

[Back To Index](#)

This story was written just for fun and is not an attempt to make money or infringe on any copyrights or trademarks. Only the original ideas contained within the works on this nonprofit web site are the property of their authors, and please do not copy or link these stories to any other website or archive or print without permission of the author.

A Matter of Responsibility

by [Sheila Paulson](#)

Luke Skywalker didn't know what it was that had awakened him. One moment, he was deeply asleep, dreaming a pleasant elusive dream, the next it was as if someone had shaken his shoulder to rouse him. He muttered a protest when his eyes opened to darkness and he found himself wide awake. It was the middle of his sleep period, and there was no reason for him to have awakened, not unless there was an alert, and there hadn't been. The other pilots who bunked with him slept serenely on, undisturbed.

But Luke couldn't get back to sleep. Slowly, insidiously, the feeling crept through him that there was something wrong, urgently wrong. "Ben?" he said faintly. Since the destruction of the Death Star some three weeks ago, he had heard nothing from Kenobi, and there had been times when he wondered if he hadn't imagined it all. Ben didn't respond this time either, but the conviction grew in him that there was trouble. "Okay, Ben," he whispered softly though he didn't really expect an answer. "What do I do?"

One of the other pilots stirred and mumbled an inarticulate word, but that was Luke's only reply. Now that he was awake, he would have to figure things out for himself, so he climbed out of bed and dressed as quietly as possible. Almost as an afterthought, he attached his lightsaber to his belt. Then he let himself out of the room and went to find out what was wrong.

The rebel base was quiet. In this, the sleeping wing, corridor lights had dimmed and no one was moving. It gave a sensation of peace and safety that was illusory. There were no safe places, and the base was safe just as long as the Empire didn't know where they were. This base, on the jungle world of Harbin, was only a temporary shelter anyway, until a more permanent site could be worked out. So far, the Empire had not discovered their location, and the Alliance

had used the weeks since their hasty and secret move to try to get back to fighting strength and to gather information.

Luke winced. That thought had brought back memories he would rather not have thought about. But now that they had surfaced, it was impossible not to think about them.

A few days ago, Luke had been having a meal with Han Solo and his co-pilot Chewbacca in the base mess hall. Luke was pleased that Han was still here, but a little scared to ask if he meant to stay with the rebels now. He had a vague idea that Han might stay around if nobody made a big deal of it and pressed him for commitment, so he kept quiet, reluctant to disturb the status quo.

Toward the end of the meal, Princess Leia, who had been eating with some of the Alliance brass, had risen and approached their table. Luke was aware of her approach immediately, and, shooting a sideways glance at the Corellian, he realized that Han was watching her too. The older man's face wore an unreadable expression, but Luke couldn't help wondering if Han had stayed because of Leia.

The princess smiled at all three of them with equal warmth and sat down. And Han said exactly what Luke had been hoping he wouldn't. "I've gotta be heading out of here, Princess."

"Oh?" Her voice was level, but Luke noticed that she had stiffened slightly. "Where are you going?" she asked, almost as if it didn't matter.

"Tatooine," Han replied. "I've got some debts to payoff unless I want to spend the rest of my life dodging Jabba's bounty hunters. So I'm going to use my reward to get him off my back."

"Fine," Leia said without hesitation. "You can run an errand for the Alliance while you're doing it." He opened his mouth to speak, but she added quickly, "Of course you will be amply paid for your services."

Han gave her a look of offended dignity. "I wasn't gonna ask about that," he said, not quite truthfully. "Just about this errand. What do you want me to do?"

"Pick up a rebel spy who's been operating in Mos Eisley. She's afraid her cover is about to be blown. We want to get her away while we can. She knows far too much for her to fall into Imperial hands."

"Sounds risky," he commented.

"I offered to pay you," she reminded him.

"Look, honey, I didn't say I wouldn't do it. Only that it wouldn't hurt to take somebody else along to help out. What do you say, kid?" he asked, turning to Luke. "Want to come along for the ride?"

And Luke surprised them all, including himself, by saying, "No."

Han was obviously disappointed, though he masked it immediately. "Look, kid," he said, "I'm coming back here when I'm through. That's what you wanted, isn't it?"

"Sure, Han. But I don't want to go back to Tatooine. If it were anyplace else, I'd go with you in a minute, but not there. I vowed I'd never go back there again." Realizing Han didn't really understand, he kept on talking. "There's nothing for me there any more. Do you understand?"

"Yeah, kid," Han said coolly. "Okay. It's all right with me. You do whatever you want to."

Chewie growled softly, looking from Han to Luke and back again. Han ignored him and turned to Leia. "When do you want me to leave?"

"As soon as possible. Shall I find someone to go along with you?"

"No, that's okay. Chewie and I can handle it on our own. We're used to each other. We don't need anybody else. They'd only be in the way." He rose abruptly. "I gotta go get the *Falcon* ready."

"I'll come and brief you then." Leia shot a frown at Luke. He knew what she wanted him to do, but somehow he just couldn't. He couldn't go back to Tatooine, not after all that had happened. There was no one left from home, and going back there would hurt too much. So he avoided Leia's eyes, looking up only after she had walked off with Han. Chewie hesitated only a minute to gather the remains of his meal to eat on the way. He made a comment that Luke didn't understand, then he shrugged his shoulders and set off after his friend.

Han left that afternoon, and Luke didn't see Leia until the next day. He had a feeling that she had been avoiding him, and he didn't really blame her. She didn't smile when she joined him. "I wish you could have seen it clear to go with Han," she said.

"I know," he agreed contritely. "So do I. If it were anyplace but Tatooine, I would have gone in a minute. I think it's great that Han is going on a mission for the Alliance and wants to come back here. But I just can't go to Tatooine."

She nodded. "I do understand, Luke. I know how hard it would be for you to go back there. But it wasn't only for Han's sake I wanted you to go with him. It was for your sake too. I think you need to face the past."

"That's easy to say," he retorted sharply.

"You think so?"

"At least you have a world to go back to."

Luke felt terrible, realizing that she was right. It was worse for her, but she had carried on and been brave about it. He could see that even now she was regretting letting that much of her innermost feelings show.

