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## ENEMY TERRITORY

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### Part 2

After the second night of extreme discomfort in impossibly cramped quarters, no one was in a particularly cheerful frame of mind. Han and Leia were in a state of siege. Even the droids were subdued. Only the storm remained as energetic and noisy as ever, some gusts powerful enough to rattle the shuttle, causing carefully balanced tools and alterations to shake loose. Time was running out, but the work was becoming slower and slower and the crew grew more tired and clumsy.

An accident was inevitable. Luke was the victim. He had burrowed in under the deck plates, squirming along on his stomach as he secured the conduits passed down to him by Solo. Luke had volunteered for this unpleasant task, saying he was smaller than the lanky Corellian. The truth was he knew Solo had not yet fully recovered from the psychological after-effects of carbon freeze. Though he would never admit it, Solo was terrified of small, confined, airless places. Being locked up in these cramped conditions for three days was already wearing him down.

Luke was deep within the bowels of the ship, the only illumination provided by the glowdisc strapped to his forehead. There was also intermittent light cast by the laser cutter he was using to cut brackets for the thick conduits. Not by nature a cussing man as was Solo, even Luke was driven to muttering under his breath as he struggled to hold up a piece of conduit and force it into the moulded niche he had carved out. No go. His right arm ached from the strain, reaching constantly upward as he lay prone on his belly. Worse, his right hand, the cybernetic one, was acting up. The damage caused by the wound he had received on Jabba's barge must have been more severe than Two-Bee had thought.

"There is no try," Luke muttered sarcastically. He triggered the laser cutter in his right hand while with his left he pushed the conduit out of the way. The shuttle shook violently. Luke's right hand gave a sudden jerk and locked tight about what normally would have been a dead-man switch. Unbalanced, he lurched forward. The knife remained active, slicing neatly down the length of his left forearm. Luke screamed. Unable to shake the active cutter free of his frozen right fist and unable to use his injured left, he could only keep his right arm outstretched, ensuring the blade did not again make contact with his flesh.

"Luke?" Solo yelled down the access hole. "Are you okay?"

"No!" Skywalker called back, his voice hoarse with pain. "I cut myself. I'm coming up."

"You cut yourself? How?"

"How d'you think?" Luke shouted angrily. He struggled to move backwards down the tunnel, but found that with both arms out of action he couldn't quite manage it. "Can you come down here and pull me out?"

Solo froze, peering down into the dark, coffin-like hole. Sweat broke out on his forehead, and fear turned his mouth dry as sand.

"Han? Hurry up. I'm bleeding."

"I-I can't," Solo mumbled.

"What's wrong?" Leia asked as she entered. Solo was kneeling on the deck beside the access. He did not answer. She repeated, "Han?" As she came closer, she saw that he was trembling, his face rigid, his expression glazed and staring. Concerned, she put a hand to his shoulder.

"Luke's stuck down there," Solo rasped. "He cut himself."

"What?" Leia cried. Alarmed, she fell to her knees and called down, "Luke!"

"Will someone haul me outa here before I bleed to death?"

Leia glared at Solo. "What's wrong with you?" she rebuked. "I'm coming, Luke!"

"No!" Solo said sharply. He pushed her away. "You're not strong enough." He drew a gulping breath as if preparing to dive into water, then disappeared head first into the narrow hole.

Kiren, who had been dozing, awoke and propped himself up in time to hear the last of this exchange and see Solo hurry below. "What has happened?" he asked, daring to speak to the woman for the first time.

Leia jumped slightly. She had forgotten about the clone. The unexpected question renewed her fear. She turned to glare at the trooper, but was struck dumb by the expression of genuine concern she saw.

"Please," Kiren went on hesitantly. "Are they all right?"

"What does it matter to you?" Leia countered, trying to sound cold though her curiosity gave her away.

"They - have been good to me," Kiren answered quietly.

Leia felt an odd twinge of shame. "There's been an accident," she explained. "Luke's been hurt." Surprise filled her again as Kiren's expression revealed absolute dismay. Somehow she could not deal with that. She didn't want to have to continue the conversation. "Chewie!" she called. The Wookiee was working in the cockpit. "Come in here, please."

\* \* \*

Down in the tunnel it was dark and stuffy. Solo cursed himself for forgetting to grab a glow disc. At least it was hot in here, unlike -. The nightmare rushed back into his mind. Cold. Trapped. Unable to breathe. Pressure. The overhead deck plates suddenly seemed to bear down on him. He whimpered and flung his hands protectively over his head. Comforting fingers held back the metal he had expected to slam into his skull, crushing slowly, vice-like. His hands were on his head! He'd done it! He had tried to so hard to protect himself as the platform dropped and the carbonite -

"Han?" Skywalker called irritably. "Will you get a move on? My arm hurts!"

Solo shook his head and dared to open his eyes. There was a faint light ahead. He could see. He could breathe. His hands came slowly down. He could move. He swallowed hard to find his voice. "L-Luke. Keep t-talkin' to me, okay?"

"Talking?" Luke repeated disbelievingly. There was blood pooling beneath him, but with his right hand useless he could do nothing to staunch the flow. "What would you like to hear?" he asked sarcastically.

"Please," Solo begged. He began to move forward again. "Just keep talkin' to me. Like you did before."

"Like I what? When?" Then he moaned as pain flared in his arm.

"I'm coming, kid!" Han's fear lessened abruptly as he heard the sound of pain. "Hang on." The images pressed at the edge of consciousness, and he pleaded again, "Talk to me. You still there?"

"All right, all right!" Luke responded gruffly. "Where else would I be?" Something grabbed his ankle. "I hope that's your hand, Solo."

Han felt weak with relief. "Why do I always get stuck with having to haul your butt outa these tight spots?"

"Hey! Whose idea -w-was - this?" Luke clenched his teeth as the pain worsened.

"How bad is it?"

"Not good. But it's too dark to see much. Han, my cyber hand's playing up. I can't switch off the knife. It's stuck in my fist."

"Oh, great! What do I do?"

"Just haul me back. I'll watch the cutter."

"If you say so." Han tightened his grip and began pulling. It was difficult and slow. He had to drag Luke close to him, squirm back further himself, then repeat the process. By the time he was back in the square of light beneath the access hole, he was drenched in sweat. He was set to find some more energy to haul himself out when two furry hands reached down and grabbed him.

"Get Luke outa there!" he gasped as Chewbacca's anxious eyes met his. "Quick! And watch that live cutter!"

The Wookiee left him to bend down again, and Solo looked toward Leia. Her face was taut and drained. He would have sworn she was the one in pain. She was even clutching her left arm.

"Leia?" Han queried worriedly. She didn't respond. Han felt an aloneness so keen it hurt. She had not even seen him. Every ounce of her concentration, all her emotion and thought, was only on Luke. It was obvious which of them she loved. Solo felt a burning in his eyes and was glad of the distraction as Chewie pulled Luke into sight. Skywalker's right arm was rigid, stretched to its fullest extent, the cutter glowing menacingly. The left, by contrast, hung limp, dark and wet with blood.

"Thanks, Han," Luke said shakily. "I know how hard it was for -"

"Forget it." Han turned away abruptly, not wanting Skywalker to see the jealousy he could not hide. Knowing Leia and Chewbacca would tend to the wound, he moved back.

"Han?" Luke could sense great emotional turmoil and some distress in his friend's aura. But Leia interrupted before he could probe further. He winced as she began examining his arm. "Be careful," he warned. "I can't shake this knife."

\*Let me,\* Chewbacca offered. He grasped Luke's upper right arm firmly and held it clear of Leia as she resumed carefully cutting away the bloodied sleeve. \*Han,\* he called, \*what are you doing? We need you here.\*

"Sure," he said bitterly. "We." But he obeyed.

\*See if you can pry the cutter loose,\* Chewie suggested.

Han nodded and surveyed the problem. With Luke's fist clenched about the hilt, he couldn't see any way he could get at it. And trying to tug the fingers free could be very dangerous. "I dunno," he muttered.

"Chewie," Luke put in, "knock my elbow against the deck." The Wookiee looked uncertain. "Go on. That's what triggered it to close."

\*All right,\* Chewbacca said doubtfully. \*Stand back, everyone.\* He waited until Han and Leia were clear. Then, using a minimum of force, he gave the rigid arm a firm jolt. Luke cried out as the nerves flared into life, and he hand jerked open again. Deactivated, the knife fell and rolled across the deck.

