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Hidden Perils

by [Carolyn Golledge](#)

"Well Chewie, Her Royalness can't complain about this load!" Han Solo commented cheerfully to his co-pilot. "These laser rifles and charges will make all the difference to that attack on Gargatha." He shook his head, "Those rebels are outta their tiny minds tho'; they're sure gonna have their hands full tryin' to heist those freighter components." He fell suddenly silent, his formerly cheerful expression replaced by one of anxiety. He immersed himself in checking console readouts.

Chewbacca smiled softly, watching his partner, knowing what had caused the abrupt change in mood. He growled his opinion, and the pilot turned angrily toward him.

"Dammit, Chewie! Why did the kid have to get mixed up with that crazy outfit? He's gonna have t' learn to look out for himself, that's all!" Solo met the Wookiee's gentle, knowing gaze and tried to stare him down. Failing, he scowled and turned back to the console. "Yeah, well maybe they'll need the Falcon to cover over 'em and ship those parts but dammit, Chewie, I'm tellin' ya, that'll be the last time."

The Wookiee grunted, unable to resist taunting his friend with mention of the Princess. He knew it was more than just concern for a young Taooine farmboy that kept Solo returning constantly to the Rebel Base, accepting charters for which he knew he'd never be properly paid. He laughed at the Corellian's predictable reaction to the teasing.

"Will you leave it!" he shouted. "She's got nothing to do with it!" Chewbacca only whuffed disbelievingly. Solo glared at him, then turned to look out at the whirling void of hyperspace. "The Falcon's the best ship for that job and you know it.

Besides we can keep an eye out for the kid at the same time. Then, we're gonna take that payment whether they can afford it or not, clear out and forget the whole crazy bunch of them, got it?"

The Wookiee nodded, but he was still smiling secretively as he returned to his work. A few minutes later, he drew his partner's attention to the flashing of a warning light on the computer console.

Solo cursed. "Those blasted alluvial dampers are workin' loose again!" He studied their present co-ordinates and came to a quick decision. "We can't risk pushing her all the way back to base like this, the drive system might cut out anywhere and we'd wind up cooked in a star or something'. Dammit! We can't make it all the way on sub-light with Vader's mob out there huntin' for us." He ran his hand through his hair frustratedly. Chewbacca calmly awaited his decision. Solo drew a deep breath, looked long into his friend's pale blue eyes and said, "We're gonna have to land and make repairs."

The Wookiee growled agreement and turned to check the vid-atlas, pointing at the information it produced.

"Yeah," Solo scowled. "It ain't much, but it'll have to do. Better bring her down on the far side of Perran's Port tho'; can't risk the Imps spotting us too soon. We sure as hell better make this a quick stopover!"

The eerie yellowish mists of the highlands and fjords of Caniscus swallowed the descending, Falcon. Almost before the ship's weight had settled on its hydraulic landing pads, the Corellian and the Wookiee were hard at work deep within the freighter's engines. Solo worked at welding the polarization levers firmly back into place, while on a level slightly above him, his immense co-pilot struggled with a hydro-spanner in his huge fist as he tried to force the bolts off the dampers so he could realign them properly. He cursed and grumbled to himself as they refused to budge even under his enormous strength. Han also swore as his weld torch fizzled and died. It needed a new stick of magma fuse. Clambering to his feet, he turned to call up to Chewbacca to throw it down, but seeing him muttering and cursing furiously, he changed his mind and decided to get it himself.

He had just drawn level with the toolkit and was reaching for it, and had no more warning than a loud bellow from Chewie when a crushing blow slammed into his face. He was unconscious before he hit the deck a few feet below.

Chewbacca stood frozen with horror. He stared from the blood-spattered spanner in his hand to the spreading red stain on his friend's still face. Terribly afraid that he would find he had killed him, he stood rigid with shock before slowly, mechanically covering the short, yet seemingly infinite distance to Solo's side.

The Corellian lay sprawled on his side, one arm outstretched, blood already completely covering the right side of his head and pooling beneath him. Other than that, his flesh was deathly white. Chewbacca stretched out a shaggy hand and lay it over Solo's heart. For one terrifying moment, he felt no sign of life. "Han!" he howled desperately, his own heart racing and his breathing stilled as he dropped his head to the man's chest and listened fearfully.