Before he could speak though, she said flatly, "I only hope that when Han brings the spy back he really plans to stay with us."

"Do you think he might not?"

Her eyes met and held his. "What do you think? You let him down, after he'd lowered his guard enough to ask you to go with him."

"He asked me to go with him once before, right before we attacked the Death Star," Luke admitted.

"That was different. I suspect he was feeling a little guilty about leaving and trying to cover it up."

That might be true. "Do you think he really wanted me to go with him to Tatooine all that much?"

"Yes. Han doesn't make friends easily. He doesn't trust people; probably in his line of work it's a stupid idea to trust anybody at all. I don't think he's trusted anybody but Chewie for a long time. And then you come along. You have a way of getting to people, and he found that he could trust you--he let his guard down a little. You expected him to live up to your standards, and I think he was a little surprised to find that he could. It wasn't because of me or the rebellion that he came back at the Death Star, you know. It was for your sake."

Luke was sure she was right. "And then I let him down. I knew he wanted me to go. But I still can't, Leia. It's the one thing I just can't do."

"Then you'll have to find a way to make it up to him when he gets back," she said, "Or I'm afraid the Alliance will lose him." She added almost as an afterthought, "He drove an awfully hard bargain for his fee."

That had been yesterday afternoon. Han would be returning any time, probably in the morning, and Luke was still not sure how he was going to handle it, or if Han would even give him the chance to explain and try to make things right. It wasn't going to be easy.

Now, as he walked through the deserted corridors on his way to the control center, he wondered if his waking had anything to do with Han. Somehow he was sure that it did.

The control center was full of people all possessing an air of urgent purpose. General Dodonna and Princess Leia were already there, and for them to be present in the middle of the night was a pretty good indication that something was up. Leia had only taken the time to throw a light robe over her nightgown, and there were slippers on her feet. Everyone else looked as if they had hopped into their clothes in a great hurry. As Luke came in, he heard the radio controller giving landing instructions over the comm unit to someone whose voice Luke didn't recognize.

As he hesitated there in the doorway, Leia turned and saw him. Her eyes seemed huge and dark in a face that was far too pale. With her hair loose around her shoulders, she looked like a little girl instead of a senator and one of the leaders of the Rebel Alliance.

She made her way to his side. "What are you doing here?" she whispered. "It's your sleep period."

"Something's wrong," he said. It was not a question.

"How did you know?"

He hesitated, then said simply, "The Force."

She nodded accepting his answer. "All right. Yes, something is wrong. The *Millennium Falcon* is coming in to land."

"That's great."

She shook her head. "No, it's not. Because it isn't Han or Chewie who contacted us. It's the spy they were sent to pick up. She says Chewie won't talk to her or to us." Her eyes were suddenly far too bright. "And she says that Han is dead."

Luke felt as if he had taken a blaster charge in the midsection at close range. "No!" he protested instinctively because he didn't want it to be true. With a real effort, he controlled himself. He didn't think he would have awakened with this sense of urgency if Han were truly dead. There had to be more to it than that. So

he said in a voice that sounded a whole lot calmer than he really felt, "Is she certain of her information?"

"She seemed pretty sure. She said there was an explosion." Leia put her hand on Luke's arm. "Luke, Chewie was there, too. Do you think he would have left Han if there was the slightest chance that he was still alive?"

"No. But I've got a feeling, Leia..." It was true, but how much of it was the Force and how much just wishful thinking he couldn't tell. "I'm going to talk to Chewie. And I don't understand him well enough to handle it on my own. Can you get me someone to translate? Threepio could do it."

"I'll send for him. "

When she had done so, Luke said, "Leia, are you sure it's really the spy that's aboard the *Falcon*? Maybe her cover was broken before Han got there. Maybe the *Falcon* is full of stormtroopers. Maybe there's a homing device aboard to lead the Empire straight to us."

"I know the spy, Luke. She's from Alderaan. I've known her all my life. I'd swear it was Jesta. I'd stake my life on it." She frowned. "I wouldn't stake the Alliance on it, though, so I've alerted security and there'll be a detachment of troops waiting in the landing bay."

"Then I'm going to the landing bay too. I've got to talk to Chewie and this spy of yours."

The *Millennium Falcon* had just landed and the hatch was just opening when Luke arrived trailed by C-3PO. Troops waited with their weapons ready, and tension filled the air. It could be an Imperial trick.

It was almost an anticlimax when no troops emerged from the ship, only a tall fair-haired girl who wasn't even armed. Looking around, she smiled a little. "You weren't taking any chances, were you? Well, it should be safe enough. We weren't followed."

Luke stepped forward, and she looked at him in surprise. "I don't remember you. Who are you?"

"Luke Skywalker. I'm a friend of Han's. Where is he?"

She looked at him sadly. "Didn't they tell you? He's dead. I'm sorry."

"Are you certain? Did you examine the body?"

Her eyes were green pools of horror as she remembered. "Luke, there was an explosion. Afterwards..." she hesitated. "Afterwards, there was...nothing left to...to examine. I'm sorry."

That sounded final, but Luke still didn't feel right about it. He didn't want to offend Jesta by questioning her word but he had to have more information, so he gave her an abrupt nod and demanded, "Where's Chewie?"

"In the cockpit. He hasn't said anything since it happened. He flew us back here, and when it was in hyperspace, he stayed in his cabin. I couldn't get him to talk to me at all. He's very upset. "

Luke wasn't sure he could do any better. Chewbacca wasn't going to be in the best frame of mind, and Wookiees had naturally hasty tempers anyway. Questioning him right now might not be the safest thing to do, but Luke had no choice. "I'll try," he told Jesta.

"I've got to report in," she said. "Good luck."

After she left and the troops dispersed, Luke didn't go directly to the cockpit. Jesta's story seemed to discourage any hope that Han could be alive, but even so, the certainty that he still lived grew stronger in Luke with every passing minute. He would need to sit down, clear his mind, and see if the Force would help him. After all, if Ben could somehow reach out across space to talk to him, then Luke might be able to do something similar. He didn't expect to be able to talk to Han, of course, but maybe he would be able to sense Han's presence somehow. The fact that he didn't know how to do it wasn't a hindrance, at least not yet. "Ben?" he whispered. "will you help me to find Han?"