"It worked!" Solo cried. Luke only nodded in response, his mouth tight and his eyes closed. "You gonna be okay, kid?" Solo asked gently, but Skywalker had apparently fainted.

"He would have been better if you'd gotten him out faster," Leia said shortly. "Find the heilanol, and I'll need the cauterizer."

Only Chewbacca saw the hurt in Solo's eyes as he looked at Leia's lowered head. Obediently, he found the medical instruments and laid them out. "If you can manage," he said stiffly. "I better get back to those nav circuits."

Absorbed in tending Luke, Leia only nodded. Solo left. Chewbacca watched her work, then said, "You are being very unfair to Han. He loves you. And Luke. You have forgotten his terror of small places. It was very difficult for him to go down there."

Leia's head lifted sharply, her expression full of remorse. "Chewie, I - I did forget. I know he wouldn't leave Luke like this. Oh, damn! I'll apologise to him as soon as I finish here."

"Good," Chewbacca rumbled. He watched as Leia began bandaging the gashed arm, then he looked around for a spot to put Skywalker. "We seem to be running out of bed space," he commented wryly. The trooper was watching them warily, but he was also obviously concerned. Chewbacca was surprised when the youngster did not flinch away as he looked at him.

"How badly is he hurt?" Kiren asked.

"Badly enough to need somewhere comfortable to rest," Leia snapped. She glared at the prisoner who lay outstretched on the padded seat, cushioned by pillows and blankets.

Kiren flushed. "I will move. You are right." He began struggling to sit up.

"No," Luke objected. He opened his eyes and sat up, cradling his arm to his chest. "Thank you, Kiren," he said with a smile. "You stay where you are. It's not that bad." He looked toward his sister. "It feels much better. Thank you, Leia."

"But, Luke, you were unconscious."

"No. A Jedi trance. To ease pain and speed healing. I'm sorry if I frightened you. I'm okay now. Really." He lurched to his feet, but stumbled dizzily.

Chewbacca reached out, but Leia was quicker. She wrapped an arm about

Luke's waist and helped him forward to where there was a sleep roll propped in a corner. "Sure, you're all right," she admonished. "You're going to rest for awhile. That's an order."

"Yes, Commander."

"You gonna be okay, kid?" Han asked as they drew nearer him. He dropped his eyes to the probe he held in his hands. He could not bear to see Leia's arms about the young Jedi.

"Sure," Luke responded. "Thanks."

"Yeah," Solo said flatly. "Sorry I didn't get you out sooner."

"Han," Leia began, "I was wrong. I didn't understand. I'm -"

"Forget it," he said coldly and turned away.

Leia stared at his back, then made to go to him, but Luke wobbled on his feet, and she helped him to his bedroll.

Luke waited until he was settled, then asked, "What was that all about?"

"Nothing you should worry about." She adjusted a cushion behind his head, then lifted a hand to his cheek. "Does your arm hurt much? I've got some heilanol here. Maybe you should take -" She was surprised when Luke drew back sharply, avoiding her caress.

"I'll be all right," he said stiffly. "It's just a touch of shock, I suppose."

"You haven't slept in twenty hours. It won't hurt you to sleep for a few hours now. All right?" He nodded, and she bent to kiss him on the cheek.

"Don't!" he said sharply. He jerked away and looked set to get to his feet. Leia's eyes clouded with confusion and hurt. "I'm sorry," he said. "It's just -" He indicated Solo who was very close by.

Puzzled, Leia forced a smile and said, "Rest, then. I'd best get back to work."

She could not know that she wasn't the only one puzzled by Luke's reaction to her attempted kiss. Solo had been watching, and, for some reason, instead of feeling relieved, he felt angry. He went to Skywalker and glared down at him.

"What's the matter?" Luke wanted to know.

"How come you did that?" Solo growled.

"What?"

"You know. Look, if Leia loves you - I mean, if she wants you - Oh, hell. Forget it. Just don't hurt her like that."

"Han" - Luke groped for words. If only he could tell his friend the truth! - "I'd never hurt Leia. You know that. You don't understand. There's nothing - Leia and I are - We can't - We're not -" He sighed. "She loves you, not me."

"Huh!" Han exclaimed bitterly. "You shoulda seen her face while Chewie hauled you up. She loves you, all right."

"Han, you're wrong."

"No," Solo correctly coldly. Jealously and anger brimmed within him, but he bit back his words. Skywalker's eyes were dark-rimmed, his face pale and his expression exhausted. Anger was replaced by concern. "She's right. You should get some sleep." He turned away.

\* \* \*

Kiren lay quietly listening and studying his captors intently. So far he had found little, if anything, to tally with the indoctrination he had been given. Horror stories ran rife in the barracks - blood-curdling tales of tortures, live organ banks, and other such terrible things that could happen to any who should become a prisoner of the insane anarchists known as Rebels. So then what was he to make of his treatment? Kiren or 117-26? Which was he? Why had Solo given him a name? Why were they considering him as one worthy of a name? Could they not bear to think of him as a clone since they were forced to have him in their midst? Were they only playing games with him? Secretly laughing at his gullibility? Waiting for the time when they could give him up into the hands of his tormentors?

He rubbed at his aching brow. Nothing made sense anymore. He looked across to where the strange, smiling Black Coat, Luke, lay sleeping. Solo, the Wookiee, and the woman had shown no favouritism. They had given their friend the same medical treatment as they had a clone. Luke had

insisted on sleeping on the deck. This had originally angered the woman, but not Solo and the Wookiee, nor Luke who seemed to want to take into account the more serious nature of Kiren's wound.

The medical treatment had not varied, then, but there was a difference. Never had Kiren seen such affection, such caring. Even Solo, who seemed annoyed about something, had left of his argument in consideration of his friend's injury. All the evidence suggested that these Rebels wanted only to ease pain, not inflict it.

The throbbing in Kiren's head worsened, as if it were trying to block out his thoughts. And so it should. He should not think such traitorous thoughts. These were not gentle people trying to help him. No. It was a clever deception. They were leading him into a trap. That was logical. That was believable.

There was movement in the darkened corner where Luke lay, the Wookiee covering him with a blanket. The creature's blue eyes were so soft, so ... hypnotic. He must not look into them. Chewbacca growled something to Kiren. He turned away. Heavy footsteps came up to his bunk, and he started as something fell across him. Another blanket. The Wookiee towered above him, showing his teeth in what Kiren now recognised as a sign of offered friendship. Or more trickery. He looked away again. The Wookiee growled something more. He ignored it. Couldn't understand it, anyway.

"He's telling you that we've had to cannibalise the heating systems," Solo translated. "You'll probably need that extra blanket."

Kiren looked up as the tall Corellian approached. "Won't you want it?"

"Nope. No rest for the wicked. With Luke outa action, I got a lot of work to do."

"But you must sleep sometime."

Solo only shook his head. "It's time for dinner. I'll get you some."

Kiren's stomach lurched. "No," he said quickly.

"No!" Solo's eyebrows arched. "You're not hungry?" Kiren shook his head, and the pilot frowned. "You feelin' sick?"

"No," Kiren denied, though nausea threatened to overwhelm him. "Just tired. I will sleep now."

"Sure." There was doubt in Solo's voice. "If that's what you want. Call me if you change your mind."

Kiren closed his eyes and listened to the rhythmic pounding in his head. It doesn't make sense. It doesn't make sense, his mind chanted in time to the beat. He felt uneasy, restless, almost panicked. Why had Solo saved him? Why? Why? What did they intend for him? Why were they caring for him so well? It had to be a psychological ploy. They needed him alive for something. What? Interrogation? No, they must know he knew nothing of value. A war trophy, then? Yes! That was it! A freak captive they could put on display. Come see the clone! There are dozens exactly like him! Repulsive, isn't it? Then they would publicly destroy this abomination. He had to escape. Why hadn't he remained true to his training? Why had he allowed himself to be deceived? Only the teachings of his Masters could protect him. If he could escape, if he could destroy the enemies' mission, convince his Masters that he was not contaminated ... But how?

