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FORM REVERSAL
by Carolyn Golledge

Part 1

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Their moment of triumph had been brief, too brief. Leia Organa's accurate blaster fire had felled those stormtroopers who had come behind them as Han tended her wounded arm. The delight in that victory left Solo's expression as he saw the Imperial walker scout clank toward the bunker and level its laser cannons directly at them. Those twin metal snouts promised instant death should he try just one small rash move.

But General Solo knew he had to try. He would never allow the woman he loved to become Vader's prisoner again. Nor did he want that fate for himself. If he could only reach the killer machine, distract its gunner, something. He must give Leia time to run, get clear, disappear into the forest, gain freedom. That's all that mattered. That and the chance she might then have to complete their mission to destroy the Death Star's protective shielding. Friends were counting on their success, their lives in the balance.

"Stay back," Han said steadily to the seated Princess. Leia looked up at him pleadingly, wondering, and he gave her a half smile, then turned away. He raised his hands high above his head, seeing a flash of red staining his fingers. Blood. Leia's blood. The sons-of-clones would pay for that.

Solo weighed up his chances for a dash toward the walker's belly hatch. A laser rifle, fallen from a trooper's lifeless fingers lay on the ground not far from him. Run, scoop up the weapon, a blinding blast at

the machine's view-port eyes, then the hatch lugs, then its occupants. Solo had no illusions about the odds he faced.

This time he knew he was looking death in the face.

This time there would be no resurrections.

But this time he had said the words, as he had every day since his release from a hell called carbonite hibernation. So little time to share so great a love. At least Leia knew of that love. It would have to be enough.

Han heard a stirring Corellian battle cry ringing loud in his ears, and knew only distantly that it was his own voice. His heart pounded, his legs pumped, hard, fast, faster. He hurled himself forward, lunged, diving, rolling, cold metal of the rifle against his palms as he closed his fists about it. His last clear thought was of aiming. But hungry fire sprang forth from the mouth above him.

Deafening noise. Searing pain. Blinding light. Razor teeth ripping his flesh. A jarring thud. The smell of moist forest earth beneath his face. Silence. Pain fading into shock. Bright daylight fading into velvet soft blackness. Still his mind refused to admit defeat. Leia needs you, Solo! Move!!

Vision returned. He stared puzzled, curious at his own hand, fingers curled, sticky with blood. Whose? Leia's or his own? Pain flared and he felt the warm surging of his life fluid from a wound in his side. And his leg hurt, bad.

A scream shattered the peaceful shock that was claiming him again. Such pain in that cry, in that voice repeating his name.

At first frozen with a fear worse than that of the carbon chamber, Leia's tongue finally responded as she screamed her lover's name. "Han," she sobbed over and over. Was that a small movement? Perhaps he was not dead. Then she was at his side. Knees buckling. He lay so still but his eyes were open. Hands trembling, she reached out to touch his cheek. Would his flesh be as cold as a carbonite mask had been?

Han's eyes focused as she lifted his head and her relief at finding him alive negated all other thought. Defeat. Capture. It did not matter just so long as he should live.

Seeing the dark eyes shimmering with tears, her pale skin etched with fear, Han tried to smile, glad of the warmth of her body beneath her head.

He was so cold. "Love you," he whispered. "I'll be okay. Get out of here." Maliciously, pain cut off his breath. He could say no more. He closed his eyes. Soft lips touched his.

"I'd never leave you, Han. Even if I could." Leia turned her head to stare bleakly up at the Imperial officer and his troopers, who now surrounded them.

The Imperial, a dark-eyed man of about Solo's age, held her gaze for a moment, then silently, a med-kit in his hands, crouched beside them. He ran the scanner swiftly over Solo's bloodied body, then said softly, "These are not fatal wounds, Your Highness. I have called for an emergency aid shuttle."

"Thank you," Leia said hollowly, then looked back to Han. His eyes were pain-clouded but alert, understanding their situation. He would live. At that moment she cared for nothing more. She heard the hiss of a hypo-infuser and Solo's eyes glazed over once more as the pain killer took effect and he lost consciousness. There was no resistance, no fight left in her. The shock of thinking Han dead had yet to wear off. She huddled numbly by Solo, feeling the cold pinching as one of the troopers locked her wrists in metal manacles, but uncaring so long as they did not separate her from Han. The Imperial officer seemed to know what he was doing as he staunched the bleeding, securing pressure bandages, and Leia was content to watch him, her body still supporting Solo's head and her fingers curled in his hair.

Slowly, shock faded and the real world returned. To Leia's fears for Han was added the ultimate fear, the knowledge that about them in the forest and worse, far overhead, those with whom she had fought side by side, were being massacred: Luke, Chewbacca, Lando, Wedge, so many, what was happening to them now that they had lost? Lost, all gone. A few yards from her she could see the remnants of Solo's team, hands manacled being herded together. Chewbacca was not with them.

A tramp of heavy feet, the snapping of twigs, and she turned her head to see two medics approaching, an anti-grav stretcher floating behind them. She did not protest, did not ask questions, but watched as Solo was very carefully lifted and laid upon the stretcher. One of the young medics checked his vital signs and covered him with an insul-blanket. Suddenly, Leia wondered at the swift, expert care being tendered to Solo. There was no attempt made to usher her away from the side of the stretcher as they headed into the forest toward the landing area. So, the Emperor and Vader wanted them together and alive. Why? Leia pushed back the flaring of dread that made her hands tremble and her heart race. Luke was up there. Luke would help them.

"You are to come with us also, Commander," one of the medics addressed the officer who had turned about, intending to aid his men with their assembling of the prisoners. The dark man's eyes were grim as he obeyed, nodding his head.

"I know the Emperor's orders were to take them both unharmed," the Commander said quietly. "Solo gave us no choice but to open fire. We intended only to stun him with the concussion from the blast."

The medic shrugged, disinterested. "That's your problem, you have to give the report. I don't. I have to ensure he stays alive until I hand him over to the surgical staff up there."

Leia marched beside the stretcher in silence, her gaze shifting from Solo's pale face to the havoc about them in the forest. Dead ewok bodies littered the undergrowth. The tiny creatures had fought so fiercely, so courageously for them. As had many others. No. Leia determined, strength of will flooding back, their deaths will not be for nothing. Luke is alive. I am alive. Han will recover. Somehow we will begin again.

