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BESPIN DELUSION

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Darth Vader had not enjoyed hiring bounty hunters to do his work for him. The scum of the galaxy, paid murderers, they were more criminals than any rebel. But then too Palpatine's methods of bleeding his subjects were anything but enlightened. There were no clearly marked lines of justice in times of revolution.

Exhausted after the Hoth battle and the unproductive search for the Falcon, Vader could still not find sleep. These hours were all he had in which to be free of his hated respirator, helmet and heavy uniform. Normally, he relished the cool, clean touch of sheets against his sensitive scarred skin and the sheer luxury of a gently cushioning pillow beneath his head. He should not curse the confinement of the sealed helmet and portable respirator that allowed him to return to active duty in spite of lungs that were all but burned away.

Restlessly he rolled onto his side, enjoying the naked ease of movement and the feel of the fluid give in the mattress beneath him. He trailed abnormally smooth fingertips over the curved metal wall beside his head. The sleeping-tube, pressure sealed, iron-lung designed, was Vader's little piece of paradise. Yet lately, even it seemed just another prison as he lay endlessly awake, staring at the dimly lit curved ceiling. He had lost family and friends because of the strength of his belief that the Old Republic was corrupt and crumbling, held back from progress by the strangle-hold of senile aristocrats with their ridiculous traditions and rigid values. In those early days of impulsive youth, it was HE who had become the rebel, turning aside from the glory and fame which were his as a decorated Jedi pilot, preferring to support Senator Palpatine's revolutionary ideas and cloned armies. The Jedi Order had been the last bastion of serious military opposition. Anakin Skywalker had been promised

the power to correct all the unequal past of the Old Republic, if he would just supply the information which would make the Jedi vulnerable to a surprise attack.

As Darth Vader, he had become known as the betrayer of his own kind. Palpatine had well seen to it that the Jedi Order would hold his name in infamy for all time. A traitor. Perhaps he was, but never as cold-bloodedly or as ruthlessly as Imperial propaganda painted it. And Ben had not given him the chance to explain that he was no murderer. Palpatine had had given his word that the Jedi Knights would be surrounded and captured, not annihilated in a bloody massacre. It had hurt him badly. The news of so many deaths had thrown him mentally and physically off balance in the ensuing duel with his former teacher and friend. And he had paid! Oh, he had paid with such agony as he would never have believed could exist. After that, his only chance for life lay in full obedience to Palpatine. He had lost his independence, to become snidely referred to as a freak, more machine than human.

In bitterness, he had won back respect through victory in battles in which he became renowned for giving no mercy. The image eventually became his personal pleasure, his revenge for the way he was forced to live, dependent upon machines. It could all have been so different if only his Jedi brothers and sisters had listened when he pleaded with them to stand, join him in declaring the need for reforms. Knowing his views, they had turned even his beloved Riasta against him. How he had longed for the birth of his son! They had taken the child from him before ever it saw the light of day. When remorse turned to bitterness during the agonizing days of his recovery, vengeance had seemed sweet justice

After the success of the purge, Palpatine had declared himself emperor, ignoring all the pledges he had made to the contrary. All those inspired speeches had been for gullible fools. Anakin Skywalker, burning the idealism of youth, had been an oh-so-easy target. And now it was far too late. He had become Darth Vader, Lord of the Sith, upholder of an Empire that was ever more boldly showing its true colors. The rebels were no better, representing as they did the flaws of the Old Republic. Equality and justice were dreams for fools.

Half asleep, Darth Vader tossed and turned as the events of the past twenty years circled in his mind. Dare he play the traitor again? Were his ideals just so much fantasy, or could he as emperor bring them into reality? An idea took shape in his restlessly searching mind. He lay suddenly still, eyes staring unseeing in the dark. Palpatine was afraid of Luke, the son of Anakin Skywalker. Did the boy have so much power? The evidence of the Ord Mantell tape returned to excite him. Yes! That was the

answer! Together they would have the power to throw off Palpatine's mind enslavement. Combined they would rule the galaxy as father and son.

