutenant had brought an important realization.

He had been thinking only of himself, of his desire not to be used to harm those he cared about. He knew now that he had a greater responsibility, to the Order, to the galaxy, to the future. It was his obligation to stand against his father, a Vader to oppose a Vader's treachery and evil. If he had to sacrifice his life to do so, so be it. If he had to place the galaxy before those he loved, he would do so, though he walked in pain all his life.

Sacrifice, duty, responsibility, discipline. A Jedi's obligation: a Jedi's burden. He would bear it as long as the Order required it of him.

He did not, could not, hate his father. Corellians had notoriously hot tempers, and long-standing feuds were not uncommon, but Han was a survivor in a particularly vicious jungle. He had stayed alive by learning to fight cool, to control his hate, to use his anger as a goad, but never to let it control him. Grand- father had been right: he had learned much control through the years that could stand him in good stead as a Jedi.

There was more to it than fighting discipline, though. with his barrier gone, he remembered the father he had once known. Hair flaming in the sun, eyes like gleaming gems, a laugh that shook walls. He remembered the man who had made him laugh when he was sick and comforted him when he had wept. But, above all, the man who had loved him.

All lost. In one moment of anger, in one wrong step onto a dark path, all lost.

In his dreams, the lost child he had been called for his father, and wept.

But that was when he was alone. When Vader stood before him, as now, he shielded those thoughts carefully. He knew the Sith would use anything against him that he could.

Swinging his sabre, he slowly got to his feet. He had a feeling that the session was over for today. Vader had failed to get a rise out of him. There was, of course, no way of telling, but he had a sneaking suspicion that it irritated the Sith, which was fine with him.

"You seem to need more practice," Vader rumbled, his voice heavy with mock solicitousness.

He shrugged. "I guess I'll never be as good as my father," he replied sarcastically. "But then, neither was Harl Skywalker -- your old friend, remember him? --but that didn't stop you from killing him, did it?"

Vader stood ominously silent, but Han did not notice, caught as he suddenly was in the grip of his memories. He stared at the far wall, as the gentle image of his mother rose before his mind's eye. "You killed her, too. The gentlest, kindest, most loving person..." His voice trailed off as he watched her, graceful and serene, move through his past. It was as if she were there again. He could hear the sound of her laughter, feel her gentle touch, smell the scent of flowers that always lingered about her. A rage he had not known existed blazed from the ten year old child, but the man ruthlessly suppressed it. It was with a cold anger that he faced the Sith.

"Murderer. You murdered her. "

"It was not intentional, Hannell."

"Did you think she would just stand by and let you kill Harl Skywalker? A friend of both of yours? You knew what kind of person she was. You knew she wouldn't forgive what you had done -- probably the only thing she wouldn't have forgiven you for --and that she would try to stop you from killing Harl, as she couldn't stop you from betraying the Order. You didn't care. You murdered them both, fine people who loved you."

The blow took him by surprise; he had never gotten a rise out of Vader before. It was incredibly powerful and, caught unaware, he took its full force. He found himself slamming backward into the wall and he crumpled to the floor, his head ringing.

He was not sure how long he lay there, trying to focus his eyes, before he was assisted to a sitting position. He knew whose arm supported him and he tried to pull away, but his strangely leaden body would not obey his aching head.

"There is no point in antagonizing me, Hannell," a deep voice said quietly. "It will accomplish nothing."

I don't know about that, he thought wryly. It did wonders for my teeth.

Gradually the floor stopped moving and he struggled to his feet. Vader made no effort to help him. Turning to the motionless guards, the Dark Lord said, "Escort Captain Solo back to his quarters."

Han headed for the door, but stopped abruptly and turned back. His voice was emotionless, but lurking behind his eyes was the long-gone ten year old vho had not been able to understand why his world was falling apart.

"Why?" he asked. "You had everything: a family that adored you --and gods, I did adore you --friends who cared for you, an Order that respected you. You had a purpose. Everything you could have wanted. And you threw it away. You didn't lose it, you threw it away. Why, damn you, tell me why!"

He waited a moment, but there was no reply. Coldly, he turned on his heel and strode from the room, followed by his faceless guards.

Behind him, Vader stood, seemingly unmoved by Han's outburst, his right hand holding the lightsabre the Corellian had been using. Abruptly, he flung it away and stalked from the room. The sabre clanged loudly against the wall, then came to rest on the floor. It bore several indentations, as if it had been crushed in a furious grip.

Back in his quarters, Han stood motionless, his eyes closed, breathing deeply, rhythmically, deliberately, carefully controlling the emotions his last scene with Vader had aroused. Calm. Quiet. Relax. Feel the Force, flowing, soothing. Control. In all things, control.

