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Ghost Ships

by [Martha Wilson](#)

PART I: SECTOR 3478.29, VECTOR 01859, LEAVING THE COMMERCIAL SPACE HUB ARTASH GAMBLE

The Millennium Falcon accelerated and broke the bonds of speed and time, disappearing as if she had never existed.

Luke Skywalker helped a protesting Han Solo down the corridor and into the Corellian's cabin. "Dammit, Kid, I'm fine. Leave me alone."

"Yeah, right." Luke let him down on the bunk and said, "Stay put while I get the medipack."

Han grabbed the edge of the bunk and watched the cabin do a long slow spin. He didn't need an admonishment to stay anywhere. He undid the buckle and tiedown on his gunbelt, pulling it off and draping it over the hook attached to the upper bunk.

His pantsleg had torn open when he'd injured his knee, so he widened the hole in the fabric and examined the injured area. His knee was swollen and bruised almost black and generally looked like hell. He winced and let himself fall back on the bunk. They had been caught in the middle of a pitched battle between two rival Sith Lords, and had escaped intact if not unhurt. _It can't get much worse than that,_ Han thought. _I hope._

Out in the corridor he could hear Luke asking about Wedge. He closed his eyes a moment and when he opened them again the young Jedi was standing over him worriedly fishing through the contents of one of the Falcon's medipacks. "So how's Antilles?" Han asked.

"Not too good. He's still unconscious." Luke sat on the bunk beside him. "I'm going to put synthflesh on that burn."

Han had almost forgotten about that. He winced as Luke applied the chilly stuff to the reddened and blistered skin on his upper arm. The young Jedi was more than a little the worse for wear himself. Han asked quietly, "You okay?"

"Huh? Oh, I'm fine. I'm tired." At Han's skeptical expression, Luke said, "They didn't have time to do anything to me. They were too busy worrying about you."

Han shook his head wearily. "Wasn't me they were worrying about."

Luke let that go without comment. There were some elements of their escape that he was none too comfortable with. He finished with the synthflesh and picked up the medipack again. "I don't think Chewie remembers much of what happened. They stunned him pretty bad, and he was out most of the time we were in the cell."

Princess Leia appeared in the doorway. She was dressed in a plain brown spacer's outfit, with hair escaping her coronet of braids in handfuls. There were pronounced circles of weariness under her eyes. She looked as tired and worn as Han felt. "How is he?" she asked.

"I'm fine," Han told her.

"No, he's not," Luke disagreed.

"He's lying."

Ignoring Han, Leia asked Luke, "Isn't there anything in the medipack for muscle regeneration?"

"There's this bacta kit but the instruction module is missing."

"Damn secondhand supplies." The princess moved to look over his shoulder. "Isn't there a dosage chart?"

As Luke shook his head, Han took Leia's hand. The usually carefully tended nails had been bitten to the quick. "Nervous about something, your holiness?"

Exasperated, Leia recaptured her hand and took the kit from Luke. There was a compact diagnostic scanner, vials of various hibernating bacta colonies and hypos to apply them. She shook her head slowly. "It looks like what we need, but I've never used one before. I'd be afraid to try it without at least a dosage chart. Han?"

"Never needed it before."

"I know how to use it." Tully Sander was standing in the hatchway. She glanced briefly around the comfortably messy cabin. She had short reddish hair and was a tomboyish figure in a bulky grey astromech's coverall. Her wide-set blue eyes were hard to read. She said, "We didn't have meddroids where I lived. I trained as a med tech."

Han met Leia's worried gaze. They both knew he and Tully didn't exactly get along. Sander had all but accused him of being an Imperial collaborator. Han knew he would rather crawl into the gunwell to die in peace than play doctor with her.

The problem was that he didn't realistically expect to die anytime soon.

It was still a long trip to the fleet rendezvous point. Han knew the depleted supply of pain killers would barely be enough for Antilles, who had a blaster burn that had seared his leg to the bone. He rubbed his face tiredly and said, "Sure. Who wants to live forever."

Luke, who hadn't been around to pick up on the byplay, gave him an odd look before relinquishing his place to Sander.

As Luke and Leia left the cabin, Han thought about how much he hated feeling vulnerable. He also thought about how much he hated being touched by someone he didn't like and didn't trust.

Sander had opened the kit and was carefully examining the contents. She said, "You don't have to look at me like that. If you hadn't lost the instruction module we wouldn't have to endure each other."

I'm glad the sentiment is mutual, Han thought. "I didn't expect to have to equip a field hospital." Actually this was nothing new for the Corellian. In most of the medcenters he'd been treated in, you had to refuse all medication and have a drawn blaster on the meddroids to avoid being conscripted into an experimental laboratory or an organ bank.

She slipped the diagnostic scanner over one hand and carefully ran it over the abused tissue. Han fixed his eyes on the underside of the upper bunk and started thinking through the equations for power allotment to the hyperdrive. It was made worse by the fact that he could tell she wasn't being intentionally ungentle. When she finished he sighed a little louder than he meant to and she glanced up at him, brief sympathy in her expression. "It's all right," he told her. "I love it. I'm a masochist."

Sander selected a hypo and filled it from one of the canisters of bacta colonies. As she carefully sent a mild electric pulse through the bacta to wake them, Han noticed the Princess had stopped in the doorway again. She was frowning with concern. That reminded him of the explanations he owed her and Luke. Damn, but he didn't want to talk about it.

Deadpan, Han said to Tully, "If you make a mistake, my copilot will eat you."

Sander looked back at him, equally without expression.

One corner of Leia's mouth twitched involuntarily. She pressed her lips together and stared determinedly at the bulkhead, then turned and left the cabin.

Sander used the hypo to inject the small bacta colony directly into the damaged muscles. Han winced, but the powerful local anesthetic the bacta exuded took effect almost immediately.

Tully packed up the kit. "It'll look worse before it looks better."

"I'm not worried about how it looks."

"Oh," she stared at him guilelessly. "I thought you would be." And promptly left the cabin.

Two points for you, honey, Han thought. And he had so obligingly walked into it. _Well, I never said she was dumb, just stiff-necked._

Leia stepped back into the cabin, folded her arms and stared at him. She had gotten control over herself again, and her expression was somewhat frosty. Her caring for her friends occasionally expressed itself as anger, and right now she appeared to be very angry at Han. "That was the most dangerous thing you've ever done..."

"It wasn't, you know. I've done things much worse than that," he said, struggling into a sitting position.

"...and you almost got yourself killed..." Leia continued, ignoring the interruption.

"I almost get killed a lot, it's an occupational hazard."

"...which is hardly surprising since you have no sense of your own mortality..."

"Tell that to Luke, he's the one who got caught."

At that moment an unsuspecting Luke entered the cabin and dropped into the chair at the small desk with a tired sigh.

Leia favored him with a glare and continued, "You and Luke have no sense of your own mortality, and you take ludicrously, ridiculously dangerous risks..."

Luke started to protest, realized he was unable to argue the facts, and subsided. Han, who lived by the axiom that the best defense was a good offense, interrupted her with "But it's fine if you take stupid risks, right? What about Stagri IV, and the Camaran Fringe Zone, huh? What about that one? Everybody thought you'd had it that time, your worshipfulness. Dodonna was planning to hold your memorial service."

That got her attention. She snapped, "Well, Dodonna's an idiot," without thinking, then slowly turned what Han thought was a very attractive shade of pink.

The Corellian fought to keep from laughing, though he couldn't conceal the amused glint in his hazel eyes. Luke snorted.

Leia said, "For the sake of the Alliance, try to be more careful in the future." It sounded lame even to her own ears. She damned Han's uncanny ability to make her blurt out whatever was on her mind, despite common sense and years of diplomatic training. "I didn't come in here to argue."

Luke looked sharply at Han, but the Corellian just managed to control himself.

Leia continued, "I think Sander told you about the report she's planning to make when we reach the fleet."