His desperation fed on itself. Questions flooded one upon the other until they became an insane jumble. He burned with the need to escape, to prove himself. The Black Coat taunted him with riddles about something called love, about friendship, loyalty, laughter. He wanted to scream a protest, but held back. They would come to him, smile at him, drown him in their soothing lies. Fire seemed to spread within him. The Masters had come for him. He was being punished for his disobedience. Sweat streamed from every pore, trickled into hollows of eyes, palms, belly, cheeks. The pain in his head was unbearable. He tossed from side to side, then demanded of himself that he lay still. Do not attract them again, the Masters warned within in his head. Do not contaminate yourself further. "I won't, I promise," he began, mumbling aloud. Good, the voices purred. The flames died down. The pain abated. He drew his arm across his forehead, smearing perspiration over his face.

Suddenly, fearfully, he realised that he must have lost track of time. How long had he suffered his punishment? The shuttle compartment was darker, Skywalker and the Wookiee were asleep, huddled in opposite corners. Solo and the woman had to be in the cockpit. Kiren's eyes flicked to the passenger hatchway. Escape. Now, the voices urged. Or we will punish again.

A weapon! Kiren thought frantically. I cannot destroy their mission without a weapon. Masters, help me! He ran his gaze over the sleeping enemy. Nothing of use there. The Wookiee bow-caster was too bulky and unfamiliar, and the Jedi weapon disgusted him.

Then he saw it: a small but steady bright light reflected from a metal object on the desk, half hidden by the overflowing cases of machine parts. The hilt of a laser cutter! Very slowly and quietly, he eased himself up, casting nervous glances towards the Wookiee. The Jedi, the Masters warned. Kill him before he can use his magic. He stood, bent almost double, shuffled a few steps, then reached down dizzily. His hand closed over the knife, and elation washed through him. Lay back down, the voices commanded. Plan your attack. Take them by surprise. Use their weapons against them. Kiren was glad to obey. He felt ill, his legs wobbled beneath him. He was so nauseous. He swallowed hard against the bile that rose in his throat, waved his hand unsteadily behind him, and fell onto his bunk. The Wookiee stirred, and Kiren's heart almost stopped, but the giant settled back to sleep.

Wait, the voices urged. Gather your strength. Wait. He closed his eyes and felt great comfort from the pressure of the knife hidden in the palm of his hand.

\* \* \*

Leia could not tolerate the tension in the cockpit any longer. Solo had surprised her by finishing the below-deck work, which meant that there remained only the intricate computer systems to be linked up in the cockpit. She was the only one with the knowledge to help him at this stage - other than Chewbacca who was exhausted and had more than once complained of the limited space available to him in there. It was unnatural, this prolonged silence between she and Solo. Unnatural and damned irritating. Finally, she could stand it no longer. "Han, please," she said. "At least let me apologize."

Solo did not halt his work or look at her. "Okay. So apologize."

Leia gritted her teeth and mentally counted to ten. "I shouldn't have criticized you for not going after Luke immediately. It was very - courageous of you to go down there. I've been wanting to tell you that I admired the way you went back and finished those conduits alone." She paused, hoping for some response, but the work continued. "I'm sorry if I hurt you," she added sincerely. "I wasn't thinking. I was worried about Luke."

"So I noticed."

"Well, what's wrong with that?" He did not answer. "Han," she began again, "There's something else I want to tell you, something that's - well - scaring me a little. I don't understand it. This is the third time it's happened, and it frightens me."

At last there was a reaction from Solo. He turned, and she read anxiety in his expression. "Something to do with Kiren?"

"No. It's Luke."

"Oh." Solo looked down at his boots. "Look, I had a talk with him. I think I can straighten him out. Just give me time."

Leia was so confused that she almost lost sight of the original problem. "Straighten him out? About what?"

"I thought you'd know." Solo answered quietly.

"No, I don't know." There was exasperation in her tone.

"I told him I didn't want him hurting you, that if you want -"

"You knew?" Leia exclaimed in amazement. "Well, it's hardly Luke's fault. He can't control these things."

"I guess he was worried about my involvement."

"You feel it, too?"

"Feel what?"

"The pain when he hurts himself, of course."

"What are you talking about?"

"What are you talking about?"

Annoyed, they stood glaring for a few moments, but the glare softened to yearning.

"Leia," Solo began.

"Han," she said at the same instant.

That broke down the last of their anger. They smiled self-consciously. Solo waved a hand, indicating that she should go first.

"This is ridiculous. I'm confused."

"Me, too," Solo admitted.

"I was trying to tell you that it scares me whenever I feel Luke's pain. It's not possible, unless you're an Empath, and I -"

"Wait a second! You were holding your arm. Are you telling me that -" Leia nodded. "Holy Fires! That can't be!"

"I know," Leia said wryly. "That's what frightens me."

Solo gathered himself and gave her a worried appraisal. "Are you okay now? I mean, can you still feel it?" He pointed to the hatch beyond which Luke slept.

"Yes, a little. But I'm sure it's only a mild dose compared to his."

"S'truth!" Solo ran his hand through his hair. "This is weird." He thought for a moment, then asked, "You said this is the third time?"

Leia's dark eyes were grave as she recalled the earlier experiences. "Yes. On Hoth - that's why I started asking everyone where Luke was. There was a terrible pain in my face, and I knew he was in trouble. And later, the cold ..." She shivered. "I first noticed it when Ben Kenobi was killed. I felt Luke's sorrow as my own. And there was something even before I met him. I think it must have been when his aunt and uncle were killed." She lowered her eyes and said, "But Bepin was the worst."

Solo's stomach churned. "You felt that?"

Leia nodded. "His hand, yes. But there was something worse still. The physical pain was gone quickly, and it was nothing compared to the mental anguish Luke experienced. I don't understand why he's never spoken to me of that. Something shook him very badly, almost drove him beyond my reach forever."

"Well ... Vader," Solo stumbled out. "I mean, Luke had to jump. That must have been -"

"No. It was more."

"Then," Solo concluded, his heart sinking, "you have some kind of permanent link with Luke. Like a Mind Bond."

"It would seem so. But that normally only exists between Jedi, Empaths, some family members, or ..." she looked away and did not finish.

"Destined Life Mates," Solo concluded heavily. There was a long silence. Han wanted to say more, to find some words, any words, that would convince her that he could make her happier, that he loved her more. But how could he convince her when he could not convince himself? There was no denying the bond which Luke and Leia shared. He had seen it. It was the Marker Stone by which Destined Life Mates sometimes discovered each other. If Solo had felt despondent earlier, he felt shattered now.

"Han, that's another reason why it scares me. I care very much for Luke, but it's not -" She was interrupted by a loud crackling as the newly welded circuits on the console beside her exploded in a shower of sparks.

"Damn!" Solo cursed. "Power overload! I'll choke it here. You go aft and switch it off."

Leia hurried to obey before more damage could be done. It was dark in the outer compartment, but she did not wish to disturb her sleeping friends by turning up the lights. She reached the terminal on the outer sano bulkhead and lifted the cover. She was about to throw the switch when a powerful arm closed about her throat. Bright light dazzled her. She tried to scream, but instead could only gasp for breath as the arm locked tighter, choking her.

"Now you will obey me!" the clone snarled behind her. "One false move and I will slit your throat!"

Leia had raised her booted foot in preparation for slamming it onto her attackers' bare instep. Hurriedly, she changed her mind. Any action that caused that choking arm to jerk would kill her. The laser cutter hissed viciously close to her cheek, its heat stinging her exposed skin.

"Leia!" Han called irritably from the cockpit entry. "Will you get -" His words trailed away.

At the far end of the compartment the clone whirled Leia around, and Han saw the wicked glowing blade close enough to turn the cream skin an angry red. "No!" he pleaded, raising his hands. "Let her go. I'll do anything you want. Just let her go. Please."

Despite her fear, Leia responded to Solo's words with amazement. Never had she heard him beg an enemy for anything. And never had she seen him so afraid, so desperate. The arm at her throat loosened its hold a little.

"Your weapon!" the clone demanded. "Unbuckle it and kick it down the corridor toward me."

"Anything you say. Just watch that knife. You wanna go, you can go. We won't stop you."

Kiren sneered. "My Masters expect more than that! I will not fail Them! You must die! I will have the shuttle to return to them! I will prove I am not contaminated!"

Solo was ready to drop his blaster, but now he paused. If the clone intended to kill them all, he couldn't surrender the weapon. But Leia! Oh, Gods!

"Go ahead, Han," a calm, authoritative voice said behind him. Luke. "Trust me. I promise you it will be all right."