There wasn't an answer, at least not in words, but all at once, his mind was clear. Tatooine. That's where Han had gone. Luke tried to picture Mos Eisley, remembering the place as vividly as possible. The more clearly he could recall it, the easier it would be to try to project his thoughts there.

"Han?" he whispered.

Suddenly, an awareness of Han's presence flooded over him, too real to be denied. Luke couldn't explain it to anyone, except possibly to another Jedi, but all at once he was positive that Han had not died in that explosion after all. He was still on the planet, still alive.

Luke jumped eagerly to his feet. "Chewie! Hey, Chewie, come here." Damn, he'd left Threepio behind. No, there was the droid, waiting for him. "C'mon, Threepio," he said, "We've gotta find him."

Threepio, who was at a loss to explain Luke's peculiar behavior of a moment before but who had come to accept peculiar behavior as the nature of humans, said in doubtful tones, "Don't you think that might be a bit dangerous, Master Luke?"

"Don't worry about it. C'mon." His enthusiasm revealed itself in a broad grin that Threepio was positive was the wrong expression with which to confront a grieving Wookiee. "Oh dear," he said faintly and followed Luke against his better judgment.

Chewbacca was sitting in the cockpit. He growled threateningly when Luke and the droid came in, but he didn't turn.

Threepio said reluctantly, "He says to go away, Master Luke."

Luke motioned for silence. "Chewie, listen to me. Han is alive."

For a moment, Chewie did not seem to breathe, then he turned slowly to face Luke, the look in his blue eyes equally between doubt and hope. He growled an urgent question.

"You've got to trust me," Luke went on. "You know about the Force, don't you, Chewie?"

The Wookiee nodded.

"Well, it's because of the Force that I know he's alive, but the only way I can prove it is by going there after him. Do you trust me enough to go with me?"

Chewie was silent for what seemed like a long time. When he finally replied, Threepio translated his words as, "You weren't willing to go with him before."

"I know," said Luke contritely. "And I don't want to go now. But I have to. Han's life may depend on it. That's more important to me than my reasons for not wanting to go."

Chewie nodded. If there was the slightest chance of finding Han, he couldn't pass it up. He would go.

"I could order you not to go," Leia said. Then a smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. "But that wouldn't stop either of you, would it?"

Luke and Chewie shook their heads in complete agreement with each other.

Leia's smile broadened. "I thought not. So I won't forbid it, not if there's any chance that Han's alive. But you can't take the *Millennium Falcon*. They might be looking for it now. I'll assign you another ship."

Chewie didn't look any too happy about that, but he agreed to it. They couldn't take any chances, not with Han's life.

"One other thing," Leia said. "You might need some help, so I've decided to go with you."

"You can't," Luke objected. "It's too dangerous. You're too important to the rebellion to risk on something like this."

"That's nonsense and you know it. I can handle myself. I can use a blaster, and I've been to Mos Eisley before, which ought to count for something. Besides," she added, as if it were the sole justification for going, "it's my fault Han is in trouble."

"Your fault? How do you figure that? You didn't force him to go to Tatooine. It's *my* fault."

"That's really stupid, Luke."

"If I'd been there I could have helped him. I let him down."

She looked at his guilt-ridden face for a minute, then she laughed. "That's nonsense and you know it. How do you know you could have helped him? Has being a hero gone to your head? Do you think you can save everything singlehanded?"

He was taken aback by her words. "That's not fair. I don't think that way, and you know it."

"Do *you*? "

For the first time since he had met her, Luke was angry with her. "If I'd been there, I might have been able to help. That's why I have to go now. Don't try to analyze my reasons. I should have gone before. You made a real point of that once Han had gone."

"True. But it won't help anyone for you to wallow in guilt."

"Oh, is that what I'm doing? Well, what about you? You're blaming yourself for Han being missing. That's why you're going, isn't it?"

Chewie had listened to the whole argument in silence. Now he decided to intervene, and Wookiee intervention is not to be taken lightly. He growled menacingly and stepped forward to take one of them with each hand and shake them. In Wookiee terms it was only a light shaking, but Luke and Leia were sure that their bodies were about to be jarred loose. All the while Chewie told them exactly what he thought of their argument. Things were very clear-cut to Chewie. Rescuing Han was the first priority. Everything else could be, and should be, settled later.

Luke and Leia didn't understand him, but they got the point all the same.

They exchanged a glance, and suddenly Luke found himself smiling. Leia smiled back, and when Chewie released them, she put her arms around Luke and hugged him. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's just that I'm worried about Han."

"I know," Luke agreed. "Me, too."

"Jesta told me a little of what happened in Mos Eisley," Leia said once they were on their way to Tatooine. "But there simply wasn't time for more details. So I want you to tell us exactly what happened, Chewie. Threepio will translate."

The story was simple enough. Han and Chewie had arrived on Tatooine as planned and Han had promptly gone off to look for Jabba the Hut. Chewie gave the impression that Han had been spoiling for a fight, but the fight had never materialized because Jabba was off planet and wasn't expected back until the following day. Since Han preferred to pay Jabba personally, he made arrangements to come back later, then he and Chewie went to set up a rendezvous with Jesta, according to Leia's instructions. It had taken extreme caution since there was a chance that Jesta's cover had already been blown, but eventually Han and Jesta had met and devised a plan to get her out of Mos Eisley.

But somebody must have informed on them. All at once, storm troopers descended on the cantina where the meeting was taking place, and Chewie, who was standing guard, barely had time to warn Han. They escaped out the back way, and Han sent Chewie ahead to get the *Falcon* ready while he and Jesta took a safer, less public way back to the ship.

They came close to making it. The *Falcon* was already in sight when the trap was sprung. Safe in the *Falcon*, Chewie didn't realize what was happening until he heard the first explosion. The storm troopers were using heavy duty grenades. At close range, they were lethal.