When at last the disorientation caused by anaesthesia drew back, Han Solo remembered that he was an Imperial prisoner and was therefore uncertain that he wanted to open his eyes. He lay still, gathering information with his other senses, marshalling his thoughts. Side and leg ached dully, but he was comfortable, lying on some sort of padded surface, warm beneath blankets, the coarse material rubbing against his naked body, his only covering the tightly restrictive bandages he could feel about his chest and something heavier about his left leg. His arms lay loosely by his sides. Unmanacled, but then an unconscious man was not likely to get up and walk off. Being unbound was not much of an advantage when you were too hurt to stand, but it was an advantage. There were voices about him issuing medical type orders, humming machinery, clicking of boot heels, clattering of metallic instruments, moans of other wounded casualties. Nothing terribly threatening in all of that. And his wounds had been treated. They needed him alive.

Grimly, he allowed himself to wonder where they may have taken Leia. It was time to open his eyes and start asking questions. A warm hand closed over his and did not release its soft but desperately tight hold.

"Han?" A gentle voice asked. "Can you hear me?"

He opened his eyes. It was no dream. She was there, dark eyes clear and fierce now. No tears. He tried to smile, to speak, but heard only the dry rattling of his own breath. His mouth was too dry for words, anaesthetic always left it that way. He ran his tongue over parched, cracked lips.

"I'll get you some water, " Leia said.

She disappeared from his line of sight but was soon back bending over him, lifting his head, holding a cup to his lips. He held her gaze, attempting silent reassurance as the cool water flowed into his mouth.

Thirst quenched, he lay back. "You okay?" he asked. The answering smile was greater reward than he could have wished.

"They tended my arm," she said. "I'm fine. They even unlocked my wrists. See?" She lifted her bare arms for him.

"Aren't they afraid you'll sabotage the place?" Han teased.

"I tried. But dirty looks and sarcastic remarks don't seem to be having much effect."

Han laughed, but stopped abruptly, wincing as his side stabbed hotly at him.

"Shh, " Leia said. "You've just come out of surgery. Rest."

Solo closed his eyes, but refused further surrender. "Sorry I scared you so bad back there." He opened his eyes as her lips brushed his. "Had to try something."

"I know," she said, trying to be cheerful, but unable to hide the sorrow in her eyes.

Solo turned his head slightly, trying to track the sharp rapping footsteps he could hear approaching with military precision. A thin faced, haggard looking man garbed in the white of a doctor peered down at him. Han's eyes were drawn to the insignia on the uniform, a green circle overlaid with twin red bars. His stomach lurched at the memories that symbol evoked. No normal doctor, this, he was assigned to the Intelligence Section. He would be one of those who measured out drug doses and kept broken bodies alive until they could be made to answer questions.

The doctor, a major, straightened and smiled down at his patient with grim satisfaction. "You are awake already, Solo. You are a remarkably strong man. Others with injuries like this would have presented me with far greater problems." The smile became a leer. "But we must see that you make a speedy recovery. The Emperor commands it. I am pleased to see that you intend co-operating." He turned muddy brown lifeless eyes upon the seated Princess who had not released her grip upon Solo's hand. "You see, Your Highness, I told you I would save him for you."

Leia nodded, refusing to look up at the man, though her hatred was tempered by a fledgling gratitude. She had been so afraid, sitting here alone, awaiting Solo's return from the operating room. He would live, but was life here better than death on Endor? Better than the death of the Alliance? Only Calrissian's daring manoeuvring had seen the escape of a handful of scattered survivors.

"I see you are not going to thank me," the surgeon pouted. "Perhaps you will thank me if I allow you to stay with him rather than have you sent to the detention cells?"

"Leave her be! You slimy little ..." Solo started up, then gasped and fell back, eyes screwed tight against pain.

"Well, Your Highness?" the Imperial snarled, ignoring his patient's distress. "Which is it to be? Perhaps if you ask me nicely?"

Leia's eyes burned fiercely with barely suppressed rage. Further defiance would cause Han to injure himself again. He would not rest quietly without her.

"Please, Major," she said with a sweetness that had an acid cutting edge, "I ask to be allowed to remain with General Solo."

Major Peram looked back at the Corellian who was again attempting to struggle. The cursed fool would undo all his handiwork. "Relax, Solo!" he snapped. "The woman may stay with you!" He turned angrily to his orderlies. "Take these two prisoners to room 27, but call those security men over here first. Have Solo's condition monitored. Call me or one of the other doctors if he suffers any relapse."

"Yes sir!" The subordinates saluted. One picked up the control to the stretcher, while the other signalled two black-clad security men.

Leia stood, still clasping Han's hand as the uniformed men swarmed about them and the stretcher was activated. She followed at its side,

wading through the crowded recovery ward, refusing to release her contact with Solo's hand and make room by coming single-file behind his stretcher. Imperial guards, medical staff and wounded, all turned at least briefly to look upon her as she passed. Some of those gazes were merely curious, but many, recognising her glared their spite for those who would rebel against the Empire and cause them bloodshed and pain.

When Han Solo woke next, it was to much more peaceful surroundings. A narrow white-walled hospital room bare but for medical monitors and instruments, a small table, the bed upon which he rested and another smaller camp cot nearby. The remaining item of furniture was the uncomfortable chair upon which a very weary Princess sat slumped, asleep, her head on the mattress beside him, her fingers still entwined about his right hand. He loosened that grip to stroke her hair softly.

"What now, Princess?" he whispered. "I guess the war's over this time."

Leia stirred at his touch, sat up and blinked back at him, her lips and eyes revealing a smile that was at once welcoming and sorrowful. She bent and those warm lips brushed against his. He held her to him and kissed her with the fierceness of anguish, trying through his love for her to ease her pain. She responded with equal intensity, bringing a fleeting warmth of hope to push back despair.

Her smile was brighter as she broke the embrace. If he hadn't known her so well it would have been hard to see the desperation she hid so bravely behind those dark eyes.

"Well, flyboy," she said gruffly, "I'd say that proves you're on the mend."

"Count on it," Han winked. He allowed his gaze to leave her face and survey his surroundings more fully. There were surveillance cameras high on the ceiling in two of the corners. Han's mouth curled downward with distaste. He looked back to Leia who was watching carefully for his reaction.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Not too bad, considering. What exactly is the damage? I mean, what hit me? It couldn't have been the laser cannon. I couldn't have survived that." He watched as she filled a mug with water. She fed him a few sips before answering.