Solo drew a ragged, pain-filled breath, and Chewbacca sagged into a limp heap of relief. He lifted the man effortlessly, growling softly, mournfully to himself as he carried the loose-limbed body to the acceleration couch in the main compartment above. Very carefully, he lay Solo upon it, easing his head down slowly. He hurried away, found the medical kit, and returned. Fumbling with unsteady hands, he found a sterile pad and swabbed at the freely flowing blood. Having cleaned the wound, he applied gentle pressure, grasped the release on the canister of synth-flesh with his other hand, then quickly released the pad and sprayed the wound. He prayed that the bleeding would remain slowed long enough for the elastic graft to harden.

He watched with relief as the new skin formed an almost complete seal, only a trickle of blood seeping through. He found a spool of bandaging and took care of that, carefully unraveling and winding it around the unconscious man's head. He hesitated before going on to the next step which he dreaded: the med scan. As he moved it over the skull, he prayed fervently that it would not reveal a fracture, or even worse: brain damage.

He sighed happily, grasping his friend's shoulder affectionately, as he read the results. He should have known nothing could dent such a stubborn Corellian skull; hadn't he found it impossible to penetrate in order to force any logic into the human's reckless head? While the scan revealed no fracture, there was an unsettling indication of bleeding into the skull cavity. If left unchecked it would soon build pressure on the brain, leading to either damage or death. He'd have to get his friend to surgery at the Rebel Base urgently. That meant finishing the repairs quickly.

With a last check of his friend's vital signs, Chewbacca covered him warmly with blankets, then returned to his work. Distastefully, he retrieved the stained hydro-spanner and wiped it clean. He toiled away, all the time listening intently for the smallest sound from the compartment above.

Groaning faintly as pain finally forced through unconsciousness, Solo struggled to open his eyes. Achieving that he found everything remained a blur, pulsing in and out of hazy focus with each of the hammering blows resounding in his head. This couldn't be a hangover; he felt concussed. What had happened to him? Where was he? He couldn't remember anything. Squinting desperately didn't

bring him any more information, he still couldn't see clearly. He tried rubbing his eyes, and this time was met with partial success.

He was on board a ship, but none of it familiar. He struggled to sit up, and was instantly overcome by nausea as the room spun wildly about him. Swallowing hard, he managed to keep his stomach in place, refusing to give up his attempt to stand. He had to find out where he was. He swung his feet to the floor, not noticing as the blankets slipped from about him. He stood in one quick motion, but took only half a step before the deck seemed to fly up and slam full-length into him.

There was a loud thump as he hit the floor, and consciousness faded for a few moments. When he recovered, still lying prone, he found himself staring down into the hold. Here he caught sight of an enormous shaggy creature apparently in the act of trying to tear apart the bulkhead below him. Fearfully, Han edged his way back, trying to get out of the creature's line of sight; but the thing spotted him. It turned a ferocious array of teeth toward him, and began howling with frightening intensity.

As the monster began moving rapidly up the ladder toward him, Han decided this was the source of his injuries. He had a dim recollection of a huge, furry fist striking him a fearful blow to the face. He had to escape. His hand went automatically to his blaster, drawing and leveling it shakily at his attacker.

He saw only danger in the Wookiee's growling and his stealthy approach. The creature must intend finishing him off, having probably assumed he'd killed him with that first blow. Solo's finger tightened on the trigger and he fired, feeling immensely relieve as the mammoth being crashed limply to the deck and remained unmoving.

Weakly, Han fumbled to reholster his blaster. Slowly, dizzily, he pulled himself to his feet, not quite sure what he should do now. His head hurt so badly that it was impossible to keep hold of any line of thought. All he could figure was that he had to get out of here now.

Groggily he searched for the exit hatch. Finding it at last, he reached a hand to the wall for support as he activated the airlock controls which were glowing green, indicating life-supporting conditions outside. He pushed the final release, and the outer door hissed suddenly back, and a ramp lowered in front of him. He stumbled out into cool, clammy air, and peered around trying desperately to find something he recognized.

The freighter was resting on a high cliff overlooking a mist-enshrouded shoreline. As he stood dazedly wondering what to do next, the mist parted briefly, and he thought he saw lights glowing at the foot of the hill behind the ship. Sick and wobbling on his feet, he stumbled off in that direction.

