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## Ghost Ships Part 2

by [Martha Wilson](#)

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Corin, who was the young Sith who had brought Han and Tully up from the bay, led the Corellian out of the main area of the deck and into the maze of interconnecting corridors. Several more of Arandu's people accompanied them, and the crew and troopers they passed on the way kept a respectful distance. Han realized his guards were treating him like a dangerous animal that had to be watched carefully but kept unhurt. He didn't think this boded particularly well for the future. They took him to a spacious officer's lounge, the chairs and couches covered in dark blue fabric. Tully was perched on the edge of one of the chairs, watching the wall-sized screen tuned to a view of hyperspace. She looked up at Han, her face white and pensive. The guards left, sealing the door behind them, and Han asked her, "You okay?"

"They haven't done anything to me, if that's what you mean. I'm terrified," she admitted.

"Join the club." Han checked the computer terminals and the controls for the screen, but they were locked from within the system and refused to respond. He dropped down onto one of the couches, winced at the pain from various bruises and his sore ribs. "I take it that other door is not an unguarded exit."

"Only a 'fresher. I examined it carefully when I was in there throwing up. You didn't look afraid down in the bay. You just looked..." She searched for a word. "Irritated."

"It's an act." He didn't have any real comfort to offer her, and he knew she wouldn't believe any false promises. Moving carefully out of respect for the shocktroopers' handiwork, he eased himself into a reclining position on the couch.

"Did you find out where the others are?"

"Detention. They were brought over from Emperor." Propped up on one elbow, he took a good look at her and decided she hadn't been kidding about being sick in the 'fresher. "What are you doing with the Alliance, Sander? You don't strike me as the suicidal idealist type."

"I'm not. I want to live too much to be suicidal. But I've seen what the Empire's done. I was in a civilian prison camp on Riiala. My family wasn't even involved in the uprising, but they took everybody. When they finally released the camp, I was the only one left. My parents, my brothers, all my family, all gone. I'm just doing what I can to keep that from happening to anyone else, and ignoring the fact that I'm a coward and I'm terrified every minute. I'm ordinary. I don't belong here, or with the Rebellion. But here I am. And I don't know why I told you that when I don't even like you."

Han privately thought this was a much healthier attitude than the gung-ho revolutionaries he encountered too often in the Alliance, who really understood nothing of what it was they were fighting, or the consequences of failure. Leia Organa was the only rebel he had met so far who managed to be idealist, pragmatist, and tactician at once without compromising on anything. Curious, he asked Sander, "Were you serious about what you said down in the hangar, you don't prefer men?"

"Yes, I was serious," she answered warily. "Why do you ask?"

"It seems to be the only thing we have in common." He rolled over and added, "Wake me if anything happens."

"You're going to sleep?" Sander was incredulous.

"Um."

"Tell me one thing first. Why am I up here with you instead of in Detention with the others?"

"He likes you because you tried to ice that shocker who was beating the crap out of me."

Han left her to worry over that, and let his exhaustion take over. He dreamed that Luke was trying to talk to him.

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When Han woke Tully was curled up on the floor next to his couch, her head resting on her knees.

The Corellian realized almost immediately what had awakened him. He had adjusted to the muted hum of the Destroyer's drive, and this time he had heard the change in pitch. On the screen the distorted view of hyperspace strobed and dissolved into a starfield. An unfamiliar starfield, and without knowing their orientation he hadn't much hope of recognizing it. He noted there was no visible traffic, and wondered what he would have done if the screen had dissolved into an image of the orbital platforms and battlestations surrounding Imperial Center.

He sat up and tapped Sander on the shoulder. She flinched and woke, and her eyes went to the screen first. "Where are we?"

"Beats me." Han stood and stretched and took a turn around the room, checking the screen controls and the computer terminal again to see if they had mistakenly been activated. He was sore all over and not looking forward to the confrontation he suspected was about to occur. The Alliance infobases had little data on Arandu. He had been a Jedi Knight and a military attache under General Obi-wan Kenobi (\_ Now that, \_ Han had thought, when he'd read the file, \_ was a personality conflict looking for a place to happen. \_ Luke's late teacher had had a terrible track record). Arandu had surfaced as a Sith Lord after Palpatine declared himself Emperor and Darth Vader had made his appearance. As Vader's second he had put down the early uprisings in the Hammeriad Systems, so effectively the Imperial Provisional Government had disbanded due to lack of population. He had stopped early rebel activity on Rialla, hunted Corellian pirates in the Cron Drift until they had all packed up and gone home, and ran one of the largest sectors in the Empire through the Territorial Governor Bin Essada. Then his rival Lord Lan Adarin had ordered an attack on one of Arandu's bases, and Arandu had disappeared for two years. \_ Good question of Tion's. What did he do with all that time? It didn't take him two years to find Boba Fett. So what was he doing? \_ One of the other things that still puzzled him was what the Sith Lord could have done with the heavy cruiser that had been detected off the Artash Gamble. It must have cost even Arandu some effort to crew a ship of that size, and to keep her operational. \_ What do the other Imperials think, that he wrecked her out of spite? Or that he misplaced her? Maybe. If I was the Imp Admiralty and some Sith Lord like say, Adarin, ran off with a heavy cruiser and then turned up without her, I'd probably write her off as breached and drifting into a system primary somewhere. \_ No, the reason the heavy cruiser hadn't shown up was that Arandu was hoping Tion and the others would forget about her, forget how many people he must have aboard her. \_ Think about that. Whoever they were, whoever they used to be, they've been out of Imperial Service for two years playing Sith pirates with Arandu. Maybe he can't bring them back. \_ And maybe that cruiser was following the Destroyer through hyper, even now.