"They fired wide, Han. They only intended to stun you, but the blast hit and shattered a tree nearby. Shards of the trunk hit you like shrapnel." She swallowed heavily against the horror of that memory. "There were pieces of wood embedded in your chest and left leg. The force of the impact broke ribs and splintered the bone in your thigh."

"Oh," Solo sighed. "Could have been worse. I'll heal. That officer from the walker got to us damned quick. Thought he was gonna finish me off, then he pulls out a medical kit."

Leia frowned. "Apparently they had stern orders to take us unharmed. I think the officer who gave you first aid was placed under arrest, something about having to explain his actions to the Emperor himself."

Solo grimaced. "I almost feel sorry for him. I'm sorry I scared you so bad, Leia. I thought I could make a break for you." He smiled ruefully. "Didn't know they'd be in such a hurry to leave that thing just to patch me up."

"You did make a break for me. That explosion would have covered me if I'd run immediately. I know you rushed that walker deliberately to give me that chance, and I know my responsibilities to the Alliance should have given me no other choice. But ..." She looked away, tears brimming in her eyes. "When I saw you lying there covered in blood, I thought you were dead at first. I had to know. I only wanted to be with you, wherever you were going."

Han swallowed hard against the lump in his throat. He closed his hand over hers, lifted it to his lips and kissed it. "I understand, sweetheart. I wouldn't have been able to leave you like that, either." She turned back to him with a hesitant smile and, touched by her love, her loyalty, Solo felt his old never-say-die spirits renewed. "Hell," he said confidently. "No big deal. We escaped from one of these things before. We can do it again."

Fuelled by his determination, Leia's smile was genuine as she held his gaze. "Why not?" she said cheekily. "This Death Star's not even completed and we're in a hospital area, not the detention bay. Should be easy." She grinned. "Being so new, the garbage masher shouldn't be quite as smelly!"

Solo laughed, coughed, winced and steadied himself. "Right." There was silence and the mood was grave as he spoke up again. "What about everyone else? The team? Chewie?"

"The survivors of the commando team are all prisoners down in the cells. Lewis was wounded in the shoulder. I spoke to him in the casualty ward. He said the last he saw of Chewie, he was organising the ewoks to go after the walkers."

Blocking his mind from any thought of the Wookiee lying dead somewhere amid the forests of Endor, Han took Chewbacca's disappearance as a good sign. "I'll bet he's hiding out somewhere down there with his furry friends. That forest is rugged. They'll never find him." He set his jaw to ask the next question. "The fleet?"

"I overheard some conversation among the Imperial wounded. It seemed their trap didn't quite come off. Lando and the Falcon shepherded the Medical and Supply frigates, Ackbar, Rieekan's Command ship and a handful of the fighters clear. Even the Imperials say the Falcon made a fine sight blasting passage through those Star Destroyers."

Somewhat eased, and proud of his friend and his ship, Han nodded. But he could sense by the tense lines of Leia's face that she had not told him it all. Some grief had cut at her badly. "Any word on Luke?" he asked quietly.

Leia's face could have been carved from stone, so rigidly did she hold back her pain. "I don't know. There's been no mention of him, except by the shuttle crew who said they had delivered the last Jedi to Vader."

"But, you and Luke," Han fumbled for words. "You've got some kind of a, a psychic link, or something. So you know he's still alive?"

Unbidden, tears streamed down the Princess' pale cheeks. "I can't be sure. Something's wrong. I heard Luke call to me. It was more a scream than a call. He was in agony. There was burning heat, then cold ... then nothing."

Han felt grief clutching vice-like at his heart. No, kid. No, not you. You can't be gone. He searched desperately for a way to avoid that conclusion. "But you'd know it if he was dead. Maybe he's just ... unconscious, or something."

Leia turned back to him, concentration and thoughtfulness erasing the worst of her sorrow. She nodded her head slowly. "Yes, that could be it."

Han determined to bolster that hope as much as possible. As great as his own pain would be at such a loss, Leia's would be far worse. Together, before leaving for Endor, they had told him they were brother

and sister, twins. Vader's children. He had been more than astounded, had yet to properly assimilate that information. But medical tests, and Kenobi's old tapes had borne out the truth. Somehow, Han, like Leia, realised he had seen that Bond all along. Luke and Leia had always known of one another's pain, moods, location; been so much of one mind that he had wondered at it. If Luke were killed, Leia would feel no less than torn asunder.

"The Imperials want us alive," he said reassuringly, "Luke's even more important to them. They wouldn't kill him. He's the one with the Force power Vader wants so badly."

"Luke said Vader had some wild scheme to overthrow the Emperor. Rule the galaxy as father and son. What if Palpatine sensed ...?"

These words had been barely audible, whispered beside Solo's head as Leia adjusted the pillow for him. It wouldn't do to have mutinous plans leaked back to the Emperor.

"Luke would never go along with anything like that," Han said.

"I know That's what scares me. If neither Vader nor Palpatine could convince him to turn, then he would no longer be of any use to them."

Han's tone was stern. "Luke knew what he was doing. He wouldn't have taken them on if he thought he had no chance. As soon as this leg's ..."

Solo thought his heart would stop as his eyes caught the movement of the door and his mind registered the presence of Darth Vader. The last time he had seen that embodiment of blackness, had been moments before he had been thrust into a cold, lonely hell. What did the Dark Lord have in mind this time?

"A visitor. How thoughtful," Han scowled. His words gave no sign of fear, but the monitor tracking his heart beat betrayed him.

"You are a very hard man to be rid of, Corellian," Vader remarked mildly. "You would be dead but for the fact that Palpatine has plans for you."

"Whatever they are, the answer's no," Solo retorted.

"I do not think you will have much to say in the matter, General," Vader's voice dropped, became almost a whisper. "Even I stood no chance against his will."

Leia lifted her head sharply as she heard this comment. It tied in with Kenobi's report of Vader's fall to the dark side. Anakin Skywalker had been lost to a wild need for vengeance over what he believed had been his wife's murder.

"What does the self-proclaimed Emperor plan for us?" Leia asked boldly.

"You have great spirit, Your Highness," Vader responded. He took a few paces closer to the bed, and stood staring at the monitor printouts, seemingly engrossed in them. Finally, he looked back to the defiant dark eyes of the Princess. "You are very like your mother, Leia," he said. "If only I had known she and our children had survived, it could all have been so different. There is no hope for any of us now. Palpatine's power is immortal. I could do nothing, even to save my son's life."

"No!" Leia sobbed.