"She mentioned something about it." At the time, Han had thought he was going to have to commit suicide to get Luke and Chewie out of Lord Adarin's ship, so he hadn't paid much attention to Sander. "And?"

"And when I try to explain to the other members of the high command exactly what did happen and why, it would be helpful if I knew what I was talking about."

"She has a point," Luke added. "And you did tell me you'd explain it." They weren't likely to get Han partially incapacitated and trapped in a confined space again anytime in the near future, so it was important to get the story out of him while they could.

"Yeah, I know," Han sighed. There didn't seem to be any help for it. "Remember Ord Mantell, when Boba Fett killed the courier I was sent to pick up and I was captured by him when I got to the rendezvous?"

"I dimly recall the occasion," Leia said dryly.

"Look, do you want to listen or do you want to be witty? I told you how I came to in the hold of Fett's ship. We were fighting, then Lord Arandu's ship locked on to Fett's and in the confusion I got away in an escape pod, right?"

"Yes." Leia nodded encouragingly.

"Well, that wasn't exactly true."

"Wait." The princess reached over and hit the release, closing the cabin hatch. "Go on."

"Fett was the one that got away in the confusion. When Arandu came on board, Fett jettisoned the main hull of the ship and escaped in the cockpit. I was still trapped in the main section."

"Oh." Leia said. She didn't quite know what to think.

"What happened then?" Luke said, leaning forward in his chair.

"When the cockpit separated from the rest of the ship, the tie fighter that Arandu came in was knocked loose, so he was trapped there..." Han reluctantly went through the rest of the story, explaining how Fett called them on a subspace frequency, gloating over the fact that the jettisoned section of the ship had a limited air supply and that he fully expected them to kill each other. They hadn't. In an attempt to lure the Hunter back to his ship, Arandu had put himself into a trance state so Fett's sensors wouldn't pick up his life readings. Instead of coming back himself, the Hunter had sent a string of Gank Killers in after them. During the struggle with the Ganks, Han had been wounded.

"You were shot? But you weren't hurt when you got back to base," Leia protested.

"Yeah, I know."

"Were you hurt badly?"

"I was shot in the gut with a needle beamer."

"So what happened?" Leia pressed, holding onto her patience with both hands. _It's like trying to wring water out of a rock! Why can't he just tell us?_ she thought, exasperated.

"He did...something and I... wasn't shot anymore."

"Did something..?" Leia repeated, confused.

"With the Force?" Luke asked suddenly.

"You want a diagram? Yes, with the Force."

Leia looked at Luke in astonishment. "I didn't realize that was possible."

"Neither did I," Luke said. He didn't want to think about any of this, suddenly, either. It was hard to ask the next question. "But why did he do it, Han? He didn't need your help any more."

The Corellian hesitated. He had been afraid that somebody would bring that up.

"C'mon Han, just tell us. It can't be that bad," Luke persisted.

"The Gank that shot me was aiming at Arandu. It didn't know I was there."

"And..." Leia prompted.

"And I yelled 'look out.'" Han winced.

There was a short silence. Luke shook his head. "He could've killed you."

"You yelled 'look out,'" Leia repeated slowly. _I don't think the rest of the high command is going to appreciate the humor in this situation,_ Leia thought. _I'm not even sure I appreciate the humor in this situation._ Well, she could handle the high command. "I know I'm going to regret asking this, but why did you do it?"

"I don't know." Han looked at her as if she was the daft one for asking the question. "I got caught up in the moment."

Leia shook her head in amazement. Han began to look argumentative so Luke interrupted quickly, "But I don't understand what happened after that. I know you two and Chewie went to Commenor to try to pick up that other courier, but how did you know you had to get to Artash Gamble to warn me when I was meeting Wedge and Tully?"

"Arandu told me that he was after Boba Fett because somebody in the Empire had hired Fett to lead a shocktroop attack on one of Arandu's strongholds. When we got to Commenor, we found out that our pal the Sith Lord Adarin was after me because he thought I was working for Arandu. Well, there was only one other person besides Leia and Rieekan who had any idea that I'd even been within parsecs of any Sith Lord, let alone Arandu. And that was Boba Fett."

"So Adarin hired Fett to attack Arandu," Luke said slowly.

Han nodded. "And Adarin had a Sith spy in the Commenor sector outpost, and he was the one who was paying Fett off with information on rebel sympathizers who have bounties on their heads, like me. That's how the whole thing got started."

Leia said thoughtfully, "But why did Adarin come to the Artash Gamble after Luke?"

"After me?" Luke looked startled.

"Yes, before we closed in on the Adarin spy in the sector outpost, he sent a transmission with your name and the location of your meeting with Wedge and Tully," Leia explained.

"Adarin came after me specifically?" Luke frowned. "I don't get it. Why would he do that?"

"Beats me," Han said. "But he was dumb enough to call Fett in to help him, and Arandu had already caught up with Fett."

"He must have known you had some Jedi training." Leia got to her feet. "But Adarin's dead now, so that's the end of it."

Luke looked at Han and started to say something. The Corellian gave him a look that should have made his friend fall dead onto the cabin floor.

Leia, who had been rubbing her tired eyes, missed the moment. She said, "I'm going back up to the cockpit to see if Chewie needs any help, then I'll check on Wedge. You two should get some rest."

"I think that's pretty funny coming from a woman who's been awake for the past three days," Han pointed out.

"I'll worry about that later."

When the princess was gone, Luke said, "You should have told her what Arandu said to you before we got away."

Before they had left the Artash Gamble, Arandu had said that there was little future in rebellion, and told Han that he had an offer of long-term employment for him. That moment had truly chilled the Corellian's blood, and it wasn't something he wanted to think about right now. It also wasn't something he wanted Leia to think about at all. "She has enough to worry about. And I mean it, kid, don't tell her."

"I won't, I won't. But I think you're wrong."

As his young friend left the cabin, Han thought, _I can do enough worrying for both of us, I don't need any help with it._ Not that he didn't enjoy a good fight with Leia. He and the Princess did have a certain spark to their discussions. Maybe more than a spark.

Han was a light sleeper at best and four people wandering around the small ship didn't exactly help, but he was too tired not to drift off eventually.

Several odd dreams later, Luke was shaking his shoulder. "Han, there's a problem."

When the alarms went off Princess Leia had raced to the cockpit and flung herself into the pilot's seat. A glance at the board told her the worst: one of the ship's computers had detected an imbalance in the hyperdrive motivator and was attempting to drop the Falcon out of hyperspace. Another computer was trying to override it. A look at the fuzzy readings from the sensors told her why. They were passing through the edge of an immense asteroid field. _There's too much debris,_ Leia thought. _No time to get out of the field completely._

She hit the sequence that allowed the manual overrides to engage and suddenly all the gauges were reading red. She activated the longrange sensors, looking for the fringe of the field where they could drop out of hyper without dangerously altering course. She barely noticed when Chewbacca appeared in the co-pilot's seat. The big Wookiee's paws flew over the controls, delicately flicking switches as he readied sublight systems. Leia bit her lip. The readings were inaccurate in hyper, and the gaps she could make out weren't nearly large enough to allow the ship to slow to a maneuverable speed. They could come out of hyper and impact on a chunk of rock before the sensors even had time to register the obstacle. Then Han reached over her shoulder and put his hand on the hyperdrive controls. "You're doing fine, your holiness. Give me a high sign about a tencount before the next big gap. It'll take us that long to drop out. Chewie, shields up as we come into realspace."

Leia nodded briefly, eyes on the sensors. Then she said, "Now." Han pulled the levers and a normal starfield phased into view. Sensor readings became clear as the ship slowed. Alarms clanged, protesting the dust and small rocks impacting on their deflectors. Chewbacca switched off the racket with a snarl. The gauges went to green as the sublight systems took over. Leia wiped sweat off her forehead and said "Your ship's computers are insane." She slid out of the pilot's seat so Han could take over.

"No, they just don't integrate too well, like some people I know."

"How long were you here?"