He had learned well over the past five weeks. In a few moments, he felt completely relaxed and calm. Opening his eyes, he looked around. He had been given truly spacious quarters, consisting of a large bedroom and an even larger living room with comfortable furnishings, contained holotapes, music discs, exercise equipment --in fact, anything he wanted.

Except freedom. He had learned much. The discipline he had known in the past had been fighting discipline; he would never have been able to tolerate the confinement he had undergone since his arrival on the *Executor*. Now he waited. The right moment would come.

And if his body was trapped, his mind and soul could still soar. He never tired of dancing in the great web that was the Force, flying along in its blazing pathways, dazzled by its beauty. His whole being sang in harmony with its great chorus.

He would go now; it was time for another lesson. He marvelled that after so short a time he could bend something so mighty to his will, but Master Yoda and his grandfather were excellent teachers, he was a fast learner and his Force-potential, it appeared, was enormous.

Opening his senses, he immediately picked up the great dark force that was his father. Secure in his arrogance, Vader made no effort to shield his presence in the Force. That presence hovered in a distant part of the behemoth that was the *Executor*. Good. The next impression was of life, churning, overwhelming life. The ship itself breathed beneath him, its mighty heart stoking the fires of its engines. It was infested with life, organic and inorganic, large and small. And through it all wove the tentacles of the Force.

To think he had once separated everything into living and dead, and had been closed to the life-force that flowed through all things, shut off from the great pattern that unified everything that existed. Never again. He knew that now, were he to walk across a seemingly barren piece of ground, he would feel the life surging through him.

Not that his father would have opened him to this. No, Vader wanted a receptor, an amplifier, someone to funnel greater power through. The Sith was definitely not interested in an aggressive Force-user. It had been Master Yoda and his grandfather who had honed his Talent, fine-tuned it, and taught him to reach out further and further, drawing the Force to him as an energy source.



He felt a stab of regret. All those years lost. All those years walking in darkness. He sent his thoughts outward, shielding them carefully from Vader's pulsing blackness, and reveled in the echoes of the Force. He was making up for lost time.

Like a child with a new toy, he played in the great web, a dancing light among its myriad lights. It seemed to share his joy, echoing his laughter and welcoming him warmly. A new toy, but one he would never weary of.

He became aware suddenly of two other presences hovering near, watching him with warm affection and gentle amusement. Feeling slightly abashed at his unrestrained enthusiasm, he stilled his dancing thoughts sternly.

No, no, youngling, nothing wrong is there in this. Always you should see the glory as well as the power.

I will remember, Master.

Have a surprise for you, I do.

Surprise?

Yoda seemed to close in on himself. Han realized that the blaster had been blocking another presence, one Han recognized immediately, though he had never touched the other through the Force before.

Luke!

Yes, me! I finally worked up the nerve to return!

Hell, kid, you shouldn't have stayed away this long. You worried everybody. We're all entitled to a few mistakes. Force knows, I've had my share.

Well, now I can join you in that august company! I really pulled some boners. The important thing is, I think I finally learned from them. I'm just sorry it took so long for me to come back.

That's partly your uncle's fault, kid. You've got to let people experiment and make mistakes while they're growing up --you can't shelter them too much --or they never get ready. The first time they fall on their faces, it shakes their confidence too much. And that hurts. Believe me, I know!

Speaking of relatives, Han, I'm sort of pleased I unloaded one of 'mine' on you.

A real friend! Are you by any chance referring to my illustrious father? Han could 'see' Luke grin broadly.

I hate to say it, but better you than me! I can see how upset it makes you. I'll remember this, kid!

Luke's 'voice' sobered. Han, I wish there was something I could do. ...

I know, kid, I know. But there isn't anything.

Enough now, youngling. Time it is for another lesson. Soon it will be time to leave there; ready you must be. Then, here, to finish. And more work with the lightsabre you must do. Have one for you, I do. A proud, ancient weapon.

Han drew closer to their essences, though part of him thought eagerly of the ancient sabre that would speak to him of the ages it had witnessed. Not like the one Vader let him use in practice, newly made here on the Executor. Much later, joined again with his body, he slept contentedly, his very being vibrating with the resonances of the Force, while his shield formed a wall between him and the great shadow that breathed and roiled in another part of the ship.

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Something was in the air; he could feel it. He had seen Vader only three times in the two weeks since their confrontation. All were 'training' sessions, limited though they were, designed to make him more receptive to the Force, but not to teach him to actually use it.

Today, though, he could feel the tension surging through the lines of the Force radiating from Vader. The Dark Lord never made any effort to shield himself, either because he didn't believe Han could pick it up or because he didn't care if Solo did.

Han shivered slightly. He did not know exactly what decision the Sith had come to, but he knew he would not like it. Worse still, he could do nothing about it. It would take all his self-control, both the old fighting discipline and the newly-learned Jedi control, to keep from defending himself, but he would have to do it. Vader must not know that he had been training with Yoda and Obi-wan. Han was well aware that he was not yet ready to take his father on.

