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Choice
by Cheree Cargill

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"Part One Decision"

Leia sat huddled in on herself, trying hard to keep her brimming tears from falling. Rieeken waited patiently for her answer, knowing the pain his inquiry was causing her.

"Don't ask this of me," she said at last, with difficulty. "Anything else, but please, not this."

"It's for the good of the rebellion, Your Highness," Rieeken answered gently. "And for your good, too."

She squeezed her eyes shut and the tears at last ran down her cheeks. "No! Don't you see? It's all I have left."

Rieeken knelt before her and grasped her shoulders. "Leia, I was your father's aide for nearly twenty years. You are like my own child. I wouldn't ask this of you if I didn't think it was for the best."

Leia struck out at him, blinded by her tears and her fury, and pummeled at him ineffectually for a minute before collapsing in his arms, sobbing. The older man held her until she managed to bring her tears under control, then sat close beside her, one arm still around her trembling shoulders.

She wiped her tears away, leaving her face still wet and blotchy. Unable to look at him, she said in a shaky voice, "I just can't ... do this. Han may be ... well, he may never ..." She turned her face up to the general, her expression tortured. "I've lost my family, I've lost my home, I may have lost Han. Don't ask me to lose our child, as well."

Rieeken sighed heavily. "Leia, have you thought about this? I mean, really *thought* about it? How many bases have we had to abandon in the past three years? How often have we barely gotten out in time? It's *dangerous* for you, carrying a baby now. It's dangerous for all of us, worrying for you and, later, a child here. Have you thought about how this will affect your loyalties and decision-making? You'll always have your child in your thoughts when you have a difficult decision to make, always be worried that she'll be safe, always worry about protecting her." Leia hung her head in anguish. "Honey, if it were any other time, any other place, I'd be the first to dance in jubilation. But, please, Leia ... think *hard* about what you're doing."

Giving her shoulders a reassuring squeeze, the Alderaani general rose and quietly left Leia's quarters, leaving her in a miserable little bundle on the bed. Once again, tears welled up and this time she let them flow unheeded, too grief-stricken at the choice she had to make to care.

Rieeken was right. A guerilla camp, always on the run, was no place to bear and bring up a child. She couldn't function as efficiently, as coldly as she had before, couldn't be the torch-bearing Princess of Alderaan, couldn't be the steel-hard battle commander she had been before an arrogant, acid-tongued Corellian came into her life.

The thought of her Corellian brought a fresh spasm of grief to her aching body. It had been over two lunars since she had impotently watched Boba Fett's ship blast away from Cloud City. Lando and Chewie had been delayed in their pursuit until they could get Luke and Leia safely back to the Alliance rendezvous point and planned to leave soon for Tatooine, thinking it the most likely place to begin their search for Han.

Meanwhile, the stirrings of life had begun in Leia Organa: a daughter, the med-droid said. Han's daughter. She closed her eyes and the picture of a chubby baby swam before her; a baby laughing as Han supported her stocky, not-too-secure legs on his lap, talking nonsense to her as she giggled and waived her arms around.

She couldn't give that up, especially when she knew that Han might never come back to play out that scenario. She just couldn't lose his child! It might be all she had left of him!

And yet, the cold edge of reality would not let her sink peacefully into this solution. The Rebellion was not finished; she could not give up all that they had sacrificed for a child. The Empire wouldn't let them rest now. Both sides had too much to lose – the Empire was feeling its power hold slipping as more and more systems balked at its tyranny; the Alliance had gained too much ground, had lost too many freedom fighters to back down now. No, they were irrevocably committed, and Leia Organa was the rallying point of that Rebellion, the symbol of martyred Alderaan, the defiant Lady of the Alliance. She was in it until the end.

Still, the vision of Han's face stayed in her mind, the intensity and emotion on his face the last time she had seen it, as he was lowered into the carbon freeze chamber. He didn't know that their brief interlude of love had resulted in a child. Leia's eyes softened in introspection as she again pictured Han cradling his firstborn tenderly in his strong arms, his face alight with wonder. No, she couldn't lost that. She **had** to do all she could to make that hope a reality.

There **had** to be an alternative. If she could find a safe planet, a safe house where she could foster the child ... that was a possibility. But could she get through the rest of the pregnancy safely? Things were particularly bad for the Rebellion right now. The Empire's counterattack had been in earnest; the rebels were scattered. They were only beginning to regroup at the rendezvous point off Sullust. Ships were still limping in. They had no permanent base, though scouts were surveying several possible planets – outside the Empire's scrutiny but close enough to be within striking distance.

And they had lost so many people in the escape from Hoth! The Imperial Starfleet had deployed and tracked the fleeing transports across the galaxy, blasting many into radioactive dust.