Equally shocked and hurt, Han drew Leia to him and held her tight against his chest, ignoring the throbbing of his wounds. With a rage fuelled by grief, he glared back at Darth Vader. He had intended his tone to be defiant, but found instead his voice was husky, choking on the pain of loss he fought to hide. "You gutless carn□spawn!" he cursed. "You claim to have loved their mother, yet you come here just to torment Leia with her brother's death?" Solo's vision blurred with his own tears and he turned his head to lay his cheek on the softness of Leia's hair, sharing her pain, trying to console her.

Vader's resonant voice broke through their grief.

"No. You misunderstand me," he said. "Damn this respirator. I cannot speak to you with my own voice, look upon you with my own eyes so that you would see the sorrow there. At the last, I felt Luke's love for me, and, I ... I loved him too. I swear it."

Both rebels' faces turned toward the Dark Lord in astonishment. Never had they suspected that Vader was even capable of talking like this. The words did not lessen their hatred or grief.

Solo's face twisted with utter contempt. "You expect us to believe that after what you've done?!"

"No." Vader answered. "I did not come here seeking understanding or forgiveness." He took a step toward Leia, but the venom in her dark eyes was so cold that he lowered the hand he had instinctively reached toward

her. "Your Highness, I am sorry. I thought you would already have known of Luke Skywalker's death. I did not intend to hurt you like this."

"You've done enough damage, Vader!" Han spat. "Get out of here and leave her alone!"

Vader ignored the wounded man, his eyes keenly studying Leia Organa. The cold hatred was gone, the dark eyes soft, a smile touching her lips. There was no focus to her gaze. She was seeing something, hearing something, through the Force. "What is it, child?" he asked intently. "What do you see?"

Confused, Solo gaped at Vader, then looked to Leia. She wore Luke Skywalker's distant expression of Force-Use. "Leia?" he asked. Suddenly afraid that she had gone into shock, he shook her slightly, desperate. "Leia, speak to me!"

Leia's eyes focused and she turned immediately to kiss Han. His eyes rounded in surprise at the joy he read in her eyes.

"Leia," he repeated. "What the hell's going on?"

"Everything will be all right," she said reassuringly. She looked up at Darth Vader. "At the last, Luke called to you as well as to me. I heard him call you 'father', he was pleading with you to come back to us, to defy Palpatine's darkness. Why didn't you?"

"I tried." Vader's cloak billowed as he turned swiftly about. "I fought so hard, but my hatred defeated me. I hated Palpatine for what he was forcing me to do to Luke, and then for the way he killed him. My heart yearned to reach out, to push him back, to take my son in my arms. But hatred always increases the power of the Dark. I was its prisoner. You must believe me, daughter of my beloved, if I could, I would gladly have given my life to save my son."

"What?!" Solo whispered. He was beginning to wonder if this were not all some kind of nightmare brought on by delirium. To his utter amazement, he saw Leia stand, cross to Vader's side and lay her small white hand upon the Dark Lord's immense black clad arm.

"Luke knew you were fighting for him, but he could not wait any longer. He would have been killed. He had to leave his body."

Vader whirled about so quickly that Leia took a few frightened steps back, suddenly wondering at her own gesture and words. "Luke left his

body of his own free will?" he asked. This time even the respirator could not mask the hope and joy that rang in the words.

"Yes," Leia blinked back tears of joy. "Luke is not dead. He spoke to me just now. He is waiting for us on Dagobah."

"Not dead? Then we can bring him back!" Vader rumbled.

Leia smiled hesitantly and nodded. That was what Luke had asked her. He had assured her that she could trust this black-shrouded man. The Sith Lord was no longer the twisted creature she had known as Darth Vader. Luke's love had reached him, had re-ignited the long hidden light within him. "Yes ... Anakin," she said quietly. "We can bring him back."

Both were shaken back to their surroundings by the strident blaring of the life□monitor alarm. Solo's heart was racing, he was having difficulty breathing. Weakened by blood loss and surgery, he was in no condition for such a rapid succession of shocks. Anakin and Leia both hurried to his side.

Through a haze of pain, Han watched as Vader's huge black-gloved hand tore the breathing apparatus from the wall above his bed, reached down and held the oxygen mask over his mouth and nose. Not conscious enough to understand Vader's concern, Han could see only threat in the Dark Lord's frightening visage hovering close to him. He struggled to break free.

"He is afraid of me," Anakin said quickly to his daughter who was activating the release switches of the oxygen supply. "You must do this. Hurry. We must calm him."

Leia swiftly took her father's place by Solo. She adjusted the breathing mask, forcing it back into position. "Please, Han." She called "It's all right. He's gone. It's only me. Everything's going to be all right." Solo's eyes focused briefly on her, and reassured, he stopped struggling, but he was still in pain, his pulse beat still erratic.

Suddenly, the small room was full of people. A young, eager-faced doctor wearing the bars of a medical Lieutenant hurried to the monitor, scanned the readings, and turned to his orderly. "Two cc's of gericyn, immediately." The grey-uniformed orderly began preparing the injection. The doctor turned to Vader, his concern for his patient overcoming his fear of the Dark Lord. "My Lord," he said courteously, "this man is in no condition for questioning. I would advise that you should return later. Continued strain now could cause an irreparable relapse."

"I understand, Lieutenant Carass," Vader replied. "He is to have the best of care. I rely on you to supply it. I will leave you to tend him." He turned toward Princess Organa. "You must explain to the General when he is well enough. He is not strong enough now. You understand, Your Highness. I will be back to see you both later. Be ready."

Understanding the meaning behind the words, Leia was hard put to maintain the appropriate expression of hatred. "We will never co-operate with you, Vader. Don't waste your time!" She turned back to Solo.

A black uniformed security man, one of those who had been stationed outside the door, continued to work testing the surveillance cameras, which seemed to have failed shortly after Lord Vader had entered the room. He frowned in puzzlement as he saw that they were operating perfectly now. He turned to enquire about this mystery with his superior, but Vader had already gone.

Leia watched worriedly as the youthful doctor completed the injection, straightened up and began a thorough examination. Carass muttered and cursed under his breath and Leia was certain many of those curses were directed at Lord Vader. Slowly, Solo recovered full consciousness, his breathing steadying, his heart rate levelling off and his eyes focusing on her. Leia looked to the doctor who nodded permission for her to remove the breathing mask.

"Tell me that was all a dream," Han said.

"No." She stroked the hair back from his face. "It wasn't a dream. Just rest."

"But Vader, -- Luke?"