There were details, many details, to weigh before undertaking such a daring scheme, but satisfied that he had found a path to victory, Vader smiled and fell instantly into dreamless sleep. Skywalker would be with his friends aboard the Falcon. The bounty hunters would find them. It would all fall into place.

Bespin's Cloud City was a surrealistically beautiful place. Almost a dreamscape, with its glistening spires and towers enshrouded in the pastel bands of clouds and gases that gave it its name and its fortune. Given an Imperial ultimatum by a Star Destroyer, Administrator Calrissian had no other option but to co-operate in the concealment of Lord Vader's personal shuttle and troop carrier. Waiting like a spider in its web, Vader smiled to himself. If Calrissian had chosen otherwise, his dream world, his private haven beyond the bounds of Imperial jurisdiction would be reduced to ash. It had been done before. Tarkin had destroyed an entire planet. If Vader could not have his dream, why should Calrissian be allowed his? Bespin was after all, an illegal mining station, full of fugitives running from the law. Vader would be quite within his rights in making an example of its destruction. But he was no mass-murderer. If he were defied, he would allow an evacuation. Such extremes would not be needed. Calrissian was an intelligent, smooth operator with an eye to the main chance. He had not protested overly, once Vader had assured him that the Falcon's crew would be taken unharmed. If only Skywalker had been with them! That was a bitter disappointment, but he had all he needed to find the boy. Thus this trap, this mock dinner. Solo would not be given the chance to make a fight of it.

Sensing the approach of his prey, Vader calmly took his place at the head of the elegantly decorated dinner table. He tensed as the door controls flashed green. Solo's reflex draw was enough to cause even an ex-Jedi some surprise. Still, the bolts were deflected with comparative ease. The rumors about the Corellian were true then. His gunplay and his remarkable display of piloting skills proved that he was no ordinary foe. Solo's expression was openly shocked as his blaster was torn from his hand to fly unheeded into the Dark Lord's waiting grasp.

"We would be honored if you would join us," Vader delighted in saying.

Solo was rigid with anger as he turned shocked eyes upon his friend Lando Calrissian. Vader well recognized that expression of hurt and betrayal. "I had no choice," Calrissian mumbled. "They arrived right before you did." Desperately he held Solo's gaze, trying to explain. "I'm sorry."

Vader was surprised by the lack of angry retaliation from Solo. He merely said quietly, "I'm sorry, too."

Those simple words held more outrage than any indignant outburst ever would. Calrissian had just become a despised enemy. As Solo calmly took Princess Organa's hand and turned to face him, Vader became aware of the strange potency of the Corellian's life aura. Not a Jedi, not even a Force-User, but something . . . undefinable, unique. "Please be seated," Vader said, relaxing into his own chair.

Solo lifted his head defiantly. "I make it a point not to eat with pets begging at the table. Get rid of him." He nodded toward the bounty hunter, who stood, rifle at the ready, behind Vader.

Furious, Fett's poison knives snapped into position on his outstretched sleeve. "You will regret those words, Corellian!" he snarled. The wookiee immediately stepped forward, fangs barred, protecting his friend.

"Enough!" Vader commanded with quiet authority. He turned to Fett. "I will settle with you later. Leave us."

"The Corellian is mine!" Fett insisted.

"I advise you to leave before you endanger the contract," Vader threatened. "I do not yet have all I was promised." Not daring to argue further, Fett resheathed his knives and strode angrily from the room.

Satisfied that he had won the first point, Solo reclaimed his defiant nonchalance, pulled out a chair for the white-faced Princess, then seated himself beside her. Calrissian sat opposite; Chewbacca remained standing, poised for action. "The Empire must have fallen on hard times, Your Highness, wouldn't you say?" Solo taunted.

"Indeed," Leia Organa agreed coolly, though her hands trembled as she picked up a table napkin. "Hiring his kind is definitely scraping the bottom of the barrel."