"We have them, now my Lord," Captain Marlock reported to Vader. "Solo's ship has been sighted near Caniscus. Our tracking station in Perran's Port followed them to re-entry in Sector Two Three Six on the other side of the planet. There's a small township there...Ascarus. It has no proper docking facilities, but Captain Rudger is certain the freighter must be nearby."

Vader's menacing figure turned toward Marlock who instinctively took a step back. "Good work, Captain. Prepare my shuttle and a landing squad. We will try to capture them on the surface before Solo can blast off. You seem to have difficulty keeping up with him once he is space-borne."

Marlock trembled at the thinly veiled threat. He won't escape this time, my Lord," he replied with more confidence than he felt.

"I hope not, Captain," Vader hissed, waving a threatening finger, "for your sake."

The tiny shuttlecraft came to a landing within a few minutes' walking distance of Ascarus. Vader turned to his assembled troops, his dark cloak billowing about him in the swirling, yellow fog, giving him an even more terrifying presence.

"I wish to take them alive," he ordered. "Set your weapons for stun. Lieutenant, take half the squad and search surrounding area. Take no action until I give the command. The rest of you come with me."

On the outskirts of the village, the Sith Lord waited until his single scout returned. He didn't wish to alert the entire village to their arrival and thereby give Solo the chance to escape from the cantina in which he expected to find him. This time his luck held.

"My Lord," the scout reported, "There is no sign of the Wookiee, however, Captain Solo is drinking at the local cantina."

"Well done," Vader responded icily. "Remain here with the squad. I will take Captain Solo myself."

Minutes later, Vader pushed back the wooden doors and strode openly, confidently into the cantina. Solo was no threat to him, especially alone. He'd quickly disarm him, and choke him into submission if necessary. Vader felt a thrill of anticipation-he'd soon have the information for which he had so long waited. Once he had the location of the main Rebel Base, he'd crush the rebellion with one swift, merciless blow to its heart

There! Solo was sitting on the far side of the dimly lit room, slightly sagged forward over a mug of some kind of intoxicant on the table before him. Vader took a victorious step closer to his target.

Wearily Han Solo lifted his aching head, shaken from the drowsiness constantly settling over him, as there was a sudden commotion in the cantina. Chairs scraped over wooden floorboards, and boots tramped heavily downward as several patrons got to their feet and hurriedly exited. Background conversation fell to a hush. Solo gazed with dull curiosity at the cause of the disturbance. A large, dark figure stood towering by the entry, his breath making harsh grating sound beneath the respirator he wore strapped to his chest. The human was dressed entirely in black, but Solo couldn't see why all the fuss. Tiredly, he put it down to the out of the way location; the locals probably were unused to strange-looking off-worlders.

His head hurt too much to be able to concentrate on the reaction for long, and besides, he had problems enough of his own. He returned his gaze to his tankard, and his thoughts to trying to remember what had happened. No one here seemed to know him, and if he hadn't felt so ill he knew he'd be terrified by the fact that he no longer knew his own name. He didn't know what to do next, and was too exhausted and sick after his long stumbling walk to the village to be able to give the situation the attention it deserved.

Vader was puzzled by the lack of any reaction from Solo. He knew the Corellian was full of bravado, but this total unconcern at his enemy's presence was too well contrived even for him. He strode toward him, mentally preparing to deflect any attempted attack. At the sound of approaching footsteps, Solo glanced up, his eyes resting dully on Vader's mask for a few seconds, then disinterestedly dropping back to the table. For the first time in a long while, Vader was unsettled. He hesitated. There was no trace of fear in Solo's aura; not even anger or hostility. "Solo!" he commanded.

The man did not react immediately, but in the ensuing silence he looked up, apparently wondering why no one had answered.

Vader's head tilted to one side, now genuinely perplexed. The corner of the cantina in which Solo sat was gloomy, filled with shadows. Warily, Vader moved closer; he had seen a gleam of white around the Corellian's head. Yes, now he saw it clearly, a bloodstained bandage. "Solo!" he called again.