"You, too, Black Coat!" the trooper snarled. "Get rid of that Jedi filth!" He swivelled a little as the Wookiee got to his feet. "And that bowcaster! Quickly!"

"We will do as you say," Luke told him placidly. "There is no cause for fear. There is no need for anyone to be hurt. Listen to me. Be calm."

"Your weapons! Now!" Kiren brought the knife closer. "Or she dies first!"

"Here!" Solo gave his blaster a kick that sent it sliding to the Clone's feet. "Don't hurt her!" Luke's saber and the bowcaster followed.

"Han," Luke whispered, "I was trying Mind Control. It's not working. There's something wrong with him. I can't reach him."

Solo cursed. "What now?" he asked between gritted teeth.

"We get Leia back, then rush him."

Solo nodded. "Send the woman to me, Kiren," he suggested. "Then I'll tell you some top Rebel secrets that'll make your Masters even more pleased. Okay?"

"Do not call me Kiren!" the clone screamed. "I am 117-26!"

"Sure. 117-26. What about our deal?"

The young trooper looked doubtful and, Solo noticed for the first time, extremely ill. He was drenched in sweat, white as Hoth's snow, and shivering fitfully. "Luke," the pilot whispered, "he doesn't look like he can stand much longer."

"No," Skywalker agreed.

"Well," Solo prompted, "c'mon. Send her down to me. You've got all our weapons. Look, I ain't got no love for the Rebellion. I'm just a pilot. It won't bother me to tell you all their secrets." Leia raised a disparaging eyebrow, then winked. Solo knew then and there that he loved her more than he loved life. If she would be happy with Luke, so be it. Just let her live. Please, God. Just let her live.

"All right." Kiren shoved Leia hard in the back, and she stumbled forward.

Han took two strides toward her and enveloped her in his arms, holding her to his chest. He turned his back to the clone, wanting only to protect her. "Oh, Leia," he murmured fervently. "I'm sorry. This wouldn't have happened if I'd listened to you. I'm so stupid."

"Well," she responded huskily, "you do have your moments."

It was so wonderful to have her back in his arms after so long. Impulsively, Han bent and kissed her. He was surprised and elated when she didn't pull away from him. He kept her close as they faced their attacker once more.

Kiren was puzzled by this display. Was this the ... love Luke had spoken of? He searched for those reassuring blue eyes and found them. The Jedi who had talked with him so long and with so much understanding seemed to hear his silent question. Skywalker nodded and smiled. Pain lanced through Kiren's temples, bringing tears to his eyes. He dropped the knife and clawed at his forehead, moaning in agony.

Han took the chance. He dived headlong toward the blaster, but amazingly the clone saw him coming and dropped instantly, claiming the weapon.

Kiren levelled the blaster at the prone Corellian. Solo's gaze locked with his. This man had tended him, eased his pain. He could not pull the trigger. YOU MUST KILL! the voices screamed at him. He was being burned alive. He could not bear the pain. "I have to!" he blurted out. "I have to! I'm sorry!" He squeezed the trigger.

Leia screamed. But Kiren, blinded by pain, his hand shaking with fever, fired wide. Solo scrambled to his feet and hurried back to her. She embraced him quickly, drew a deep breath, and regained control. The blaster raised toward them. They faced it defiantly, hands entwined.

Luke pushed past his friend and his sister, shielding them. "We can help you," he pleaded. "Don't do this."

"No!" Kiren cried hysterically. "No! I must obey!" He fired again.

Solo saw what happened next, but he didn't believe it. Skywalker raised his black-gloved hand, and the bolt was deflected harmlessly into the bulkhead. "Vader!" Solo whispered. "Only Vader can do that!" He could not see the result of his words, but Luke had heard, and he closed his eyes as if in pain.

"You cannot harm us, Kiren," he said calmly. "And we will not harm you. You're sick. Let us help you."

Kiren was aghast. He lowered the blaster, his arm hanging limply by his side. He had failed. So simple a task and yet he had failed. His Masters would punish him. He could not bear it. Better if he should die. Yes! That was it! No more pain. Freedom. At last. Freedom. Slowly he raised the weapon until the hollow bore pressed against his aching brow.

"No!" Luke cried. "Death is not the way. Please. Let me help you."

Leia stepped up beside him. She touched his arm. "Let him do it, Luke," she said softly. "It would be merciful. He's dying already."

"What?" Solo asked.

"I wasn't sure. He must have had more resistance. It's a slow-acting, dependent drug. They put it in the clones' food. He's in withdrawal. It's a torturous death. Let him go, Luke."

"No," Skywalker repeated. "Not like this. Kiren, please listen to me. I promise -" He stopped, watching in horror as the young clone closed his eyes and took a firmer grip on the blaster butt. Luke also closed his eyes. He relaxed, joined the tidal pulse of the Force about

him, concentrated on one point, reached out, and felt the jolt of metal on his palm as the blaster flew securely into his hand.

"How in blazes!?" Solo gaped. "I don't believe this!"

"So you've said before," Luke commented with a wry smile as he turned around. "I think this is yours." He handed the weapon to his friend.

"Please let me die!" Kiren sobbed. "They will punish me! They won't get out of my head!" He clutched at his face and collapsed to the deck.

"Quick!" Luke ordered. "Leia, get a trunk shot. Chewie, hold him steady for me."

The Wookiee obeyed, though it was not in his nature to subdue someone so obviously afraid of his touch. Skywalker knelt before the clone and administered the tranquilliser. Once again Kiren took the sight of a hypodermic as evidence of punishment. He struggled to get beyond its reach, but Chewbacca held him firmly, taking care not to place pressure on the shoulder wound which was already bleeding.

"It's all right, Kiren," Luke said soothingly. "You're safe now. This will make them go away."

It was no use. The clone was delirious. He simply continued to mumble, "I have failed" over and over until finally he lapsed into unconsciousness. Carefully, Chewbacca picked him up and placed him on the bunk.

"So what do we do now?" Solo asked. He stood staring down at the trooper. Despite the anguish he had been caused and the self-recrimination he felt, he could not bring himself to direct that anger at a youngster who had been so terribly abused.

"Leia?" Luke said hesitantly. "You're the expert. I know you think I should have let him die, but" - he lifted his hands helplessly - "surely there's something we can do to help him. We can't just kill all the clones who surrender to us. We have to find a solution now while we have the chance.

Leia nodded agreement and considered the problem. "If we knew the composition of the drug, maybe we could synthesise some, give it to him intravenously."

"Go on," Luke said as she fell silent.

Threepio came shuffling into the compartment, Artoo behind him. They had been assigned to some of the more tedious mechanics in the aft engine bay. Solo had said it was either that or he'd melt them down. "Oh, Mistress Leia," Threepio cried, "I hope you have not been harmed. Thank goodness Master Luke knew what to do. Artoo and I were -" He halted abruptly as Solo gave him a glare that could have melted his motivator.

"I'm fine, thank you, Threepio," Leia responded.

"Mistress Leia," Threepio continued miserably, "Artoo reports that the engine bay is functioning perfectly now. We have done so much greasing and welding. Look at me! I will never get these stains off!" He cringed back a little as Solo took a threatening step toward him. "Please don't send us there," he begged.

"All right, Threepio," Leia said with a smile. She grabbed at Solo's arm to stop his advance. "But please be quiet. We're trying to uncover some way of curing this man. Perhaps you can help."

"Oh," Threepio said. It was obvious at that moment he was thinking only of his reprieve. Artoo gave a rude beep that could only mean he had been happy where he was.

"Synthesising this drug wouldn't be a permanent solution, though, would it?" Luke asked as he began cutting away the stained bandaging on the trooper's shoulder.

"No," Leia told him. "He can't remain addicted to it forever. Whatever it is, we know that it causes brain deterioration. Average life span for a clone is only ten to fifteen years, provided they're not killed in battle, of course. I would imagine few reach that stage. Probably the Masters eliminate them before then. Even clones might mutiny if they knew what they faced." Luke opened his mouth to make a suggestion, but Leia knew what it was and spoke for him. "Yes, we've tried telling them, sowing insurrection, but they simply won't believe us. You just witnessed how well indoctrinated they are against us."

"He can actually hear them in his head?" Solo asked.

"Yes," Leia responded sadly. "Only the drug holds back an overload from their earlier conditioning."

Solo cursed. "Poor bastard."

"What if they could be weaned off this stuff fairly early?" Luke inquired hopefully.

