

[Back To Index](#)

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Getting Under the Skin

by [Alison Glover](#)

And now, Chewbacca instructed, *flick this switch to start the recharge sequence...*

Luke Skywalker might not have understood Chewie's words, but he'd obviously followed the accompanying gestures. He hauled on the switch. It was a big, solid lever. The quad-gun recharge drained a lot of power and Chewie had set the system up so it couldn't be activated accidentally.

The lever snapped closed with a satisfying clunk. Chewie preferred switch-gear that he could feel and hear work - and that was more sturdily built than the flimsy little push-buttons humans used so often.

He patted Luke approvingly on the shoulder. The young human had done well to shoot down two of those TIE fighters. He could hardly have had much practice with a quad-gun on a Tatooine moisture farm. But even though Han and Luke had disposed of the TIE fighters... Chewie frowned and sighed. Their escape from the Death Star had still been too simple. If the Imperials had wanted them dead, a weapon system that could reduce Alderaan to rubble could have vaporised the Falcon and all aboard her.

Chewie checked the read-outs on the recharge panel and increased the charge rate. He might not have Jedi powers of prediction, but it was a safe bet they'd need the guns again soon enough.

He also had a strong feeling that this wouldn't be Luke's last trip in the Falcon, so he'd started showing him how things worked.

Luke rubbed absently at his neck and looked up at Chewie. "What now?"

Now, you go and find out where our next jump's to. The Falcon's current hyperspace jump was merely to put light-years between it and the Death Star as quickly as possible. If there was a homing device on board, it might have a range limitation. Besides, Chewie knew he wasn't the only one who simply wanted away from the planet-killer. *And I,* he went on, wrinkling his nose, *am going to recycle extra coolant water for the long showers we all need so badly.*

Wookiee was a notoriously difficult language for humans to understand, let alone speak, but Chewie could see that Luke was trying to follow what he was saying. Not that Luke needed to. His droid, Threepio, helpfully translated that last sentence and added, "Why, Master Luke, are long showers required?"

Protocol droids, it seemed, were devoid of even the most rudimentary olfactory sensors.

Chewie would have ignored the droid's question, but Luke said, "Because that garbage masher smelled very, very bad and now so do we."

You said it, kid, Chewie muttered, brushing mournfully at his bedraggled fur.

Luke grimaced and tugged at his stained tunic. He rubbed his neck again, which brought his sleeve close to his face. He sniffed it ruefully as he started up the gangway. "Can we wash our clothes, too?"

You'd better. To Chewie's nose, the stench of decay and garbage was still nauseating.

There had been another smell in the garbage masher, too. A particular sickly, almost acidic odour, one whiff of which had had Chewie pounding on the locked door in a vain effort to beat his way through it, to get out, away....

He sniffed cautiously. It was faint, under the other smells that clung to his fur and to Luke's hair and clothing, but it might still be there.

Hopefully, he was imagining it.

He glanced up the gangway. Young Luke had reached the cockpit just as Princess Leia emerged from it.

"You're friend's quite the mercenary," she said.

Chewie suppressed a snort.

"I wonder if he really cares about anything - or anyone," Leia added.

"I care." Luke said that quietly to the Princess's retreating back, perhaps uncertain whether or not he wanted her to hear it.

Chewie smiled. His own youth was safely in the past, more than a human lifetime ago now. It had been fun, but Chewie wouldn't want to relive it. All the emotional ups and downs, the completely unnecessary angst...There was quite enough real angst in the galaxy. Especially with a battle-station like the Death Star operational.

From the cockpit, Chewie could just catch Han and Luke's voices, although Leia either couldn't hear them or was doing a good job of ignoring them.

"What d'you think, kid? Could a princess and I guy like me - ?"

Chewie smiled again. To judge by his tone, Han hadn't been sure whether he'd spoken to tease Luke, or because he was really considering the possibility.

Luke, however, sounded absolutely sure of what he was saying. "No."