The corridor door slid open suddenly and Arandu entered with Corin. The younger Sith leaned back against the far wall.

"All the pieces on the board?" Han asked.

"Almost." Arandu touched a switch on the viewscreen and the locked controls came back to life. The view of empty space dissolved into an Imperial Cruiser approaching at sublight. It had a tractor- lock on a smaller vessel, a blockade runner nearly half the size of the cruiser with a non-reflective black hull that made it almost invisible. That they could see it at all at this distance and against the blackness of space was because the Destroyer's comps were using sensor data to enhance the image.

"A derelict, discovered by the patrols in this area. Tagge and his troops will transfer to that cruiser, the Resolution. We will take the derelict in tow for eventual transfer to Imperial Center, where the Emperor anxiously awaits it." Arandu paced away from the viewscreen, thoughtful. Han looked over at Sander and saw she was sitting on one of the couches, hands together in her lap, and knuckles white. \_I wasn't feeding you a line Tully, you are really not the only coward in the room at the moment.\_ Arandu continued, "It was one of Lord Adarin's ships, and there is something on board which belongs to me. I learned of its existence from Barris, but the Resolution found it before I could ascertain its exact location. You remember Barris?"

"I thought he was dead," Han answered warily. To be accurate, Han thought he had killed Barris.

"He is now. He was only badly wounded, when you shot him aboard the Gamble, and two of my rather enterprising young people were able to take him prisoner. He didn't last very long, but he did part with some revealing information before he died. This ship was where he said it would be, and there was other evidence that most of what he told me was true." He paused a moment, then looked back at Han. "Tion doesn't know what is on the ship that is so important to the Emperor. He will want to investigate it for himself, and he will order the ship brought up to Subjugator's bay within the magnetic field. The window of opportunity will be rather small."

Han considered it, but refusal didn't seem to be a viable option. He asked, "Why does it have to be me?"

"It's not something I can trust one of my own people with. Not now. I meant to do it myself, which would have involved some complications. Your presence makes it much simpler."

\_For some people, yeah,\_ Han thought. He folded his arms and leaned back against the console. "And if I do this, you'll release the rebels."

"Yes, even the General. Oh, of course I know who he is, I'm not as senile as all that."

Han heard Sander's dismayed gasp. He asked, "Tion doesn't know?"

"Tion doesn't know. Not yet. I saw Rieekan years ago when he was in Bail Organa's service on Alderaan. Of course, his identity cannot remain a secret for long. But Tion is very busy at the moment. He has just discovered that the hyperwave comm is no longer functioning properly, possibly due to the close presence of the Astaran Nebula. The rest of the task force is too far away for regular subspace communications."

He paused, looking out the viewport. "The item I want should be in a stasis chamber in the Adarin ship's main hold. Remove it, bring it back up to the hangar bay, and I'll release the rebels in one of Subjugator's shuttles. Tion will not be able to recapture them. He will have other things on his mind."

"Is this before or after he kills you?"

"Before, possibly during. I've left allowances for unanticipated changes in the schedule."

Han was glad somebody was keeping their sense of humor through all this. Then Arandu said, "I cannot, will not allow that ship to arrive at Imperial Center. If it becomes necessary, I'll destroy this ship, and everything on it, including myself, to keep it from the Emperor's hands. Do I make myself clear?"

"Very. I don't need to be convinced," Han said, hoping to head off any demonstrations of sincerity.

Arandu came back to the screen. "It isn't visible from this angle but there's a small transport attached to one of the derelict's locks. A ship I thought destroyed, brought to this place by a woman I thought killed in Adarin's attack. Her name was Sanja Traviay, and she was captured by Adarin and later escaped. He told me that much himself, before I killed him. I can only suppose that she arrived here before the Adarin crew were forced to abandon ship, that she made a foolish and desperate attempt... I don't know why she didn't try to contact me. Perhaps Adarin told her I was dead. She had a very low degree of Force sensitivity, to the point that she was almost blind to it. She would have believed him. But that doesn't matter now. She was possibly the last person to enter that ship before it was abandoned."

"Which brings up the question, why did the crew leave?"

"I don't know. Following orders he received from Center after reporting his find, the Resolution's captain allowed no one to go aboard."

Han had remembered why the name Sanja Traviay was familiar. Contrary to popular myth, not all Corellians were pirates, smugglers, or corporate robber barons engaged in hiding profits from the Imperial tax collectors on the good old homeworld. Sanja Traviay had been Corellian, and a famous courtesan on Imperial Center, and rumored to be a sector Governor's mistress, and then Grand Vizier Sate Pestage's mistress, only to drop out of sight a few years ago. If Han had ever stopped to think about her, which he hadn't, he would have assumed she was dead. People, even senators, generals, and famous courtesans, tended to disappear regularly in the vicinity of the Imperial Court. That she had had a connection to Arandu was interesting, but not really surprising. And useless to the Alliance, now that Traviay was dead.

"One more item of note," Arandu said. "The escort cruisers left behind to search the system you were captured in turned up the deserted hulk of a Sullustan-built cutter, registered out of Commenor, its logs blank and comps destroyed by blaster fire. The hyperdrive had been disabled by ship combat sometime earlier, by one of the TIE Fighters missing in the search no doubt. I thought that might be of interest to you."