"Sad," Solo shook his head with mock sympathy. "But that's life.,, He looked up to the towering, angry wookiee. "Pass me the wine, will ya, pal?" Chewbacca took his cue, following his partner's lead. He left off his snarling to comply, then found and occupied the larger chair provided for him.

"Han ..." Calrissian began.

Solo's hazel eyes flared. "Save it!" he snapped. Ignoring the administrator, he smiled charmingly to the regal woman beside him. "What do you fancy, Princess?" He waved a hand at the beautifully prepared meal. "Company's not the best, but the food's pretty good. I'm starved." He began helping himself and dishing food onto Leia's plate.

Vader grunted in approval. Being so casually disregarded he could not but admire his captives' courageous pretense of enjoyment. "I am pleased to see that we can be civilized about this," he said.

Solo flicked him a glance. "By all means," he replied with smooth sarcasm. "Let's be civilized. Every dinner party should have an honor guard at the door." He poured a glass of wine and sniffed disdainfully. "Thought you could do better than Pilaris vintage, Calrissian." He lifted his glass in salute. "Oh well, here's to the revolution..,"

Vader was surprised by Solo's knowledge of wines. Leia Organa's lips twitched with genuine amusement as she touched her glass to Solo's. She held his gaze for long moments, and they seemed to share a special secret which excluded their companions. Vader felt the pulsing of the bond between the couple. Organa was drawing strength from this brash Corellian, and he drew from her in return. Vader continued to observe them as they exchanged light conversation. It was more than that. Much more. He could not read Organa's well-shielded aura, but there was a fierce protectiveness about Solo and a radiance about the princess that could only mean love. And by the strength of the Force bond, they were a Destined Pair. A smuggler and a princess. Interesting. Vader returned his attentions to the present moment as Solo addressed him.

"You're not drinking?" the Corellian asked with mock concern. Vader felt a flash of anger. Solo continued as if he had only just noticed the sealed helmet. "Too bad."

"I hope you'll pardon us if we continue without you," Leia Organa played along. "We haven't had much time to enjoy a relaxing meal lately."

"So I hear," Vader said acidly, ignoring Solo's grin. "A shame you could not rejoin your Fleet."

Solo shrugged. "Rebel food's not as good as this. And I wanted to say hello to my -- buddy -- here. Why hurry?" He gave Calrissian an icy stare.

"If it's the rendezvous co-ordinates you want, Vader," Leia announced victoriously, "You're too late. You must know we have better security than that. The Fleet will have moved on. Even we would have to pass stringent

security testing before being given final clearance. And under duress, there are simple code words which could warn our friends."

"The remnants of your so-called Fleet are not worthy of my time, Your Highness," Vader retorted. "If they had been my target, I would simply have had you kept under surveillance."

Solo took a sip of wine, leaned back in his chair, and said, "Well, if you just wanted the pleasure of our company at dinner, why didn't you send an invitation? Would have saved a lot of trouble -- and expensive bounty hunters."

"Why don't you get to the point, Vader?" Leia asked.

"Captain Solo is closer to the mark than you suspect, Your Highness. I merely wish to discuss old times with you before I have you transferred to detention."

Solo stiffened. He replaced his glass on the table, and his right hand went to his empty holster. "What do you mean by 'old times'?" he growled. "If you're referring to the last time you had Leia prisoner, I swear, if you so much as --" Suddenly the Corellian smiled, aware that he had lost control. For the first time in many years Vader read a genuine threat of death in another's calmly certain eyes. "Well, I'm sure you understand me," Solo finished.