Chewie had finally finished explaining the idiosyncrasies of the Falcon's plumbing to Leia. Once again, Threepio had been obligingly translating. And commenting. At length. Chewie groaned and contemplated, for the nth time, turning the droid off. Without Threepio's long-winded assistance, Leia and Chewie could both have had very long showers by now.

Fortunately, Luke's other droid was less vocal and more efficient. Chewie had sent Luke and Artoo to scan the Falcon for trackers and homing devices. So far none had been found, but the Imperials had had plenty of time to conceal any number of them.

Han came striding into the lounge. "No reply yet on that frequency, your worshipfulness."

Leia winced at the title, but just said, "There may never be. Captain Antilles got one last message off when we knew the Imperials were on to us. Knowing that he and I would likely be captured, the Alliance would have switched frequencies and codes. They may suspect that any message sent using our old ones is an Imperial trick."

Han flopped down on the couch. "And that our request for a rendezvous in space is a set-up for an ambush."

If the Falcon was being tracked, a rendezvous in some uninhabited system was the obvious way to avoid leading the Empire to any Rebel strongholds. Pity, then, that that plan wasn't going to work.

Luke reappeared, examining a small object, Artoo trundling at his heels.

"You found something, then?" Han prompted.

"Yeah." Luke tossed him the object. "But Artoo says this style of tracker is usually used in pairs. So far we can't find the other one anywhere inside the ship."

Han looked at the tracker. "The other's probably on the hull. Somewhere it can't be removed unless we land. That's where I'd put it. Maybe we should stop somewhere and look for it - "

"We need," Leia interjected, "to get the Death Star plans to the Alliance as soon as possible. Analysing them for a weakness may take time. The experts who were to supposed to study them had been assembled on...." She swallowed. "On Alderaan."

Luke moved closer to her and put his hand, a little uncertainly, on her arm.

Han shot him a glance, but Luke was obviously concerned about Leia, not thinking about potential rivalry with Han. Just for a moment, Leia leaned against Luke, as if she could gain strength by doing so.

"Can't we transmit the plans to an Alliance base?" Luke suggested.

"To all the Alliance bases, for that matter," Han added. "That way more people could work on them."

Leia straightened, brushed at her hair and started pacing the lounge. "Captain Antilles wanted to transmit them as soon as we acquired them. Not just to the Alliance - he was going to broadcast them to as many systems as possible, so that planets couldn't be taken unaware by a cloaked battle station and worlds outside the Alliance could also start working on defences." She smiled ruefully. "And people would know what the Empire had spent their taxes on. But we couldn't."

"The Imperials blocked your transmissions?" Han asked.

Leia shook her head. "Not just that. Even before the Imperials located the Tantavie we couldn't send the plans. It's the way they're encrypted. If any one but an expert tries to transmit them or even just read them, they'll be scrambled."

"At least," Luke said quietly, "if the Death Star's following us, we know roughly where it is...." He let his voice trail off. There wasn't any need for him to add what Chewie knew they were all thinking:

And while it's following us, it isn't blowing more planets up.

Leia stopped pacing and turned to face Han and Chewie. "Yavin. Set a course for Yavin. My father said there was base there."

Han stood up. "All right." He paused. "Does it have the firepower to destroy the Death Star?"

"I don't know." Leia shrugged and looked grim. "If we can't find a weakness in the plans, maybe nowhere does."

Chewie growled quietly. It was all too likely Leia was right. The Death Star had looked liked it could hold off an entire starfleet - and from what Chewie had heard, the Rebels had many supporters but few ships.

"I don't know what resources the Alliance has on Yavin," Leia went on. "My father thought it best I didn't know too much. But he mentioned that General Dodonna was there. For some reason, he didn't want Dodonna to be on Alderaan if General Kenobi did come back." She smiled briefly. "Dodonna might have roughed it with his troops back during the Clone Wars, but he's an old man now and likes his home comforts. If he's on Yavin, there'll be a substantial base there."