It was. So Commander Skywalker and his daring band of rebel refugees had dumped their damaged cutter and gone limping around the system playing hide and seek with Imp cruisers in the almost equally damaged Millennium Falcon. \_Luke,\_ Han thought, \_if you get yourself caught after all I've been through I will never forgive you.\_

His expression must have betrayed something of his thoughts, because the Sith Lord smiled and said, "Believe me, Han, I don't give a damn about the Rebel Alliance." Arandu turned and strode toward the door. Halfway there he stopped abruptly, and looked at Sander. "It was Lord Rasalon who was in charge of the Ri Allan prison camps, and you needn't worry about meeting him here."

Sander swallowed in a dry throat, and managed to say, "Oh?"

"I killed him two months ago on Imperial Center. He was most annoying."

As the door closed behind Arandu, Sander looked over at Han, and said, "Is there any way that we can get out of this alive?"

"I doubt it."

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Corin and a group of guards took Han and Tully back down to the hangar. They went by maintenance lifts and lesser used corridors, and saw only techs and low-ranking crew, no one who would think it their business to report them. At one

corridor intersection Corin had held them back, waiting until two officers deep in conversation passed.

In the bay General Rieekan and the two rebels who had piloted the shuttle waited under guard. Han felt a surge of relief; he hadn't been looking forward to the eleventh hour protest he would've had to stage if the rebels hadn't been present. All three of the men looked exhausted and battered from the shuttle's crash.

"You okay?" Han asked Rieekan.

"We're fine. We've been treated very gently, considering. What's going on?" As Sander came up Rieekan put an arm around her shoulders and gave her a brief hug.

"I'm trying to get you out of here," Han told him.

"Solo, don't do anything you'll regret. We've each been trained to resist mindprobes..."

"Look, don't start second-guessing me now. You can do that back at the fleet."

One of the other rebels asked tensely, "You have a plan?"

Both of Rieekan's companions were watching Han suspiciously. *Great,* the Corellian thought. He started to answer and hesitated. Neither a blunt "No" nor a "you've got to be kidding" would tend to induce confidence, or encourage them to listen to him when the situation got tight. Then Sander answered for him. "Yes, of course. But it's a secret."

The other three rebels stared at her.

At the far end of the bay was a housing for an expandable docking tube. The tube had been extended and warning lights flashed around its rim. The Adarin blockade runner would be below, the tube fastened to one of its airlocks, Subjugator's smaller docking tractor holding it in place and keeping it from blocking the bay entrance for emergency launches.

Corin was betraying increasing impatience by pacing in front of the docking tube and staring at them. Han decided they had pushed things as far as they could. "Come on," he told Sander.

They crossed the bay under the eyes of Arandu's men. Han noted that techs and bay officers were scarce.

"Weapons?" He asked Corin.

"Down in the tube."

That figured. "Any contingent plans if Tion gets on to us?"

An explosion reverberated through the hull and Han grabbed the rim of the hatch as the deck seemed to sway: the internal gravity fluctuating, trying to compensate for the vibrations. \_The drive blew,\_ he thought. Then \_no, can't be, we're still alive.\_

"Lord Tion is otherwise occupied," Corin said. He gestured and the Sith moved back. The alert klaxons began to wail and warning lights flashed above hangar bay hatches.

Han caught the ladder as the deck swayed again and swung into the docking tube. He reached back to give Sander a hand, and when she had her footing he hit the switch to close the hatch. "What the hell was that?" she asked.

"Probably the bridge."

"That's some distraction. We'll be lucky if he doesn't blow up the ship."

\_Yeah,\_ Han thought. \_That will be lucky.\_

There were two blaster pistols tied to the tube ladder near the bottom. Han hooked his arm through a rung to disentangle them and check the charges. He handed one up to Sander and tucked the other into his belt.

The hatch below was a small round one, probably the topside emergency access for the Adarin ship. It was freezing cold to the touch and beaded with moisture. Han used the keypad at the bottom of the docking tube to release the locking bolts. It opened into a short vertical accessway. The Corellian climbed down, Tully following him.

The somewhat clunky equipment and the concussion pads on the bulkheads told Han the blockade runner was recommissioned Clone Wars surplus. In the corridor the lights were at half strength and the air smelled stale, as if the regeneration system was long overdue for maintenance. The ship must have been derelict before Adarin's death three months ago to be that far gone, Han knew. He wondered what could have caused the vindictive Sith Lord to abandon his property.

"Which way?" Tully asked, interrupting his thoughts.

"Down here." Han led the way down the corridor, looking for a drop shaft that would take them to the right deck.

"What do you think is in that cargo hold?" Sander asked. Unconsciously, she'd lowered her voice to a whisper.

There was only one likely explanation that Han could see. The one chance Adarin would have had to capture something belonging to Arandu was the raid he had hired Boba Fett to stage on Arandu's base. He said, "I think it's not..." Han stopped abruptly, holding out a hand to halt Sander.

Ahead in the gloom of the corridor, he could see a dark unmoving form stretched half out of a maintenance hatch. Han moved cautiously closer until he could see it was the dead body of an Imperial crewman. The long-dead body. A glance down the maintenance hatch revealed at least two more bodies piled within. The lack of micro-organisms and the dryness of the filtered ship's air had slowed decomposition, but still it looked as if the crewmen had been dead for months at least.

Han sat on his heels to take a closer look at the nearest corpse. After a moment he asked Sander, "Do you feel all right?"