Leia flickered a warning glance from Solo to the doctor and security men. "Not now, Han. Rest. There'll be time to talk about it later. Just don't worry about Luke. Okay?"

Comforted, but not really understanding, Solo nodded. "Sure."

Carass left off his testing of Solo's leg and began checking the chest bandages. "You must keep still, Solo," he ordered. "I don't want those internal injuries haemorrhaging again."

"Your concern is touching," Solo leered. "Shame you Imperials haven't caught up with the latest advances in medicine. What's with the leg cast?"

The youngster looked surprisingly shamefaced. "Emperor's orders. Apparently you have a bad reputation for trying foolhardy escapes."

Leia's tone was sharp-edged with disgust. "So you are deliberately withholding proper medical treatment, Lieutenant? Even though that leg may not set correctly without it? Whatever happened to your medical oath?!"

Carass whirled toward her, his face twisted with fury, and, alarmed, Han struggled to a sitting position. "Touch her and you're dead!" he wheezed over the pain of movement. An orderly grasped his shoulders and forcibly held him down.

"Enough!" the doctor shouted. "Let him go, Talren! He is not to be harmed!"

Bleary-eyed and short of breath, Han exchanged a quizzical glance with Leia who had moved toward the orderly, preparing to push him away.

"Damn you, Solo," Carass gritted out. "Lie still. I would not have hurt the Princess - and I will not." He turned to glare at her. "The Emperor wants both of you in good condition. I swear if there is any further impudence I will have you separated. Is that understood?"

Leia lowered her eyes and nodded. For the sake of future chances of plying information from the man, she would have to soothe his injured pride. "I did not mean insult," she apologised. "I was merely worried for the General's full recovery."

"The leg will heal well," Carass said shortly. "It is the Emperor's wish that Solo regain complete health. The break will have laser treatment at a later date, once intensive security arrangements can be made. You are not to be held here. The Emperor plans to have you transported to his home world once his tour of inspection is over. Until that time, Solo is to be kept immobilised." Carass looked back at his patient, his manner suddenly weary and inoffensive. "In spite of what you think, I am a doctor first and a military man second. I want only to treat you and get you off my hands. I have many other casualties to care for. You are too weak and your right lung too badly damaged for me to have you continually sedated. I was told to have you restrained, but tying an injured man is abhorrent to me." His soul-weary brown eyes met and held Solo's gaze. "Have I your word that you will rest, General?"

Surprised by the voluntary revelation of personal motives, Han nodded. "I won't try anything," he said. "As long as the Princess is allowed to remain here, unharmed."

"Good," Carass smiled faintly. "We have an agreement then. You have my word that these injections will contain no more than painkillers and antibiotics. I will have meals sent for you both. Make sure you eat all yours, Solo. If you are to be transferred later tomorrow you will need your strength."

Again, Han nodded. "We will be transported together?"

"Yes. The Emperor was most specific on that point." Carass turned to leave.

"Wait up," Han called, playing out a hunch. "You're Corellian, aren't you, doctor?"

Carass stared at him. "How did you know?"

Solo shrugged. "Just one Corellian's instinct for another, I guess."

"Eat and rest, Solo. The Emperor himself intends visiting you at 1700 hours."

"Visiting or interrogating?" Leia asked coldly.

"As far as I know, there will be no questions. You have little information that could be useful to the Empire now. The war is over. Your fleet is scattered. In any case I will ensure the Emperor is informed that Solo is too weak for questioning." Without another word, Carass and his entourage left the room.

"What a strange man," Leia remarked. "Aloof one minute and almost helpful the next."

Solo nodded. "Typical Corellian." Seeing Leia's mildly amused reaction to this summation, he grinned. "He won't be enjoying holding a fellow Corellian prisoner."

"Corell is so fiercely independent," Leia pondered. "What's he doing in an Imperial uniform?"

Han shrugged. "If I could wind up as a General in the Alliance, he could wind up an officer in the Imperial Medical Corps. Now what was all that between you and his Lordship?"

Bending close, Leia lowered her voice and began attempting an explanation. It was not easy going. Several times Solo's astonishment

almost caused him to raise his voice, but finally she convinced him Vader would be working towards their freedom. Han was still sceptical, and since he did not have the benefit of Force-Sight, she could not blame him. It was still hard for her to accept. They would just have to wait and see.

* * *

Meals and medical checks came and went, interspersed with the occasional security systems test by one of the guards, and Han and Leia passed the hours in periods of conversation or rest. Both were too tightly wound with what the Emperor's plans might entail, to be able to relax to any extent. Each caught the other staring apprehensively at the wall chronometer, until 1700 hours couldn't come fast enough, if only to ease their state of nervous waiting.

Despite the tension, Solo eventually drifted back to sleep only to be roused shortly afterward to be informed by the guards that he must prepare himself for the honor of the Emperor's presence. Leia clasped his hand tightly and he glanced at her with as much of a reassuring smile as he could muster. Carass bustled in, ran a cursory check of his patient's vital signs, then carefully propped him up with pillows.

Minutes after the doctor had left, the door hissed open again and a pair of royal guards, resplendent in their floor-length red robes, moved silently into the room, checked it quickly, then took up position on either side of the entrance. The door was kept in an open mode and Han and Leia watched it keenly. A dark clad figure appeared there, his head covered by a hood and in profile to them as he spoke to Carass.

The robed man turned fully toward them, pushing back his hood to reveal his face. Blonde hair, blue eyes, on the short side but powerfully built, Luke Skywalker stood looking toward them.

Forgetting his promise, Solo started up, leaning forward in his bed, arm outstretched in disbelieving, joyous welcome. "Luke!" he cried. His friend's smile became feral, malevolent. There was no light of humour, of affection in the blue eyes that met his. Solo felt the chill of the grave pass through him. His heart lurched with shock and his arm dropped.

"That's not Luke," Leia stated flatly beside him.

Han turned numbly to look at her. Her face was sheet white, taut with grief, fear and rage. Before he could attempt to stop her, she hurled herself at her brother's form, her small fists raised in impotent outrage.

"What have you done to Luke?!" she screamed.

The Emperor merely appeared amused. He made a small motion with his new fingers and Leia was compelled against her will to turn slowly back to seat herself upon her chair.

Absolutely horrified, Solo reached out to touch her, then he gaped, open-mouthed, totally uncomprehending back to the young man who approached to stand at the foot of the bed.