"Long enough. You were doing fine, your worshipfulness."

Despite the compliment, Leia felt irrationally irritated that Han and Chewbacca seemed to consider the ship's attempt to drop out of hyper and slam into an asteroid as a commonplace occurrence.

The Wookiee muttered worriedly and Han said, "Yeah, the damper's worse than we thought. It caused the drive to overcompensate and throw the motivators into imbalance. We're gonna have to pull the damper and adjust it."

Leia was looking over his shoulder at the navigation console. "We're close enough to the fleet to send a subspace message."

Han glanced at the screens. "Hell, if we'd managed to stay in hyper we'd have been there by now." He hesitated. Yelling for help wasn't a pleasant prospect, but it beat spending six hours pulling the alluvial damper. And at this distance, in this unpopulated system, a short, carefully directed message burst wouldn't be picked up by any unfriendlies. He decided to compromise. "Send the message, and I'll start on the damper just in case. Chewie, run a systems check before you come back to help."

Leia took the com console, and Han watched her long enough to be sure she knew how to send the transmission in one short burst that would be difficult to intercept. True to her upbringing, she hadn't forgotten to send it in code. She glanced up at him and asked a little stiffly, "How are you feeling?"

"Better." That was an understatement. The bruises were still there but the swelling had gone down and the pain was diminished to a minor discomfort. "Don't worry about me, Princess, I always land on my feet." _I wish._

Luke was doing it again.

Han accepted the tool the young Jedi was handing him, glared, and said, "Will you stop reading my mind?"

Luke stared at the tool as if he'd never seen it before. "You asked me to get that."

"I did not."

Luke shrugged irritably and went back to the technical schematics. It wasn't mindreading by any stretch of the imagination, but he did get flashes of insight, usually about unimportant things. More often than not, it tended to happen around Han and Leia. "So stop thinking so loud."

They were in the compartment next to the starboard escape pod slot. The access grill on the bulkhead was down and the Falcon's interior was exposed and dangling out onto the deckplates. Luke didn't know enough about hyperwave mechanics to be much help, but he wanted to learn as much as he could. They were silent for a few moments as Han struggled with a particularly difficult connection on the motivator. "You know," the Corellian mused, "I never did teach you how to pilot the Falcon. I should've gotten around to that."

Luke said quietly, "You are thinking of leaving."

Han glanced up at him. "Uh-huh."

"Because of what Sander's going to report when we get to the fleet? She just made a mistake. Leia already explained things to her and she'll take care of it when we get back..."

"Kid, it's not like I haven't been thinking about this for a while. I've got to get Jabba off my back, one way or another. It's not money anymore with him; he wants my ass. And I've got to take care of some other things before I can deal with him. I can't run missions for Leia with bounty hunters dropping out of the ductwork."

"You know, Leia doesn't have any other friends. You, me, Chewie, the droids, we're it. Everyone else she was really close to died on Alderaan..."

"Guilt won't work." _Why did I tell him, _ Han asked himself ruefully. With preternatural stubbornness and the persistence of a limpet, Luke would try to talk him out of it. _You'd think I wanted him to talk me out of it..._

Luke idly traced a grease stain on the deckplate, apparently lost in thought. Han figured that he was planning his attack. Finally the Jedi said, "But what are you going to do about Arandu?"

"Yeah, well, in light of recent events, it might be better if I moved around more."

"What do you think he wants from you?"

"I don't have any idea, and I'm going to dedicate the rest of my life to not finding out."

"It worries you, doesn't it?"

"It worries me, but I'm not going to hide in a corner in a foetal position because of it."

"What if something happened? I'd never find out in time. Dammit, I'd never even know."

Han gestured with a tool. "I've been out in the big bad world alone before, kid, and nobody's collected my scalp yet. Besides, once Arandu gets busy killing people for the Empire again, he'll forget about whatever plan he had that included me, all right?" That one didn't even reassure himself; Han was hardly surprised when it failed to reassure Luke.

"It's not okay. You're my friend, I care about you..."

"I care about you too. Want to get married?"

"...and people I care about don't tend to live very long." Luke hesitated. He hadn't quite meant to say that.

Han pulled his head out of the Falcon's innards and looked at Luke seriously. "What do you mean by that?"

Luke shook his head. "It's nothing. I didn't mean anything. And you're just trying to distract me from..."

Han leaned back against the wall and tossed the tool into the box. "Luke, what happened on Tatooine, and Kenobi and Darklighter, that didn't happen because of you, that happened in spite of you."

Luke nodded. "I know. I believe that."

"You do, huh? You're not very convincing about it."

Luke put on a good show of mock indignation. "Are you calling me a liar?"

"Yeah, so what are you going to do about it?"

"Tell Chewie. Anyway, that's not what we were talking about."

"What were we talking about?"

"Han..."

"All right, all right. I told you about Jabba..."

"Can't you let us help you? Or at least come back afterwards and let us know what happened..."

"I'm not sure I'd want to. Sander's made some accusations that are going to make people wonder, and I can guess that Imperial collaboration is a sensitive subject to knock around the rebel fleet."

"You're paranoid."

"Yeah, but I keep it under control with medication."

"If you leave when we get back to the Tantavie IV, you'll look guilty, no matter what Leia tells the council."

"If I was guilty I wouldn't go there at all. I'd dump the lot of you out the airlock and go my merry way. Unless I wanted to bluff it out which, I'll admit, doesn't make a lot of sense for an agent who's already been targeted. Too easy to get tripped up. But it is a possibility."

"Still, it would look better if you stayed awhile. We could use your help when the new base is finished."

Han shook his head. He'd thought this through a hundred times. Rebellion wasn't a hobby for a working Corellian smuggler who had a growing Wookiee and a starship with a frantic maintenance schedule to support. He and Chewie were continually risking everything and then some for no more than what they could scrounge from the Reb supply dumps. But with this problem with Jabba, he'd have to set up all new contacts before he could get a decent high-paying spice run again. He knew who to go to, but those things took time. And leaving now stunk of unfinished business. There was also the intriguing and thoroughly confusing problem of the Princess to consider. "All right, I'll stay until this thing blows over," he said finally, adding to himself if it does.

"Good." Luke said, and handed Han the hydrospanner he hadn't asked for yet.

INTERLUDE: IMPERIAL CENTER

"You're certain it was him?"

"Yes."

Darth Vader looked away from the transparisteel port and the panoramic view of the SD Defender, the largest of the orbital platforms of Imperial Center. "It changes nothing."

"Then you'll let the Emperor have him?" Emil Arandu let a little of his vast store of impatience creep into his tone. It was more than enough to make his point.

Vader's hands tightened on the railing, denting the corundum alloy. The catwalk the two stood on and the vast chamber of the station's receiving area below were empty, quiet except for the hiss of the ventilation system, the hum of machinery. "Never."

"Then what? That idiot Adarin wasn't terrorizing a civilian space station for the joy of it. His operative in the Alliance targeted the boy for him, and young Skywalker was a prisoner on Adarin's ship. If he hadn't escaped he would be at the Emperor's mercy this instant and you would be dead, my old friend, a discarded tool."

"What would you have me do?"

"Complete the second half of our original plan. Finish what was started twenty years ago. Kill Palpatine."

"It is not yet time. You have waited this long, you will wait a little longer."

There was a moment of silence, of decision. Then Arandu said quietly, "Twenty years ago, when we expressed our disgust over the actions of certain members of the Jedi, and the leadership that allowed us to become political pawns of the Republic, Kenobi told us to wait, to be patient, to let the problem solve itself. We grew tired of waiting."

Vader's helmet faced toward the port, and the starfield. "What are you telling me?"

"I grow tired of waiting."

PART II: SECTOR 5786.99, VECTOR 02054, THREE MONTHS LATER.

The Millennium Falcon dropped out of hyperspace into a trap.