Leia sighed. "I can't say for certain. I believe those we've tried with have all died ... or lost their sanity." Solo looked sharply up at her. She flushed. "As Luke said, we had to try. I guarantee you they were not caused any suffering. Most of them were continually sedated, as he is now." Solo nodded, his expression shamed.

"Then there's no hope for him," Luke said miserably.

"I didn't say that."

"Why didn't you tell us all this before?" Solo demanded.

Leia wanted to scowl, but somehow she could only manage a wry smile. "I was finding it difficult to communicate," she chided. Solo's lips twitched in embarrassed amusement. "In any case, only some clones are addicts. It depends on which centres they come from. Others rely more heavily on the mind conditioning, take more care and more time. There is quite a lot of argument about various methods raging among what Kiren refers to as his Masters. Those who prefer the long term conditioning say their clones are most cost efficient since theoretically they have normal life spans and also don't require continual doses of a drug which costs more credits.

"Cost efficient!" Solo snarled.

"Kiren is very young," Leia continued. "He hasn't been exposed to the drug for an extended period, and his mind conditioning was not as thorough. That was evidenced by the incredible advances he made in the last few days. He even showed concern for you when you were hurt, Luke. Those clones who were captured by us some years back were old campaigners. I believe we may have a good chance of helping Kiren. Perhaps you noticed, Han, he even apologized to you before he pulled the trigger."

"Oh, yeah," Solo muttered. "It made the world of difference to me."

"So," Luke concluded as he finished spraying synthflesh on the torn wound, "we administer the synthetic drug to get him out of this crisis. But then we have to find some reliable, painless way of freeing him from his addiction."

"If I might suggest ..." Threepio interposed.

"Make it good, Goldenrod."

"I was merely about to offer my opinion that this is an area for which droids are more suited," Threepio declared both nervously and indignantly. "Perhaps Two-One Bee with all his knowledge and research into biochemistry could -"

"Yeah!" Solo exclaimed, interrupting. "The metal quacks are good at this kinda thing! If we could get our hands on some of this stuff, maybe Two-Bee could come up with some sort of antidote."

"'Metal quacks', indeed!"

But the golden droid went unheard. "Leia," Han asked, "do the security people back at base still have any of this stuff?"

"No," Leia responded heavily. "As I said, that was years back. Once the Imperials discovered we were researching the problem, they began continually changing the formula. Kiren is from the most recent batch; they'd have no idea what he's been given."

"Wonderful."

"It'd be no use taking a blood sample from Kiren," Luke said. "There must be none of it left in his bloodstream considering the severity of his withdrawal."

There was a prolonged, grim silence, broken only by the trooper's delirious mutterings and moans. This time it was Artoo who spoke up. He chirped on for some time, gaining everyone's attention. Finally he halted, and they looked to Threepio for translation.

"He says," the droid announced gleefully, "that since this is an Imperial shuttle, he should be able to patch into the clone barracks computer back in Essfeld. Perhaps he can tap the information from its memory banks!"

"Yes," Luke enthused. "They'd have to keep its composition on record there so as to mix it into their food every day!"

"Oh, great!" Solo scowled. "So Artoo goes breaking into their computer banks, and they trace that signal back to us. Then we have Vader and the entire fleet sitting on top of us."

There was yet another silence. Luke finished re-bandaging Kiren's shoulder, then covered him with a blanket. The clone's lips moved as he fought the sedation. "Please, Masters, no!"

"Sith!" Solo growled. "They're still at him!" He turned and looked determinedly down at the small droid who seemed to be awaiting his decision, his photo-receptor aimed up at the tall Corellian. "Okay, Artoo, you got yourself a deal! But I'll need eight hours before you start. By then I'll have this tin can so souped up that it'll singe Vader's cloak when we jump!"

Remembering that this risky 'deal' would also endanger the lives of his friends, Solo looked to each of them in turn for permission. Luke and Chewbacca nodded immediately. Leia was the last to meet his silent question. "I guess you don't owe him anything," Han admitted. "He had that knife to your throat. I shouldn't even -"

Leia silenced him as she also agreed. "You and Luke were right. If the Alliance isn't willing to try to help people like him, then we have nothing to fight for. We'd only be changing the name of the government, not its ethics. I'm glad that you - and Kiren - have made me see that."

Han was surprised and proud to hear Leia referring to the clone as human and acknowledging that he had the same rights as any of them. She had overcome her fear, just as he had overcome his fear of small places. It was cause for celebration. Without thinking, he bent and gave her a quick kiss. Then, remembering, he gave Luke a glance, but Skywalker was intent on the clone. "That's settled, then." Han gave Chewbacca a slap on the arm. "You an' me got work to do, pal. C'mon."

\*In there?\* Chewbacca asked mournfully, indicating the cockpit.

"Fraid so!" Solo laughed.

"Eight hours might be too long, Han," Luke warned. Solo turned to see that Skywalker had placed the palm of his left hand on Kiren's brow. "His life aura is dangerously weak, and, what's worse than that, I can sense no will to live."

"Then you stay with him. Talk to him. Get him to hang in there. Get those bastards out of his head. It worked for me. It'll work again." He turned and followed the Wookiee.

Luke nodded and drew up a crate. He settled himself on it and placed his hand back on Kiren's damp forehead.

"What did he mean, 'It worked for me'?" Leia asked.

"The carbonite."

"Oh. Will that work for him, too?"

"I don't know," Luke confessed. "The programming is deeply entrenched. It's clouding everything. Then there's the sedative. Han was reaching out, actively seeking help."

"Well -" Leia patted his shoulder - "You can only try."

Luke smiled at his private joke. "Right." Leia turned to go, but he called after her. "Amazing, isn't it? Han just recommended that I use the Force to heal someone, and he doesn't even believe in it!"

Leia had to stifle her laughter as she entered the cockpit.

\* \* \*

"How's he doin', kid?"

Luke started a little as he broke the intense concentration he had been maintaining for hours. "Not too good, Han. I got through to him once or twice, and I think he responded, but then he drifted away again. He doesn't have the stamina to fight the fever," Luke looked up to Solo. "I can't hold him much longer."

Han gripped his friend's shoulder and smiled. "You won't have to. Artoo's in there now. He's patched a line through to the barracks."

"What?" Luke glanced at his chronometer. "It's only been six-and-a-half hours! What about your -"

"I have my magic, too!" Han shrugged and winked. "This heap'd give one of your X-wings a run for its money now."

Luke grinned with sheer relief. "You must have worked like a styl-rat!"

"You should see yourself, kid!" Solo retorted. "You look ready to be wrung and hung out to dry. Maybe you should take a few minutes. Go get yourself some kalin'r somethin', huh?" Han looked down at the unconscious clone. Kiren's face had the waxy sheen of one near death. "I'll sit with him."

Luke nodded. "I could use a break. Thanks. I'll be right back."

"Sure," Han said absently, his attention focused on the sick man. He picked up a cold, limp hand and rubbed at it. "C'mon, Kiren," he urged. "I've been workin' my butt off for you. Don't quit on me now."

"Captain Solo! Captain Solo!" Threepio came bustling excitedly into the compartment. "He's done it! I knew he would! We have the formula!"

"Great!" Han looked at Leia who appeared behind the droid. "Any sign of a tracer?"

"Not so far. Chewie and Artoo are monitoring." Leia handed him the printout. "What are our chances of synthesising this from our supplies? We have only three hours until the fighters will be here to cover our lift-off."

"Mmm," Solo grunted as he read the list. "Most of this stuff we should be okay for, but the chorelinate? That's organic. Gotta be fresh. We can't use a substitute there."

"There are dozens of species of plant life outside," Luke offered. "Chorelinate is common to a large section of green life. If I take a micro-spectrometer and go out, I could -"

"There's a hurricane blowing out there!" Leia protested.

'I could use a safety line."

"Ha!" Solo snorted. "Great! So we haul back a lump of minced meat! Sorry, Luke. Look, want him to live as badly as any of us, but somehow he's gonna have to hang on till we get back to base. There's no sense in one of us getting killed over this." Solo turned to his partner as he entered the compartment to report that they seemed to have gotten away with their break-in.

"I'd like to at least try going out," Luke insisted. "It's ten hours flight time back to base. He can't last."

"What about your arm?" Leia objected. "And your right hand has already -"

\*I will go,\* Chewbacca announced.