"Luke," he rasped, confused and in pain, "What are you doing? Ease up. C'mon kid. You can break the conditioning. That's Leia you're using your Force stuff on. Your sister. C'mon, Luke. You love her, remember?"

The hideous cackling that issued from Skywalker's throat froze Solo's pleas on his tongue. The fingers twitched again and Leia slumped, sobbing openly as Han had never seen her do before. He twisted to wrap his arms comfortingly about her shoulders, barely noticing the protesting stabs of pain in his chest. He spared Leia only a brief glance, he simply could not take his eyes from the man who stood at the foot of the bed, so like and yet so totally opposite to Luke Skywalker.

"You never listen do you, Corellian?"

Han felt the hair at the nape of his neck bristle with abject fear. The words came from Skywalker's mouth, but it was not Luke's voice. The tone dripped malice, hatred and lust. The timbre was the same but the pitch was all wrong. Despair turned Solo's body rigid as at last he began to understand what had happened.

"What have you done to Luke Skywalker?. I swear I'll have your filthy heart..." Solo's threats were cut short by a strangled scream as intolerable white-hot fire burned at his brain. Reflexively, he began bringing his hands to his head, but as suddenly as it had come, the attack ended. He fell back against the pillows, stinging sweat streaming into his eyes.

"So now you know I am not your precious friend!" Palpatine snarled. "It was an amusing deception was it not? Luke Skywalker was a hopeless fool. He is dead, but his body serves me well. My old form had become so feeble, so ugly, that I could no longer enjoy, shall we say, life's pleasures. It is a good feeling to be so physically strong and healthy again."

Shock faded, Leia faced the Emperor with typical iron-willed composure. She tried not to think that this face, those eyes had once been the veil for her brother's soul. "Your childish trick is over,

Palpatine. Such poor jokes were always typical of your mental abilities. Get to the point. What do you want of us?"

"You Skywalkers are all the same," Palpatine sighed. "So tedious. A shame that fate chose to endow such morons with the gift of the Force. Your brother chose to die rather than use that power. I presume you will be equally obstinate, Your Highness. Fortunately, children are much more pliable."

"What the hell are you getting at, scum?!" Solo growled.

"You will mind how you address me, smuggler, or I will have your tongue cut from your head!"

"Han, please," Leia pleaded.

What had once been Luke Skywalker's openly trusting face, twisted into a lustful leer of which he would never have been capable. "Such touching devotion!" Palpatine sneered. "You love this Corellian upstart, don't you, Your Highness?"

"Yes, I do," Leia said proudly.

"Good then," the blue of Luke Skywalker's eyes was lost to an evil red-yellow glowing. "You will be eager to bear his children, to take pleasure in his love-making. And I shall take your offspring the moment they emerge from the womb."

"You're mad, Sith! Do you really believe you can control us like herd beasts? We'd die first." Solo's hazel eyes glittered with hatred. "Take your perverted ideas and crawl back into"

Palpatine's eyes flared full red and Solo was abruptly silenced. "I think that refutes your pitiful argument, Corellian," he taunted. "Your body is entirely mine to command. You will not say another word until I allow it."

Silenced, Han could do no more than glare his murderous fury.

Palpatine closed his eyes, the lines of his face revealing what could have been ecstasy. "Yes, Corellian," he whispered, "I feel your hatred. You are a powerful Sender. A shame you do not have the Force. You would have been so strong in the Dark Powers." He opened his eyes to look once more upon the Princess. He could feel both fear and hatred in her. Perhaps she could be turned to the Dark as her father had been. But then she would loathe the Corellian and be incapable of producing children.

What a pity the Dark had the effect of infertility. But there was plenty of time. Patience. He would have her once she had given birth to several children. She would still be young and attractive as would he in his newly acquired form. They could rule side by side.

"You are Skywalker's twin," Palpatine said. "Kenobi did well to keep that secret from us, but only Yoda could have shielded you from me for so long. Such an unexpected boon, your brother betraying you as he felt your pain. Compassion is such a fatal weakness. So fortunate that you were wounded at that precise moment. You have equal Force power as your brother, Your Highness. The Corellian also has power, though it is unlike anything I have felt before. Those abilities will be inherited by your children, and they shall be mine to train in the ways of the Dark. You and I shall be immortal. When the time comes we will each take a new form as I have done several times already. You will enjoy the dungeons of Lyxtrax, Your Highness. Such surroundings should bring you to a full appreciation of your future home when you become my consort. In the meantime, my guards will remain constantly with you both. We cannot have you harming yourselves. Such a dynasty you will create for me! Your pathetic rebellion is crushed. There will be none to oppose the spread of my dominion."

Leia listened to this ranting in stoic silence, but Solo simply could not remain submissive. Palpatine had turned his back to them but was standing very close to the bed. Han made a lunge for the creature and had the pleasure of feeling his fingers close about Palpatine's throat before the guards hurled him forcibly back and he became unconscious.

* * *

When next Solo became aware of his surroundings, he discovered that he and Leia were no longer alone in their prison hospital room. The two royal guards stood threateningly against the far wall, and Carass fidgeted with the removal of an intravenous feed tube from Solo's arm. As Han watched this process, he saw that his wrists were now manacled to either side of the bed.

He looked up again to find Leia gazing searchingly into his eyes. He was surprised at the amount of spirit, the hope he read in her steady gaze. After that foul creature's little speech and seeing what had been done to her brother's body, Han had expected even Leia's fierce will may have snapped. But instead, she was trying silently, fervently to tell him something she could not speak of before the guards. Han could only assume by her expression that whatever it was it was good news. His own spirits were more buoyed simply by finding her apparently emotionally unscarred and as willing as ever to continue the fight. Luke must have contacted her again somehow, reminding her he was not really gone.

"You all right?" Han asked softly. He wanted to reach up and caress her face, but his arm was brought up short by the manacles. He scowled down at the restraints, then felt Leia's fingers tracing his jaw. He looked back to her and saw that she was smiling.

"I'm fine, Han," she said, "but you've had us a little worried."

"Us?" Han queried.

"Her Highness, the Emperor's guardsmen and I," Carass answered. He crossed back to stand looking down at his patient. "I'm sorry, Solo. I didn't know that was Skywalker's form the Emperor had taken, nor that he came here merely to taunt you. I do not understand why he would risk enraging you. Your good health is very important to him."

"Yeah. He told me all about it," Han snapped.

"I can't say I approve of you're hurting yourself, General, but," Carass sounded secretly pleased, "Princess Organa told me what Palpatine's plans are, so I can only congratulate you on at least giving him some form of opposition."