"I do," Vader rumbled. "More than you know," he added quietly. There had been an amazing surge of energy in the Corellian's aura. Flaring outward, it had contacted Vader's dark isolation with an undeniable flood of emotion. Every Jedi in the galaxy would have been swept up in such an uncontrolled broadcast not so long ago. Solo was an incredibly powerful Empathic Sender. Vader was elated. His plans were so much more likely to succeed now. Despite his excitement at this discovery, he was also duly impressed by the emotion he read . . . it was not just Solo's use of the personal name 'Leia' that evidenced the intimacy he shared with his Force-lover. A powerful bond indeed. What children they would breed! "I assure you, Your Highness," Vader continued. "There will be no repetition of the treatment you experienced two years ago. You have no information I require, and the strength of your shields have been well proven." Vader was relieved when Solo relaxed, and the unconscious broadcast ebbed.

"So what IS it you wish to discuss?" Leia asked.

"Ord Mantell," Vader said flatly.

Solo choked on his wine in surprised reaction.

"Very well," Leia said coolly. "The situation there is no secret. We no longer have any contact with that planet. As you are well aware, it was originally a stage for the shipment of arms; a neutral world. Thanks to Imperial infiltration, it is no longer of use to us."

"It is not politics which interest me, Princess," Vader explained. My concern is on a much more personal level." He looked toward Solo. Somehow the Corellian seemed to have sensed what he was after. Solo looked like a trapped leonine, a dangerous foe indeed. "You did well to elude us in the asteroid field, Captain," he said. "May I compliment you on the inspiration with which you successfully bluffed your way out from literally under the hull of a star destroyer." Solo bowed his head graciously. "Might I inquire where you learned to fly like that?"

"Just comes natural," the Corellian said smoothly.

"My information is that you were once a top cadet in the Academy. The Blood Stripe bears evidence to that."

"So?" Solo's mouth twisted. "I was only in it for the flying. I'm not one for the military life. After I learned what I needed, I left."

"Not quite," Vader rumbled. "I believe there were court-martial proceedings. You were dishonorably discharged after serving part of a prison sentence on Kessel." Chewbacca growled loudly in defense, but Solo remained unfazed.

"Dead right," he answered coldly. "How else could I avoid being executed as a deserter? Clever, huh?"

"So it would seem," Vader replied. "You and I both know otherwise. But I have no time to discuss your military background. I agree that hiring bounty hunters is distasteful, however, they do seem best suited to keeping you under surveillance. Jabba the Hutt is very interested in you. I believe he almost had you on Ord Mantell. Our purposes seem to keep crossing. That is quite a price he has on your head."

"My talents are always in demand," Solo returned jauntily. Leia smiled. Vader noticed he touched his hand to hers. "My contacts reported a prolonged shootout in Ord Mantell docking bay 35. Your friends fought hard to free you from the bounty hunter. According to that report, Zeriex shot you at point blank range rather than give you up. My contact was certain that you had been killed. Then, he reports a young man, whom we have since identified as Luke Skywalker, somehow brought you back to life."

Solo blanched, but his sneering expression was pure insolence. "What a story! You gotta tell your spies to quit drinking on duty."

"Holo tapes do not lie," Vader responded. "It appears the Jedi Order is not quite extinct after all. Young Skywalker showed remarkable skill with the lightsaber while covering the wookiee as he carried you into your ship. That was a very large hole in your chest. You must still bear the scars. Skywalker is a powerful Healer indeed. Without full Jedi training he would have been dangerously drained preventing your death."

"You're imagining things, Vader," Solo said unconvincingly. "It wasn't as bad a wound as it looked. Missed all the essentials."

"I believe a medical scan would prove otherwise," Vader said. "As an ex-Jedi, I know what I saw. You are fortunate to be alive. Only a Jedi Healer's Link over a period of days could have saved you from the effects of so grave an injury." Solo looked set to protest, Vader overrode him. "Or would you prefer I prove the truth by subjecting you to a medical scan?"

Solo drew a deep breath and steadied himself. "So I'm a lucky guy. I heal fast. Big deal."

"I was most disappointed that young Skywalker was not with you aboard your ship." Vader continued. "Now I must use other methods to locate him."