Solo was able to hold them off with a blaster long enough for Jesta to start for the ship, but the storm troopers, in attempting to hit them both, had aimed at a spot between them. The grenade fell short of Jesta. She was knocked to the ground, shaken but unhurt. Chewie started to go to Han, but even as he emerged from the ship and the smoke cleared, he realized that Han was nowhere in sight. The grenade must have scored a direct hit. Convincing Chewie of that had been difficult, and Chewie was in no mood to listen, but not even a Wookiee could deny the evidence of his own eyes. There wasn't even time to despair if he were to finish the mission and save their lives. Luke got the impression that saving his own life had ceased to be a priority, but he had accepted Han's responsibility so that had to be completed. He allowed himself to be dragged back into the ship and they had raced three star destroyers and made the jump into hyperspace with only seconds to spare. The rest of the story they already knew, so Chewie fell silent and turned expectantly to Luke.

The others did the same, and it was left to the princess to ask the question that was on all their minds. "Luke, how can you possibly be sure that Han is alive?"

"I can't really explain," Luke said, "Not to anyone who doesn't know about the Force, but I am sure." He added thoughtfully, "If you had to wait for the smoke to clear, Chewie, then there could have been time for Han to slip away. Han's resourceful, Chewie. He's too tough to die that easily."

The Wookiee grumbled a little, but the things that Luke was telling him were things he wanted to hear. He was willing to give Luke--and the Force--the benefit of the doubt.

Leia wasn't sure either. Luke could so easily be wrong. He had not had much formal training in The ways of the Force, so he could be mistaken in his interpretation. Leia didn't want to build up her hopes only to have them destroyed. All the same, she could see that Luke was convinced that he was right, so she nodded. "I agree," she said, and even she wasn't exactly sure what she was agreeing to.

They arrived at Tatooine right on schedule, and no one challenged them. Chewie was all set to go charging out to look for Han, but Luke and Leia restrained him. "You can't, Chewie," Luke insisted. "You'd be too conspicuous. If we have to break Han out of jailor rescue him from Imperial headquarters, then we'll need you. In the meantime, you'd better stay here out of sight. Monitor the local viscasts and see what you can pick up. We'll report back regularly."

Chewie didn't like it one bit, but he saw the sense of it. He had surely been seen when he tried to rescue Han, and it wouldn't do Han any good if he were captured too, so he agreed to wait.

Luke and Leia went out to search for Han, leaving the droids to wait with Chewie. They split up to make it easier. Concentrating heavily on the Force, Luke let it guide his footsteps. He wasn't sure if it was working or not, but he soon found himself in a small square where cafe tables spilled out along the walkway and crowds of people passed continually, all manner of beings, some humanoid, others not remotely so. Luke didn't expect Han to be in such a public place, but all at once he saw him sitting at a cafe table with his back against the wall. He had a bandage around his head and he looked a bit worse for wear, but he was alive and alert and apparently not badly hurt.

As Luke watched in relieved surprise, Han climbed to his feet, limping slightly, and headed off across the square away from him.

"Hey!" Luke yelled, forgetting caution in his excitement. "Han! Over here!"

People turned to look at Luke, but Han didn't. He kept right on walking, then, after a moment, he turned and glanced up and down the street. Luke wasn't sure if Han had seen him or not, so he yelled again. "Hey, Han, over here--" and waved at him.

Han turned his back on him and walked away fast.

Luke's jaw dropped. He couldn't believe what had just happened. Maybe Han hadn't seen him, but he must have heard him. He had deliberately ignored him. It made no sense. Luke stood there staring blankly in the direction Han had taken, and his shocked expression caused people near him to edge away.

Han had deliberately avoided him, and Luke couldn't think of a reason for it. Surely he wasn't still holding a grudge for Luke's refusal to accompany him here; even if he were, Luke's presence here could mean nothing more than an attempt to rescue him and to make it up with him. Luke didn't think Han would hold a grudge that way.

Han must have escaped the stormtroopers and hid out. Or had he? Luke realized with shock that Han could easily have been captured. That bandage around his head might mean that he had been knocked unconscious in the explosion. If so, the storm troopers would have to have been blind to overlook him. So maybe he had been captured--but he was free now. And just what exactly did that mean?

There were a few things Luke could think of, none of them pleasant. He didn't want to think that Han might side with the Empire. Luke's entire being rejected the idea. But on the other hand, Han did have a mercenary side to his nature. Luke wanted to believe that Han had changed, but could he really be sure of it?

Another possibility to cross his mind was brainwashing, but Luke didn't know enough about brainwashing techniques to tell if it could be done this quickly or not. He doubted it, but still...

On the other hand, Han might have been captured and then freed in the hope that he might attract more interesting prey. And if so, Han, who wasn't stupid, would have to know it, and he couldn't acknowledge Luke's call without endangering him.

Luke preferred this explanation, but it made him look around quickly, expecting danger. If it were present, it was very well concealed. Any of the beings in the square could be watching him right now. Luke's hand moved involuntarily to the pouch on his belt where his lightsaber was concealed.

Maybe he'd better try to find Han again anyway. The two of them together could handle things, Luke told himself, hoping it were true. He set off in the direction Han had taken.

But when he rounded the corner, there was no trace of Han and no clue to which way he had gone. Luke searched through the back streets for him until it was time to rendezvous with the princess.

She was waiting at the meeting place. "Luke, I've found out something, but I don't know if it is good or bad."

Luke held back his own puzzling news for a moment. "I...well, go ahead. What is it? "

"Han hasn't been arrested. I talked to a witness. He said he saw Han before the explosion but not afterwards. The storm troopers searched but they didn't find him." She looked depressed. "Han would never run out on Chewie. And if he'd been hurt in the blast, he would have been found." Suddenly she reached out for his hands, gripping them tightly, her eyes full of distress. "Luke, Han must be dead."

"He isn't dead."

"That's what you keep saying, but..."

"I've seen him."

"You've what! Now? Where is he? Is he all right? What happened to him?" And then she noticed the look in his eyes. "Something's wrong, isn't it?"

"Yes, but I don't know what it is. I saw him, Leia. He doesn't seem to be badly hurt, a few cuts and bruises, and he was limping a little, but nothing terrible. Only,

when I called to him, he ignored me. He looked in my direction once and then he just walked away. Even if he was mad at me for not coming with him in the first place, I don't think he'd act that way once I was actually here. By the time I realized what had happened and followed him, he had vanished, and I couldn't find him again."