Leia bowed her head in sorrow at the thought. So many ... The Rebellion needed her more than ever. She couldn't afford to be pregnant now. Rieeken was right, damn him!

And yet, there was a way, she knew, to transplant a fetus to a surrogate womb and nurture it there. The technique had grown out of clone research but was available only on the most advanced Imperial worlds. There was no way that the Princess Leia Organa of Alderaan could stroll into an Imperial medcenter and request the procedure in order to save the child of two wanted revolutionaries, so that the mother could return unhampered to her efforts to overthrow the Empire.

But there **had** to be an answer. She **had** to make a choice. She felt that she was being torn apart by the forces pulling at her – loyalty to the Alliance, love for Han, the desire to carry and bear his child, the pain of knowing it wasn't really possible right now, the desperate lifelines just out of her reach, of giving up the baby to a surrogate and then fostering her somewhere safe.

Duty and love, realism and hope warred back and forth in her for what seemed like a long time. Far into the night, she sat cross-legged on her rumpled bed, then at last, she knew what she would do.

"Part Two the Fostering"

The aristocratic, dark-skinned man gently guided his lady down the ramp of the private yacht. Her jeweled robes and veiled face exuded wealth, as did his expensively tailored suit and half-mask. They were followed by a burnished gold attending droid, who was carrying a small case in one hand.

The port steward hurried to greet them; here was obvious money and, no doubt, power to match. AS they walked from the landing bay into the spaceport's main terminal, the lady's arm threaded through her lord's, the steward met them and bowed low in deference.

"Greetings, exalted ones," he said. "How may I be of service?"

The man waved away the steward as if brushing off an insect, the commoner being too unworthy to rate his notice. The gold droid faced the young man and said, "A private car, please, and quickly." He produced a ten-credit note, which the steward made disappear.

"At once, excellencies! Please enjoy refreshment while I make arrangements." He bowed them into a private lounge and left at a near-run.

The dark-skinned lord eased his lady down onto a cushioned chair, his eyes worried behind his mask. "You okay?" he asked in a low voice.

The skin visible under the veils was pale, but the dark brown eyes snapped up alertly. "Yes," she answered in an annoyed whisper. "And stop throwing money around so freely. I saw that tenner you had Threepio give the boy."

"We have to make it look real," the man answered. "We're rolling in money, remember? We have to go out of our way just to find ways to spend it."

She studied him for a minute then the eyes looked down, defeated. "I know. You're right."

"How are you feeling? Still sick?"

"A little. I think the medicine helped." She put a delicate hand, gloved in lace, against her slightly swollen stomach. "I hope he appreciates what we're doing for him."

The man's mustache twitched into a smile. "Don't worry. When we find him and he hears about this, it'll knock his socks off."

Her eyes came up to meet his again. "We *will* find him, won't we?"

The man's eyes became serious again and he gripped her hand reassuringly. "We'll find him, Your Highness," he said resolutely. "I owe him that ... and his child."

Her eyes looked grateful but the worried crease between her brows did not smooth out.

The sound of footsteps alerted them to the steward's return and both straightened imperiously as he entered, slightly out of breath, bowing formally once again. "Your car is waiting, excellencies. Side gate 3A. This way, if you please."

Lando Calrissian helped the veiled and draped Leia Organa to her feet and they preceded the steward out the door into the main hallway. The boy hurried ahead of them, leading them to their car. The gold droid bustled behind them as fast as he could.

Once settled in the car, Leia blanked out the windows and instructed their droid to override the autoguide system. "Okay, Threepio, you know what to do. Take us to the medical center."

"Yes, Your Highness." The droid got to work and a few seconds later the car lifted smoothly off and skimmed away into the traffic pattern.

C3PO had been extensively overhauled for this mission, inside and out. His exoskeleton had been burnished until it gleamed like new, all the dents and nicks he had acquired over the years had been smoothed out and his spare-part silver leg had been replaced with a gold one. The silver leg was, of course, perfectly functional, but it was also recognized in the heart of the Empire. This way, he was just another Cee-Three unit owned by a wealthy family as an attendant.

His programming and memory circuits were also gone over in minute detail. Threepio was a remarkably sentient droid and had acquired during the course of his long existence that ephemeral thing called contrary programming; it also tended to render him loquacious at times.

Leia couldn't risk a loosely dropped remark and had taken pains to see that he would follow her instructions without question or unnecessary chatter. She had patiently and gravely explained it to him so that the importance of the mission would be a priority on both his conscious and subconscious levels. His programming thus doubly imprinted, Threepio had solemnly assured her that there would be no errors on his part.

Lando had called in some old debts and had gotten the yacht for them; it belonged to an old buddy who owned a string of profitable casinos and brothels on Nodaru. The jewels and velvets, the satins and laces were scrounged here and there and gave the illusion of wealth. Thus cloaked, Lando, Leia and Threepio had departed for Coruscant.