As the pilot raised his head a second time, this time with a trace of irritation, Vader noted that his eyes were glazed, the pupils very large, the face flushed

and feverish. Solo was hurt, the man's eyes were totally devoid of recognition. With head damage, memory lapse was always a possibility. Vader was unsure if this was a boon to him or not. Now the Corellian would almost certainly be unable to reveal the Base location.

It was as well for Solo and the patrons of the cantina that they were unable to see the malicious smile which spread across the Dark Lord's scarred face as his plan came to him. Yes, Solo would be even more valuable to him in his present condition. The pitiful Rebellion would be destroyed within a matter of days. But he'd have to be careful not to damage Solo any further. There had to be a way of getting him to the Imperial Command Center in Perran's Port without having to use physical violence of any kind. Further injury might result in death; Solo looked dangerously weak. He needed to know just how extensive the damage was. He became aware that the Corellian was now eyeing him with hazy suspicion.

"You want somethin'?" Solo scowled. "Or are you gonna stand there like a stunned gundark all night?"

Well some things about the Corellian would never change, Vader thought coldly, he was still as ill mannered as ever. "This is not much of a welcome for a friend...Han," he responded with as much of a friendly tone s he could muster.

"Han?" Solo repeated, staring vacantly at his visitor. "You know me?" The question was filled with a mixture of suspicion and hope.

"Yes of course," Vader replied smoothly, his suspicions confirmed. "We've been friends for some time."

Anyone other than Vader would have been moved to see the relief that crossed the man's desperate, pale features. But Solo was still suspicious; this being didn't arouse any feelings of friendship within him. In fact, he felt decidedly uneasy, and the sound of the hissing respirator did nothing to inspire trust. Nevertheless, right now anyone who might know something about his past was a welcome sight.

Pushing down an instinctive feeling of alarm, Han attempted to find a smile. "Well, maybe you can fill me in," he said unsteadily. "I'm not remembering things too good at the moment. I was beginning to think no one around here had ever seen me before!"

Vader tried to put concern into his artificial voice. "You mean, you remember nothing at all?"

"Nope. Afraid not." Solo didn't sound as cocky as he'd've liked. His eyes were desperate as he added, "It's all a blank."

Darth Vader was for once grateful for the concealment provided by his mask. It made it so easy to hide his true emotions. "Han, I think it would be wise if I took you to the medi-center. You need a doctor."

Han wasn't sure he wanted to go anywhere with someone of whom the locals were obviously terrified. On the other hand, he was beginning to feel almost panicked. He had to find help somewhere, and a doctor would be his best bet. If this man made any false moves, he always had his blaster...if he had the strength to fire it. "Yeah. Suppose that'd be the best thing," he replied vaguely, his head aching so fiercely that he could barely talk. "Guess I don't feel so good at that. That damned furry creep sure hit me good and hard!"

Vader again blessed his mask as it hid his surprised reaction. So, it had happened at last, the Corellian and the Wookiee had argued. "You had another run-in with that Wookiee then?" he asked.

"Wookiee? Yeah, I guess that's what it was. He's tried to get me before?"

Vader leered; he was enjoying this. "Yes. He's a bounty hunter."

"Oh." Solo's head sagged as exhaustion and pain rolled up over him. He felt close to collapse. "Can't even remember why I've got...." He gasped as the pain intensified.

Vader took his chance. He reached out a supporting hand. "Come on, Han," he said, not entirely having to fake the urgency in his voice; "the doctors will be able to help you."

"Okay," Solo agreed groggily. He allowed himself to be helped to his feet, unsure he could have made it on his own.

Vader supported the weakened man, marveling at the ease of capture, but his pleasure turned rapidly to alarm. Solo took one staggering step, and with a final grunt of pain, slumped into his arms, completely unconscious. He studied the deathly white features, disappointedly. Solo was more severely injured than he'd realized; perhaps he would not survive long enough for him to carry out his plan. It was imperative that he get the man to medical attention.

Carefully, he lifted the inert body, cradling the injured head firmly against his arm, as he strode briskly from the cantina.

The puzzling dream slowly unfolded in the Wookiee's mind. He saw Solo threatening him with a blaster; surely this must be a joke, a prank in revenge for the accidental blow with the spanner. But Solo's eyes showed no recognition and

not the least hint of humor. The blaster waved dangerously, more or less aimed at his chest, and Chewbacca continued to inch cautiously forward, speaking softly and reassuringly. He noted thankfully, that his friend's weapon was set on "stun", at least Han wouldn't be able to seriously injure himself, or Chewie. Then came the shocking blast again...