"All right." Han headed for the gangway. "I'll lay in a course. You might as well go get cleaned up, your highnessness." He started towards the cockpit, then turned back. "What about there being substantial cash on Yavin?"

Luke rolled his eyes, clearly exasperated with Han. Leia shook her head again. "I don't know that either. But don't you worry, Captain Solo, I'll see that you get your just reward." She grabbed a towel from the pile on the games table and stalked off towards the shower.

Chewie grinned toothily at his partner. *You have such a way with people, Han.* He wondered if either Leia or Luke had realised that one reason Han was harping on about the money was an attempt to hide just how terrified he was of a battlestation that could destroy entire worlds.

"We need the money, Chewie - you know that. If we don't get Jabba paid off, we'd be safer with the Rebels than trying to stay in business."

Chewie did know that, perfectly well. He suppressed a grin. Typical Han, taking an indirect way to tell Luke.

Predicably, the younger human began, "So why don't you - "

Han held up a warning finger. "Don't start, kid. I'm a businessman, not the hero type. Talking of which...you paid us two thousand as a deposit to get you to Alderaan. We haven't exactly done that. We can't go back to Tatooine until we've got at least some money for Jabba, but if you can wait until then, we could take you home."

"Home?" Luke's expression was bleak. "Home doesn't exist any more. There's nothing for me on Tatooine. I'll stay on Yavin and join the Alliance."

If he'd said that back in the cantina in Mos Eisley, Han would have sarcastically inquired what use a kid like Luke would be to the Rebels. Now he shrugged and looked unhappy. "It's your life, kid. Don't let me stop you throwing it away."

Luke was, Chewie could see, about to argue. After the 'she's rich' exchange back on the Death Star, this might be interesting. Chewie folded his arms and leaned back against a bulkhead, prepared to be entertained.

Only the couple of steps that Luke had taken towards Han had brought him opposite Chewie. Once again, Chewie caught a whiff that distinctive, sickly odour...he straightened and sniffed cautiously at Luke.

No, it wasn't his imagination.

He put back his head and howled.

To Leia's surprise, the Falcon's shower produced an interrupted supply of warm water. Even more amazingly, the little clothes 'fresher delivered her clothing intact, clean and with a faint but pleasant floral scent.

She pulled her robes straight and tried to do something with her hair. She'd have to find a simpler way to wear it in future. There was no mirror in the shower compartment, so she had to go by her dim reflection in the polished metal door of the 'fresher unit. She had no brush or comb either, but after being rolled on either side of her head for days, maybe her hair would oblige and go back into the style easily.

She'd also been surprised not be disturbed. It had been hard to tell, over the flowing water and the cacophony of gurgles and bangs from the Falcon's plumbing, but she'd thought she'd heard Chewbacca howling and Han shouting. But no one had come to bang on the shower door and demand she came out, so maybe she'd imagined it.

Or maybe it was Han and his co-pilot's normal mode of conversation.

She should apologise to Chewbacca. Not exactly diplomatic, a senator describing a sentient being as an ambulatory rug. A sentient being from a species that had been building tree cities long before most human races had figured out how to make fire.

A species that was still more civilised than humans. Wookiees didn't build weapons of mass destruction...

I'm so sorry, Chewbacca, for implying that you were a mobile floor covering, but having my planet blown up is bad for both my temper and my vocabulary...

Ignoring the hairpins she was clutching, she slammed her fist against the bulkhead. Don't go there. What matters is getting the plans to the Alliance, stopping the destruction of other worlds....

Damn. She'd bent half the hairpins.

Sighing, she started straightening them out. Maybe she could get Threepio to help her with her hair.

From somewhere in the back of her mind, a little voice piped up, Or Han?

She ignored it. Yes, she'd ask Threepio. Protocol droids often helped their owners with formal dress. She managed to raise a smile from that thought. Whatever uses young Luke had for Threepio, hairstyling obviously wasn't one of them. It was a wonder he could see where he was going, with that mop of blond hair perpetually in his eyes. Though obviously he could, or they'd both be at the bottom of that service shaft....