A burst of energy impacted on the ship's starboard quad, punching a hole through the deflector and overpowering the shield generator for that quarter. Han swore and hit the emergency signal on the comm, then brought the sublight engines back online to fight the ship's uncontrolled tumble. Chewbacca was howling his distress at the top of his lungs and his big hairy hands flew over the controls as he tried to regain some control over the ship.

Han glanced at the data beginning to scroll across the sensor outputs and thought *_we're dead._* There was something big out there, and in the comp's considered opinion, it was much too close. Five rebel ships were following them out of hyper and there was no way to warn them until they were in realspace.

The rebel x-wings in their escort came out of hyper in the Falcon's wake. Their attacker fired again and two of the fighters blossomed into radiation stars on the sensor screens and disappeared. The third was caught in the edge of the blast and fell away, leaving a rapidly fading energy trail.

With no time to spare to think of who might be alive and who wasn't, Han felt the Falcon begin to respond and worked to turn their headlong plunge into a deceptive roll. The Alliance cutter dropped out of hyper, picked up the Falcon's signal and veered away on an evasive course. _Good boy, Antilles,_ Han thought. But the less maneuverable shuttle appeared on the screen and was immediately caught by a proton burst that sent it spinning out of control, tumbling after the spiraling path of the damaged x-wing.

"How the hell did they know we were here?" Han raged. The starfield wheeled by outside the canopy, and trying for a visual ID was useless. Chewbacca had started the main batteries charging after the first impact, but the attacker was so huge the Falcon's guns would be unable even to tickle it. Han didn't need to know any more. He said, "Don't drop any velocity, I'm programming another jump," and unstrapped to move back to the nav seat. He hoped Wedge Antilles was doing the same. _Hell, Luke's on that ship._

Chewbacca said that was fine for him but could Han hurry because he had plans for the next few years that didn't include being some Imp bastard's rug. "They'd more likely hang you on the wall," Han said over his shoulder, and the Wookiee put the ship through a hard port turn and dive, keeping the next two bursts from turning the Falcon into component particles.

The third burst took the Falcon in the now unprotected starboard quad.

The compensators kicked out for a second and Han was knocked out of the navseat and slammed down into the deck plates. He pushed himself up off the deck in time to see half the boards in the cockpit go dark. Chewie howled as if he'd been mortally wounded and Han pulled himself back into the pilot's seat. From the readouts that were left, he knew they were tumbling again, out of control. Comm was out, sensors were out, the engines shutting down from overload. _Blind, deaf, and helpless,_ Han thought. _This is not the way I wanted to go._

"Go back to auxiliary systems, try to get us some power for the main weapons." His partner looked down at him. Han said, "Don't say goodbye, Gruesome, we're not dead yet."

Chewbacca tore himself out of his seat and went aft, and Han broke open the tool locker and started ripping up panels, trying to patch power into dead systems. When he bothered to look up star orientation told him their tumble was

slowing, but that only meant less trouble locking a tractor on to the defenseless freighter.

Han stood to reach the heads-up panel and another concussion threw him sideways and into the comm console. He struggled to get to his feet, ignoring the pain of bruised ribs. Through the canopy the starfield was deceptively stationary. Their tractor had the Falcon, and now he could see them.

Feeling like a small furry animal trapped in the headlights of an oncoming ground transport, the Corellian saw the long, long triangular shadow out there, light from the system primary picking out the distinctive flattened plane, the aft control castle... It was a Star Destroyer. There had been a small rebel outpost in this system. _Not anymore,_ he thought.

Then Han realized he couldn't hear Chewie banging around in the hold anymore and turned. The cockpit hatch had sealed itself.

Oh, no. Not Chewie. Not like this. He kept working, fed power from what was left of the sensors into the internal systems monitor.

The rest of the ship still had atmosphere, and lifesupport was still functioning, but pressure had dropped 25%, triggering the hatch-seal. The Falcon's outer skin must have been breached and, because Luck was ignoring them today, ruptured one of the air system's conduits. But pressure had stabilized at the lower level, meaning the self-sealing air system Han had paid a fortune for and spent days planetside installing was paying him back for his trouble in triplicate.

It meant his partner was still alive back there.

He set the hatch back to manual and forced it open, his ears popping as the cockpit pressure equalized. The companionway was choked with smoke, lights fluctuating to half-strength, and circuits sparking in the wiring overhead. He was too worried about Chewbacca to care what they'd done to his ship; that would come later, if he had a later.

The bulkhead doors around the central core had dropped as well and Han lost more time forcing the one at the end of the companionway.

He found Chewie slumped over the engineering station in the repair bay. The Wookiee was alive but unconscious, and there was blood matting the hair around his ears. Wookiees were more sensitive to pressure changes than most species and the drop had been abrupt.

Han snagged a breather off the nearby rack and got it on his copilot. He didn't remember he needed one too until the constriction in his chest started to bother

him. He eased the Wookiee back in the chair and lifted his eyelids. The pupils were dilating, but he didn't show any sign of returning consciousness.

The ship shuddered one more time, and Han felt a low-frequency vibration travel through the hull. They were being pulled into the Destroyer's hanger.

Han looked down at the engineering station. The patchboards for the hyperdrive were dark; the larger ship had a damper on the Falcon's main systems to drain power, so he couldn't fire the drive inside the Destroyer's bay. Likewise the quad guns and the light cannon.

Standing there listening, Han realized he had one hand knotted in the long fur on Chewie's shoulder. He let go and smoothed it down. The Wookiee rumbled deep in his chest without waking.

It was too bad. This wasn't the way Chewbacca would've wanted to go. _I'll have to pay the life debts for both of us._

He left Chewie there, and went to open one of the storage lockers. If he'd had a proton grenade he could have dropped it into the power core, but at least there was a bandolier of concussion grenades to make things uncomfortable for the unwelcome guests he was about to have. He slung it over his shoulder, and put a fresh energy pack in the Kell Mark III blast rifle.

Han forced the bulkhead into the empty hold and let it seal behind him, then cut the lights so the only illumination came from the emergency strips overhead. Then he opened the hatch in the opposite wall and jammed the controls so he'd have a clear view of the entry ramp.

He could hear them opening the main hatch. It sounded like they were using a code breaker to unlock it, instead of simply blasting it open. He wondered why, but the answer didn't immediately come to mind.

Leaning in the open cargo hatch Han pulled the first concussion grenade off the bandolier. He heard the outer door slide open and the lock cycle, and the smell of another ship's air mix drifted down the entryway. He armed the grenade for 10 seconds.

At 6 seconds the first helmet peeked around the corner. Han tossed the grenade and ducked back into the hold.

The boom was muffled; the concussive explosives were meant for close quarters, boarding actions and structure fighting. It wouldn't damage the bulkheads but it would play hell with people, even armored people. What worried Han most was the helmet he'd caught a glimpse of. It had unpleasantly resembled a shocktrooper's hat instead of the stormtrooper's he'd expected.

Shocktroops weren't standard equipment, even on Star Destroyers; they were special units. Then Han shook his head, irritably dismissing the question. _We'll be just as dead._ He armed the second grenade for 5 seconds and tossed it without silhouetting himself in the hatch.

After it blew, energy bolts splashed against the far wall of the bay. The Corellian winced. The carbon scoring would never come off.

He armed the third grenade for 3 seconds and tossed it. The energy bolts resumed right after the blast. _Damn, but there's a lot of them._

The first trooper came in with a dive and roll. It was a shocktrooper. Han fired two short bursts knocking the shocker back into the bulkhead he'd been decorating with blast scars, then armed and tossed the fourth grenade.

It didn't go off. By the time he realized it he was already moving back, but two more shockers were through the hatch and more behind them. Han braced the blast rifle against his hip and kept firing, waiting for the bolt that would cut him in half. Two of them dropped, another one, then something flashed besides blaster fire in the dark hold.

Then Han was sprawled on his back on the deck plates, staring at the arch of the cargo bay's ceiling, tasting blood.