"Compared to what?"

"Compared to breathing normally."

"Yes. Why?"

"So do I. Which is funny, because I can't find a mark on this guy, and toxins in the air system is the first explanation that comes to mind." He stood to look at the at. readout on the nearest tech station. No toxins, and the ox level was normal, and there was nothing in the mix to kill the crew, unless it had dissipated. But it wouldn't dissipate, not in a closed air system. He couldn't imagine a concerned bystander coming along, flushing the poisoned air, restoring the mix to normal, and heading off for parts unknown, without taking the ship or at least parts of it for salvage, or doing anything about the messy deceased Imperials.

Han looked back at Sander and she shrugged her own bewilderment.

They found more bodies along the corridor and in the drop shaft to the next deck. In the corridor below that led to the hold, they found two dead stormtroopers who bore blaster scores in the chest pieces of their armor, the only evidence of physical injury they had seen so far. It would have been illuminating to stop and look for the sick bay and the medical log, but they didn't have the time to waste, Han decided. Not so near their goal.

There were two bodies near the hatch into the hold, a black- uniformed man and a woman. The woman had been killed by the man's lightsabre, and there was a

blaster pistol near her right hand. Her dark clothes weren't a uniform, but spacer's gear.

Han turned the man over with the toe of his boot. Not a mark on him. He was betting the woman was Sanja Traviay, that she had been the one to put the blast holes in the two troopers up the corridor. \_She made it this far, then this creep pegged her. And then he dropped dead of remorse, along with everyone else on the ship. Unlikely.\_

The hatch to the hold was wedged half-open. When Han stepped through the temperature dropped so abruptly he thought someone had opened a port to vacuum. Reflex made him step back into the corridor.

In the corridor the air was dry, slightly stale ship's mix. In the hold it was damp and freezing.

Tully put out a hand to feel the difference. "What...?"

Han shrugged. It was as unexplainable as everything else. Or it had the same explanation.

"You never did finish telling me what you think is in there that he wants back so badly."

"Not something," he told Sander, "Somebody," and stepped into the hold. It was dark and empty except for the stasis canister, lit by the green and amber glow of its own LEDs. Han crossed the shadowy chamber, Sander trailing behind him. The transparent lid was opaqued by a layer of dust and grime. He looked at the controls. They were set for slow rejuvenation. Exquisitely slow, maybe one degree a cycle. With a rejuv level like that, the being inside could die at any moment. Tion might have been presenting a corpse to the Emperor. Han wondered if Arandu had known it.

Then he made the mistake. He brushed the dust away and looked inside.

It was a girl, maybe eight or nine standards if she was mainbreed human. Blond hair like the dead woman outside, skin so pale she might already be dead. But she wasn't dead. Han saw that the canister controls were reading a painfully slow heartbeat.

"Oh, damn," Tully said. "These people are all monsters."

Han stared down at a hostage Arandu would know he couldn't use. \_He knows me better than people who have known me most of my life.\_ Han could never claim to kill this child if Arandu didn't live up to his part of the bargain and let the

rebels go. It would be a bluff, and a bluff just wouldn't be enough. Han put the rejuv control on full.

Tully ran a distracted hand through her short hair. "I don't understand. Why did he want you to do this? Why couldn't he trust one of his own men?"

Han shook his head angrily. "Because this is his daughter. He couldn't do it himself, because Tion would have been right behind him. And no matter how loyal his people are to him, they're still Sith. He couldn't risk it. And here I am. He knows I pal around with a half-trained Jedi Knight, so I'm definitely not secretly working for anybody in the Empire, and I'm not the crazy revolutionary type who could blow a kid away for principle's sake. Neither are you."

"That was why he let your co-pilot go. He wanted you to owe him a life. But... If he does mean to let all of us go, even Rieekan, how is he ever going to go back to the Empire after all this, after the bombs on the bridge, and killing that other Sith Lord Tion?"

\_\_He said he didn't give a damn about the Rebel Alliance, and he was telling me the truth.\_\_ "He's not going back to the Empire." The rejuvenation cycle was finished. Han popped the latches on the case and lifted the girl out. Her eyes flickered but didn't open. It was like handling a dead body. She was wearing a dirty gray coverall and didn't weigh anything. He handed her to Tully.

Han led the way out of the hold and headed back for the drop tube. He didn't know how long they had, if Tion had realized yet what Arandu was after and if he had any time to do anything about it.

In the corridor leading to the drop shaft, Tully said, "Wait."

"What?"

Tully had shifted the unconscious child so she could see her face. "She said something. I think she said, 'the monsters are everywhere'."

Han took a step closer. "Are you serious?"

"Why would I make that up?" Tully brushed the fine blond hair off the girl's brow, and suddenly found herself looking into a pair of wide gray eyes. Their expression was mild, vaguely curious, oddly empty of fear under the circumstances. Tully said, "Hello there," which was the first thing that came into her mind.

In an almost inaudible whisper, the girl said, "Monsters live in trees."

Tully and Han exchanged a look. She said, "You think the stasis...?"

"Maybe." There were more unpleasant possibilities, considering that the girl would have been Adarin's prisoner before she ended up on this deserted hulk.

A clanking sound echoed down from one of the decks above and both of them started. Han listened intently, but the sound wasn't repeated. It didn't need to be. Tion was on to them. \_Hold it,\_ Han thought suddenly. "Wait, what did you say when you saw her in the case? 'These people are monsters?'"