Leia listened blankly. "Are you certain it was really Han?"

"What do you think?" Luke asked disgustedly. "I'd know him anywhere, you know that. It was Han. And something's wrong." He proceeded to outline his theories and she heard him out in silence. It had never occurred to her that Han might not want to be rescued. When Luke had finished, she said sadly, "We take too much for granted, don't we? We assume that Han's values are the same as ours. But maybe we're too vain. We haven't really known him long enough to be certain of his loyalties."

"Maybe. But I don't think Han would betray us," Luke said seriously. "I let him down though. Maybe he thought that was a betrayal. I thought Han had changed, but it's really been just a short time since we met him. Maybe it wasn't long enough."

Leia frowned. "He told me once that he was in it for the money. Maybe they offered him so much he just couldn't turn it down."

"No." Luke was suddenly positive. "Han wouldn't betray us, no matter how much money they offered. He might leave and go back to his old life, but he wouldn't betray us to the Empire. I don't think we've thought of all the answers. Come on, let's go back to the ship."

"Why?"

"I want to ask Chewie where the fight took place. Maybe it would make more sense if we could see it."

* * * *

At first it made no sense at all. Most of the damage from the explosion had already been cleared away, but there were blaster scars visible on the walls of the docking bay. Luke looked around slowly, then he moved toward the area where the grenade had exploded. Reaching the spot, he simply stood there, his eyes closed.

Leia moved to join him. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to use the Force," he explained. "Ben told me that the Force sometimes obeys a Jedi's commands and sometimes controls his actions. I don't know how

to make it obey me yet, but I have a feeling there's something to be learned here, and I can't think of any other way to learn it. So I'm going to try. It might seem like I'm going into a trance. If I don't snap out of it in a few minutes, shake me or yell. Or something."

Leia nodded, somehow impressed. She touched his arm gently. "Good luck."

Luke closed his eyes again. For what seemed like an eternity to the princess, nothing happened. She went over to sit on the edge of the loading platform and waited.

All of a sudden, Luke's eyes opened. To Leia's surprise, he lay down on the ground and began to wiggle under the platform. It was a narrow squeeze, but in a moment, Luke had vanished. Leia got down on her hands and knees and peered under. "Luke, what are you doing?"

He had taken a small torch from his belt and was shining it around. "This is where Han was during the explosion," he explained. "Until you get right down on the ground, you don't even know there's a space under here. The platform would shield him from the worst of the explosion. It probably stunned him, and when he revived, everybody had gone." He crawled out again as he spoke.

Leia agreed. "So now we know what happened. This means he wasn't captured. But then, why did he avoid you when you called to him. I don't think he'd do it out of anger either."

"We've got to find him," Luke said urgently. "Come on. Chewie'll have to help. He knows places where Han might go, and we don't." He added seriously, "I think we'd better hurry."

Han Solo had seen the grenade coming. In that instant, he knew that he didn't have a chance, but, instinctively, he flung himself down on the ground--and saw the space under the platform. He barely had time to scramble under before the blast.

Even sheltered by the loading platform, Han felt the effects of the explosion. It was the loudest thing that had ever happened. He was lifted right off the ground and dropped down again, but by that time, he had gone beyond feeling it.

Minutes, hours, years later, awareness came creeping back. After the roar of the blast, the silence seemed complete. He lay perfectly still, his body aching, his head throbbing, drawing shaky breaths. After a few minutes, he felt ready to try to move and was relieved to find that everything still worked. He was stiff and sore, but no bones seemed to be broken.

Blood from a cut on his forehead had trickled down the side of his face. He rubbed at it, investigating the wound with cautious fingertips. It had almost stopped bleeding, and it didn't feel too bad, but it was swollen and his head ached unmercifully.

He listened for some sounds of search or pursuit but he heard nothing, no sounds at all, and that was strange. There ought to be sounds, distant street noises if nothing else. But maybe the area had been cordoned off. If so, they would eventually find him, so he'd have to move now, painful as the thought of moving was to him.

He crawled over to the edge of the platform and looked out at the docking bay. The *Falcon* was gone. That was good; it meant that Chewie and his ship were safe. Chewie would come back for him as soon as he could, and probably he'd manage to con another ship out of the rebels, get Luke to help him. So all Han had to do was lie low in the space port area until Chewie got back.

There were two men across the docking bay, talking to each other. It must have been secret, for they were whispering in tones too soft to reach the Corellian's hideout. If so, it ought to be important, and Han wanted to hear. It might have something to do with a search for him. It was early evening, and while the sky was still light, large areas of the docking bay lay in shadow, so he ought to be able to get closer without too much trouble.

As he watched, one of the men bent to pick up a small toolbox. The other man said something that caused him to turn quickly, and he dropped the box.

It hit the ground in total silence.

Han stared at it blankly for a moment, trying to make sense of what he had just seen. "What the hell..." he muttered. And then he froze, because he hadn't been able to hear his own words either.

It wasn't quiet in the docking bay after all. It was probably just as noisy as usual. It was simply that he couldn't hear anything. The explosion must have damaged his eardrums. He was deaf.

For a long moment, he lay there unmoving, straining to hear even the slightest sound. Once he thought he heard a faint muted rumble, but he couldn't be sure if he were imagining it or not. He put the palms of his hands against his ears and pressed them hard. When he released them, there was still no sound.

Despairingly, he inched his way out from under the platform. Maybe a doctor or a medical droid could do something to help. He couldn't live this way. He couldn't survive. He wasn't some fat successful merchant, surrounded by bodyguards and servants and high walls. He was on his own in a cutthroat world with nobody but

Chewie to watch his back, and Chewie wasn't even here. He couldn't risk having somebody get the jump on him or he'd be dead.

There was another muted roar. He wasn't sure, even this time, if he'd actually heard it, but raising his eyes, he saw a ship lifting off from a neighboring docking bay. He wasn't sure if he'd heard it or simply felt the vibration, but a ship launching was loud. If he couldn't hear that, he could hear nothing.

Depressed and a little dizzy, he sat on the edge of the platform, holding his head in his hands. He had forgotten about the two workers, and he didn't see them notice him or hear them call. When one of them reached him and bent to touch his shoulder, Han jumped and made a useless grab for his blaster.