A shocker with sergeant's color tabs on the breastplate of his armor leaned over him. Han had lost the breath mask and his blastrifle was gone; he tried to draw his pistol and his arm only twitched. The shocker jerked the bandolier off his shoulder and tossed it aside, then unsnapped the buckle of his gunbelt and dragged it off.

Two more shockers yanked him to his feet and shoved him face first into the bulkhead. Another one pressed the nozzle of a blast rifle against his temple and they started to search him. The Corellian gritted his teeth and opted not to express his resentment of this process.

His ears were still ringing but the shock was wearing off. The sergeant said, "Put your hands behind your head and turn around."

He did. They led him out of the hold, past more dead shockers, and down the ramp. Outside was the big metal cavern of a Victory- Class Ship-of-the-Line's hangar. There were small ship bays on all three levels, and six shuttles in docking clamps and a full squad of TIEs in launching racks overhead. The Falcon was in a docking clamp suspended above the magnetic field-sealed port, her ramp stretching down to touch the deck. The damaged x-wing hung in another clamp. It was missing two engines and the starboard side was burned black with the force of the blast that had destroyed its two wingmates. The pilot lay

crumpled and unmoving on the deck, face still obscured by his helmet, one side of his flightsuit singed.

They took Han to about the center of the hanger, under the windows of the gantry office above. The sergeant, who was apparently the only one who knew how to talk, said, "Stop here."

Han stopped. Then the sergeant said, "On your knees."

Han decided to pass on that one. The shocker on his left was standing a little too close. Han tackled him and grabbed his rifle, swinging him around so he was blocking the others' fire field. The two struggled for the gun but Han realized almost immediately he wasn't going to win. The shocker armor was power-augmented and Han wasn't nearly as healthy as he used to be. The others were moving to get behind him, and he shoved the nozzle of the rifle up under the struggling shocker's helmet and triggered it. It made a terrible mess.

He didn't have a chance to shoot anyone else. The stock of a blast rifle between his shoulder blades knocked him flat, and one of them kicked him solidly in the ribs when he rolled over. Han looked up to see a shocker bringing a blastrifle to bear on him. Then the man staggered, hit by a narrow energy bolt that glanced harmlessly off his armor. Someone was yelling "Stun only, stun only!" and there was the characteristic whine of a stunner blast. The sergeant knocked the homicidal shocker's blastrifle up, snarling, "Not yet, you idiot."

Han looked around to see who had temporarily saved his life.

The x-wing pilot was laying stunned on the deck, a palmgun near her outstretched right hand. She had pulled her helmet off and it rolled free next to her. It was Tully Sander. The shockers had missed the tiny gun, if they had bothered to search her at all. They must have thought her almost dead, but her tough flight suit had protected her from energy burns.

Han ended up on his knees, hands behind his head, surrounded by ten shockers standing off about four meters and pointing rifles at him.

This is not going to be pretty, Han thought. Shocktroops were notorious for amusing themselves with prisoners and then dumping the remnants out the nearest airlock, still twitching or not. _You knew this was going to happen eventually, Solo, you knew it was only a matter of time._

The sergeant moved off and spoke into his comlink.

Eight troopers came down the ramp awkwardly carrying Chewbacca between them. They carried him into the bay and dumped him on the deck. Han winced when his head hit. Wookiees had thick knobby skulls that were not readily

susceptible to injury, but he still didn't know how badly the pressure drop had hurt his co-pilot. The Wookiee lay in a big furry heap.

The sergeant moved back with the other shockers. It looked like they were going to wait. Sweat and the last dead shocker's blood was sticking the front of Han's shirt to his chest and he was starting to feel the effects of minor oxygen deprivation and being slammed into various bulkheads, decks, and consoles with pointy corners.

From here he could see what they had done to the Falcon. The starboard quarter had a dark raw blast scar that stretched almost but not quite to the lip of the drive. He could smell the scorched metal. Looking at the damage made him feel violated, but not as violated as he was going to feel when the shocktroopers got around to doing whatever it was they did to helpless Corellian ex-pirates.

"Are we waiting for anything in particular?" He asked the shockers.

The sergeant answered, "For someone who's anxious to see you," and laughed.

Very amusing, Han thought. _Well, the party's over. Now Captain Han Solo and Chewbacca are history and who do I have to blame but myself._ At least there wasn't an Alliance Cutter stored in any of the shuttle bays. Not yet.

The elevator from the gantry started to drop to the bay level. The officer turned toward it and a couple of the other shockers actually shifted restlessly, as if they were nervous about the new arrival. The techs who had been working on the shuttles, or around the fringes of the bay, scattered to various exits. Han began to have a very bad feeling about what was about to happen.

The elevator door opened and Emil Arandu stepped out.

Han muttered, "Oh, shit."

The shocker sergeant looked down at him, surprised. Now Han knew why they had taken him alive, and kept him alive, despite his deliberate provocation, despite Sander's valiant attempt to blow one of them away with a palmgun. A Sith Lord's implied "or else" beat being shot by a Corellian smuggler any day.

Arandu crossed the bay toward them. He was tall and strongly- built, but looked older than Han remembered him. The shockers moved out of the way as he came closer. He looked down at Han, and the Corellian looked up at him, and he said, "What are you doing with yourself these days, Han?"

"Oh, nothing much," the Corellian lied. "Really, Emil, if you wanted to talk to me, couldn't you have just put in a comm call?"

Arandu chuckled. The shockers backed off another meter or so, because seeing a Sith Lord in a good mood was like witnessing some bizarre and frightening natural disaster, like a sun going nova or a massive planetquake that made rivers run backwards. He said, "I'm only partially responsible for your being here. These aren't my shocktroops."

Han remembered Arandu had reasons not to like shocktroopers. The Sith Lord paced around behind him, and he didn't try to turn to watch him. It would have been a tactical error in the game of wills they were about to have. Arandu said, "I've watched the security tapes that were transmitted off the Death Star before it was destroyed. Why do you persist in behaving as if you're not very bright?"

Han decided he meant the episode in the corridor with the stormtroopers. He looked up at the bay ceiling and said, "Gee, I don't know." Han had never personally met an Imperial Officer who could tell his asshole from the Great Mishtaran Crater, though he understood there were a few. He knew it was because they drew their officer core from an extremely limited mainstream human gene pool in the systems near the Capitol World, which were practically joined at the hip with Imperial Center. Entrance into the officer core was obtained by political pull, not merit, and officers with command know-how but not political savvy died quickly, and no one came up through the ranks anymore. That was why you saw no nonhuman officers, and the rest all seemed to look alike compared to the wide variance in pigmentation, size, shape, and secondary characteristics of a normal mainstream human population in the well-travelled systems like Commenor or Sullust. This was one of the reasons Arandu scared the hell out of him, aside from the obvious. He was extremely intelligent, and Han suspected the Sith Lord could easily out think him.

Arandu said, "The offer I made you on the Artash Gamble is still open."

"My answer is still the same, so we can just move on to the part where one of these protozoa-brained shockers shoots me and dumps me out the airlock."

The shocker sergeant was staring at the Corellian and though his expression was anybody's guess, Han had the feeling he was doing a serious reevaluation of the situation and wondering if he had made a mistake in roughing his prisoner up. Han hoped the shocker was sweating it as much as he was.

"That isn't one of the options. And I really don't see what your objection is, Han. You've been under my protection before," Arandu said. His voice was patient and amused.

Han's arms were getting tired. "No, I have not, Emil."

Arandu moved back to where Han could see him. "Yes, you have."

"You sent me in to Adarin to keep him and Barris occupied, so they'd be too busy to pay attention to you."

"If I had done that, you would be dead."

"Well I'm not dead, for the moment, and that is what happened."

The shocktroop officer touched his comlink receiver, then cleared his throat and said, "M'lord, the Lord Tion requests your presence on the bridge."

Arandu ignored him so completely the shocker was probably left in doubt of his own existence. The Sith Lord said, "Why did you do it then? Did you become too caught up in your favorite role of ignorant spacer?"