Gwraaaarghwr!!

She started, dropping the hairpins. That howl hadn't been her imagination. Chewbacca sounded really upset about something. Hastily grabbing the pins, she went to investigate.

There was no one in the Falcon's lounge. The howling and yelling - Han was shouting, but Leia couldn't make out the words - were coming from further down one of the gangways.

Leia followed the sounds. "What's going - "

She stopped. Whatever disparaging remarks she may have made earlier, she hadn't seriously doubted her rescuers' sanity.

Not until now.

No, there must be some sensible, logical explanation for the scene with which she was confronted. It just wasn't obvious.

All right, she'd start with the aspects that were.

She was staring into what was clearly a sickbay. A well-appointed one, which on reflection wasn't surprising. Out on the Rim, major medical centres were few and far between, and she'd doubted that Han Solo was the type to trust himself to them anyway.

The room was only just large enough for three people, especially when one of the three was a large Wookiee. Chewbacca was squashed in a corner, holding a deep metal dish and a pair of forceps and looking agitated. Han was standing beside the single bunk, behind Luke, with a laser scalpel in one hand, a hypo in the other and a very worried expression.

The little voice from the back of Leia's head said, See? He can care.

Luke was leaning over the bunk, his shoulders out of his tunic, which was hanging round his waist.

Looking at him gave Leia a strange sensation. Not only the feeling she'd had already, that she must be an extremely shallow person to keep noticing, at a time like this, that Han was good-looking and Luke was cute. Her brain was trying to think two ways at once. Half of it was pointing out that Luke had a very nice body while the other insisted that she shouldn't think of him like that.

Why shouldn't she?

And then Luke glanced at her and she registered how scared he looked. Much more scared that he had during their rush through the corridors of the Death Star, even on their mad swing across the service shaft.

"Han, what are you doing to - " she began.

But Han still yelling at Chewbacca. "Why didn't you warn us about this earlier?"

Leia didn't speak Wookiee, but Chewbacca's reply was clearly that he'd been trying to.

Han put the hypo down and brushed Luke's hair away from the back of his neck. There a long, thin, dull red weal there, Leia saw. An odd sort of weal. It almost looked like it was wriggling.

Han gingerly touched Luke's neck. "That local anaesthetic working yet?"

To judge by the way Luke winced, it wasn't. He swallowed, gritted his teeth and turned his head to look up at Han. "It doesn't matter, Han. Just - just get that thing out."

Get what thing - ? Leia stared at the wound on Luke's neck. It hadn't been her imagination. It was moving. There was something wriggling, burrowing under his skin.

No wonder he looked queasy. The movement was enough to make Leia's stomach churn and it wasn't inside her.

"Right," Han said. "Here goes." He checked the setting on the scalpel, picked up a wad of dressing and took a long and somewhat unsteady breath.

Some other time, she might have - all right, she would have - enjoyed seeing Han lose his aggravating self-assurance. But not now... Flyboy, you'd better be more organised at surgery than you are at rescues.

But it seemed that this time the three of them had worked out advance what they were going to do.

"Okay," Han was saying, "kid, keep your hair out the way. Chewie, get ready to grab it."

Leia took a step forward. There must be something she could do..... but she always felt that, even when there wasn't. If she hadn't felt that way about the Death Star plans, someone else might have got them to Alderaan quicker...

Chewbacca moved up beside Han, as Luke held his hair off his neck with one hand and with the other got a grip on a stanchion that ran above the bunk. A tight grip - his knuckles were white. Han nodded at Chewbacca and mouthed, "One, two - "

It was reassuring that he and the Wookiee were obviously used to working together but Leia still had to bite her tongue when Han reached "three" and touched the scalpel to Luke's neck. She settled for screaming silently, Don't hurt him!, while some more analytical part of her wondered why she should feel so protective of Luke. Being grateful for his part in her rescue didn't explain this sudden conviction that she should be looking after him.