As their car moved quietly through the crowded lanes of city traffic, Leia let herself lean back into the upholstered seat, closing her eyes. A part of her relished the luxury that echoed her childhood and adolescence. She'd almost forgotten what it was like to really *be* a princess, to take for granted a quietly efficient staff and servants, to feel silk against her skin instead of cheap broadcloth, to bathe in a marble tub piled high with fragrant bubbles rather than taking her turn at a frigid communal shower and latrine.

Lando quietly took her hand and squeezed it, breaking her thoughts. She opened her eyes and smiled at him. "Are you sure all the arrangements have been made?" she asked.

"I'm sure. You'll check in as Baroness Beniska. Everything should go as planned."

Leia managed a skeptical laugh. "Things very seldom go as planned. I'm living proof of that!"

Lando laughed too and patted her hand.

Leia was silent for a few moments, then asked softly, "Have you heard anything from Luke and Chewie? Have they learned anything?"

"They're getting close. Boba Fett's ship was definitely reported docked at Mos Eisley for a few hours then took off again. He didn't unload a cargo and Chewie's checking out some leads. He's almost positive that Fett was headed out over the Jundland towards Jabba's palace." Leia had turned intense, hopeful eyes on Calrissian, her unspoken anxiousness radiating from her. "We have to go slow on this, Princess. We can't just waltz in there and demand Han back. We think the best way of getting him out unharmed is to use Jabba's own methods. We'll need time to infiltrate and gain Jabba's confidence, locate Han and make sure he's all right, then strike when the time is right. Chewie's keeping an eye on things. As soon as you're okay, we'll move in."

The Princess swallowed hard and nodded. "It's so difficult to wait," she said softly. "I feel so torn ..."

"You know this is the best way."

"I know. But that doesn't make it any easier."

Threepio turned his head slightly from his position in the pilot's seat and said, "We are nearly there, Your Highness."

She straightened and sighed. "All right, Threepio. Take us in." She folded her hands protectively over her abdomen, sheltering the child that would soon be parted from her.

As they pulled up to the entranceway of the huge medical center, Leia adjusted her veil so that only her eyes showed and then let Threepio hand her out of the car. Lando followed and took her arm, then the droid removed the forged credit chip from the car's pay slot, retrieved the princess' case, and sent the car on its way. Then he hurriedly shuffled after the royal couple into the lobby of the hospital.

* * * *

The private room was more like a luxury hotel suite than a hospital cubicle. Leia had never known anything like it, even on Alderaan in the days when her father's powers were at their greatest. Tired and sore, she burrowed down into the large bed, willing sleep to come.

The procedure had been long and delicate but had gone well. The Imperial surgeon had located the 10-week-old fetus, gently removed it, and transferred it to a surrogate womb, where precisely controlled conditions would allow it to develop to full term.

It had taken all of Leia's control to remain stoic throughout the process, for the charade being played said that she was only a wealthy, idle noblewoman too involved in her society functions and palace intrigues to bother with a pregnancy. The child was not to be aborted, certainly, for it was of noble lineage, but she had no time for such inconvenience.

Lando had supported her with studied nonchalance and had said nothing when, later in her room, she had buried her face in his chest to muffle her sobs.

The next day, she was released and they left the hospital as they had arrived, with an air of royal pompousness and the trappings of wealth. But Leia could not

help casting a worried eye towards the small life-support unit accompanying them, knowing that the matrix within held her unborn child.

At the main field, they boarded their private yacht and signaled their leaving to the central computer. Their forged credit chits drew on a bank on Ile-Jhanar, a world in the Mid-Sector, and the careful programming that had gone into the little pieces of circuitry convinced the Bank of the Imperium's computer that they were who they said. It cleared their departure with pseudo-cheerfulness.

Lando lost no time in lifting ship and putting a great deal of space between the Imperial hub-worlds and themselves. Once in hyperspace, he joined Leia in the central lounge where she was checking the reading on the life support unit closely, lines of fatigue etched into her face. She was still dressed in the flowing gown she had worn, but had discarded the cumbersome veils. She looked up as Lando entered and sat beside her.

"Next stop Algire and Joharra," he said.

"Are you sure about this, Lando?" she asked anxiously.

He reached out and patted her hand. "Don't worry, Your Highness. Joharra is an old, old friend ... of both mine and Han's. She owes Han a lot and, if there's any place on this side of the galaxy that your baby will be safe, it's with her."

She turned back to study the life unit. "I wish I could be sure..."