Solo frowned up at his giant friend. "I dunno, Chewie. Maybe you wouldn't get knocked off your feet, but what is something clouts you on the head?"

\*I know how to duck.\*

"If you see it coming!"

Chewbacca looked unconcerned. \*Monitor me on the scanners. Give me a yell and I'll drop.\*

"It could work," Leia said.

"Okay," Solo consented at last. "If you're sure. But take it easy. If things get rough, we're gonna haul you back. No argument."

The Wookiee nodded. "Agreed."

\* \* \*

"Ready?" Solo asked ten minutes later.

Chewbacca, his massive head encased in a space helmet, nodded.

"Here goes nothin'. Hang on, everybody." Solo hit the hatch-open signal. A screaming gust of wind and debris blasted through the cabin interior. Solo ducked his chin onto his chest and squeezed his eyes shut. "You out?" he called into his wrist-com. The answer was positive. He hit the close mechanism, and the wind died abruptly. He opened his eyes and checked for damage. There were pieces of foliage and mud and water decorating everything, but no structural damage. "Let's hope luck's with him," he called to Luke who had covered Kiren against the gale. Then he hurried into the cockpit to man the scanners.

"And the Force," Luke added quietly as he checked the clone's weak pulse.

It took Chewbacca only half an hour to locate an appropriate plant and extract the needed substance, but it was Han who was exhausted and sweating after the tension of his unblinking vigil at the scanners. There had thankfully been only three instances when he had shouted hoarsely for Chewbacca to drop as something hurtled by too close for comfort. It seemed whatever there was out there that wasn't nailed down had long since been relocated by the storm. Having checked the Wookiee for injury and finding none, Han watched as Leia set to work distilling the chorelinate while Threepio finished gathering the remainder of the ingredients and Artoo programmed the synthesiser. The most difficult period followed the completion of the measuring and the pouring of chemicals into the synthesiser. Now there would be an hour's wait before they would know of success or failure. All stole reluctant glances at their comatose patient. Having seen his stark white face and heard his laboured breathing, it was hard to avoid the conclusion that all their efforts were in vain.

But there was plenty of activity with which to occupy themselves. Solo and Chewbacca adjourned to the cockpit and ran through a thorough pre-flight check list and a test warm-up of the engines. This, the passengers were relieved to note, seemed to satisfy their pilot enormously. Leia and the droids hurried about securing loose equipment. Only Luke remained immobile, seated beside Kiren, lost to the concentration needed to give the clone the will to survive.

Though Solo was immersed in checking and re-checking his newly-implemented flight systems, he also kept a wary eye on the scanners. As he had expected, their luck did not continue to hold. Chewbacca was also monitoring the patterns on the screen. \*That's a snooper homing in on our energy levels,\* he growled.

"I know, I know." Solo flipped the intercom switch to the rear compartment. "Strap in back there. We're taking off. Company's coming."

"How close are they?" Leia asked as she caught Luke's dismayed expression. "The drug isn't ready yet."

"Let me put it this way - I'm not lookin' to renew my acquaintance with Vader."

"But, sir," Threepio pleaded, "I need only ten minutes until synthesis is complete. Then the I.V. can -"

"Ten minutes an' we'll all be synthesised!" Solo responded.

"We'll be safe a little longer, Han," Skywalker's calm voice interjected. "It is Vader out there. I can sense him, but they're having difficulty pinpointing our location because of the storm."

Solo was about to ask how Luke could possibly know so much, but, remembering what he had witnessed earlier, he simply said, "You better be right. Give me the word if he so much as twitches. Then we go."

"Right, Luke answered. then he returned all his energies to his Force Scan.

"Han," Leia called, "what about our cover?"

"We play dodge 'em till they get here. There's some fair-sized canons and valleys hereabouts. Those Imperial tin-wings'll never follow me through there. We hug the ground, we'll be safe, but I'll have to do some sharp flying. Hang on to your britches. Should be just like the asteroids. Remember that?"

Leia paled. Beside her, Threepio said, "Oh, dear, oh, dear." Artoo beeped inquisitively. "Believe me, Artoo," Threepio answered in the tone of one accustomed to long-suffering, "hope you never do find out." Artoo chirped something else, and Threepio reacted with shock. "What do you mean, 'It sounds excitin'? You'll regret that!"

Threepio's fears were realised as Luke shouted, "Han, Vader knows where we are! He's dispatching fighters!"

"Heads up!" Solo yelled. "We're blasting outa here!"

Leia snatched the half-full beaker from beneath the synthesiser and handed it to Luke. "I'm not sure if its properly dissolved, and the quality is below mark, but it's all we have." She watched as Luke poured it into the prepared I.V. bag and inserted the needle into Kiren's hand, taping it down tightly.

"How do I get myself into these things?" Threepio asked woefully as he and his fellow passengers were shaken to their cores by Solo's abrupt lift-off.

But what followed was even worse. Almost an hour of the most frantic, insane flying anyone, mechanic or organic, had ever endured. It made the asteroid field seem like a picnic. Solo weaved and skimmed, reversed and dove, sometimes making repeat circuits and stomach-churning loops through a maze of canyon bluffs with the gale buffeting and slamming unpredictably at the small craft. A near miss close enough to scrape off some of the camouflage paint and dent one of the fake struts caused Solo to lean on the power and zoom out clear of the cliffs and dive low over a storm-lashed body of water that spat at them through protruding, mist-shrouded rock teeth. The chase continued through valleys, tearing clumps from trees already almost bent double by the shrieking wind.

Leia shut her eyes and prayed, glad only that she wasn't near a viewport and so couldn't see the narrow misses as she had during her last sampling of a Solo escape. He had rigged a propulsion unit which gave the shuttle some deflector shields, but these were being severely tested as several bolts hit home. Over the comlink, she heard Solo alternately cursing and whooping as yet another enemy was annihilated failing to keep pace with the Corellian's incredible aeronautics. The pursuing pilots would have been even more incredulous if they had known, as Leia did, that Solo was loving every minute of it.

Luke was too involved with his patient to notice much else. Kiren had been securely strapped down, but was taking quite a jolting nonetheless. Luke could do little to steady him as he himself was thrown about on the bench seat beside him. He held a med-scan in one hand and searched hopefully for any sign of positive effects from the transfusion. So far there had been none. All of Kiren's vital signs were still dangerously feeble. Deep in the back of his mind, Luke was aware of his father's mounting frustration and anger.

Leia sagged in relief as she heard Chewbacca call, \*The Rebels are here. Fighter movement in Vector 18.\*

"Just when I was beginning to enjoy this," Solo said with mock disappointment. "Those friends of yours better be good, Luke. We ain't got more'n a thread of deflectors. Here goes nothin'." He plotted for the given vector in orbit above. Fortunately, it was not far off line with his present position. He did not want to emerge where he would be spotted by a star destroyer, yet he was out of places to play hide-and-seek below. He must give his pursuers as little warning as possible that he was making for open space. the shuttle's camouflage was effective enough that the enemy would know only that it was a small, non-FTL ship they were chasing. Its hidden potential should come as quite a surprise, and Solo was looking forward to demonstrating it for them. "Yahoo!" he bellowed as he suddenly drew the control stick all the way toward him. "Eat fire, suckers!"

Leia gritted her teeth as she was thrust forcefully back into her seat. Luke worried how Kiren could endure the G-forces Solo was throwing at them. Then, abruptly, the unseen hand released its hold. They had left the atmosphere.

"Clear!" Solo called. "Sixty seconds to jump!"

Leia counted down silently. It seemed a long time; then there was the familiar lurch and slight disorientation followed by stillness and tranquillity.

"We did it!" Solo whooped. "She flies like a real little lady!"

\* \* \*

Kiren slowly distanced himself further and further from a darkness filled with pain and accusations. A gentle voice was guiding him. It had replaced the confusing, shrill tones that had all shouted at him at once. It promised new life and peace, easing the despair that had urged him to seek death. Already there was some peace. All the voices were silent,

including that of his guide. He wanted him back. He felt lonely and afraid without him. With that realisation, consciousness returned.

"Are you feeling better?" someone asked, very close by. It was the guiding voice, the one for which he searched. Kiren dared to open his eyes. A fair-haired young man with intent blue eyes smiled down at him. Slowly Kiren nodded an answer to the question. "Good," the man said. Then he turned away. "Han! Leia! Kiren's awake!"

