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BESPIN PLEDGE  
by Carolyn Golledge

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"You certainly have a way with people," Leia quipped. She bent down and took Solo's right arm as Chewbacca gripped the left. Between the two them, they eased the stiff and sore Corellian upright, then helped him to what passed for a bunk in their cell on Cloud City. Solo groaned with relief and pain as he gingerly eased himself flat on his back. He closed his eyes. Leia studied him anxiously. He looked so pale and was too exhausted to find any wisecracks. Chewbacca grunted mournfully. Leia gave him a worried glance, then looked back to Solo. She placed a hand to his cheek and he opened his eyes. "Head hurt bad?" she asked

Solo managed a wry smile. "No more than the rest of me," He lifted his head slightly and surveyed his surroundings. "Any water in here?" he asked hopefully. Chewbacca barked a negative. "Figures," Han grumbled. He closed his eyes again, lay back, then lifted his hand to his aching neck. His fingers came away sticky with blood. He wiped his hand on his dark jacket. Alarmed, Leia reached out to him. "It's nothing," Solo assured. He sighed wearily. "I'm tired. Need some sleep."

"Your wrists!" Leia explained. Gently she examined the abraded, swollen flesh. Solo flinched. "What did they do to you?" she demanded.

Solo held her gaze for a long moment as if deciding whether or not to her the truth. Leia glared at him, insistent. He couldn't lie, and she'd imagine something worse if he remained silent, though at that moment Solo doubted that was possible. "Scan grid," he answered flatly. the blood drained from the Princess' face. Chewbacca waved his fists in the air and howled. Without further ado, Leia tugged at the fastenings of Solo 's

shirt. Han grinned slyly. "Why, Your Highness," he said, feigning shock "I never knew."

Leia smiled back, her anguish fading as she delighted in his return of spirit. "Shut up, Flyboy." Chewbacca peered fretfully over her head as she pulled the shirt back. Solo's chest was a mass of discoloration, a combination of welts from the restraints, bruising, and circular burns caused by the probes. Leia drew a sharp breath, swallowed and simply said, "Oh, Han." Her response was drowned out by the Wookiee's reaction. Chewbacca bellowed so long and so loud that the entire city must have been shaken to its foundations. He took out his frustration on a nearby stanchion. It buckled beneath the force of the blows and Leia realized just how fearsome a strength the Wookiee possessed.

Solo waited until his partner could hear him, then said irritably, "You're not doing my headache any good, gruesome." Chewbacca whuffed an apology, sat down and held his giant head in his shaggy hands. "Come on," Solo said, "It's over. I'm alive. Nothing's broken. No big deal. Now let me get some sleep." He rolled onto his side away from them, muffling a groan at the pain of movement.

"I'm sorry, Han," Leia said. "I should never have talked you into staying with....."

Solo threw a stern glare back over his shoulder. "Nobody talks me into anything. I stayed on because I wanted to." He eased himself onto his back and smiled disarmingly. "The scenery was too good to pass up."

Leia shook her head. "You never give up, do you?"

"Nope." Solo's expression became fiercely intent. "Not when it's something as important as this."

Leia blushed. She avoided his gaze by studying his bruised chest. "You need patching up, and I haven't checked that gash Lando's guards gave you either."

"I just wanna sleep!"

The sound of heavy footsteps in the corridor had them all look to the cell door. It slid back and a squad of Bespin City guardsmen and two civilians entered. Solo rolled his eyes heavenward. "Can't a man have some peace?"

The elder of the civilians, a distinguished-looking, elegantly dressed gentleman approached them. He carried a red-banded case in his right hand.

"I am Doctor Sarlin," he introduced. "Governor Calrissian thought that you should have medical attention, Captain."

Chewbacca snarled. The doctor hurriedly moved behind the protection of the guards who raised their weapons. Han pushed himself stiffly to sit up. "I can do without any further -- help -- from Calrissian!" he spat.

"Suit yourself," Sarlin sounded uncaring. "If you will not allow me to tend you, Lord Vader has an Imperial doctor waiting outside."