Chewbacca was between her and Luke, blocking her view. All she could see was Han's look of concentration, that Luke was gripping the stanchion even tighter and that blood was trickling down Luke's back faster than Han could mop it up. Frustrated, she stood on tiptoe, but still couldn't see past Chewbacca's broad,

furry shoulders. Then the Wookiee pounced, moving surprisingly quickly and deftly for one so large.

She didn't need a translation of his triumphant growl. *Got it!*

Han let a wad of blood-stained dressing drop on the deck and took another deep breath. So did Luke.

"It's done, kid." Han adjusted the scalpel. "Just let me close this cut up."

Chewbacca put the metal container down on a cabinet. Leia kept her distance, but she couldn't resist looking. Inside it, something was still squirming... a long something only a couple of millimetres thick, that nevertheless had a recognisable head with one big, single eye....

Han finished cleaning the blood off Luke's back and patted him on the shoulder. They both sagged, rather than sat, onto the bunk. Han fiddled with the scalpel again and aimed it at the still-wriggling creature. There was no visible emission from the scalpel, but Leia had heard once that they operated mostly in the infrared.

Han must have turned the power right up. The creature charred, then burned. Han held the scalpel on it until the metal dish was glowing with heat.

Chewbacca gave a satisfied growl.

"I'd say that's safely disposed of," Han announced, looking pleased with himself.

"Good," said Luke, but very quietly.

"You okay, kid?"

He didn't look okay. He looked like he was about to either pass out or throw up.

Han put his arm round him. "Take a few deep breaths, kid."

"No!" Luke swallowed and repeated more quietly, "No. Not with that in here." He nodded at the smouldering remains. "It smells - bad."

Chewbacca yowled in agreement and went off with the dish.

Luke was staring blankly at the wall. No, not blankly... as if he were seeing something dreadful.

"Luke?" Leia sat down on the other side of him, but he didn't seem to have heard her. She leaned forward, looked into his faraway blue eyes and for a moment it was if she was somewhere else...

Heat. Blowing sand. Crackling flames. The smell of smoke and another stench - burnt flesh. Tears stinging in eyes that weren't hers...

Then Luke blinked and said, "I'm okay. I was just - thinking."

Thinking? Or remembering? Leia was sure that what she'd seen hadn't been her imagination. In some ways, the brief vision had seemed more real than the silent destruction of Alderaan. Then there had been no smell of burning, no cries, no shock wave felt on the Death Star.

Maybe that was why it was still so hard to grasp. Not just because of the numbers who had died, but because it had been so clinical, so easy to deny. It could have been a scene from a holo-drama, and for hours she'd hoped that somehow it had been.... that Tarkin had somehow faked it, that the Death Star main weapon wasn't really that powerful. *I can't believe he's gone*, Luke had said of Kenobi. But maybe Luke could weep because he did believe it, couldn't pretend it hadn't happened. So he could grieve and move on....

If she were to weep for Alderaan, she'd never stop....

She didn't remember moving, but her hand was gripping Luke's arm. He looked round at her. "Leia? Are you all right?"

No. I'm never going to be right again. But there was no point in saying that. She sat back, moved her arm and pushed a straying strand of hair back behind her ear, suddenly very aware that Han was looking intently at both of them. "I - " And then Chewbacca came back, growling cheerfully to himself, almost like he was whistling, and it was easy to find something practical to say. "That thing - what was it?"

She couldn't understand the growled reply, but there was something about the Wookiee's tone. She'd heard it before. That was it, when Chewbacca had landed in the garbage masher and immediately started yowling and hammering on the locked door.

"That creature in the garbage masher - " she began.

"Yeah," Han said. "Chewie says it was a dianogu."

"A dianogu? I thought they were mythical, just stories to give children nightmares."

"Obviously not," Luke muttered, holding a dressing to his neck.

"I didn't know they existed for real either," Han said. He listened, nodding, to Chewbacca for a moment. "They're parasites..."