Solo gaped, then nodded warningly toward the guards.

Carass shrugged disinterestedly. "How do you feel?"

"Ummm, okay I guess. Better," Solo responded mechanically, still watching the guards for reaction.

"You're surprised I'd sympathise with you?"

Han looked back up at him. "You're a Corellian. How did you get mixed up in all of this?"

"It's a long story, General," Carass pointedly emphasised the rank, "and I have to be getting back to my other patients. Suffice it to say I was born without a clan. Few of those abandoned to make their own way ever fulfil their dreams. Mine was to be a doctor. Yours to be a pilot. How did you earn your training?"

Solo nodded, understanding. He could not help but admire the man for the progress he had made. Han's clan had been massacred, but he had had fourteen years protection and training. He was already a skilled pilot when he had been enslaved. A child without clan protection rarely survived to adulthood, yet alone made something of their lives.

"I am sorry about these restraints," Carass said. "But there is nothing I can do about it. I must be going. Take care."

Solo's eyebrows raised at this last remark. Leia clasped the young Corellian's arm as he passed by her. "Thank you, Lieutenant," she said quietly. Carass nodded and smiled, turned and left.

"How did the Emperor take control of Luke's body like that? How can that be possible?" Han asked as she sat by him again.

"Transmigration of one soul to another is a legendary Force skill, Han," Leia explained. "Such things were possible to those with the Power, but there are few cases of permanent exchange since such would require the death of another or his banishment to another plan of existence. According to Jedi history, transmigration was used as a form of trance through which a Master could communicate to"

The explanation was cut short as the door opened yet again and Darth Vader strode into the room.

"Back again?" Han said sarcastically. "Can't resist our company, huh?"

Vader ignored him and turned to the guards. He lifted his fist. Both men struggled, clutched at their throats, then slid unconscious to the floor.

Han swallowed hard against surprise and the adrenaline which surged through him. "The monitors?" he asked.

"Not recording," Vader answered. "Come, we must hurry." He released Solo's left manacle while Leia worked on the other.

Han stared from one to the other, his suspicious gaze finally settling on the Dark Lord. "Why the hell should we trust you, Vader? How do we know you haven't got plans of your own for us?"

"Princess Organa is able to see through her Force link with her brother that such is far from my intention. I wish only to help you. However, there is no method by which I may assure you of that immediately, General. You will simply have to trust to Her Highness' judgement. If it will help you to understand my actions, remember that I desire vengeance as badly as you do for what was done to my son."

Solo looked unconvinced. "It could be a trap," he said to Leia.

Vader sighed heavily. "I do not have time to debate with you, Solo. Whether or not you trust me is immaterial. You have no choice. Your chances will be better if you come with me, escape now, rather than wait for Palpatine to have you transferred to Lyxtrax. You could never hope to escape from that world.

"It's not a trap, Han. I feel it," Leia assured. "This is our only way out of here."

Solo squeezed her hand and nodded agreement. He eyed the Dark Lord warily. "Okay, Your Lordship," he said, "so what's your plan? I'm not exactly up to running through corridors right now. Maybe you'd do better just to get Leia out of here."

"No!" Leia objected. "I'm not leaving without you."

"You are a brave man, Solo," Vader responded, "I do not intend leaving you here to die. I took you from one another once before. It will never happen again. Leia has chosen her life-mate well."

Han realised his mouth was hanging open, absolutely stunned to hear such words from Vader, and he covered his astonishment by getting back to practicalities. "We're not gonna get far if we just try strolling out the door, so how ..?"

Han jumped, reaching reflexively for his non-existent blaster as the door opened once more. But it was only Carass.

"I have the uniforms for you, My Lord," he announced calmly.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Vader rumbled. "Help Solo into the stormtrooper's armour. There is not much time until the charges I placed will detonate. There will be a power failure and a good deal of noise and confusion. We should not have too much trouble. Those two guards are an example of what can be done to any who wish to question us." Leia and Carass were already helping Solo into the chest armour. Vader stared at the awkward bulk of the leg cast, then back to Solo's pale face. The movement required to fit him in the chest plate alone was causing him pain. "I do not want those wounds re-opening," he said. "I will carry you, Solo."

"Now wait a minute, that'll never work." Han stared directly at the black visage, "And since when do you care about how much I hurt?"

"Since Anakin Skywalker returned," Vader answered. "You must think of me now as the Jedi I once was, for in truth he whom you knew as Darth Vader no longer resides behind this mask."

"Oh fine," Solo grumbled. "Not another switch!"

There was a deep rumbling noise that could have been laughter booming from Vader's vocoder. "I have always admired your spirit, Solo," Anakin Skywalker said. "The fact remains that you cannot walk on that leg. It will be quicker if I carry you until we can find a vehicle. I do not think that anyone will dare to stop me merely to ask why I choose to ride in a maintenance cart."

"I can believe that!" Solo muttered.

"I'll get into my white armour," Leia said. She examined the sectioned, heavy uniform and sighed. At least three sizes too big.

Carass, helping Solo ease carefully into the one-legged lower half of his disguise, spared the Princess an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry, Your Highness," he said, "there were not any small enough. Use this blade to shorten the arms and legs." He passed her the laser knife.

"She has that problem with everything she wears," Solo quipped. Leia threw him a disparaging glance, then they both grinned. Despite the danger, Solo felt the old eagerness for challenging action.

"Doctor," Anakin warned. "I do not think it would be wise for you to remain here. You should come with us."

Carass shook his head. "I can't leave my patients."

"Vader's right," Han said grimly. "The Emperor's gonna blow all his burners when he finds out about this. You're not gonna be any good to your patients dead."

Carass finished putting Solo's feet into stormtrooper boots. "I'm sure the security guards will be the only objects of reprisal," he said but without conviction.

"It's too big a risk, Lieutenant. Especially once Palpatine discovers you are Corellian." Leia was totally swamped by her disguise. She wriggled her hand free of the armour to touch the young man's arm. "There

are plenty of other medical staff to tend the wounded here. The Alliance will be badly in need of doctors now. Please, come with us."

A slow, very Corellian smile spread across Carass' attractive dark face. 'I never much enjoy wearing this uniform in any case. I'll go get myself some armour. There's plenty, taken from the casualties."