But the two men didn't seem threatening. Han's battered, bloodstained appearance and the blank look in his eyes had caught their sympathy, and even in his dazed condition, Han realized he could relax a little. He didn't withdraw his hand, but he didn't draw the blaster either.

"You look like you're in a bad way, pal," the man said. "Can we help you?"

Conscious of being spoken to, Han only stared at him blankly, unable to accept the fact that he couldn't hear what was being said to him.

"He looks out of it," the other man said. "He must have been caught in the explosion, Jon. He's the one the damn stormtroopers were looking for. We'll have to get him out of here in case they come back."

Jon nodded. "He needs medical help first of all. Do you know anybody who wouldn't turn him in, Jarl?"

"Yeah, but we've got to get him there." He turned to Han. "Can you walk, buddy?"

Han didn't realize that he'd been lucky enough to fall in with two men who wouldn't turn him in, but he did know that he was being spoken to. He stared at Jarl intently, remembering that people could sometimes understand what was being said to them by reading lips. It proved to be a lot harder than he had thought it would be. It was impossible. "What?" he said dazedly.

Jarl repeated the question. Something about walking, Han thought, though he couldn't even be sure of that, and he climbed to his feet. Waves of dizziness kept sweeping over him, and his knees threatened to buckle. He said vaguely, "Where are we going? "

Jarl and Jon exchanged glances. "I don't think he can hear us," Jon said, taking Han's arm to help him stay on his feet. "Make some kind of noise, Jarl," he instructed, and Jarl took a step back out of Han's line of vision and clapped his

hands together loudly. Han didn't even blink. "Okay," Jon said, "So we know that much. I think the explosion did it. Let's see if we can get through to him." He tapped Han's shoulder. When the smuggler lifted his head, Jon spoke slowly, exaggerating the words, "We will take you to a doctor."

Hey, thought Han in gratified surprise, *I understood part of that*. He had caught the word 'doctor.' He nodded wearily. "Yeah, okay." These two might take him instead to Imperial headquarters, but he didn't have any choice. It was all he could do to stay on his feet; the thought of fighting them off and getting away seemed impossible, and even if he could manage it, where could he go?

Jon spoke to him again, but this time, none of it got through, even though Han concentrated so hard that it made his headache worse. To his horror, he realized that he was practically on the verge of tears. Helplessly, he squeezed his eyes shut. It was all he could do to keep from falling, even with the other man's support.

Jon looked at him a minute, then picked him up as easily as if he had been a child and slung him over his shoulder. "Let's go," he said. "The sooner we get him taken care of, the better."

They weren't stopped on the way to the doctor Jarl knew. It proved to be a woman, and though she stood straight and tall, and there were few lines on her face except around her eyes, she was elderly. At the sight of Han Solo, her face filled with concern. "Bring him in and put him on the bed," she instructed. "What happened to him?"

"He was in an explosion," Jon said. "An explosion caused by the Empire. I don't want them to find him." His hand hovered near his blaster as he spoke.

"They will not learn of it from me," she reassured him. "He won't be the first I've hidden from them, nor, I hope, the last. Do you know what is wrong with him?" she asked as she began her examination.

"He lost his hearing in the explosion," Jon told her. "Can you help him?"

"I don't know yet." She eyed Jon a moment. "Jarl and I are old friends, but who are you and what is your concern for this man?"

"I'm Jon Case, and I never saw him before tonight." He frowned. "I've a son his age that I haven't seen for more years than I'd like to remember. Say I do it for his sake and let it go at that."

"I see. I am Rovenna. You may wait if you choose, but outside." She did not pause to see what he would do but turned instead to Han. "So," she said. "You are awake. That is good."

Somehow, it was easier for Han to read her speech, although he didn't catch everything she said. Still he relaxed a bit, and Rovenna smiled, her eyes warming. "Tell me what happened to you," she instructed.

Han looked a question. When she repeated herself, Han got most of it. He explained about the blast and how he had revived to find that he could hear nothing. It was hard to admit it, even to this woman who was apparently a doctor of some sort and who must already know. As he spoke, she fetched bandages and began to sponge the blood from his face. She looked into his eyes, felt his pulse, and brought out monitoring instruments to read his condition.

"You have no fever," she told him, "And no concussion. Can you hear anything at all?"

"No," said Han, bitterly.

"The explosion, was it very close to you?" She repeated the question slowly and carefully.

"Yes."

"I think," she said slowly, "that you will hear again. Sometimes, temporary deafness can be caused as this was." She took an instrument and looked into first one ear and then the other. "Good, the eardrums are intact."

He looked at her helplessly. "But I can't hear," he argued.

"I think you shall. "

And at that moment, a strange thing happened. It was as if he had been listening to the comm unit in the Falcon and not receiving anything when all at once a bit of signal came in, fragmented and faint. Han actually heard her say "...think you..." and then it was gone again.

"Hey," he cried, "I heard..." His voice trailed off as he realized that his hearing had gone again and he lay back in despair.

Rovenna put her hands on the sides of his face and looked down into his eyes. She said, "I believe that you will hear again. It may take several days or even several weeks. Will you trust me?"

Han's head throbbed with the effort of trying to understand her. He said flatly, "I can't trust anybody."

"Why not? Has life treated you as badly as that?"

He remained stubbornly silent, and she suspected he was pretending not to understand in order to avoid the question. She said, "Is there no one you can trust?"

Put like that, it was different. Han trusted Chewie completely. But Chewie had proven his trust over and over again so that not trusting Chewie was almost like not trusting himself. Sometimes he suspected he trusted Chewie even *more* than he trusted himself.

And a memory of Luke Skywalker flashed into his mind. Luke had refused to come with him to Tatooine, but Han was certain, though he couldn't have explained that certainty to anyone, that once Luke knew he was in trouble, he would come here to help in spite of his reasons for not wanting to.

And the princess? Han didn't want to think about Leia right then. He couldn't face her, not like this. He didn't want her to see him this way. But not trust her? He wouldn't put it exactly like that.

Rovenna smiled, reading his expression easily enough. "You see," she said gently, though he could not hear the tone of her words, "You can trust people. I wonder, will you trust me enough to tell me your name?"