"Which use other species as part of their reproductive cycle," Leia finished for him. She remembered that much, probably because the stories had given her nightmares as a child.

"Chewie says that if there's no males around, the females can clone themselves," Han went on. "But they still need a host to..."

"... provide food for the offspring." At least, that was the story Leia had been told.

Chewie was elaborating. "Ideally, the host will live long enough to take the young to another body of water," Han translated. "That's how they spread."

Beside Leia, Luke shuddered. "Thanks. I really needed to know that. So how did that one get into the Death Star garbage?"

Chewie shrugged expansively. Han said, "In contaminated supplies, maybe?"

Or in some unfortunate labourer, perhaps. If Tarkin had deliberately brought a parasitic aquatic monster onto his battlestation, he wouldn't keep it in the garbage masher. He'd have had it in a tank to threaten people with. A transparent tank, so he could show them exactly what they were in for.

Or maybe it usually had been on display in Tarkin's quarters. For all Leia knew, he could have it transferred to the masher as soon as he'd realised their route out of the detention block.

"So, your highnessness," Han was saying, "when you had your shower, I hope you didn't find any bumps that weren't supposed to be there." His expression wasn't exactly a leer - it was too pleasant - but Leia still found herself adjusting her robes.

"No," she said briefly. "Besides, I was higher up the pile of garbage, remember. The dianogu didn't get near me. Luke was the only one it touched."

"It must have got a tentacle- or whatever - inside the neck of the stormtrooper armour," Han mused.

"Maybe that's why it let me go," Luke suggested.

"Because it had had its wicked way with you? Maybe." Han threw the stained dressings into the disposal shoot with unnecessary vigour. "I hope it gets

squashed flat next time they compact the garbage." He turned back to Luke. "What about the joints of the armour? Could it have got through there as well?" Without giving Luke a chance to answer, he grabbed his arm and checked his elbow.

"I don't think so," Luke said, eyeing his other elbow. "It was my neck it was hanging on to. I didn't feel anything anywhere else." He ran a hand round his waist. "I don't feel anything now, either."

"Well, have a good look while you're having a shower."

"Don't worry, I will."

There being nowhere else, Leia put the datapad down beside her. The Falcon's spare cabin was little bigger than a closet and contained no furniture other than the bunk on which she was sitting. She'd been trying to make notes on what little she'd seen of the Death Star interior, anything that might help the analysts work out how to defeat it. But it was hard to concentrate...

They were still a couple of hours from Yavin. Maybe she should try to sleep.

Before she did, she wanted - not company, just reassurance that she wasn't alone. Quietly, she slid the door open and listened to the voices coming from the cockpit.

Han and Luke were talking too softly for her to catch the words, and she wouldn't have understood Chewbacca's quiet growls anyway. No matter - it was more their tones of voice that interested her.

Especially Han's.

I wonder if he really cares about anything - or anyone?

Obviously, yes. Chewbacca. His ship. Luke, although he'd doubtless deny it.

Perhaps, said that little voice in the back of her head, he might come to care about you, too.

She ignored it. What Han thought about her wasn't important. Maybe when they got to Yavin, she could make him see that the Alliance needed people like him....

The little voice spoke up again. That you need someone like him?

I don't need someone like him, she told it sternly. Not like that. What I need is to get the Death Star plans to Yavin. That's all I need Han Solo for.

The little voice was silent. Maybe she'd convinced it. Convinced herself.

Maybe.

Leia still couldn't hear what Han was saying, but he sounded.... Sounded reasonable. Concerned. Nice. Just as well that if she emerged from the cabin he'd doubtless have thought up yet another facetious title for her, because Han Solo being nice could all too easily get under her skin.

And just as well she'd hadn't emerged, because she found herself grinning inanely at that analogy. If she were to ever let Han under her skin, getting him out again would, she suspected, take much more than a quick cut with a laser scalpel.

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[Back To Index](#)