As Carass returned and began pulling the stiff white suit over his medical tunic, there was an abrupt, muffled whump and a solid vibration rippled through walls and floor, rattling glassware and instruments, and causing Leia to grab at the bed frame to steady herself. The lights flickered then winked out. Pitch blackness settled about them. A few seconds later the faint glow of red emergency lighting gave just enough illumination to make out each other's whereabouts. The abrupt silence was shattered by the screech of alarms. Beyond the door could be heard shouting voices, frightened cries of wounded men and running footsteps.

"You Skywalkers never do anything by halves, do you!" Solo commented wryly.

Behind his mask, Anakin smiled, appreciating Solo's at least verbal admission of new identity. He saw that Solo was now fully attired in the uniform but for the mask and the left leg which would not be noticed in the shadows since the cast was as white as the armour would have been. Carass adjusted the stormtrooper's helmet upon Solo's head.

"Let's move," Leia said. "I'll check the door."

Vader reached out and clasped Solo firmly, one arm about his waist and the other under his knees. "I will be as careful as I can," he said apologetically.

Han gritted his teeth as he was lifted, thankful for the darkness and disguise which cloaked proceedings. It helped him feel a little less ridiculous and he didn't want anyone to see this. He was amazed by the sheer strength he felt in the arms about him, in the power of Vader's' strides as he crossed to the door. For all the hindrance he was causing to the Sith Lord, he could have been no more than a small child. Strong, but gentle as Chewbacca. He rolled his eyes. Struth, if Chewie ever finds out about this, I'll never live it down! Suddenly remembering, Han prayed only that Chewbacca was alive.

The wardroom beyond the door seemed in turmoil, and no one gave them more than a fleeting glance.

"Where the hell are we setting course for anyway?" Solo inquired.

"Home," Anakin answered cryptically.

* * *

Han, Leia and Carass were left hidden in a shadowy corner while Vader took on the task of finding some kind of transport. Apparently this was accomplished with little or no difficulty as the Dark Lord soon reappeared, ordered the driver of the vehicle out, and brusquely waved at his 'troopers' to climb aboard. More than glad to be dismissed, the former driver hurried off into the red-lit corridors, leaving Solo's friends to assist him to take a seat for himself by throwing out unwanted tools, Carass took over the driver's place, and Vader, looking definitely out of place, squeezed in beside him and gave him directions.

Alarms, shadows and red pulsing emergency lights eventually gave way to fully lit, calmly businesslike surroundings as Carass drove them clear of a second elevator. They had reached the hangar level. Solo shifted nervously, clutching at his confiscated laser rifle, but none of the Imperials about them gave them more than an odd veiled glance. It was Vader who attracted the curious stares, and it was obvious no one's curiosity had overridden their sense of self-preservation. They merely drove along without the slightest hint of opposition. "Definitely the only way to organise an escape," Han whispered to Leia, "Beats garbage mashers by a long shot!"

Leia nodded fervent agreement. She smiled ruefully at the absurdity of it all. Being assisted to escape the Death Star by the Dark Lord Vader himself! But then what was it Vader had said? I am no longer of the Dark. I am Anakin Skywalker. Was that what her brother had meant when he had whispered, ghostlike, 'Trust him. He will help you.'

The corridors seemed never-ending, but finally they were halted by a determined looking guard detail stationed in front of the entrance to the docking bay.

"My Lord," the officer said as he stepped forward. "We are on emergency standing. No one is to have access to the shuttles. General Solo and the Princess Leia Organa have escaped from the hospital area. It is believed they are holding one of the doctors as hostage."

"The Emperor has returned from Endor?" Vader asked.

"Yes, My Lord."

Vader waved what could have been an impatient hand. "I have urgent business at the shield generator. You will let us pass. Organise clearance for my shuttle."

The officer, eyes glazed, stood back and signalled his men to allow the small vehicle passage into the docking bay. "Lord Vader has urgent business. Let him pass."

Solo tried not to hold his breath as their slow-moving transport edged nearer and nearer to one of the awaiting shuttles. There were enquiring glances cast at Vader and his escort, but again, none dared approach the Dark Lord or question his doings. The only awkward moment came when at last the maintenance vehicle halted at the bottom of the shuttle ramp. A flight crew stood by, watching them curiously. The docking bay was brightly lit. One sight of that leg cast and the game was most definitely up.

"I will distract them," Vader said. "Move quickly."

The three rebels watched apprehensively as Vader left the vehicle and strode to the flight crew. "I will not be requiring a pilot," Vader said, walking slightly beyond them and drawing their gazes after him. "Is this shuttle fully fuelled?"

Carass took his chance. Solo reached up to him for support, Leia covered his flank so that the cast could not be seen, and Han did a passable imitation of a normal stride up the ramp as Carass took the weight from his bad leg. Once inside the shuttle, Leia had to make a conscious effort to keep her knees from buckling with sheer relief. She leaned up against the crash padding, steadying herself, as she watched Carass carefully lower Han into one of the flight seats. The doctor eased Solo's injured leg up onto the opposite seat, then began hunting about for the emergency aid kit with which all shuttles would be provided.

Vader strode up the ramp, activated the hatch close mechanism and addressed his band of escapees. "Strap yourselves in. Our deception cannot last long. I will have to jump to hyperspace as soon as I am clear of the Destroyers. I will establish voice contact with their Admirals. I should be able to prevent them obeying any attack orders from Palpatine."

"You'll need someone to set co-ordinates for you while you do the flying. Carass, help me into the cockpit, and get this damned helmet off me. No wonder those troopers can't shoot straight!"

"Solo, I don't think," Carass began, then halted. The General was far from fit for his self-appointed task, but then they might all be dead if he did not push himself to do the navigating. "All right," he nodded, helping the man to his feet once more, "but only until we're clear."

Solo was barely safely strapped into the co-pilot's seat before Vader had the shuttle lifted off and clear of the blast doors. It was a good feeling to be free of the Death Star, but the sight of the sentry ships was not reassuring. Already their communications board was alive with incoming calls, demanding identity and clearance. Vader flicked toggles and calmly threatened punishment to any who dared question him further. Han hurriedly set jump co-ordinates for clear space, leaving the finer details of destination to the Dark Lord. The final co-ordinates could be set later.

"The Emperor is screaming at them to open fire," Vader announced coolly. "When will you have those co-ordinates, Solo?"

Han punched a last number. "Now!"

Palpatine's panic was caused by the fact that the shuttle was now past the blockading destroyers. Vader engaged the hyperdrive and the tiny spacecraft winked out of view as if it had never been.

* * *

end part 1

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