His name was probably on wanted posters from here to the heart of the Empire, but he found himself saying, "Yeah, I'm Han Solo."

"Thank you, Han." She rested a hand on his shoulder a moment. "You should rest now. I will come back in the morning. Sleep. Things will be better then."

Han doubted it, but he was too tired and his head ached too much for him to protest. His eyelids drooped, and quite soon he seemed to sleep. Rovenna watched him for a moment, then she went out to see if Jon and Jarl had waited for her. When she opened the door, she was not really surprised to find that they had gone.

After looking up and down the street, Rovenna closed and bolted the door, then went to take another look at Han. He was sleeping when she entered, and she stood looking at him in silence. In sleep, he looked vulnerable, the effect heightened by the bandage she had fixed around his head and by the almost fierce look of concentration he wore while he slept. He had, she saw, taken his blaster into his hand after she had gone.

Rovenna stepped forward and eased the weapon from his hand. His fingers tightened convulsively around it, then relaxed. She smiled a little as she drew blankets over him, then, almost as an afterthought, she set the blaster on a table near the bed where he would see it when he awoke.

Han roused at dawn, relieved to find that his headache was bearable this morning and that his brain no longer felt like it was stuffed with sand. Alert again, he studied his surroundings, remembering them only vaguely from the night before. The doctor had left him his blaster, and he reached out to touch it briefly, feeling a bit safer knowing he was armed.

Rovenna came in then carrying a tray. "Good morning, Han," she said cheerfully, "You look much better this morning."

Han couldn't hear a word of it. Disappointment filled his face before he masked it, and he turned away. Rovenna felt a pang of pity for him and sternly suppressed it. He would hate pity. Putting down the tray, she came to sit at the edge of the bed and turned his face toward her. "You are too impatient, Han," she told him.

"Well, yeah, what do you expect?"

"I told you that you will hear again," she reminded him. "It won't happen overnight, though."

It came again. Sound filtered back for a moment. Han heard her say, "overnight, though..." before silence descended again.

Rovenna said, "You see. You heard something else."

"How do you know?"

"I could see it in your eyes. How do you feel this morning?"

"Better," he admitted. It didn't give him as much of a headache to try to understand her. "I want to get up," he said in an attempt to assert himself.

"You may if you wish," she said serenely, rising to her feet. "But first, I have brought your breakfast. Please eat first."

As soon as he was finished with the meal, Han got to his feet. "I gotta go down to the spaceport," he insisted.

Rovenna had been expecting something of the sort, but all she said was, "Why?"

"My friends'll be looking for me. I gotta find them."

"All right. But it may be dangerous."

That worried Han too. He wouldn't be able to hear danger creeping up on him, but he didn't want to admit his concern. "I can make it," he said with more confidence than he really felt. "And I'll be back, once I've found them, to pay you off."

She smiled a little. "As you please."

He hesitated. "Thanks," he said and let himself out the door.

An hour later, he was sitting in a street cafe, a wall guarding his back, drinking something potent and foul tasting. He must have looked into every docking bay in Mos Eisley, and there was no sign of the *Millennium Falcon*. There were, from time to time, sounds in his ears, but in the noisy street, none of it was quite clear, and it never stayed long. Since he'd sat down to order his drink, he'd heard nothing. He'd been obscurely pleased that the bartender had not realized that he couldn't hear. He preferred it that way.

And that led to further realization. He didn't want Chewie--or Luke and Leia--to find him while he couldn't hear. It would be an admission of vulnerability, and that was something he couldn't quite bring himself to do. He wouldn't let himself be dependent on anyone else, not even Chewie. Maybe he could just stay here until his hearing came back--if it ever did. He had a few connections here--some of them owed him money. If he could find a way to collect without revealing his weakness, and without encountering Jabba until he could get him paid off, then he could get by.

He may as well go back to the woman's place. He'd told her he'd be back.

So he got to his feet and headed in that direction. After a few steps, he remembered that he had one less sense to depend on, so he stopped and looked up and down the street. He didn't see Luke standing there, and since his hearing didn't choose that moment to turn itself on, he didn't even realize that Luke was there. He had a feeling that he was being watched though, so he got out of there fast. After a few quick turns in the back streets, he stopped to make sure he was still unpursued, then reassured, he went back to Rovenna's house.

Luke and Leia had returned to the ship to confer with Chewie and the droids to see if anyone had any idea of where to search next. They talked it over for a bit, and finally Luke said thoughtfully, "Chewie, you've been here before. Han was hurt; he'd need medical help. He wouldn't want to risk anywhere he might get turned in. Have you got any ideas of where he might go?"

Chewie thought about it. He had a couple of possibilities, and this time, the others weren't going to keep him on the ship. *I will take you there,* he said firmly, and no one argued with him.

"Well?" Rovenna asked. "Did you find your friends?"

Han looked away, reluctant to meet her eyes. "No. And I'm not gonna look again." He flung himself into a chair and began to rub his temples automatically. His headache was back, accompanied by a dull roaring in his ears. He felt like hell.

Rovenna came and knelt before him, capturing his hands and looking into his eyes. "I believe your friends will come."

Han nodded tiredly. "Yeah, I know. But I don't want to see them."

Rovenna's grip on his hands tightened. "Why not?"

"What do you think?" he asked sullenly. "I don't want them to see me like this. Do you understand that?"

"I understand. But you will hear again. Trust your friends. They will not hurt you. "

He looked at her blankly, and she wasn't sure whether he hadn't been able to read her lips or whether he couldn't let himself believe her words. Then he shrugged and turned away. Rovenna let it go. Time would end the problem. Freeing his hands, she got to her feet. Han sneaked a curious look at her. She had gone to a cabinet and set to work preparing medicines, her expression resuming its customary serenity. But at the moment, Han wasn't ready to be reassured. Without looking at her again, he got up and went over to fling himself down on the bed. Rovenna paid him no attention at all. She was aware of him, but tried not to let him disturb her. Her heart ached for him, knowing he was hurting inside but unable to ask for and accept help.

After a bit, Han noticed that she raised her head as if listening to something he couldn't hear, then turned and went into the front room. Someone at the door, Han reasoned, and he reached for his blaster. She was gone a long time, but when she came back, she was smiling. It must not have been danger after all. Surreptitiously, he eased his hand away from his weapon.