Suddenly, Kiren remembered. Han, Leia, Luke, Chewbacca. I tried to kill them. They will want to punish me. The tall Corellian stood quickly and approached the bunk. Kiren flinched away from the expected blows and turned desperately toward the bulkhead.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Solo asked.

"Kiren?" Luke said gently. "Why won't you look at us?"

"I have earned punishment." Kiren gave the correct response. Something other than fear caused him to add, "You - you must hate me."

"Hate you!" Solo exclaimed. "You think we'd risk our necks to save your life if we hated you?"

Kiren stared at the bulkhead, unable to comprehend or believe what he had heard.

Luke, Han, and Leia waited for the clone to turn about or speak, but he did neither. Luke prompted, "Do you remember a voice leading you away from the others?" Slowly, Kiren nodded, but he remained turned away. "Do you know who that was?"

"You," Kiren said after a moment's hesitation.

"Do you remember what I said?"

"You told me that my Masters had only used me and lied to me, that they weren't really in my head."

"Do you believe that?"

"I - I don't know. I don't know what to believe anymore. I don't understand why you have not punished me."

"Kiren," Solo said firmly, "look at me."

Accustomed to taking orders, Kiren obeyed unthinkingly, but he kept his gaze fixed on Solo's gun belt. "I'm not down there," the Corellian told him.

"I - I tried to kill you," Kiren mumbled without looking up. "I am no longer worthy of my Masters - or of you."

Solo would not tolerate any self-recrimination from someone else. Only he was entitled to that form of punishment. He didn't intend to forgive himself easily for endangering Leia's life, or for responding to her warnings with insult.

Luke and Leia watched their friend curiously, satisfied to leave this to him for the moment.

"Kiren," Solo ordered, "you look me in the eye when I talk to you."

Kiren flinched at the sharp tone, but oddly enough also felt reassured, more relaxed. This behaviour from a superior was something he could understand. Nervously, he did as he was told.

"Right," Solo said. "Now listen and listen good. You were outa your head before. You haven't earned any punishment, and we don't give 'em, anyhow. I forgive you. We all forgive you.. You got that?"

"I -"

Solo lifted a warning finger. "You got that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Right. Next - your Masters are gone for good and so is all the garbage they crammed into your brain. From now on, you're one of us. To start with, you do what we tell you. Then, when you're all unscrambled, you have a say of your own. Got it?"

Kiren nodded. "Yes, sir."

Leia and Luke exchanged amazed expressions.

"Okay," Solo continued. "Your first duty is to relax and get well. You thirsty?"

Kiren ran his tongue over his cracked lips. "Yes, sir."

Solo smiled. "You can drop the 'sir' stuff except when I'm giving you an order. You call me Han."

"Yes, Han."

"I'll get you some water then." Solo gestured for Luke to follow him to the dispenser. "How am I doin'?"

Luke shook his head and grinned. "Absolutely incredible!" He clapped his friend on the back. "I was all set to hit him with sympathy and explanations of the moral reasons for what we did."

"Nope. He ain't ready for that yet."

"You're right. He was totally confused. Having someone to give him orders will put him back on familiar ground."

"That's what I figure." Han squeezed some water into a mug. "Now what I need to know is if he's likely to freak out again."

Luke considered. "No, I'd say not. The drug seems to be working, and I think you've taken the place of a Master in his mind."

"Wonderful." Solo sighed. "Well, it'll do for starters. You an' me got a lot of fast talking to do if we're gonna prepare him for arrival at the base."

"That's true," Luke agreed tiredly. He looked up to see that Leia and Kiren were conversing. "Wait a second," he said to Solo.

"You were a prisoner, too?" they heard Kiren ask.

Leia nodded. "Yes."

"After what I did to you," Kiren said hesitantly, "I don't understand Why you would even want to talk to me."

"I want to talk to you because I ..." Leia paused, searching for the right words. "I understand how you must feel. Imperial Security, the Black Coats, tried to get into my head, too. It hurt me because I fought them. I wouldn't let them in. But it was worse for you because you had no choice, you knew no other voices but theirs. I had my friends to remember, to use to keep them out. But they grew you especially to make a place for themselves in your head. That's very wrong. Your mind should be your own place. My friends and I want to help you be master of your own mind as we are of ours. Do you understand?"

"I think so," Kiren said after a moment.

Han was pleased with how well Leia had explained their objective. He and Luke returned to her as she finished. "Han is not your Master. No one is. But for now he will be your commander. You obey him until you learn how to look after yourself."

"And I'll tell you when that is. Here. Drink your water." Kiren winced as he tried to sit up. Han slid an arm beneath the thin shoulders. "Easy," he said. "You've been through a real rough space. Scared the daylights out of the lot of us."

Kiren gulped thirstily at the water, then sipped as his throat hurt. He leaned heavily back against the supporting arm, enjoying the sensation of offered help, but dismayed at how much he needed it. How had he become so terribly weak? "Yes," he mumbled apologetically after he had quenched his thirst and lay back. "I am sorry for the fear I caused all of you when I stole your weapons. I did not -"

"That's not what Han meant," Luke interrupted to explain. "He meant it frightened us to see you so ill. You've been unconscious for hours. We were very worried about you."

Kiren frowned. "You were worried because I was sick?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because we got used to having you around," Solo said gruffly.

"You did not want me to die?" Kiren's eyes were bright, his expression happier than ever before. "You did not want me to leave you?"

Luke nodded. "Right."

"Does that mean ..." Kiren's voice was tremulous with hope.

"Yes," Luke said with a gentle smile. "It means we like you." The young clone's eyes filled with tears, and he turned away.

"You okay?" Solo asked. To Luke he said, "Maybe we should let the kid get some rest."

"No, I am all right," Kiren protested, looking quickly back to them. "I do not want to sleep. I want to talk. Please?"

"All right," Luke agreed. "But not for too long. Like I said, you've been very sick. You mustn't overtire yourself."

Kiren wiped at his cheeks. "What is this moisture?"

"Tears," Luke explained. "They happen when a person is either very sad or very happy."

Kiren wasn't listening. His eyes widened in alarm as he noticed the intravenous tube inserted in his hand. "What is this for?"

"The Masters were poisoning you," Luke answered. "That's what made you so sick. This medicine saved your life. It'll make you feel better for now, but later the doctors will try to find something that will cure you completely, so you won't need this anymore."

"Doctors?" Kiren repeated fearfully. He became aware that the ship was humming and realised that they were in hyperspace. Even more alarmed, he tried to push himself up. "Where are you taking me?"

"Now settle down," Solo intervened. "That's an order." Gently but firmly, he pushed against the clone's chest.

Kiren lay down, but was obviously shaken. "I am afraid," he said. "I do not want to leave my Brothers."

"That's understandable," Luke said. "But to go back to them, you would also have to return to your Masters. You prefer us to them, don't you?"

"Yes," Kiren responded immediately. "They would execute me." His fear lessened, and his expression became sorrowful. "I do not like to leave my Brothers back there with them."

"Neither do we," Solo told him.

Leia joined in the conversation once more. "We don't believe it's right that human beings should be grown only to be someone's slaves or soldiers. The Rebellion came about because of a war over cloning. Did you know that?"

Kiren shook his head.

"We want to free your Brothers," Luke added. "We want them to be their own masters, too. We hope you won't be alone for long. When the war is over and we have won, your Brothers will have to surrender to us."

They'll be afraid of us at first, just as you were. We're hoping that by then you'll be well and strong and able to explain to them that we only want to help them."

Kiren's youthful face brightened. "I'd like that."

"You're never gonna get well and strong unless you get some rest," Solo chided.

"I will sleep, then," Kiren agreed. He looked pleadingly toward his "commander" and dared to add, "If we can talk some more later?"

Solo smiled. "Sure."

"How long is it until we will reach your base?" Kiren asked suddenly as everyone turned to leave him to his rest.

"About three hours," Solo answered.

"Oh." Kiren looked crestfallen. "The people there will not like having a clone amongst them."

"They will, or they'll regret it," Solo snapped.

"Only the doctors will know you're a clone," Luke explained. "They won't tell anyone until we say they can. In the meantime, we'll tell our people just how important you are to us, and how you want to help our cause. I'm sure they'll make you welcome then."

"I am important to you?"

"Damn' right," Solo said. "Your Batch Brothers would never believe us. They'd go down fighting to the last man. We're gonna need you."