"Something like that." Sander nodded, puzzled. Then she looked startled. "You think she heard me?"

The girl reached up and put her hand on Sander's mouth briefly.

"She's trying to warn us," Sander whispered.

It didn't seem possible, but... \_But hell, what do I know?\_ Han thought. He looked speculatively at the hatch that opened into the drop shaft, their access to the upper decks. It was a perfect spot for ambush. "Put her down and cover me."

Sander moved back to set the girl down on the corridor floor. As soon as Sander let go of her, the girl immediately curled up into a ball against the bulkhead. Sander shook her head, then followed Han back to the drop shaft.

The Corellian stepped past the hatch, circling around the ladder area, trying to stay out of the line of sight from above. He'd almost worked his way around to the opposite wall before he saw a shadow along the edge of the drop-hatch, a shadow that moved just a hair. Han took a couple of slow steps sideways. If the shadow was there, then the shocker had to be...

Han caught Tully's eye, and let her see that he was changing the setting on his blaster to narrow beam. She nodded understanding and adjusted her grip on her pistol. Then Han fired up through the hatch. There was a yell and a shocker fell through the opening above and crashed into the deck. A second came down almost behind him, firing short deadly bursts that slagged the bulkhead behind Han as the Corellian dove out of the way. Sander squeezed off two shots, hitting the joints of the armor and sending the shocker crashing into the bulkhead. But the third one landed almost on top of Han, power-armor letting him control his fall. Han rolled away and Sander dove for the hatch, but there was no time to get to cover. Han snapped off a shot that missed and toasted the outside of the man's armor. The rifle swung toward him and Han aimed at the shocker's chest knowing they were going to fry each other. Then the shocker dropped his gun. He made a surprised, awkward grab for it before Han's shot knocked him across the deck.

Han sat up slowly, breathing hard, and tried to figure that one. That was too much dumb luck, even for him. Then he looked over at the girl. She was staring

at the body of the shocker, blinking her eyes, her expression blank. No, it hadn't been dumb luck.

Han sat there for a minute, rubbing his temples, then got to his feet. He rolled over the last shocker, and removed two proton explosives from his utility belt and tucked them into his own vest pockets. The shockers blast rifles were attached to their armor and powered by energy packs built within, so the extra firepower was useless to Han and Tully. They couldn't use it to disguise themselves either; unlike stormtrooper armor, it was code-locked and they wouldn't be able to get it off without a fusioncutter. \_Not much help here,\_ Han thought. Unless he wanted to blow up the blockade runner. "You okay, Sander? We need to move."

"Yes, I'm fine." Tully staggered a little standing up and had a new bruise on her forehead, but she collected the girl and followed Han up the drop tube ladder without complaint.

Han knew the crew must have been alive when Traviay had boarded and tried to reach the hold, because she had had to shoot her way through some of them, because she had been killed by one of them on the doorstep of her goal. If the girl had been aware enough of the outside world to hear Sander, she could have known that Traviay had been killed. And then the crew had started to die. Han felt a chill progress up his spine, and resisted the urge to look down at Sander and the girl. Adarin wouldn't have given permission to either kill their prisoner or abandon ship, and so most of the crew had died, probably without knowing what was happening. It was a disquieting thought, that a child's semi-conscious, dreaming mind might be capable of this much destruction, but Han found it impossible to feel any moral outrage over the death of the crew. Anyone in Lord Adarin's employ was not likely to be a bright-eyed young innocent and he doubted very much that this group had gotten anything they hadn't asked for. The girl could barely communicate, maybe she could barely even articulate her thoughts, but in some way she understood that she was being rescued. \_She must, or we'd both be dead by now.\_

Han shook his head and turned his attention back to the more immediate problem. He told Tully, "Those shockers didn't come down the docking tube. If they had, there would've been a whole squad and we'd be toast by now. They came from outside. Shocker armor is pressure-sealed. They popped out one of the belly hatches near the hangar, used personal jump-jets to reach this ship and came in through one of the other hatches or an empty docking bay slot."

"A scouting mission? Then they reported that we were down here before they jumped us."

"Exactly, and there's a hell of a lot more where they came from."

"Arandu's people are holding the hangar bay. If they take us, use her as a hostage, they can go right up the docking tube and..."

\_\_And Rieekan and the others are still up there,\_\_ Han finished her unspoken thought. \_\_And will be lucky if they're only killed in the crossfire.\_\_

They reached the top deck and Han took a careful peek through the overhead hatch. The dimly-lit corridor above was empty, silent, and suspicious. Han climbed out of the shaft and took the girl from Sander while she scrambled up beside him.

While Han checked the tech station next to the shaft Sander tried to look in every direction at once, the girl held tightly in her arms. "Han, what is Arandu doing? Is he insane? What can he possibly hope to gain by all this?"

"I don't think he wants to gain anything." Han was checking the air flow rate around each hatch and escape pod slot. The shockers were experienced at boarding actions and would disable any security alarms that alerted the interior of the blockade runner to the fact that one of its hatches had been forced from the outside. But the shockers would only be able to enter two at a time at most, and continuous cycling of a hatch would cause the maintenance comps to log it as a possible trouble area. "I think this is his way of turning in his resignation. Hah, here they are. Portside, this deck." \_\_And on their way here right now. This next part is going to be tricky.\_\_ "You take her and make for the docking tube, and get back up to the hangar. Watch your back."

"But..."