"Leia," Calrissian said earnestly. "I am sure. Joharra is just as much a rebel as you are; she's just a little quieter about it. To the Empire, she's just a barkeeper who pays her taxes with not much more than the usual amount of griping, serves up a good glass of beer, and otherwise keeps her nose clean. But she's also been passing information along to the Rebels for years now and subtly defying the Empire for about as long as I can remember. She's also been known to take in a stray kid or two off the street and to supply to spacers, at least a hidey-hole if a fellow needed it for some reason." He paused for a minute and continued, "She saved Han's life once and he never forgot it. She's been a very special friend of his ever since."

Leia had a guarded look on her face. "Were they lovers?" she finally asked.

Lando studied her for a moment before replying seriously. "I think they gave it a go for awhile, but then decided just to be friends. They didn't work as lovers." He smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry. Things will be fine."

* * * *

Joharra turned out to be a big woman about 40, sturdy without being fat, strong and generous looking. Her coppery-blonde hair was pulled back into a thick ponytail but curls escaped around her face and formed bangs, giving her a deceptively youthful look until one noticed the faint lines about her clear blue eyes.

She embraced Lando in a long wookiee-like hug, laughing with the easy familiarity of old friends, and they stood for a moment, gripping each other's arms and scrutinizing each other's faces.

Then she turned to Leia and for a second the princess thought she saw reservation in the other woman's eyes, then Joharra smiled warmly and took Leia's hand in both of hers. "Your Highness," she said warmly. "I'm pleased that I can do you a service."

"Thank you," Leia answered and something passed between them, woman to woman, that made the Alderaani relax and trust her. "I ... I don't know what to say ..."

"You don't have to say anything, Your Highness."

"Please, call me Leia. My former titles don't mean much anymore." She smiled, though with a touch of bitterness. "Alderaan and the Senate are gone."

Joharra sobered and nodded, then smiled again. "Aye ... but let's not stand around here. You're tired and it's not long since your surgery. Come on, I have a chamber prepared."

Leia looked around. "Threepio?"

"Here, Mistress Leia!" the droid answered and appeared with her case and the life-support unit on its anti-grav sled. Leia appropriated this from him.

She stroked the top of the device for a moment then said soberly, "I'd like to keep her with me tonight. It will be such a long time until ..."

Joharra smiled again. "You don't have to explain to me. I've had little ones myself." Without further conversation, she led them to their respective chambers and a night's rest.

* * * *

Morning came too quickly for the princess and it was time to leave before their presence was discovered here. Besides, the sooner they left Algire, the sooner they could be on their way to Tatooine and, hopefully, Han.

"She'll be safe here," Joharra assured the younger woman as they made ready to leave. "I'll keep her existence secret and feign a pregnancy. I'm still young yet, and when she's born, no one will question a new babe here." She chuckled with genuine humor. "Though, glory be, how the tongues will wag! Ol' Joharra with a wee one at her skirts and probably the spawn of a passing spacer, too!" She threw back her head and laughed at the prospect. "But there won't be any question that she's my daughter. Never fear that."

"Thank you, Joharra," Leia said earnestly. "I will be in your debt forever. Forever."

"Here, now," the big woman said. "You just go do what you have to and bring our Hanna back to us." Something hard and ruthless crept into Joharra's eyes. "I'll guard his babe with my life."

Leia felt tears coming to her eyes and flung her arms around the other woman, hugging her tightly, gratefully. For a second, it almost seemed that she was back in the arms of her Alderaani nurse, the only real mother she had ever known, and she felt safe, some of the burdens melting from her shoulders. When she pulled away, she knew that she could leave now.

"I'll be back," she said with determination. "And I'll bring Han with me."

Her conviction was echoed on the other woman's face and, with a final squeeze of Joharra's hand, Leia marched out into the cool dawn and toward where Lando was waiting.

"Part Three Janaree"

The masked bounty hunter slipped silently along the corridor of Jabba's palace, taking care not to awaken its sleeping denizens. A wheezing snore from somewhere made the hunter start and run full-tilt into a hanging windchime. Quickly, a hand stilled the noise and paused, listening. All was quiet and the hunter proceeded into Jabba's audience chamber and to the carbonite-encased form of Han Solo.

The hunter released the gravity shield suspending the block and the mass crashed heavily to the floor. Nervously glancing around, the bounty hunter stepped up to the carbonite block and quickly pressed the release switches, then stepped back.

A hum issued from the block as the thawing units kicked in and the hard black mineral coating began to glow red as its chemical composition changed. The casing dissolved first over Solo's lips and the bounty hunter nodded in

satisfaction as they moved slightly in a sluggish attempt to draw in air. The decomposition of the carbonite spread quickly, allowing fingers to flex, knees to relax, chest to rise and fall, tortured expression to smooth out somewhat.