Kiren considered this, his expression gradually becoming pleased. "And you'll tell your people this?"

"Count on it," Solo said. "any more questions?" Kiren shook his head. "Then get some sleep. I'll wake you when we're coming up on the base."

\* \* \*

"Welcome aboard, General Solo. We are pleased to have you with us as an official member of the Alliance at last." The Mon Calamari representative of the Council was seated furthest from Han at the opposite end of the long, ovoid conference table which was the central feature of the Security meeting room. The chamber was furnished only with table,

chairs, vid-screens, printers, and computers lining the walls. But even this was enough to cause an appearance of clutter in so small a space and made it necessary for both Corellian and Mon Calamari to stand and lean forward to reach one another. The successful completion of the shuttle mission had certainly quieted any who might have wished to oppose the rapid promotion of a rather less than prestigious outsider. In Han's own mind, it had earned him the right to accept what seemed a very generous offer.

"Thanks, Admiral." Han reached out and clumsily clasped the offered fin. He had never shaken hands - er, fins - with a fish-head before. The Alliance had gained some unusual allies in the time he had been decorating Jabba's wall. That was the last of the handshaking routine. Though not all the members of the Security Council were present, the rest would have to come later, and one in particular would be very surprised. "Just remember," Solo added as he sat down again, "I'd like to keep this news from Princess Organa for the time being."

"Very well, Han," Mon Mothma agreed with a smile. "I'm not sure I approve ... But I have to admit that I, too, am looking forward to witnessing her reaction."

Han winked. "Good."

"If I know Leia" - General Rieekan chuckled - "you better know how to duck."

"Lightning reflexes," Han assured him with a laugh. His expression became serious as he eyed each of the members in turn - Mon Mothma, Ackbar, Madine, Rieekan, and Maklin. "It's agreed the Endor mission is mine, then?" One by one, the members nodded or mumbled affirmation.

"Certainly," Madine answered. The organisation of this area of the attack was chiefly his responsibility. "You're the man best equipped for the job."

"You mean foolhardy enough to try anything once," Solo commented dryly.

"Well..." Madine coughed self-consciously, his fair face flushed as he lowered his gaze and shuffled the papers on the table before him. "You'll need a strike team. I have a list of people qualified in demolition and ground combat." He passed the page to Solo who began reading through the names. "Will Chewbacca be co-piloting?"

Solo lifted his head, his expression thoughtful and intense as he considered. "I'm not sure. I'd prefer volunteers on this. Chewie isn't a member of the military. I can't order him to, and I wouldn't if I could." He tapped the paper he had been given. "As to these people, there are some here I'd definitely want to come along and others not. I'd like to select my own team."

Madine did not look terribly happy about it, but he had no other choice. "Fair enough," he acquiesced. "Forward the names to me when you have them."

"If there are no other matters to discuss?" Mon Mothma asked. "Well, then, thank you again, General Solo. I declare the business of this meeting successfully concluded." Everyone pushed back their seats and began moving toward the door. "Oh, General Solo," Mon Mothma called, "perhaps you should report to Supply for a uniform fitting."

"Ahh, well..." Han turned to face her. "I'd prefer my usual gear. Wouldn't a simple insignia or somethin' do?"

The woman considered, then said, "I see no reason why not. But you will need a camouflage coat. As you know, Endor is a forest moon."

"Right." Solo smiled in relief. He hated uniforms. "Thank you."

Rieekan grasped Solo's arm as the Corellian exited into the corridor. "Han," he said, "may I ask what prompted you to accept?"

Solo shrugged. "Nothin' in particular. A mixture of reasons." Rieekan knew it would be pointless trying to dig for a fuller explanation. "Where are you headed now?"

"To the Medical Frigate."

"Another check-up?"

"Yeah, the Council wants a full clearance, but I wanna see how Kiren's doing, too."

They resumed walking down the corridor. "Oh, yes, the clone," Rieekan said. "Skywalker's ideas are well worth considering. We do need to establish a clone prisoner rehabilitation policy. He seems to have pointed us in the right direction. Nonetheless, I was surprised that certain members of the Council reacted so well to the news of your prisoner."

"You mean Madine and Maklin," Han said sourly.

Rieekan refused to be drawn out. "You and young Luke have made remarkable progress with the fellow. But it was you, not Skywalker, who brought him aboard."

"Yeah." Han nodded. "Leia wasn't real impressed at first."

"I can imagine." Rieekan smiled wryly. "Tell me, why did you take him prisoner?"

Solo shrugged again. "His arm was stuck in the hatchway. It was easier to pull him in than kick him out."

"No other reason?" Rieekan asked quietly.

"No, not really." Solo met Rieekan's curious gaze and admitted, "Okay, so I'm not keen on fryin' people alive."

"Not many would have thought of him as 'people'." Rieekan commented grimly. He sighed. "I hope this scheme of Skywalker's works out well, then. The conditioning drug is the main obstacle. Has there been any further word on Two-Bee's research into an antidote?"

"Last I heard, he'd made some kind of breakthrough. It looks promising. That's what I want to check out now."

"I have an hour's break. Mind if I join you? I'd like to meet Kiren - if you think he's ready for that."

"Sure. It'll do him good to get to know someone else before I leave on this mission. Speaking of which, when's Luke due back from Carvesk?"

"We hope it will be before the end of the tenner, but he's going to have his work cut out checking the likely reaction to any victory we gain on Endor. There's going to be quite some upheaval if we're successful in killing the Emperor Palpatine. We're relying on Luke's abilities as a Jedi to assess the mood in the old Senate Capital." Rieekan sighed again.

"It was much easier in the old days when there were more Jedi. They make wonderful scouts; they can almost make themselves invisible in a populace, you know."

"Yeah. I'm sure they can," Han muttered. They stopped in front of an elevator, and he pushed the down-call button. "Luke's got a lot of tricks up his sleeve."

Rieekan was intrigued both by Solo's tone and the words, but he merely raised an eyebrow and remained silent as they waited for the lift. The doors slid open and both stepped inside.

Solo pushed the indicator for the docking bay level. "Looks like we were wrong about Luke and Leia," he finally said.

"What do you mean?" Rieekan asked with surprise.

Solo looked down at his boots. "Something I discovered on the mission. Leia has a Mind Bond with Luke. There's only one explanation. They must be Destined Mates. I've accepted this commission because I expect to be posted out. There'll be a lot of clean-up battles after Endor. If I'm gone, Luke and Leia can work things out between them."

It was some time before Rieekan found his voice. "Destined Mates? Are you certain?"

"Absolutely." The doors slid open, and Solo stepped out into the docking bay.

## EPILOGUE

The forests of Endor were peaceful again. Twilight was settling softly about the towering trees. All was as it should be. Death and destruction were done with - at least for the time being. Solo finished tying the bandage around Leia's arm. His relief that the wound was not serious did not make the ache in his heart any less heavy. In that moment when he had thought that both he and Leia would die as the Stormtroopers surrounded them, he had told her he loved her. It didn't matter that she knew then. Her answer had sent bitter-sweet memory through him. "I know." And now the Death Star was gone, disintegrating into a spectacular canopy of burning debris overhead. Luke was all right. Leia knew it. She had also admitted she loved the young Jedi. Han would never have believed that the words he had expected all along could hurt so much. Somehow, foolishly, he had still allowed himself hope. He drew a deep breath and steeled himself to say what he must, what he had promised himself he would. Leia would be happy with Luke, that's all that mattered - or so he tried hard to believe. She was watching him, an odd puzzlement in her eyes. She looked so beautiful. Surely she knew what he had to do.

"I understand," Han said. "When he gets back, I won't get in the way."

It was Solo's turn to be puzzled by Leia's reaction. She looked as though he had just spoken in a foreign language. Then a sudden light filled her eyes, and she smiled the most wonderful smile he had ever seen. He didn't quite know what to do when she reached up and took his face in her hands. Her touch was all he wanted in life, but couldn't have. He heard what she said, but sheer shock kept him from comprehending.

"It's not like that. He's my brother."

Solo struggled to digest this astounding information. He was aware he must look like ten kinds of a fool sitting there with his mouth hanging open, but it was just too good to be true. Could it be? Could it really be that at last he had found his love? It was true! She loved him!

Elation surged through him, and he gathered breath to whoop with delight, but Leia's warm lips closed over his, sealing the Bond between them forever.

THE END

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