"There's no time to discuss it, Sander, just go."

He gave her a shove in the right direction and Sander snarled with exasperation but she started to run down the corridor to the docking tube. Han headed in the opposite direction, toward the Shockers.

He knew there was no time for anything fancy now. He thought, \_\_you're out of excuses, Solo, this isn't survival anymore, it's cooperation.\_\_ But if he was right, it was such an audacious, desperate plan. He knew now what Arandu had done with those two missing years. He had built a new stronghold, somewhere beyond the Empire's official borders, the Rim maybe or the Drift, or past the boundaries of the Corporate Sector. Somewhere far enough away that the Emperor, with resources already committed to searching out the bases of the Rebel Alliance, would not be able to dig him out.

Han reached a segment of corridor sectioned off by open blast doors and halted, pressing back against the bulkhead and listening. After a second he was

rewarded by the click and static buzz of a comlink, audible from around the curve of the bulkhead.

The first shocker appeared on the other side of the blast doors, saw Han, and raised his rifle. Han fired first, two shots sending the shocker staggering backward. The Corellian hit the controls for the blast door with his elbow, firing constantly to keep the others back as the doors slowly dilated shut. Then he stepped back and blasted the control mechanism to slag. Now would they wait and jimie the doors from the other side or blast through them? Han knew the answer to that one. Using the plastic adhesive handily included in a compartment on the proton grenade's case, he attached it to the center of the blast doors and ran back up the corridor.

There was no sign of Tully or the girl near the docking tube. Han stopped for a minute to look down the adjoining corridors, hoping Tully had obeyed him and gone back up to the Destroyer. This would be a lousy time for her to mutiny.

A muffled boom from up the corridor sent a vibration through the ship's skin that staggered him. He held on to the end of the accessway's ladder for support. The shockers had found the proton grenade by burning through the blast doors. The heat would have activated the explosive just before the doors gave way. *Stupid bastards,* Han thought, and started to climb up the accessway to the docking tube.

A blaster bolt from below struck the ladder just above his reaching hand and sheared the metal in half. Han fell back against the side of the tube, caught one of the projections there and braced himself awkwardly. Another energy bolt struck the opposite side of the tube, spraying sparks and hot metal shrapnel at him. Holding on one-handed he fired downward, forcing the shockers below to stay to the side and not come up the tube after him. They were being cautious because they still wanted him alive, he realized.

Han was too angry at himself to be afraid. *Talk about stupid bastards,* he raged inwardly. Stupid to think they wouldn't send a squad the long way around the deck to cut him off, stupid to stop to look for Sander, who really did know better than to argue in the middle of a firefight and had obediently headed for the comparative safety of the hangar bay. Then he remembered he still had the second proton pack.

He fired down the tube again to hold them back, then tucked the gun into his belt and pulled the explosive out of his pocket. He hesitated for an instant, but set it for thirty seconds, unwilling to solve all his problems permanently by setting it for a shorter time, then dropped it down the tube.

There was a moment of obvious consternation below, as the shockers realized what had clattered to the floor, and Han took advantage of it to stretch up and

catch the still-hot end of the ladder and scramble up. The shockers would have the choice of picking the pack up and trying to defuse it, blasting it and setting it off prematurely, or running. Han made it past the tube safety blast seal halfway between the blockade runner and the Destroyer, and knew they had chosen to run.

There was a blast from below that made the tube shiver and nearly lost him his precarious hold on safety. Air rushed past him suddenly with the strength of a gale, and he knew the blast had knocked the tube free of the blockade runner's hatch and the bottom end was now open to vacuum. He held on for one second, two, then it tore him off the ladder. An instant later he fell against hard metal with stunning force, and knew he had used up the last of his Corellian luck. He'd held on just long enough for the tube's safety blast doors to detect the breach and close. Then he was unconscious.

Han realized dimly he was being slung head down over somebody's shoulder and hauled up the tube toward the hangar, but he was too dazed to decide if this was a bad turn of events or a good one. His instinctive attempt to fight free of whoever was carrying him was mostly ignored, and reality faded out again for a time.

He woke abruptly to find the warm metal of the deck beneath him was shuddering continuously, and the distant roaring was the sound of a ship in its death throes. He pushed himself into a sitting position cautiously, so his head didn't fall off. They were back in the hangar bay, and Tully was seated cross-legged on the deck a few feet away, holding her pistol, the little girl curled into a catatonic ball in her lap. Corin and the other Sith were grouped around them, but at several meters distance. Tully saw Han was conscious and asked worriedly, "Are you all right?"

"Sure. What's up?"

"Rieekan and the others are in that shuttle." She jerked her head towards an Imperial shuttle in launching position above the bay. "They said we could go, but I'm not handing her over to them until Arandu gets here. If he couldn't trust them to go and get her I don't see why we should trust them now. If we're going to do this at all we might as well do it right."

"Good thinking. You've been holding them off with one blaster?"

"Not exactly." She patted the girl's shoulder. "That's as close as they can get."

"That's what I thought." Han rubbed his eyes, trying to get his thoughts together. "All right. Give her to me, then you go get on the shuttle and get them out of here."

Tully stared at him. "Han, there's a minor problem with that plan. I'm not going to just leave you here..."

"Sander, there's no choice."

"I think there is."

"Look, this deal..." He was almost too weary to argue the point. "It never included me leaving with you. They won't let me get on that shuttle."

"Huh?"

"Think back."

She shook her head stubbornly.