"You know damn well why I did it." Then Han remembered why he had done it. Because Lord Adarin had taken Luke and Chewbacca prisoner, and Han had had to get them away and get them away right then, because Luke was a Jedi and there was no telling what they would do to him, and Chewie was a Wookiee with a temper and he could very well imagine what they would have done to him. _And there's Chewie lying over there now, alive and unconscious and maybe badly hurt._ Here with his partner at a Sith Lord's mercy again, he had as little choice now as he'd had on the Gamble. He said, "Why don't you just threaten him outright, why do you have to dance around it?"

"Because that is not the tone I want to set for this relationship."

"We're not going to have a relationship, Emil." But Han couldn't take his eyes off that heap of fur.

The shock officer cleared his throat again, and said, "M'lord, Lord Tion is again requesting..."

Arandu held up one hand and the sergeant moved hastily back. Arandu said, "He's not dying. He's in shock, apparently caused by temporary low oxygen content in the bloodstream. A restorative hypo would bring him out of it in moments." He paused, "Many lifeforms are not suited for space travel."

"He doesn't understand that," Han whispered. He didn't bother to ask how the Sith Lord could tell all this without going near Chewie. It had been brought home to him in a very personal way that Arandu was a better diagnostician than any meddroid.

"There's something else."

Han looked up at him. "You're kidding."

"I am technically not in command of this task force. Lord Tion is on his way here now, and unless you accept my protection, I won't be responsible for what happens."

"Oh, won't you?"

He ignored that. "Really, Han, it won't be pleasant. Once it becomes known who you are, you and the Wookiee will be questioned as rebel agents, by Tion, who badly needs the prestige your capture and the information you have will bring him. The rebel shuttle that was damaged in the attack has been picked up by my ship Imperator. That gives me some control over the fate of the crew. I will have to comply with Tion's wishes and transfer them onboard this ship, but I can prevent him from questioning them, and the young woman over there. If you cooperate."

Han had heard of Tion. Another Sith Lord, he thought. That's all I need. And Tion's reputation was far worse than Arandu's. "What kind of deal are we talking about here?"

"A medtech's services for the Wookiee, and he can leave now, in your ship. I can see the drives are still functional, and I assume he could effect repairs."

"Yes, he could." Damn, that's more than I was expecting. He looked over at his partner again. There was the hull breach, but Han knew it was only the outer skin, or they would have lost all the air. Chewbacca could use the auxiliary control until he got power back to the cockpit and then limp out of the system, and back to the rebel fleet for free repairs. Which is the least they can do, considering what's about to happen to me, Han thought. "What about the others, the shuttle's crew and the fighter pilot?"

"They will have to be discussed later. In the meantime, I will agree to shield them from Tion."

Later. When I'm even more desperate than I am right now. He saw Sander was conscious again, and she had sat up on one elbow to watch them. It was worth a try. The fewer hostages Arandu had the better. "Let her go with him. You don't need her if you've got the crew of the shuttle."

"No, not her. Anyone who will attempt to attack a shocktrooper armed with only a palmgun is worth further study."

Ah, hell. Too bad he couldn't see Sander's reaction to that from here. "How do I know my co-pilot doesn't get blown up as soon as the ship clears the magnetic field?"

"Details. I'll guarantee his safety out of this ship's reach." The elevator had started down from the gantry again. Arandu said, "The decision has to be made now, Han."

The words stuck in his throat for a second. "All right," he said finally.

"You accept my protection. Say it, Han."

"Okay, okay, why do you have to be so damn particular? I accept your protection."

Arandu turned back to the shocktroop officer and said, "You're dismissed." The shockers withdrew back to the bay wall.

Han stood up slowly, and stumbled over to Chewie. The shockers still guarding the Wookiee didn't try to stop him. Chewbacca was breathing hoarsely, and whining a little to himself in his sleep. Han sat down beside him and pulled his head into his lap, and looked for fresh blood around his ears. There wasn't any. Maybe he would be all right. With nothing else to do for him, Han started working the mats out of his mane, trying not to think about anything in particular.

The elevator door opened and the man who stepped out wore an Imperial High Admiral's dress uniform. That had unpleasant associations: Lord Adarin had worn an Admiral's uniform, but on him it had been an affectation. Tion actually did command the home sector fleet. He was a heavy worlder, big enough to be just this side of mainstream human, the bones of his face thick and prominent. There was an aura about him of barely contained physical power, as if he were perpetually on the edge of an explosion. He crossed the bay and bore down on Arandu. For a moment Han didn't think he would stop. "I will not tolerate any more of your interference," Tion shouted at the other Sith Lord. "What right do you have to take my prisoners?"

"What sort of right?" Arandu asked. "Philosophic, moral, legal, or political?"

Tion stopped for a moment as if nonplussed, probably as much by the question as by his total failure to intimidate the older man. He said harshly, "This is not a debate. I command here. Rebel prisoners are my province."

"You command here. I have never disputed that. But you must allow me control over my operations that are already in progress, if this arrangement is meant to work. Is this arrangement meant to work?"

Ignoring the question, Tion said, "You're claiming this ship is part of one of your intelligence operations?"

"Claiming?' Are you suggesting I might be lying to you?"

Tion snorted. Apparently he knew better than to go down that route. "No games, Emil. Who is he?" Tion's hard gaze went to Han, who felt a rush of useless fight/flight reflex adrenaline. The look in Tion's eyes should have been able to peel flesh from bone.

"No one of importance to you."

Han watched Tion's rage build. Finally the Sith Lord snarled, "Keep your pet Corellian then, for all the good that will do you in the end," he stepped closer to Arandu. "Where were you all that time, Emil? Where did you go that the rest of us couldn't follow? The Emperor wanted you dead, and now you're back and you're the Dark Lord's favorite again. What did you do?"

__And where's Lord Adarin, he might well ask,__ Han thought. He wondered what answer Arandu would give to that question.

Imperturbable, Arandu said, "There was something I had to find."

Tion shook his head, battling frustration and rage. Arandu watched him. After a moment, Tion said "The reason I called you to the bridge was a message just received from Imperial Center. Three ships did not arrive at the Bestine system as ordered. They are not responding to comm, and there has been no sighting of them for the past six timeparts."

"And?"

Tion's eyes narrowed. "They had one astonishing thing in common. Each was under the direction of a former apprentice of yours. Lady Karadon, and the Lords Tlingit and Haida."

Arandu smiled down at the deck. "You suspect some sort of connection?"

"Only that they were your students in the Dark Side, and obviously you imparted your own brand of lunacy to them."

"Obviously. Then they will return when they're ready, with or without a plausible story." He looked up. "As I did."

"Do you ever wonder if you have outlived your usefulness to the Emperor?"

"I outlived my usefulness to the Emperor twenty years ago."

Tion had been thinking out his next move, and now he said, "I was preparing to make a hyperwave transmission to the Dark Lord. Should I tell him of your latest impediment to the progress of this mission?"

"You and I both know what this 'mission' is."

Tion went absolutely still. Stiffly, as if the words were being forced out of him against his will, he said, "If the New Order is to succeed, the Emperor must be served. Political necessity..."

"Please, as a last request, don't quote rhetoric written by some propaganda officer at me. The Emperor wouldn't know a political necessity if one bit him on a tender portion of his anatomy. His only motive is overwhelming greed."

Another long moment of silence. Whatever Tion had expected from this confrontation, it hadn't been this. _And while it's fascinating to watch history in the making here,_ Han thought, _it's not like I'm going to live to tell anybody about it._

Then Tion said in a low growl, "You've brought this on yourself."

"I certainly can't argue with that."

Tion stood there, his blunt features impossible to read, but Han knew what he was thinking. What could you possibly do with someone who thought it was funny when you bullied him, agreed with all your arguments but still wouldn't give in, and who kept inviting you to attack only to expose your own weaknesses? Especially if you were Tion and had no sense of humor.

Tion couldn't do a damn thing. "I won't listen to your treason." He turned and stalked back to the elevator.