Leia paled. "If you intend holding us in exchange for Skywalker, you will be disappointed again," she said firmly. "First, we don't know where he is, and second, he would not be permitted to come here after us. And hostage exchanges have led to treachery in the past."

"There will be no exchange," Vader said confidently. "I will have you both. Now, if you are finished with your meal?" He waved a hand; the doors slid obediently open. A black uniformed officer entered, saluted and asked, "My Lord?"

"Have Princess Organa and the wookiee taken to their cells," Vader ordered. "Solo will be taken to interrogation."

The officer's response was drowned out by Chewbacca's blood-curdling roar. Several stormtroopers rushed forward, covering him with their laser rifles. Solo somehow managed to control his mammoth partner.

"Han?" Leia whispered brokenly.

Solo squeezed her hand and managed a smile. "No problem. I'll catch up to you later."

Calrissian gathered his courage and spoke up. "Lord Vader," he protested. "It was agreed that the Falcon's crew would become my prisoners. They are under my protection and are not to be harmed."

"Nor will they be," Vader assured. "Captain Solo is to be interrogated. That is not a breach of our agreement."

The guards manacled Solo's hands and began leading him away.

"He can't tell you anything!" Lando protested, eyes wild and desperate.

"That's true," Leia implored. She resisted her guards' grip. "Skywalker is with the Fleet. We have no way of finding him now."

Vader ignored her. "You have your orders," he repeated to his officer, "Carry them out." Without another glance at his prisoners, he left the room.

By the time Darth Vader entered the interrogation chamber, Captain Solo was already locked into the restraints of the scan grid. The Corellian's face was drained and taut, white with fear as he saw what form his 'interrogation' was to take. But he lifted his head proudly, his eyes defiantly questioning as he met and held the Dark Lord's impersonal, masked gaze. Vader noted Solo did not beg, nor attempt to talk his way free; he refused even the characteristic insults.. Just this stoic, accusing silence. Vader could not face the man's courageous, mildly curious expectancy. Solo was listening for the first question, but there would be none. There was not even the thinnest veneer of an excuse for what was to come. Troopers and prisoner alike could only believe this cruelty to be some form of sadistic vengeance. Vader's stomach churned and his chest tightened in an odd emotional reaction. Never before had he ordered such intense, cold-blooded torture. It was shame he felt. He could give no justification, the explanation was even more cruel than the man's imagining.

The scangrid frame tilted into the upright, ready position, and the troopers stood back, awaiting the order to begin. Vader strode to the console to check the settings, and all the while Solo's questioning, brave eyes bored into his back. Even the troopers were impressed now by his

resolute silence. It was unnerving. It was Solo who should be shaken, not his torturer.

Vader broke the silence. "Do not exceed this setting," he ordered. "No more than 500 units. I do not want him crippled. If he should enter into shock, leave off until he has recovered. He must survive undamaged. is that clear?"

"Yes, My lord," the troopers answered in unison.

Against his will, Darth Vader's eyes were drawn back to Solo's taut, proud face. The Corellian understood now that there would be no questions. His hazel eyes were bright with contempt. Vader turned away. "Begin," he ordered.

Solo braced himself. He drew a quick breath and clenched his fists as the platform tilted forward. Still he remained silent. The first probe made contact with his abdomen, then another with his face, the heat of the discharge causing sparks to fly. Solo grunted, choking back his scream. He clenched his teeth and threw his head to one side, but more probes made contact, digging deeper. Vader felt the first surge of the man's pain and fear; searching, hunting for a familiar comforting presence in the Force. Good, Solo was unknowingly beginning to call for help. And Skywalker had bonded with him when the Corellian had been so near death after his wounding on Ord Mantell. Luke would hear and respond. The pain crested, threatening to engulf Vader too. He hurried from the chamber.