"He didn't let Chewie go just to keep me happy. It was a trade. Me for my partner."

"But..."

"Look, you need to get Rieekan out of here or all this is for nothing. I don't want to die for nothing, Sander. How about you?"

"Dammit, I..." She looked defeated. "All right. But... But... You'd better get yourself out of this, or I'm going to be in mortal danger from a certain Alderaanian senator." Sander handed the girl to him then stood and started toward the shuttle.

Han looked over at the Sith and met Corin's eyes. Would they let the rebels go without Arandu's permission, or did they already have it? Han knew Sander and the others had to escape while they could; Arandu would not want witnesses for the next part of the program. Corin watched Sander cross the bay, but made no attempt to stop her.

The hatch opened for Sander as she reached the shuttle. A few moments later the small craft dropped from its clamp and disappeared through the bay door.

The girl's head lifted suddenly, vague eyes alert for the first time since they had awakened her from stasis. Then Corin came to his feet, staring at the wall beneath the gantry. A 2-meter circle of metal bulkhead was turning red.

Han was on his feet, snatching up the girl, and running in an instant. He made it only ten steps to the nearest shuttle bay before the bulkhead exploded. He managed not to fall on the girl, letting go of her before he was smashed to the deck by the force of the blast. He rolled over, his head aching intensely, and saw

that Corin and the others were sprawled on the deckplates, just as incapacitated as he was.

Tion was coming through the jagged hole in the bulkhead. The Sith Lord was bloody, his uniform scorched and torn, but his eyes were blazing with fury. Han wondered if he had already fought Arandu and won. There was only one figure still standing between them and Tion. It took Han a second to recognize Erin. He must have just arrived in the bay, and had been far enough away from the bulkhead to avoid the blast that had flattened everyone else. He was facing the Sith Lord with only a lightsabre and grim determination. Han was suddenly and vividly reminded of Luke Skywalker.

The girl was sitting up near Han, unhurt and looking vaguely off toward the bulkhead. Han sat up painfully, and turned her head toward the two Sith. He said, "That's your brother. That's a monster who's going to kill him. Do something about it."

Tion's sabre had beaten Erin back two paces already and the next blow would carve the boy in half. Then Tion stumbled, driven backward by an invisible blow that startled as much as staggered him. Erin lunged, and a second later Tion collapsed. Erin turned off his sabre, stumbled once, and sat down heavily on the deck, apparently from sheer amazement.

A moment later Arandu stepped through the opening in the bulkhead, took in Tion's corpse and the rest of the situation, and walked toward Han and the girl. He looked as if he had been in more than one firefight as well. Reaching them, he said, "You can see why it would be unwise to allow the Emperor to tap a resource of her potential."

Han got to his feet by using a handy support pylon for one of the launchers as a ladder. He said "I see why, but I'm not sure I understand why you do."

Arandu looked down at him a long moment. "I always understood that Palpatine was too dangerous to be allowed to live. But I let myself be convinced to hold my peace. I didn't understand the extent of the influence he held over the Dark Lord, even at that time. He is killing us, one by one, piece by piece, openly, or through treachery, or by insanity caused by his manipulation through the Dark Side. Eleven Lords of the Sith have gone mad and died in these past twenty years. I do not intend to be the twelfth." He glanced around at the carnage in the hangar bay. "The Emperor will unravel this mystery soon enough. Likely he will have the audacity to be surprised." He held out one hand and the girl came to him. "I've seen the possible futures, and disaster for all is the most likely outcome."

"Uh, don't tell me the future. I'd rather not know." Han found it ironic that there was no doubt in his mind that Arandu could see the future. He believed in Arandu's powers completely, in a way he had never believed in Kenobi's.

Perhaps because the old Jedi had dropped dark hints like a mystic trying to hold an audience, and Arandu was so matter-of-fact it was frighteningly real. "You know, things might have gone a little smoother if you'd told us what you were doing."

"If I told you I was deserting the Emperor's service, you would not have believed me. But I assumed you would eventually figure it out for yourself." The Sith Lord eyed him for a moment, amused, "Are you sure you won't come with us? It is the best reward I can offer you at this time."

Han felt light-headed. Arandu was very good at what he did. In the middle of all this chaos, the man had somehow simultaneously managed to arrange his daughter's rescue, destroy Tion, confuse whatever pursuit the Emperor would send after him with the remains of the Star Destroyer, and put Han in a position where it would be very easy to say yes to this offer. Easy if had never met Leia Organa or Luke Skywalker. "No, I can't. I've got... Commitments in another direction."

"I won't tell you of the uncertain future. But you would come to less harm if you trusted yourself to me."

Oddly enough, Han believed him, but it was too late to matter. "Thanks, I appreciate the offer, but... I can't." \_This is it,\_ Han thought. \_The one thing he wants from me that he can't take is my loyalty. So he'll either let me go, or he'll kill me.\_

"Very well. It will be a great shame when your luck finally runs out."

Erin appeared with Corin behind him. "Father, we only have ten minutes before the hyperdrive explodes."

"And we still have things to do." Arandu looked back at Han once more. "Good luck, Han. You're going to need it."