And then Solo was free. He remained still for a second then pitched forward before the hunter could catch him. He lay where he had fallen, stunned, and the bounty hunter knelt and pulled the Corellian into a sitting position. Abruptly, Solo was seized by violent tremors and a cold sweat broke out on his face. Sick as he was, he tried to flinch away from the arms holding him.

"Just relax for a moment. You are free of the carbonite," the bounty hunter said in a rough, filtered voice. "You have hibernation sickness."

The man opened unfocused eyes and his pale face grew whiter. "I can't see," he said, barely controlled panic in his voice.

"Your eyesight will return in time."

"Where am I?" Han asked. Rigors from the fever shook him.

"Jabba's palace." The hunter's voice was matter of fact and not very reassuring.

Solo's groping fingers met the cold mask of the hunter's face and he drew in his breath sharply. "Who are you?" His body shook violently again and he scooted away as the bounty hunter released him and reached up to remove the heavy helmet.

Leia looked down at him, pain knotting in her chest to see him so, her eyes burning with tears. "Someone who loves you," she said earnestly.

"LEIA!" There was relief and hope in the shaky voice, as if the surge of his emotions threatened to overwhelm him.

The princess seized his face between her hands and kissed his cold lips with a hunger and desperation that bespoke the months of agony since their parting. He uttered a soft moan as their lips parted, as if he couldn't bear to let the kiss end, but Leia knew that their reunion would have to wait for later.

"I've got to get you out of here," she said, wedging her body under his arm and supporting his stumbling effort to rise. His legs shook under him and he leaned heavily on the young Alderaani.

Suddenly, a rumbling chuckle echoed through the chamber and the couple froze. "What's that?" Han ventured, feeling helpless in his debilitated condition

and blindness. The chuckle sounded again as a curtain parted behind them. "I know that laugh..."

Rigid with apprehension, the lovers turned to face Jabba and his entourage.

* * * *

The sounds of battle raged furiously outside the sail barge, but Leia had little time to heed it. Blood pounded in her ears and veins stood out in her throat as she dug in her heels and pulled on the chain with all her strength. Jabba's huge bulk nearly yanked her arms from their sockets, but she hung on with a tenacity that surprised her. Her world telescoped until the only thing that mattered was keeping the chain taut around the Hutt's fleshy throat.

The chain was buried in the folds of fat and his short fingers couldn't secure a purchase on it. The huge body bucked, the tail lashing in desperation as Jabba fought for breath, his eyes bulging.

Leia's vision began to go black from the strain. Then, after eons, she became aware that the Hutt was no longer fighting, that he had emitted a long, rasping sound and was motionless, his long tongue dangling. Gradually, Leia let the chain go slack, only half believing that Jabba was dead. But he made move and, in the panic among his courtiers to escape the barge, no one seemed to notice.

Laser blasts abruptly rocked the barge and Leia became aware of the desperation of her situation. The Hutt was dead but she was still chained to his body. She was looking around hurriedly for something to sever the chain a blaster, a laser knife when Artoo rolled up, beeping reassuringly. In a moment, he had her free and they turned to get Threepio from underneath Salacious Crumb's vicious gouging beak.

There was commotion on the above deck and, through it, Leia could hear the unmistakable drone of an activated lightsaber. "Come on," she said to the droids. "We've got to get out of here."

The three rushed to the open deck of the sail barge and Leia hardly had time to absorb what was happening before she was caught up in the events. She barely saw the droids go over the edge of the deck, her attention focused on Luke, who was furiously parrying laser bolts with his saber.

"Get the gun!" he yelled at her, not taking his eyes off his opponents. "Point it at the deck!"

Obediently, she leapt aboard the gun carriage and swivelled it away from the direction of the skiff that rested alongside the embattled barge. Then Luke was

there with his arm around her waist, kicking the gun into activation and swinging them across the gulf of empty air onto the skiff.

Chewie caught them in his great embrace and Lando, noting the moment their feet touched the deck, paused only to pick up the droids before shoving the skiff into its top speed, racing the little air boat across the shimmering sands and away from the explosions that lit up the desert behind them. The concussions knocked them all to the deck, but Lando managed to keep the skiff airborne and Leia found herself on her knees, holding Han with all her might.

* * * *

"How is he?" Lando asked. The Millennium Falcon was safe into the void of hyperspace and he had left the cockpit for Solo's cabin. Chewbacca was standing at the foot of Han's bunk and Threepio waited out of the way, cautioned to silence by Leia.

She looked up from Han's bedside, then placed a cool, fresh cloth on the Corellian's forehead. "I think the fever is breaking," she answered and Chewie, behind her, hooted softly. "It's just the hibernation sickness getting in its last blows. He should be okay in a few days."

"Are *you* okay?"