Solo's first harsh, drawn out scream followed him into the corridor. Vader flinched beneath his mask. Burning flames seared savagely into his mental shields, and worse, he read Solo's silent, desperate plea; "Someone help me!!" Vader shook his head slightly, making a conscious effort to drive away the vision those cries summoned in his mind -- glowing, evil, molten rock, wrapping around him, clinging to him, eating away his flesh. Fallen into the volcanic pit, he had mentally screamed once and once only. He had betrayed the source that could have comforted him. The sudden shock of isolation from the Jedi Bond had been even more agonizing than the physical pain.

Solo screamed again, and Vader suddenly felt ill. He increased his pace, hurrying toward the protection of the lift-tube which would take him far away from the sound. He was annoyed when the bounty hunter approached him, slowing his progress. "You may take Solo to Jabba the Hutt after I have Skywalker," Vader said, in an attempt to forestall questions.

He sensed even Fett's disgust in the clipped statement, "He's no good to me dead."

Vader was surprised at the detached, calm tone of his answer as the pain lunged for him again. "He will not be permanently damaged," he assured bluntly. Fett seemed satisfied by this, but the same could not be said for Calrissian. The administrator's polite exterior barely hid his outrage as he tried for the second time to protest. But it was not Solo about whom he inquired.

"What about Leia and the wookiee?" Calrissian asked.

Having reached the elevator, Vader swung about impatiently. "They must never again leave this city," he answered.

Calrissian's jaw dropped in surprise. His dark eyes flashed furiously, and his voice rose, "That was never a part of our agreement nor was giving Han to this bounty hunter!!"

His patience at an end, Vader retorted, "Perhaps you think you are being treated unfairly?"

"No," Calrissian denied reluctantly.

Good," Vader repeated his earlier threat. "It would be most unfortunate if I had to leave a garrison here."

The doors slid closed and Vader resisted the urge to sag back against the wall, as finally, blessedly, Solo's screams disappeared. Now he could maintain his mental shields, cut himself off from Solo's hell. Vader felt a second touch of shame as he considered Leia Organa's fate. She was still enduring Solo's screams. She could not run away. For an instant, Vader saw just how thoroughly he had surrendered to the Dark. He was no better than all those he so despised.

Darth Vader spent the remainder of that morning on the other side of Cloud City, distancing himself as far as possible from Solo's desperate emanations. Even exerting all his powers could not entirely shut them out. Occasionally there were quite periods, and Vader knew the Corellian was unconscious. As the hours dragged by, each resumption of emotional feedback drained the Dark Lord of his sense of purpose. Torture disgusted the young idealistic Jedi Knight he had once been. Where had he learned to become so ruthless? Exhausted and impatient, he slammed one fist into the

other as he paced the length of his luxury quarters. Surely Skywalker would respond soon? What if Luke had been wounded in the Hoth invasion and was lying somewhere unconscious, or for some other reason was unable to hear? Again and again, Vader had probed for his presence and been unable to find him -- yet the boy's Force presence had been so strong as Vader had approached Hoth.

The days were long on Bespin, equivalent to two and a half standard planetary cycles. The sun had been on its upward arc as they led Solo to the scan-grid, now the clouds were beginning to change hue as the afternoon drew on. Still no word on Skywalker! Vader shut himself in his quarters but was unable to sleep. He ordered Solo be given respite, but was not to be removed from the interrogation chamber. Even had Skywalker heard his friend's Sending, it would take some time to reach Bespin. Would Skywalker's military superiors prevent him from coming? His Bonding with Solo should ensure that nothing would hold him back. But if they locked him away . . .the boy could be driven insane.

Pushing down his doubts and self-recriminations, Vader strode to the communicator and ordered Solo's torture resumed. There was no other way to restore order to the galaxy! He must have Skywalker at his side! A new age could then begin. Solo's suffering was not lacking in purpose.

A renewed tide of agony and despair reached out to him through the Force, and Vader slammed his fist through the earthenware sculpture on the table before him. Where was his son?! What was holding him back?! Had he misjudged the strength of the Bonding?! There was no way of shutting himself away from the black tide of pain that flowed upwards from the bowels of the city.