He and the others disappeared in the deepening haze of the bay, and Han leaned against the pylon for a moment in relief. \_That was a near thing.\_

Han reached the airlock of the nearest shuttle just as the next explosion hit. He braced himself in the inner hatch and hit the seal for the outer. It cycled as air rushed past outside to the new hull rupture. He made it to the cockpit, strapped in and started powering her up. A glance out the transparisteel port showed him the damn Adarin blockade runner was now partially blocking the port. He worked with the sensors, trying to get a better picture of the widening tear in the floor of the hangar bay. The sensors could read through the smoke and fire, but not the free energy that was flying around; the readings on how wide the gap was kept changing. \_I never wanted to live forever anyway,\_ Han thought.

He hit the emergency override that transmitted a pulse through the shuttle's skin, shorting out the docking clamp. It fell away and he set the shuttle's orientation as best he could with the destroyer shaking around it and its fluctuating gravity interfering with his. Then he set the sublights on full and sent her shooting for the narrow gap of free space.

More explosions, on board the shuttle this time, and then it was free and tumbling. Then another blast impact, and that was the last thing Han remembered for a while.

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Han woke sometime later, for a moment thinking he was on the Falcon, just after the Destroyer's first score. He had a terrible headache and thought \_well, explosive decompression will do that to you.\_

Then his surroundings penetrated. He was still in the hotseat of the shuttle, held in by the straps and nothing else; the grav was out. The board was partially dark, warning lights blinking. The screens were still working, and he hit switches until he got a view of Subjugator. \_I seem to have this problem lately with ships getting shot out from under me or blown up around me.\_

The Star Destroyer was drifting about 1000 clicks off the shuttle's bow. Power readings were minimal; it was leftover force from the explosions that was making her rotate. The shuttle's sensors focused on the blackened hole in the control castle where the bridge had been, and a tear in the hull forward above the hangar bay. Chunks of the Adarin ship drifted by. Han was willing to bet that ship was now wearing Imperator's ID codes in her carefully preserved control sec.

\_Two thousand crew on that ship and I helped kill them,\_ he thought. But how many people had died on the Death Star? \_No, that's not a fair comparison. Ask yourself how many civilians died on Riiala and the Hammeriad Systems. Sweeping generalizations will get you every time.\_

Han unstrapped and used the overhead partitions to pull himself aft to look for tools. The shuttle had internal power but the drive controls were out. He'd lost too much time already. He had to get out of here.

Both the subs and the hyperdrive had been badly toasted on the way out of the destroyer. Han got the grav back then worked for a couple hours on the drive, interspersed with intervals of sitting on the deck with his head in his hands feeling sick and dizzy. He found the medipack and took the capsules that were supposed to do something for concussion, but they weren't intended to work while you were hanging upside down in an access panel replacing burned circuitry.

Finally the subs came back online, but he'd run out of onboard supplies and still needed to repair the hyperdrive. With the subs up he could get back to the destroyer and scrounge parts out of its repair bays, or even take another shuttle if he could find one that wasn't in pieces.

Han was so damn glad to be off that destroyer he didn't want to go back, but it was beginning to look like he didn't have a choice. He decided to stretch out on the cool deck for a minute before he did anything else. He couldn't afford to rest for long. The destroyer would have kept in constant communication with the flight of heavy cruisers that used it as a mobile base, with any of a hundred possible planetary bases in the sector. After a few more missed check-ins the local task force would get antsy and start looking for it, if they hadn't already.

Han had started to drift off, when the sensor-suite beeped for attention.

He staggered up to the cockpit and checked the screens. There were two ships moving into the debris area, scanning. One of them was an Imperial shuttle. The other was a sensor trace Han recognized without even checking the ID scan. It was the Falcon.

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Later, when Han asked Luke how they had managed to find the Subjugator again, Luke got quiet. He explained that after abandoning the Cutter and jury-rigging repairs to the Falcon, they had ducked the Imperial ships still searching for them and followed the Destroyer's ion trail until it dissipated. While Wedge used the navputer to work out possible routes, with hypothetical destinations like Gyndine and Cordevant, Luke had tried the Force. He didn't think he was getting anywhere with it, but when he stopped trying and looked down at the screen of the tech station, he found he had typed in a set of coordinates. He ran them through the navputer and discovered that not only were they not random numbers, but they were the outsystem of Kanda Alerandi, which was on one of the possible routes that Wedge had worked out. Luke had talked the others into taking a look, (Chewie had been the only one to really believe him, and that was only because he was desperate enough to try anything, even Luke's offplanet magic. Wedge and the others were ready to give their captured friends up for dead, and were just humoring him.) But entering the system they had jumped right into the edge of the spreading debris field, and minutes later had been hailed by Rieekan and Sander.

\_We were lucky,\_ Han thought. \_But they get closer every time.\_ He noticed Luke was looking at him like he didn't expect belief from Han either. So Han told him what happened on the destroyer. Then they had a fight about it.

Han told Luke that one day he was going to find out that everything wasn't black or white the way Kenobi said it was, that occasionally people did things for

reasons that weren't metaphysical, and that one day he was going to run up against some hard facts that he couldn't put into a neat category, and if he wasn't prepared for them he was going to be one dead-and-very-surprised-about-it Jedi. Luke had replied that Kenobi knew more about it than Han did, that he was well aware everything didn't fit into neat categories but there were things he was certain about, and that Han was only talking like this because he was half dead and so he should shut up anyway. Han told him to go to hell, then fell asleep.

When Han woke up he decided to let it go. There were some things you had to learn for yourself.

Chewie was keeping the Falcon limping along with bailing wire, string, and propitiatory libations to the Forest Spirit Han would have to scrape off the deck later, but the battered freighter held together long enough to reach the new under-construction rebel base.

On Hoth.

**end**

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