Arandu called after him, "Then whose treason will you listen to?" As soon as the elevator doors shut, he said, "Now, that was enlightening."

Han looked down at Chewie. A few minutes ago he would've said the situation couldn't possibly get worse, but now it appeared that it had. One of Lando Calrissian's only valuable pieces of advice was that you could run a game on anybody. (Han didn't know this at the time but later, after Bespin, Lando would add the qualification "almost anybody.") The idea was to be waiting for your mark every time he turned around, but never to corner him, because a cornered mark could kill you.

Every time Tion had turned around, Arandu had been waiting for him.

Arandu looked back at Han and said, "I hope you're not going to let your sense of injustice get the better of you," then started for the returning elevator.

Han didn't think that needed an answer. The shockers guarding Sander had backed off as well, and she took the opportunity to stand and make her way over

to Han. She was a little unsteady, and sat down a few feet away. Han asked her, "How much did you hear?"

"Most of it. I didn't understand it. He's going to let your co-pilot go in exchange for your cooperation, but in what?"

Han shrugged, not wanting to discuss it with her.

Tully sat quietly for a moment, hugging herself. "They got the shuttle, I saw that," she said suddenly. "Did the Cutter get away, do you think?"

"So far."

The medtech arrived then, crossed the bay and kneeled down next to the two smugglers, pulling a hypo out of his Imp-issue medipack. Han slapped it out of his hand. The medic flinched back, startled, and Han said, "Give yourself that hypo, let me watch you fill another one, and then hand it to me."

After a second the nervous medic nodded, rolled his sleeve up, and gave himself the hypo without any apparent reluctance.

Sander said, "Well, I'm glad to know you're like that with everyone."

Surprised, Han almost smiled at her.

The medic filled the second hypo and handed it to Han, then retreated a few meters back. Han combed hair out of the way until he found a patch of dark brown skin on Chewie's arm, and gave him the hypo.

The Wookiee stopped whining and made an urf noise. A minute later his hand came up and grabbed the back of Han's head. "Ow, it's me," the Corellian said.

Chewie opened his eyes, woofed happily to see Han, then took a look at where they were. "Ooh."

"'Ooh' is right," Han told him. His eyes were watering. _Probably because Chewie smells so damn bad,_ he thought. "Listen to me. They're going to let you go with the Falcon, but the rest of us have to stay here..."

The Wookiee howled a protest that started Han's ears ringing again. He grabbed a double handful of his co-pilot's beard and said, "Listen to me. This is it. You're leaving, I'm staying here." The Wookiee let go another howl and Han could've punched him. This was hard enough as it was. The Corellian pulled on Chewbacca's beard until he got his attention again. "Shut up and don't scream when I'm trying to talk to you. That's an order."

Chewbacca told him where he could put his orders, a procedure he would be happy to assist with as soon as he could stand up, then he wanted to know why Han was talking like this. It was a reasonable question.

Han said, "First, it's the only deal I could work, Chewie, and it's just not going to get any better. Not now. Second," he thought for something Chewbacca would accept, that he couldn't argue with. "It's a life debt."

Chewbacca shook his head, moaning.

"Yes, listen to me. I used it to buy you and the Falcon out of here, and to keep them from using mindprobes on us to find out what we know about you-know-what." _At least for the moment,_ Han thought. Speculating about what would happen to them if the balance of power shifted abruptly was useless.

"Uuh?"

"The Rebellion, you dumb ape." Han shook him again, he was so mad. Chewbacca stood up suddenly (Wookiees might have been unfit for space travel by human medical standards but they recovered from injuries rather quickly) dragging Han with him and shook him until his teeth rattled, then wrapped him in a hug that almost smothered him. Han pounded on his shoulder until the Wookiee let him go and Han shoved him away, with the result that Chewie stayed where he was and the Corellian staggered back a couple of steps. Han wondered if the watching shockers were finding all this highly entertaining. He said, "You know we have obligations."

Chewie was finally thinking, Han could see that. In one timepart Leia's transport would be arriving here, in what the Alliance assumed was a safe system, unless someone warned them. The Cutter might have escaped by now, but they couldn't take that chance. Chewie didn't give a damn about many humans, but he had moved Leia Organa from his list of people he tolerated to the list of people he was personally responsible for, and he would consider warning her a sacred trust. It might just save both their lives. Han said, "There's a hull breach, but she's not leaking anymore. And the Falcon's yours now." He couldn't remember if he'd told him that yet or not.

The Wookiee wailed as if Han had dropped dead at his feet.

"Tell Luke..." Han stopped. _Hell._ "Tell Leia... No, don't tell them anything."

The shocktroopers had disappeared, and been replaced by guards wearing the black fatigues of Imp regulars, but unlike the techs who had been working in the hangar bay they all wore sidearms, and five of them had lightsabres.

One of them came toward the rebels now, stopped at Chewie's warning snarl, and said, "It's clear. He can take the ship out and they won't fire."

Chewie made another interrogative sound and Han said, "No, no more questions. It's a life debt. I'm dead, you're alive, and you have a ship to patch up."

Chewbacca moved uneasily toward the Falcon's ramp. The big Wookiee looked back one last time, and Han shook his head at him. _No, it's over, go on._

Chewbacca went up the ramp and the hatch closed behind him. In a few moments the ramp retracted, and the docking clamp dropped the Falcon. Han watched in relief as she slid through the magnetic field and out the port, saw her tip down and her subs come to life, then she was gone.

Sander had crept up to stand next to him. Hesitantly, she said, "Can we do anything?"

She had been awfully quick to whip that palmgun out before the shockers could stop her. Han decided he could have done worse in the way of company. "Get killed."

"Well, I'm sure I'll regret it later, but I'd like to put that off for the moment." She was shivering.

"You're going to have to trust me."

"Okay."

"As if you have a choice."

"Exactly."

He glanced down at her and decided she could do with a little irritation to take her mind off her fear. "Don't worry. I always make it a policy to leave with the same woman I came in with."

That earned him the more familiar expression of disgust, this time mixed with irony instead of mistrust. "Too bad I don't prefer men."

Suddenly there was blaster fire up in the gantry office, one shot that sounded as if it had impacted on a bulkhead. _Can't hear the sabres at this distance,_ Han thought. That was interesting. Sander had flinched, and he explained, "Arandu's Sith are killing the shocktroopers who were down here, so Tion can't question them about anything they might have overheard."

"Oh," Sander said. "Oh damn. I just realized... The other x- wings... Cherne and Evan are dead."

They were taken up in the elevator out of the hangar area, guarded by five of Arandu's men, including one of the ones armed with a lightsabre. Han felt the elevator shift into a horizontal passage, moving back to the Destroyer's aft control castle, and thought about the difficulties inherent in being a prisoner on a ship with a crew of over two thousand. It made him feel claustrophobic.

The elevator opened onto one of the decks of what an informed guess told Han was Systems Control.

The guards split up, one of them starting to lead Sander away. Han caught her arm and pulled her back to him, and the startled guard let go of her. "Sorry guys, she's with me."

The Sith glanced around the deck irritably, trying to note who was watching them, who was close enough to overhear. He said, "We have our orders."

"That sounds like your problem."

"Look." The Sith took a step closer. Han eased Sander behind him but the Sith only said, "He wants to talk to you alone."

Han tried to estimate how much trouble he could make at this point, but Sander said, "No, it's all right. I'll go."

He looked down at her. Her eyes said that it was anything but all right, but she was doing a good job of faking a demeanor of calm determination. He didn't want to give them the bright idea of using her to force him into anything, but he didn't want her handed over to Tion to keep the other Sith Lord from pushing too hard either.

He let her go, and she walked away with the guards, managing not to look back.

The others led Han through Systems Control. The techs were staring at him, but they probably didn't get to see bloody and disheveled Corellians wandering around the control deck every day. Han knew engineering would be directly below and to stern, with Detention in between, and the bridge straight up several more levels.