The princess sighed tiredly and sat back in her chair. "Yes. It's been a long year, that's all. I could use a nice vacation somewhere." She smiled up at Calrissian. "Know of a nice, quiet beach where a girl could sit in the shade and sip *taqqa*?"

Lando laughed. "I'll try to think of one! I could use it myself!"

Han stirred fitfully and made an attempt to move the cloth down from his eyes. Quickly, Leia intercepted him and smoothed it back down again. "Take it easy," she murmured softly, and he quieted under her touch. "Is it bothering you?"

"A little," he murmured.

"Okay. I'll leave it off for a while." She removed the cloth from his forehead and bathed his sweaty face with it, noting that he squinted reflexively at the light in his cabin. "Does the light hurt your eyes?"

"Yeah," he answered, screwing up his face and turning it to the wall.

"Chewie, could you dim the overheads a bit?"

The Wookiee quickly complied, then moved back to his partner's bedside, peering down anxiously at him. Han's face had smoothed out in the subdued lighting and he looked more at ease.

"Han, can you look at me?" Leia asked. Solo turned his head in Leia's direction and half-opened his eyes, blinking. Leia could see that the pupils were still dilated, but there was something else there now. "Can you see me, Han?"

He looked at her harder, straining to make his eyes focus. "Yeah!" he said in a stronger voice. "I can! You're still fuzzy, but I can!"

The effort exhausted him and he fell back against the pillow with a sigh. Leia clasped one of his hands and bent over it silently, pressing the back of it against her cheek. Chewie had pulled his lips back into a toothy grin and slapped Lando resoundingly on the back, nearly knocking him off his feet, but both recovered, laughing.

Leia lifted her head and softly kissed the broad hand she held in both of hers. "Your eyes should be back to normal in a couple of days."

"They hurt," Han said.

"That's normal, I think," she answered. "It'll be like a bad case of eye strain." Han shivered as the fever chill swept over him and Leia tucked his hand back under the covers, pulling the blankets up warmly about him. "You go back to sleep. You're not over this thing yet."

He didn't argue, snuggling down into the warmth of his bed and closing his eyes with a sigh of exhaustion. Leia rose and ushered Lando, Chewie and Threepio out. "I'll sit with him for a while yet," she said in a low voice, "then one of you can relieve me later." Chewie whuffed softly and she patted his arm, then closed the door, turning the lights down nearly all the way. Returning to her chair, she settled down wearily and listened to Han's even breathing as he slept. The steady, subdued throb of the ship's engines enveloped her, lulling her tired mind and body into sleep as well, and she dozed in her chair in the darkened room.

She was dreaming that she was on Alderaan, at the palace at Helenan. The warm night air surrounded her as she stood on the marble balcony off her chambers, overlooking the garden, the scent of night jasmine rising about her in dreamy intoxication. The moons were low over the trees, the dusty arc of the galactic arm studded with brighter stars, and the breath of night breeze off the summer ocean stirred the treetops with a sibilance like silk.

Han came up behind her, dressed only in the gossamer sleep trousers he wore in their private chambers, and encircled her with his arms, bending to kiss the back of her neck. "Come back to bed," he whispered. She could feel the masculine insistence of his request pressing against her through his pajamas.

"I'm pregnant," she said, then knew that that was wrong. She wasn't. Not really. She'd been pregnant and then wasn't anymore. But the baby wasn't dead. She just couldn't find it now. Confused, trying to remember, she nibbled on one of her fingernails.

He slipped the thin straps of her gown off her shoulders and nuzzled her neck. "Come back," he whispered insistently. "Come back now... I need you, Leia. Come let me love you, Leia ... now."

"I've got to find the baby first," she said, troubled.

Relentlessly, he moved the gown out of the way, baring her swollen breasts, and slid his hands around her to cup them, stroking, massaging the nipples erect. He tickled the lobe of her ear playfully with the tip of his tongue. She gave into the wash of desire that swept over her, leaning back against his hard, warm body, reaching back to caress the beloved face now pressed against her own. As she arched her back, she realized abruptly that her nipples were leaking milk and she gave a cry and jerked away.

awake and for a moment was disoriented, then recognized her surroundings and settled back into her chair, trying to steady her pounding heart. Han was awake and regarding her with a curious expression on his face.

"You okay?" he asked her.

"Yes," she said, shaking off the dream with a nervous laugh. "I just dozed off for a moment. You look better."

"My eyes are better, too. You sure you're okay?"

She got up and retucked the blankets about him. "I'm fine," she said firmly. "You go back to sleep. I'm going to get a bite of supper. Chewie will have an ear cocked if you need anything." She kissed him lightly on the forehead and left quickly, before he could question her further.

* * * *

She didn't go toward the main galley when she exited Han's cabin. Instead, she wheeled toward the ship's head. As the hatch closed behind her, she began stripping off her coveralls and boots, then stepped into the shower booth and jabbed the controls. The sonic waves pulsed over and around her and she leaned back against the wall, giving into the ragged sobs that shook her.