That had been, as Luke himself admitted, the younger man's mistake. The Tatooin had believed he was ready. Otherwise, he would not have come to Bespin; if he could not handle Vader, he could not help anyone, since Vader was clearly waiting for him. Well, Han thought, maybe in the end it turned out to be for the best. Both he and Luke had come to terms, at last, with who they were.

Solo suddenly sat bolt upright. Lost in his musings, he had failed to realize that Vader was approaching until this minute. The dark presence roiled outside Han's quarters, then the door slid open silently.

Vader entered alone, his great bulk seeming to dwarf the room. There was a brief glimpse of Solo's omnipresent guards outside before the door closed again. The Dark Lord seemed to hesitate momentarily, as if disturbed by a twinge of conscience. But it was only the distant echo of something long lost, and it faded as swiftly as it had come.

"The Emperor wishes to see me. I will be leaving tomorrow." Vader stopped directly in front of Solo and turned to face him. "Before I leave, I think it is time to test our progress."

"Our progress? Not mine, thank you. I hardly consider being used as a mobile food market a step forward." He cocked his head and eyed Vader questionably. "It really doesn't bother you, does it?"

"No."

"Well, that's unequivocal enough. Interesting to think that it was your anger at injustice that started you on this path, and now the only emotion left in you is anger."

He struggled to hold on to that thought in the time that followed. Vader's attack came swiftly. A vessel, nothing more, a pathway for Vader to draw the Force through to increase his own strength. And gods, it hurt. Nothing like the strength and light-ness he felt when he himself drew upon the great web; this was sheer agony. It seemed to burn his very soul as the blazing fire was pulled through him.

A part of him screamed for him to throw up a shield to defend himself as best he could, but he silenced that voice. At all cost, he must not give himself away, must not reveal his training. He must remember that he was not ready to face his father.

Then it was over. Whimpering to himself, he huddled in a heap as Vader towered over him, electric with an air of triumph.

"It worked!" The Sith's voice carried a ring of exultation. "And it will work again when I need it! Have no fear, Hannel, you will recover quite nicely." Without another glance at his son, he strode from the room.

Through a red haze, Han could sense the darkness that was his father receding. Still he waited until he felt safer. Then, with the agony that still burned in his soul, he sent himself forth along the lines of the Force. As he raced outward, and behind the confused condition of his thoughts, a part of him was wonderingly aware of the Force reaching out to him, vibrating with soothing tones, seeking to ease his pain and slow his headlong flight. Though weakened by his ordeal, he continued to drive himself forward and away from the twisted evil that was Vader. Then, suddenly, they were there, holding him firmly despite his struggles,

surrounding him with a cocoon of concern and caring. Surrendering to the pain at last, he wept softly while they soothed him.

Lean on the Force, Hannell. It will help. Draw it to you.

Shuddering slightly, he reached out to the great web and felt its fire fill him. Not burning this time, but warm and gentle, washing away the agony as a bath soothes a sore body, while its quiet lullaby filled him with peace. He felt his strength return- ing as the lines of power fed him.

You did well, youngling. Yoda's voice broke in after a while. Not easy was it, to let him hurt you so. Strong in discipline are you. I'm glad I did not fail you, Master. But I am not sure about next time, especially now that I know what to expect.

No next time will there be. When Vader next leaves the Executor, so will you. Reached the point, your training has, where you will be able to escape. Patience and control, youngling; you will have to exercise both.

He nodded. Yes, Master, I will.

Do you feel well enough for more instruction, Hannell?

It doesn't matter whether I do or don't, Grandfather, he replied grimly. I need more, and time is running out for all of us. And I can't always count on their coming at me when I'm at my best.

He reached out again to the Force, once more pulling its strength to him. Its song, glorious and welcoming, vibrated through every fiber of his being. For a moment, he floated on its radiance, then he reached again for the essences of his grandfather and Master Yoda.

I'm ready.

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He was ready. It was the day, the moment, he left this floating behemoth --and its dark master --behind. The Sith had been called back to the Emperor, a summons even he could not ignore, and the Uark Lord was preparing to leave even now. Just a little longer. Just a little more patience.

Patience. He had learned much about it these past eight weeks. He had never thought himself a hothead --though he knew that others did, and with just cause - -but he would never have made it through these two months without the training he had recently received. It had enabled him to tolerate a confinement that would have driven him crazy before.

The time for patience and discipline was not yet over. Though he was eager to go to Dagobah and finish his instruction, a part of him wanted, equally fiercely, to find the Rebels, his friends and Chewie. And Leia. His Leia. He knew how hard this must be on her. Not that it would be easy for Chewie, but the Wookiee was free to at least search for him. Leia, tied to a responsibility to the Alliance that she could not turn away from, could only wait, a much harder task. And Chewie also had not just lost his whole world and family, as Leia had. His own loss was just one more blow to someone already reeling under a series of them. He never ceased to marvel at her strength.