"Vader?" Leia was incredulous.

"Yes, Your Highness." Sarlin turned and bowed politely to her. "Apparently, he has given orders that Captain Solo is to have a full medical scan. He wants the results within the hour. Solo is to be treated for any injuries and left to recover before he is claimed by the bounty hunter."

Han and Leia exchanged mystified glances. "Why?" Solo asked suspiciously.

The doctor shrugged. "I wasn't told. The Governor asked Lord Vader that I be permitted to tend you. Calrissian thought you would prefer it and it would prevent any further need of force."

"Get on with it then," Han scowled. He began painfully shrugging out of his jacket and shirt. Leia moved to assist him. "You better hope I don't have to take any more off!" Solo teased.

The doctor was efficient, the examination did not take long, and the dressing of Solo's minor injuries was not painful. By the time Han put his shirt back on, he was too exhausted to argue or ask questions, though there were many matters he wanted cleared up. No longer caring about appearances, he lay down and closed his eyes.

"How is he?" Leia asked anxiously.

"Fortunate to be alive," Sarlin answered frankly. "A less fit man would have been crippled."

"Seen a lot of scan grid cases have you, doctor?" Solo asked sarcastically, eyes still closed.

Leia saw the angry red flush color Sarlin's cheeks. "You're the first," he answered tersely. "And the last. If the Imperials are staying, I'm leaving. Torture disgusts me."

"I'm not too fond of it either," Solo said tiredly.

The doctor sighed and turned to give Leia some capsules he had taken from his kit. "See that he takes these," he said. "Painkillers. He has a mild concussion and those burns will be painful. There is no internal damage. As I said, he was lucky."

"Lucky," Solo echoed bitterly. "Keep your drugs, I'm not that stupid."

Sarlin looked offended. "I assure you," he insisted haughtily. "They are ordinary gresol. You are free to take them or not, as you wish. If Vader wanted you drugged, you would not be given the opportunity to refuse."

"Makes sense, Han," Leia agreed.

Solo eyed her, then nodded his aching head defeatedly. "Leave them then," he said wearily. "But I don't think I'll need them. I'm dead tired."

"The pain will get worse before it gets better," the doctor warned.

"You're a real ray of sunshine," Solo muttered.

Leia smiled. "Thank you," she said as the doctor turned to leave.

Sarlin halted before the door. "I must tell you, Your Highness," he said apologetically. "I do not approve of any of this. Governor Calrissian is very angry, but there is nothing he can do. Vader is threatening to leave a garrison here if he does not cooperate. Lando has asked me to see to it that you are made as comfortable as possible. My orderly here will leave food and water for you. You cannot sleep in these conditions. I will have bedding sent down to you."

"Thank you," Leia said again. "What are Vader's plans for us?"

"I am sorry, my Lady. I only know that you and the Wookiee are not to leave the city. None of you are to be harmed, but the bounty hunter has a claim to Captain Solo."

Leia nodded and the doctor, orderly and guards left. She filled one of the provided mugs with water and took it to Han, along with the capsules. Solo drank thirstily, downing the contents in one long swallow. "Want some more?" Leia asked with a smile. Solo nodded.

"Can't figure it," he mumbled over the second mug.

"What?"

"What Vader's up to."

"Maybe Fett wanted the medical scan," Leia suggested.

"Maybe, " Solo agreed. "He sure wouldn't want his bounty money halved because I died on the way to Tatooine." Leia bit her lip and looked away quickly. Han lifted a hand and caressed her cheek. "C'mon," he urged. "Cheer up. That's our ticket outta here. Don't you see?" Leia looked back to him. She frowned and shook her head. Solo smiled. "Remember how mad you were at me back on Hoth when I said I was leaving?"

Leia stared down at her hands, shamefaced. "I'm sorry for the way I behaved," she said. "I was just so ... so hurt to think that you could leave after all we've been through in the past two years. I thought you had finally made a commitment, that you were happy with the Alliance."

Solo drew an angry breath and removed his hand from her face. Can we leave the Alliance out of this?!" he growled.