Desperate to find distraction, Vader called his orderly and went for the second time that day to inspect the facilities of Cloud City's mining industry. When Skywalker arrived, he must be ready to take him unharmed, to conceal him in carbon-freeze hibernation. It was the only way to shield the boy from contact with Palpatine until such time as Vader could train him for their combined attack. Skywalker would not refuse once Vader had explained this was the only way to bring peace to the galaxy.

"My Lord," the officer hurried across a walkway and saluted. "Commander Cullen reports that the Corellian is unconscious. They cannot revive him without the use of stimulants. It is the Commander's opinion that further . . .interrogation will cause the Corellian's death. He is awaiting your order to continue."

Vader strode angrily toward the window at the far end of the corridor and stood gazing out at the magnificent sunset. The Corellian's lack of

consciousness was a blessed relief to them both. Vader's head ached mercilessly. It was difficult to think clearly. Solo was of little use to him dead. Yet, if he were to stop now, Skywalker might believe the danger ended. Decision made, Vader turned about swiftly. "I will judge the Corellian's condition for myself," he answered curtly.

"Yes, My Lord," the gray-haired officer responded. He had to jog to keep up with Vader's urgent strides as he hurried toward the elevator.

Lando Calrissian had not left the detention bay corridor in all these long hours. He looked as haggard as Vader felt, which gave the Dark Lord all the more cause for surprise when the administrator sprang to his feet, alive with desperate fear and anguished protest.

"Lord Vader," Calrissian growled, no longer bothering with the polite facade. "I demand to be allowed to have Solo given medical attention. He must be removed to the infirmary immediately."

"You are in no position to make demands, Calrissian!" Vader threatened. "Solo will remain here."

Calrissian suddenly looked dispirited and broken. "Solo's dead, isn't he?" he said quietly.

"No," Vader answered. "He is not dead."

"Then he must be close to it!!" Calrissian shouted. "This has gone on far too long!! He is not being questioned! Surely you've had enough vengeance!!"

Vader raised his fist. "You overstep your place," he hissed. Calrissian gasped for air and clasped his hands to his throat. "I do not seek vengeance," Vader finished. He let his hand drop, and Calrissian gulped air.

"Then . . .leave . . .him be!" Lando pleaded hoarsely. But Vader had disappeared into the torture room. As the Dark Lord stepped aside, Calrissian caught one horrifying glimpse of Solo's lifeless face. "What have I done!" he muttered remorsefully. Fett moved toward the door, and Lando whispered to his aide. "We've gotta get Han and the others outa here . . .somehow."

Even though he had known what he would find, Darth Vader was shocked by the Corellian's appearance. Solo looked like nothing so much as a corpse.

He lay motionless, barely breathing. The slack flesh of his face was a stark white contrast etched against the unrelenting black of the scan-grid's surface. The platform was in the horizontal position now, deactivated, but the restraints were still locked about the pilot's unresponsive form.

Seeing that his superior had come to an abrupt halt in the entryway and was staring fixedly at the prisoner, Commander Cullen nervously reassured, 'He is alive, My Lord. We were careful. He has not been crippled, but we did not expect to have to continue so long. His system cannot. - ."

"I can see the effect for myself, Commander!!" Vader cut him off. "The interrogation must continue."

"Very well, My Lord," Cullen said coolly. "I will have the stimulant administered, but it is my opinion that the drug will cause him to go into irreversible shock. He will not last until morning."

"You will not need the stimulant" Vader explained. "I will revive him."
"My Lord?" Cullen was as puzzled as he looked.

"Move away from him. Do not touch him," Vader warned. The officer stood back, and Vader went to the unconscious Corellian. Removing his right glove, Vader placed his fingertips to the man's clammy, sweat-streaked brow. The life force was weak, distant. Vader called it to him, projecting some of his own power to strengthen the thin thread of life. As Solo's aura grew brighter, his consciousness climbing, Vader felt first Healer Bond contact with the essence of the man he had had tortured. There was much he found to like and admire -- courage, vitality, spirited humor, fierce pride, gentleness . . .all these qualities forming a unique _ presence in the Force, all this he was coldly preparing to destroy.