Why had the dream unnerved her so? She let the sonics calm her and wash away any sign that her emotions had frayed. With a deep sigh, she examined her breasts. They were a bit chafed from the metal bra of her slave outfit, but they weren't swollen from pregnancy and they certainly weren't lactating. Still, she knew that her subconscious was kicking in it was nearly time. It had been seven months since Bepin, five and a half since the journey to Algire.

She closed her eyes and leaned against the wall again. There hadn't been time to tell him since they'd rescued him from Jabba and he'd been so ill with the hibernation sickness. He didn't know that their night of love had created a child.

She could still feel the warmth and strength of his arms after all these months, could still feel the power of his lovemaking, the incredible sensation of waking to find him curled around her in the rose-colored dawn of Bepin. They had made love again, a less frantic, sweeter coupling than the night before, then he had risen to shower and dress. Leaving her with a warm kiss, he'd gone to check on the Falcon, and she'd finally made herself get up and take her turn in the apartment's bathing facilities.

Han hadn't returned until nearly noon, and then Lando had come to take them to Vader and her world had shattered. The long afternoon of torture, the hellish journey to the carbon freezing chamber, the expression on Han's face as he descended into the pit, his eyes locked on hers. The memories still had the power to chill her blood.

Then the long weeks on the Alliance command ship, waiting for Luke and Chewbacca to send word, and meanwhile playing the role of Rebel leader, watching the remnants of the Hoth fleet limp in. She had discovered that she was pregnant on an especially bleak day. General Rieeken had taken the news with pain in his eyes and tried to convince her that it would be better for all concerned, herself included, if she would consider aborting the pregnancy.

But that was something that she couldn't do. No word had yet come from Tatooine and this baby might be all she had left of Han. The end result had been that desperate charade she and Lando had played out on Coruscant. Against all odds, it had worked, but it had put her in hot water with the Alliance command for exposing herself to that kind of risk.

She shook her head, further loosening the braids coming undone in the sonic pulses. No, she'd have to wait for the right time to tell Han of his child. Reaching up, she finished unbinding her hair and let the sonics ripple it clean, then took a proper shower and felt better for it. She still had time. Joharra would take good care of their unborn child; Leia knew that. The baby would be about seven months along now, filling the life matrix rapidly, testing developing muscles and becoming aware of itself. In another six weeks or so, the matrix would sense the viability of its independent existence and would release the child from the artificial womb. Leia only hoped that she and Han could make it there in time for the birth.

She'd look for the proper moment to tell Han. Until then, there was no use dwelling on it. She needed her mind clear to concentrate on more pressing matters. They were on their way to the rendezvous point near Sullust, where the fleet was gathering for one gigantic thrust against the Empire. Darkly, she realized that the possibility of ever seeing her child was distinctly remote. This could well turn out to be the final hurrah for the Alliance, in which case she could only hope that they took a sizeable chunk of Imperial firepower with them.

Steeling herself for the coming battle, Leia put thoughts of a softer life out of her mind and stepped out of the shower to dress.

* * * *

The brilliance of the explosion dwarfed even Endor's sun for a moment and the spreading fingers of energy from the mass that had been the Death Star dominated the sky over the pines. Like everyone else in the clearing, Han and Leia stared spellbound at the silent spectacle, then cheering broke out among the Ewoks, a wild hooting that quickly spread into the trees until it seemed that the forest itself had joined in.

Solo glanced intently at Leia and said tentatively, "I'm sure Luke wasn't on that thing when it blew."

"He wasn't," the princess replied softly, preoccupied. "I can feel it." A little smile quirked at her lips at the Force-flow she was experiencing.

Han drew back, suddenly unsure of himself. There was a look on Leia's face he had never seen before as she continued to gaze at the fading medallion of light in the sky. Abruptly his heart constricted with realization, but the surge of sadness ran unbridled for only an instant before he seized control with savage resolution. Well, then, so be it...

Tightly, he regarded her dreamy expression and said, "You love him. Don't you?" It wasn't really a question.

Leia blinked and turned to face him, bewildered at the unexpected demand. She fumbled for an answer and finally could only manage a stunted, "Yes," not understanding the nature of his inquiry.

Han seemed to deflate for just a second and a look of indescribable pain flickered over his features, then he stiffened again and the old Solo seemed to take command again. Indifferent, he brushed it aside and answered, "Okay. I understand. When he comes back... I won't get in the way."

Leia gaped in amazement and for a moment was unable to even reply, then comprehension flooded over her and in its backwash she knew that she loved this man more than ever. Shaking her head, she chuckled at his puzzled expression and said, "It's not like that, at all." She leaned closer and caressed the beloved face tenderly. "He's my brother!"