Rovenna smiled at him. "Han, you have a visitor."

"Who?" he demanded suspiciously.

"Luke Skywalker. "

For a moment, Han found himself grinning. Luke had come to Tatooine after all. Then he remembered that he couldn't hear yet, and his smile died. He said, "I don't want to see him."

"What am I to tell him? "

"Tell him whatever you like," Han said and turned away

So Rovenna did. She went back into the room where Luke, Chewie, and Leia were waiting. They had decided that under the circumstances it would be best for Luke to see Han first, though it would be hard for Chewie to wait. "Luke," Rovenna said, "He says he won't see you. But I know he was glad to know that you were here. Are you brave enough to go in there and have it out with him?"

Still shocked by the news of Han's deafness, Luke sat there a moment, then climbed to his feet. "Yeah," he said, "If that's what Han needs. Are you sure he'll be able to hear again?"

"Yes, his hearing could return at any time, but he doesn't believe that."

"Okay, I'll go. No, Chewie, let me talk to him first. I'll tell him you're here." Worried and miserable, the Wookiee reluctantly subsided, and Luke squared his shoulders and strode into the room. Han was sprawled on a bed, his back to the door. He didn't stir when Luke came in.

"Han?" Luke asked tentatively, then when there was no response, he remembered that Han couldn't hear him. "Damn," he muttered and stepped forward to touch Han's shoulder.

Han said coldly, "Go away."

There was self-pity in his voice, and Luke didn't like the sound of it. It made him angry, and without thinking, he jerked Han around to face him. "No, I won't go away," he all but yelled. "Look, I'm sorry. I should have come with you in the first place."

"I didn't want any unwilling passengers," Han replied, angry too, then his anger died. "Ah, hell, kid, why'd you have to come in here?"

"Because I'm your friend, damn it. Chewie's out there worried sick about you, and Leia's waiting too. We've all been pretty worried about you."

Han looked startled. "Leia came too?" He hadn't expected that.

Luke averted his eyes from the sudden vulnerability in Han's face. "We all did," he said. "And now you've got the nerve to tell me you don't want to see me. Well, I didn't want to come back to Tatooine, but I did. It was harder for me than it is for you to see me. After all, you'll be able to hear again soon, but my aunt and uncle and Ben and Biggs are still dead, and that's permanent." And having made this admission, he realized that it had all been for nothing. He'd forgotten about having to face Han when he was speaking to him, and he'd made his whole speech to the wall.

But Han was saying, "Yeah, kid, I know. I'm sorry, but I..."

"Han!" cried Luke accusingly. "You heard me." And he spun around to face his friend. Their eyes met and they stared at each other. "You heard me," Luke repeated. "Didn't you?"

"Yeah," Han spoke slowly and with difficulty. "I guess I did. I still do." And all at once, his face crumpled and there were tears in his eyes.

Luke laughed shakily, halfway to tears himself, and threw his arms around Han in a jubilant hug. And the door burst open and Chewie came charging into the room.

If anyone had tried to stop him, they had failed. Chewie spotted Han and rushed over. Grabbing him by the shoulders, he lifted him right off the bed, asking questions nonstop and inspecting him for injuries. Satisfied that Han was all right, he engulfed him in a massive hug that almost cost Han his ribs. Han laughed and didn't resist.

Chewie deposited him back on the bed as Leia came in. She looked at Han a moment, then she ran across the room and flung her arms around him. Han cooperated fully, managing to get a kiss from her before she struggled free.

"Well, I can see you're all right," she said with mock sternness, her eyes dancing.

Rovenna entered then, waiting in the doorway. Han saw her. "Hey, c'mere, I don't even know your name," he accused, as if it were somehow her fault.

She smiled. "I told you it would be all right," she said. "I'm very glad."

Han was less than happy with the ship that Princess Leia had commandeered for the rescue mission. He looked at it a moment, then his eyes lit with humour and he turned to Luke. "What a piece of junk."

And Luke, remembering when he had made a similar comment about the *Falcon*, burst out laughing. "It'll make .5 past lightspeed," he echoed Han's boast.

"I doubt it," Han said with a grin.

"So do I," Luke admitted. "But we couldn't bring the *Falcon* back here so soon. It wouldn't have been safe."

"Well, I guess I can take it," Han said with another look at the vessel. "And I suppose that means I'll have to wait a bit before I get Jabba paid, since his money's back on the *Falcon*. He ain't gonna like it, but it can't be helped." He looked at the ship again. "I'll fly us home," he said, adding before anyone could protest that he wasn't up to it yet, "I can fly anything. And it's about time you learned to fly something bigger than a fighter, Kid. I'll let you be my co-pilot this time around. You might as well learn from the best."

Luke laughed. "Han, how do you think we got here?"

"You flying copilot for Chewie," Han said promptly. "Right?"

"Something like that."

"Then Chewie needs a break--and you need all the practice you can get."

They boarded the ship to find the droids waiting. "Captain Solo, sir," Threepio said, "You're safe." He sounded pleased about it.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Have you been keeping an eye on things here?"

"Yes, sir. We--Artoo and I--have been quite concerned about you." And Artoo beeped in agreement.

"Yeah, well...thanks. " Han found himself at a loss for words at this concern from a totally unexpected source. "Well, we can't hang around here much longer. Come on, kid."

When Han and Luke were in the pilots' compartment, the younger man said slowly, "Han, there's something I wanted to say."

"Yeah, kid?" Han was going through the pre-flight check and he sounded preoccupied.

"Well, I just wanted to say I was sorry I didn't come with you in the first place."

Han left off the check and looked at him seriously. "That's okay, Luke. When I had time to cool down and think it over, I knew why you didn't want to come."

"I just didn't want you to think I'd let you down."

Han looked at him a minute more. "Where are you right now, kid?"

"Well, on Tatooine, but..."

"So you didn't let me down," Han grinned. "And now, let's go home."

Home, thought Luke, and he realized what Han was trying to say. He knew better than to comment on Han's choice of words though, so all he said was "That sounds good to me."

end

[Back To Index](#)