Solo's eyes were open long moments before they finally took on focus. Vader removed his hand and the Corellian moaned and moved his head feebly to one side. Solo's bleary gaze fell upon Vader's black glove, and he followed the arm up to the impersonal mask looming above him. At first his expression was remote, curious, then with a visible effort of will, the old spark of defiance returned. Solo licked his parched lips, attempted to speak, and not able to find his voice, managed a taunting smile instead.

It had been a very long time since Vader had felt any emotion other than bitterness, arrogance or anger. But this display of courage moved him as none other had. For he had Bonded with Solo, even if only fleetingly, and he had been in contact all during the long hours of that terrible day, faintly felt the man's horrific suffering. The experience had left him as

mentally racked as Solo was physically. Darth Vader was not the same man who had so confidently ensnared his prey.

"Give him water," Vader ordered. Solo gave him a mildly surprised, disdainful glance. A trooper filled a tankard and stepped forward, lifting Solo's head. The Corellian drank painfully but thirstily, swallowing only with difficulty. Finally, he indicated he wanted no more and lay back. He stared up at Vader without anger, his eyes so full of anguished yearning to understand why this was being done to him that Vader was glad of a mask to hide shame.

"Why?" Solo asked.

The single rasped word tore through twenty years of protective layers built to prevent Darth Vader from feeling emotion as Anakin Skywalker once had. He felt himself coming apart, another person struggling for dominance somewhere deep within.

"I have my reasons," he answered remotely. The words echoed scornfully in his mind as images of past betrayals, long suppressed, returned to haunt him.

"Your kind . . . always . . . do," Solo retorted, each word an effort, forced past his raw throat.

He's right, Darth Vader agreed silently. My kind. I am no different to Palpatine. No better. That is where he trapped me. I have been deceiving myself all these years. Just as ruthless, just as self-interested. Flying the banner of idealism, ignoring the blood.

"Shall we continue, My Lord?" Cullen asked matter-of-factly. "He seems recovered sufficiently."

The coldly uncaring words bit deep into Vader's new understanding of himself. He whirled savagely about to face the torturer, and Cullen's bored, blank eyes left him feeling nauseous.

"NO!!" Vader roared. And it was a cry as much in defense of himself as Solo. A word he intended for Palpatine's ears. Stunned by the outburst, Cullen jumped backwards, white with fear.

"No," Vader repeated calmly, gathering himself. "Have him returned to his cell."

It was Solo's turn to look surprised. Then suspicious. Dawning horror gave way to fury and he shouted with all the strength he could muster. "Leave Leia out of this!!"

"Have the Princess placed in the cell with Solo," Vader ordered. He looked down at the relieved but still suspicious Corellian, then whispered to himself, "Ben was right. He knew me better than I know myself."

Puzzled, Solo sneered, "You're mad."

Cullen stepped forward to punish Solo's insolence, fist raised, but Vader lifted an arm and blocked the blow. "Release him," he said quietly.

The troopers stepped forward and unlocked the restraints, then pulled Solo roughly to his feet. The man's abused muscles protested sharply, and he bit back a cry. Dizzied by the abrupt change in posture and drained by his ordeal, Solo fainted, hanging limply from the guards' supporting arms.

"Take him to his cell," Vader repeated. "Allow him to rest. I may have need of him later."

"Further interrogation, My Lord?" Cullen asked carefully.

"No," Vader responded. "I will need a test subject for the carbon freeze. I feel a disturbance in the Force. Skywalker is on his way here. Have the Commander of the watch aboard the Nemesis informed to bring long-distance tracers into use. I must be informed the moment Skywalker enters the Anoat System."

At last, he would have his son at his side. The confusion he felt within himself would be resolved once he could put his plan into action.

END

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