But he knew he could not return to them at this time. It had been a hard choice, perhaps the hardest he had ever had to make, but he had chosen Dagobah. With the Rebels, and without the completion of his training, he would just be another pilot --albeit an excellent one --and another gun. He would, in the end, be more valuable to them as a Jedi than as a soldier. So he would go to Dagobah, though the thought of her pain was an unceasing ache inside him.

He became aware of the essence of his father, deep in the lower recesses of the ship, where the various transports were located. The Executor was so massive that she held a full complement of vessels --some as large as the Falcon --in her belly. That was the place Vader would leave from, and where he himself would go after the Sith was gone.

He did not have to wait long. Scanning lightly, without actually beaming directly enough to disturb Vader, he followed the Dark Lord's progress as the Imperial left the Executor. Vader's presence moved swiftly away and then suddenly was gone, as if a door had slammed shut. Hyperspace; it completely cut the thread. His receptors open, he could 'hear' the collective sigh of relief that echoed through the ship as the Dark Lord disappeared.

Still he waited. He had the time and he would make sure Vader was well and truly gone. This was not the time to start acting hastily. Besides, there would be fewer people active during the ship's night shift. He settled into a chair.

He would take one of the freighter-sized vessels. Like the Falcon, they were highly-powered and heavily-armed. It would be good to feel the controls of a ship beneath his hands again. He was Corellian-raised, and the stars were as much his heritage as was the Force.

The time passed quickly. Without glancing up, he struck and the single guard who stayed inside his quarters with him crumpled to the floor without a sound. He rose and looked about him. Nothing here he wished to take with him. Placing a hand against the door, he closed his eyes and sought the lock. There. He had it now. Carefully he moved the locking mechanisms through their paces, but when he had finished he held the door closed.

Slowly, patiently, he built his shield. He would meet too many people to blanket each of them. Better to warp the space around him to fool the eye. Organic beings he passed would not see him, nor would holocams, but he would have to be very quiet. His sounds could still be heard.

Building and holding such a shield, especially for someone only partially trained, would be quite exhausting. It was actually easier to confuse an individual mind, but there were just too many on board, and he was liable to meet a large number together unexpectedly. So, hard as it was, he would have to carry his shield with him.

The first step would be especially hard. In addition to holding his shield, he would have to create the illusion that the door had remained closed. Silently, he opened it and stepped out, closing the door behind him. His two guards never moved. He continued on down the corridor, half-exhilarated by his success, half-afraid that it would not hold. A part of him expected to hear the alarm raised any second.

It was not until he was in the Tube, heading toward the hold, that he actually began to believe he was going to make it. When he reached the bay, he again held the Tube door closed while he scanned the room. Only one person was on duty; waiting for the night shift had been wise.

He was glad it was almost over; holding his shield was becoming harder by the minute. He slipped inside and, evaluating the ships with a professional eye, headed for a mid-sized vessel with a sleek and deadly look. As soon as he was inside, he dropped his shield and slumped wearily against a wall, then shook himself. Not yet. A couple of things left to do.

Gathering what strength he had left, he concentrated on the lone figure patrolling the bay. You don't really want to be here. It's dark and scary. (He noted with amusement that the guard had begun to look fearfully over his shoulder.) There are things out there and they're coming to get you. Nobody will care; they left you here. You're all alone.

The guard held out for a moment longer, then suddenly bolted out of the bay. Han sighed with relief. He was going to open the bay to the vacuum of space and he didn't really want to kill some poor slob just trying to stay alive.

With a gesture of his hand, he activated the bay doors, and as they slid open he kicked the ship's engine to life. He raced out into open space, using the last of his strength to throw out vibrations that hopefully would confuse the Executor's instruments just long enough.

Building up speed, he began to punch the coordinates for Dagobah into the navicomputer, with a silent prayer that Leia would understand. She will, a voice

whispered in the recesses of his mind. If there is one person who understands the meaning of duty, it is Leia Organa.

The ship had reached the right point and he slowly slid the lever back, throwing the vessel into hyperspace. He felt the familiar soaring in his soul as he watched the stars turn to streaks of light and then disappear.

A fierce exultation filled him. He had done it! Laughter welled up inside him, and he felt airy and light. Lightheaded is more like it, he thought wryly. You're ready to hit the floor.

He knew he should find a bed, but he was too exhausted to get up out of the chair. In fact, he preferred to sit there and watch the time tick away, each second bringing him closer.

To Dagobah.

It had taken twenty-two years and more light-years than he could ever count, but at long last he was going home. With a contented smile and a little sigh, he drifted off to sleep, while his silver bird carried him home.

***THE END***

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