Leia hesitated, then seeing the hurt in his eyes, she bent forward and kissed him gently. His eyes widened with surprise. She drew back before he could take her in his arms. "Yes," she whispered huskily. "I meant, I didn't want you to leave. Not then. Not now."

"That's more like it!" Solo smiled warmly. He resumed tracing her mouth and jaw with an outstretched forefinger. "I wasn't leaving you, Leia," he said. "I'm not leaving you. Not permanently. I was coming back after I paid Jabba off. That's what I meant when I said Fett taking me away from here is for the best. I've got Jabba's money on board the Falcon, plus those fiergla stones Chewie and me found on Rakan 3. I'll talk Jabba round, give him a nice fat bonus, then come back for you two."

Leia smiled and reached up and took the hand that caressed her face "You make it all sound so simple."

"I've talked my way outta worse spots", Solo said confidently. "It's Luke I'm worried about. I can't get back in time to stop him walking into Vader's trap."

"There's got to be a way," Leia said determinedly. There was a silence as they both considered the problem. "Couldn't you pay Fett off, give him the bounty money and the stones?"

"No. A bounty hunter can't be bribed. They have a Huntsmen Honor Code. Break it and they can never lay claim to another bounty."

"Oh," Leia sighed. Her expression became fearful. Han -- the money on The Falcon. Vader will have had it searched."

"No problem, " Solo smiled. "The Falcon's been searched by Imperials before. They'll never find it."

"But how are you going to get it to Jabba?"

"I'm workin' on it," Solo mumbled. "If I can just figure a way to get the jump on Fett, I could still be back here in time to help Luke."

Leia drew back in alarm. "Han, you can't! You know Fett's reputation. He wouldn't give you the least opening."

"True," Solo admitted. "If only Luke hadn't used that Jedi stuff to save my hide on Ord Mantell Vader wouldn't be after him."

"You surrendered yourself to a bounty hunter to save Luke," Leia pointed out softly. "He couldn't just leave you to die."

Han shrugged. He scrubbed at his aching brow. "Damn imp spies! They recorded every move the kid made! The last Jedi. Vader must want him bad. I wish I knew how Vader got a message through to Luke about us. Hell, we don't even know where he is!"

Leia gripped his hand tightly and he turned and looked questioningly into her eyes. "You said they didn't ask you any questions," she prompted.

"So? Vader just wanted a little amusement."

Leia shook her head emphatically. "Vader may be a lot of things, but he's not a sadist. He was once a Jedi Knight. He wouldn't enjoy torture."

"If you say so," Han sighed doubtfully. "He didn't hang around to watch, but I figured maybe they were recording."

"Vader was a Jedi," Leia explained. "Many Jedis were empathes. It's possible he may have felt your pain. Luke claims you are a Sender."

"I hope so," Han said savagely.

"You remember how Luke stayed with you non-stop for three days in the infirmary after you were so badly wounded on Ord Mantell?" Leia hinted.

"Yeah," Solo frowned. "So?"

"It wasn't just company," Leia explained carefully. "He used the Force to keep you alive. It's called a Healer's Link. The doctors say you would have died without it. Once a Link like that is formed, it can't be broken."

Solo straightened, his face taut as the implications registered. "Are you telling me that Luke could feel what Vader did to me?"

Leia nodded. "It's the only way Vader could have gotten Luke here so fast."

"I'm gonna kill that Sith mongrel when I get outta here!" Solo snarled. Chewbacca, who politely had moved to the further end of the cell, looked across and howled questioningly. Solo waved off his concern.

"If Luke doesn't kill him first," Leia added quietly.

Solo shook his head. "Luke wouldn't stand a chance."

"No," Leia agreed grimly. "Not if Vader wants to kill him. But I'm almost certain he wants him alive."

"Why?"

"I don't know. It's just a feeling I have. Vader could have killed Luke three or four times in the past, but always he held back. I think he doesn't want the Jedi faith to become extinct. He is ridiculed for his belief in the Force; maybe he'd like a Jedi at his side, an apprentice in ways of the Darkside, an heir."