It was Han's turn to gape. In all the scenarios he had ever imagined between Luke and Leia, this had never been one of them. Stunned, he looked away, trying to absorb this sudden realization. Leia laughed again and brought his face back to hers, capturing his lips with a kiss that made her feelings unmistakable.

He drew back and a smile of comprehension spread over his face. This time he kissed her and sealed the commitment between them.

Wicket hooted, startling them, then Han grinned and ruffled his fur. The Ewok chortled and scampered away.

Abruptly, the first rumblings hit them, progressing quickly into thunderous, land-shaking booms. It had taken some minutes for the shock waves of the Death Star's explosion to penetrate Endor's atmosphere, but now they slammed into the planet's surface with a vengeance. Leia screeched and slapped her hands over her ears, while Han shoved her down and covered her, similarly protecting his head.

Gradually, the thunder died away to a muted grumble and was gone. In the ensuing silence, Ewoks and Rebels alike lay stunned, then from the middle distance, a small voice made an astounded comment in Ewokese and the tension was broken. Laughter spread throughout the clearing and people began picking themselves up, dusting pine needles and dirt from both their clothing and fur.

Han got to his feet and helped Leia up, grinning at the smudge of dirt on her cheek. "Are you okay?"

"Yes." She slapped some of the debris from her clothes then began to brush off the front of Han's shirt. She stopped when she realized that he was simply

staring down at her, a wondrous smile pulling at his lips, and she had to smile back, her eyes shining.

Suddenly, he threw back his head and let out a triumphant whoop, then caught her up and swung her around and around. Laughing, she ordered him to stop, but he made several more circuits before he set her back on her feet, catching her in a Wookiee-like embrace and hugging her tightly to him.

When he let her draw away, there was something like tears glistening in his eyes. He bent down and very gently kissed her for a long time. After their lips had parted, Leia took his hand and said softly, "Let's find someplace quiet. I have something to tell you."

* * * *

Joharra enveloped Han in a long, fervent hug, rocking him back and forth with a happy moan. When the middle-aged woman finally released him, she wiped a tear from her cheek and declared, "You bad, bad boy! I ought to turn you over my knee for this!"

Solo laughed again with the ease of old friendship. "You gave that up a long time ago, Jo, when you found that I fought back!"

"Aye, and I'll have my revenge someday!" They laughed and hugged each other again.

Leia had stood by during their reunion, on seeming tenterhooks, and Joharra finally disentangled herself from Han and turned, smiling, to the Alderaani princess.

"You're late," the big woman said with a smile.

"Is she all right?" Leia asked anxiously.

"Come and see for yourself."

Joharra turned and led the nervous couple back into the private quarters of the inn, to a pleasant, sunny room dominated by a big, soft bed, a scratched dressing table, and, in one corner, a wicker bassinet which moved slightly.

The innkeeper watched the two with a smile as they slowly entered the room ahead of her, almost afraid to approach the cradle. "She came a week ago," Joharra said. "As pretty a bundle as you ever saw." Han and Leia didn't seem to hear her, so she quietly closed the door and left them alone.

Leia hung onto Han's arm as they came to stand over the cradle, gazing down at the tiny figure blinking back up at them. Neither of them could find voice to speak; it was Han who finally moved.

Reaching into the wicker cradle, he gently slid his big hands underneath the tiny body of his daughter and lifted her from the blankets, one hand behind her head, the other supporting her back. The baby waved tiny fists at him and gurgled. Her hair was a dusting of dark Alderaani silk but the large eyes that peered uncomprehendingly back at him were pure Corellian green.

He eased down onto the edge of the bed, unable to take his eyes off the baby, and Leia sank down beside him, as much enchanted as he. She reached out a finger and stroked the soft cheek and the baby turned her head toward Leia in response.

Han wet his dry lips and said in a voice hoarse with emotion, "This is the most precious thing I've ever had. I I don't know what to say ..."

Leia merely shook her head, mute with emotion. She stroked her daughter's head and let her hand cup Han's in communion. After a while, she had a thought. "We haven't even named her."

Han was silent for a moment then said softly, "Janaree. That was my mother's name. I'd like to name her Janaree."

Leia nodded, turning the sound of it over in her mind. "I like that. Janaree Solo."

Han glanced up at her and smiled. "Janaree Organa-Solo. Don't forget that she's got quite a heritage on her mother's side, too. Or maybe we should make it Janaree Skywalker-Solo.' I don't know what you're calling yourself these days."

"No ... it's Organa. Bail was the only father I ever knew. I'd like it to be Organa-Solo' in his honor."

Janaree, unimpressed by her christening, yawned expansively and went to sleep in her father's arms.

THE END

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