He was led back to the circular platform of a command center above and partially walled off from the rest of the deck. Through the arch out the back he could see the rest of systems control, four tiers of decks leading down. There was an aft observation port in the far bulkhead, small in that it was only ten meters across. There were more of what he assumed were Arandu's people working in the

command center, more Imperials dressed like techs who just happened to be packing lightsabres. The Alliance had discovered that some of the routine physical and intelligence testing now performed at the Academy were actually tests for Force sensitivity. If you tested positive, you disappeared, sometimes permanently, sometimes to reappear with a lightsabre, as part of a Sith Lord's retinue.

On another elevated platform was a holotank displaying a sensor-generated view of the system along the ecliptic plane superimposed with the ship's current status reports. Around it were banks of unattended consoles, locked and dark, ready for the transfer of primary control if the bridge systems went down.

Arandu was pacing around the holotank, and looking at the chrono-readout that was floating above it. He muttered, "What are they waiting for?"

Han had heard the engine build-up but it was so muted from here he didn't immediately realize what it was. Then the observation port dimmed to shield the crew from the flare of the drive, and when it lightened again the stars were strobing with hyperspace. The Destroyer's internal gravity and compensators were so strong Han hadn't felt anything. He sat down in one of the chairs at the locked consoles. The adrenaline that had been keeping him functioning since the attack was beginning to dissipate.

"Your little Jedi friend uses the name Skywalker, doesn't he?"

Han didn't look away from the port. The jump had startled him. _Maybe I was cherishing the idea that when Gruesome caught up with the kid, they would come up with some crazy-but-brilliant plan to get us out of here._ Now the Destroyer was heading out of the system at .3 light, and rescue was impossible.

"I recognized him on the Artash Gamble," Arandu was saying. "He has his father's nose."

The fact that Luke's father had been a Jedi Knight was no secret, as far as Han knew, but he was unwilling to give away anything. Ignoring the implicit question, he said, "You put yourself out to get me here, Emil. Why?"

"In a moment. We're about to have a visitor."

If it's Tion again, Han thought, _I'd like to be excused._ But it was an Imperial General coming up the steps to the Command Center. He was young for the uniform, but he had the cold lizard eyes seen so often on the most successful Imperial Officers. A survivor in a snake pit. Han noted he was wearing an energy pistol in a side holster. The General stopped with an expression of disgust when he saw the Corellian. "What is he doing here?"

"He's sulking," Arandu answered. To Han he said, "This is General Tagge. You remember his brother the Governor, one of Lord Adarin's more fortunate victims."

"Oh, yeah," Han said. Tagge was reining his temper, but the strain was beginning to show in the reddening skin above his uniform collar.

"Did Tion open the sealed orders?" Arandu asked the general.

"Of course." Tagge smiled, and there was a malicious edge to it. "When we rendezvous with the Resolution, I'm to transfer my troops and proceed to Botha." He added, "I came to convey my condolences on your imminent demise."

"How very kind. Is that all?" Without looking up, Arandu said, "And if you're going to wear a sidearm up here, please keep to the other side of the platform."

Han slumped back in his chair, angry that he could be read so easily. Now that the adrenaline was wearing off he was starting to hurt, and he probably couldn't have taken the general's gun anyway. He was also hardly competent to go after Arandu in his present condition and who else was he going to shoot? Himself?

Tagge moved to the other end of the platform, eyeing the Corellian speculatively. Han looked back, not giving him any help. Tagge wanted to know why he was here almost as bad as he did. Han filed that away for future consideration. Tagge said, "Our escort of cruisers has remained behind to search for more rebels, a search complicated by your refusal to allow any of the prisoners to be questioned. Lord Tion is most disappointed."

"Lord Tion will have to learn to live with disappointment. Especially if he continues to support you in your schemes."

Tagge forgot about Han and leaned forward on the rail of the holotank, almost snarling. "But I stand on firm ground. You've pushed the Emperor too far this time. You know those orders are under Darth Vader's personal seal. Can't you guess what else they contain?"

"My death warrant, of course," Arandu looked up, holding Tagge's eyes. "If you think that comes as a surprise to me then you are even more ignorant of the situation than I assumed."

Tagge straightened up slowly, as if he were straining to get his self-control back. Han thought he was a good actor. "Very well. You know. At least send the boy Erin with me to the Resolution. He belongs with his mother's family."

"I have no intention of sending Erin anywhere. Now that he is past adolescence, I find I am almost able to tolerate him." Arandu sat down in the officer's hotseat next to the holotank.

Han had noticed one of the Sith below look up when Tagge said the name "Erin." He was a few years younger than Luke, and by far the youngest in the group below. The resemblance to Tagge was there in his eyes and the structure of his features. Watching the general the young Sith unconsciously touched the hilt of his lightsabre.

"If you keep him with you," Tagge insisted, "He'll be killed with all the others. I have influence. I can protect him."

He could protect him. Yeah, right, Han thought. And Tagge hadn't even recognized his beloved nephew or cousin, whatever the relationship was, standing in the crew pit below and looking up at him with contempt.

"Out of your intense familial affection, of course," Arandu said, "And the fact that as my heir he would bring to the Tagge name over a million credits in property, corporate holdings, and share portfolios within the Empire alone is totally irrelevant."

No Imperial taxes on that, Han thought. Bored with the Tagge family floor show, he looked back at the viewport. At .3 light how far had they gone, just in these few minutes? How long would the ion trail that could show their heading last? Han could do the equations in his head, but he decided he didn't really want to know.

"But you would find Erin a poor tool, Tagge. I haven't kept him with me for five years simply because I enjoy his company. He's not as biddable as you remember."

Han believed that. If the boy wasn't a complete sociopath by now he had nerves as strong as corundum alloy.

Tagge sneered, "Very well. I hope your sorcery helps you, Arandu. Nothing else will." He turned and went down the steps of the command center.

After a moment, Han said, "This 'don't mind me, I'm only marking time till I fall over dead' act of yours is really something. Just the right touch of pathos. I think he believed you."

Arandu turned his chair around to face him. "I rather enjoyed it myself. Tagge is very good at this, but he has a tendency to perceive what he wants most to believe. It's the one flaw in his thinking. But it makes him ideal to carry the news back to the Emperor that I was honorably and stubbornly set on playing the game to the end, just as if all the other players weren't petty, scheming cowards."

In the hangar bay, Han had formed the theory that the two Sith Lords, a volatile combination at any time, had been put on this ship together to give Tion a chance to kill Arandu. That Arandu apparently knew this and was not overly disturbed by it worried Tion. _As well it might,_ Han thought now.

He considered asking again just why the hell he was here watching Arandu bait Imperial Generals instead of down in Detention having horrible things done to him. _Is he really not going to let them question the shuttle's crew? Hell, if they even do ID searches on them, this whole deal could be finished right here, regardless of why he wants me alive._ "Where's the crew of the shuttle?"

"They were brought aboard before we went hyper and are being held in Detention."

"I want to see them."

"Do you doubt my word?"

Oops, Han thought. "No. I doubt my ability to read your intentions and anticipate your next move. So I have to do things the hard way."

Arandu considered that a moment, then said, "It isn't possible to see them now. I don't want Tion's attention drawn to them."

Got over that difficult minute fairly well. Han decided not to push his luck any further in that direction. "Does that have anything to do with the sealed orders?"

"No. I'm the one who sealed the orders."

"I thought he said they were under Vader's personal seal."

"Of course. Tion would hardly accept orders under my seal."

Han suddenly had a headache. He wondered if Arandu's gray eyes were just a little more mad than when he had last seen him, after Adarin's death. He said, "Now I see. You brought me here to watch you commit suicide."

Arandu thought that was funny. There was a beep from the comconsole and he glanced at it. "Speaking of Tion. But there's ample time. Considering our course and speed we won't be arriving at the rendezvous point for two timeparts at least. Corin, take Captain Solo to rejoin the young lady. It appears I'm going to have to take care of a few other matters."

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