Solo grunted with grim amusement. "Fat chance of that!" He paused, reached up and cupped Leia's face until her gaze met his. His eyes were aglow with tenderness as he determined to reveal his love. "Leia," he said softly as she looked curiously at him, wondering at the intensity of his expression. "They'll probably be taking me outta here in morning. There's something I've got to tell you before I leave..."

Realizing what was coming, Leia pulled free to protest, "No, Han. Please."

Solo continued as if she had not spoken. "I love you, Leia," he said gently. "Always have. Ever since I first saw you. You and the kid changed everything. And I kinda like it this way. "

Leia avoided his searching eyes. "Han...I can't ..." she mumbled. "I have to put the Alliance first. If I let myself..."

"Shh," Han smiled softly, then kissed her brow. "I understand. I just wanted to tell you how I feel. I know how important the Rebellion is to you. I plan on stickin' around till it's over ... there's no hurry. You don't have to say anything now." He gave her another soft kiss, his lips fleetingly warm against hers, gently loving, not insistent. Leia's eyes were closed as he drew back. He stroked her cheek with one farewell touch then stood and stretched, grimacing as his abused muscles reminded him of the pounding they had taken. "I've got a lot of rescuing coming up," he said wryly. "Better get some sleep." He lay down on one of the thin pallets spread on the floor, pulled a blanket about his shoulders, closed his eyes, and was almost immediately lost to sleep. Leia sat watching him for a long time before she, too, gave in to weariness.

Morning came, and with it a day that would forever live in Leia's nightmares. Carbon freeze. The industry which made the city's fortune, but used to freeze gases, not human beings. The Dark Lord towered over the glowing pit, clouds of steam billowing about him. A scene from hell itself. The reason for Solo's medical examination became terrifyingly apparent in Calrissian's clipped answer, "You're being put into carbon freeze." There would be no daring rescue bid, no escape. Solo would be lucky to survive.

No! They can't be doing this!! Leia thought frantically. She clung desperately to Solo as he kissed her one last time. This time he did not hold back and neither did she. Why now, only when it was too late, could she find the courage to open herself to him. The guards pulled him free of her embrace. Fear clutched at her heart, turning her as surely to ice, as Solo soon would be. Tell him! He wasn't afraid to tell you. To hell with the Rebellion!

"I love you," Leia cried haltingly. The words were wrenched free of the prison in which she had so carefully locked her feelings.

Solo's smile was gentle, sad, understanding. "I know."

And then he was gone.

In the agony of the weeks that followed, Leia lived for one objective. She would find him, and if he were dead, her heart would die too. Luke seemed to understand when she explained that she must be the one to free Han, she must be the first to know. And if he were near death, she must be with him in those last moments.

It was not the threatening shadows which filled every corner of Jabba's throne room that made Leia shiver with dread. She barely noticed them. Only the carbon etched face existed, all her senses were focused upon it, upon what she might find when she activated those tantalizingly glowing panels.

The light was dazzling, so bright that she was forced to turn away. She blinked and squinted, and saw Solo's lifeless body fall limply, heavily to the floor. There was no room to allow emotion as she stood staring down at that dreadfully still figure. The slightest easing of her mental guard, and fear and despair would crush her in an instant. Mechanically, barely breathing, not wanting to breathe if he did not, Leia bent down and carefully rolled Solo onto his back. Her joy when finally he moved choked her so that the words of reassurance were hard to find.

"You're free of the carbonite. You have hibernation sickness." Cursed metal voice! Why had she promised Luke she would remain disguised!

"I can't see." Solo's shocked words cut through her, tearing into her resolve.

"Your eyesight will soon return."

"Where am I?"

"Jabba's palace."

"Who are you?"

Han's reaction as he contacted her masked face decided Leia. He must know now, from this moment on. Forever. If they were to die at Jabba's hands, he would know she had come for him, know that he mattered far more to her than any Rebellion, more even than life itself. She tugged off the helmet and shook her hair free of its confinement.

"Someone who loves you," she answered. She brought her lips to his and the pledge between them was sealed.

END

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