Slowly Chewbacca returned to consciousness. Immediately he searched for his friend, alarmed when he found no sign of him. Quickly, he gathered his bowcaster and headed out into the cold night. Han must be in Ascarus by now, if he hadn't collapsed before he got there. Chewbacca wondered how he was to convince Han of their friendship, get him to medical care, without having to take any aggressive action that might cause further internal bleeding. He'd have to be very careful.

As he drew nearer the village, he heard the whine of shuttle engines rapidly approaching maximum thrust, then the roar as it lifted off. He couldn't make out what type it was, but he hoped desperately it wasn't Imperial. If wasn't long before the locals confirmed his worst fears. Vader had captured Han. The Dark Lord had carried him, unconscious, from the village cantina. The only small consolation they could give Chewbacca was that Vader had offered no violence, and in fact had seemed concerned for Solo's health. Chewbacca was dismayed as he realized Han could not have recognized his enemy. Vader needed him alive; the shuttle must be taking him to the closest medical facility. If he wanted to deceive his prisoner, he couldn't take him on board an Imperial Star Destroyer.

Chewbacca was sick with worry as he returned to his repair work on the Falcon. As soon as he was off planet he'd send a coded transmission to the Rebel relay station and arrange a rendezvous with Skywalker. Perhaps with the aid of a disguised ship, Luke and some of his rebel friends could free Han. Chewbacca was forlornly certain that he couldn't go after his partner personally; there were none of his species in Imperial Service. He could see only one small glimmer of hope: Han's injury should give them time to reach him before the sadistic Imperial could go to work on him. The Corellian would be of no use to them while he was suffering amnesia. Hopefully, they'd treat the injury and halt the bleeding before Han's condition could deteriorate any further.

Vader stood staring down at the sedated figure on the bed before him. He's not allowed Solo to regain consciousness during the journey to the Infirmary; he wanted him to recall as little as possible of his contact with Imperials. "Well?" he asked impatiently as the doctor completed his examination.

Nervously the man turned to him. "It's a severe concussion, my Lord," he reported. "There is no fracture, but some internal bleeding which should be treated immediately if there's to be no permanent damage. I'd say it's the

pressure from that blood clot that's causing his memory loss. As soon as we've removed it, and he's recovered strength after the operation, I should think you'll have no trouble interrogating him." He placed the scanner back in its container, looked down at his patient, then turned back to the imposing Sith Lord. "Will I have the orderlies prepare him for surgery now, my Lord?"

Vader moved closer to the bed, gazing intently at his prisoner as he considered his options. It would take several days, possibly longer, for the man to recover and give him the information he required. The Corellian was maddeningly stubborn and recklessly courageous; it was possible he'd die before betraying his friends. And while he was being interrogated, the Rebellion would move to a new Base; it had happened when they'd taken prisoners in the past. No, his first plan was still the safest - he must return the Corellian to his friends quickly, while still suffering amnesia so they wouldn't consider it necessary to take any precautionary measures.

Vader turned back to the doctor who stood patiently awaiting his decision. "How long can he survive without surgery?" he asked coldly.

The man blinked in surprise, then considered long moments before answering. "Provided there is no further trauma," he said slowly, "it's possible he will recover health, but it would take longer for his memory to return, or possibly it never would. The danger is that a future blow to the head could move the clot and kill him."

"I see," Vader stared long and hard at Solo, then said, "Yes, have him prepared for surgery, but you will not treat the injury. It will suit my purpose if his memory loss remains. There is, however, an operation you will perform for me."

"Don't worry, Chewie," Luke reassured softly. "We'll get him out of there somehow. Marklin and I will find a way into the Infirmary. They probably won't have him under heavy guard. He'll be back before you know it." Chewbacca growled doubtfully, and Luke added, "If he's lost so much of his memory that he couldn't recognize you, there'd be no point in them taking him to Interrogation until he recovers. We'll get him out long before then." He grasped the Wookiee's arm comfortingly. "We'll rendezvous with you here."

As twilight fell over Perran's Port, Luke jumped back into his hiding place among the shadows of a supply dump immediately across from Imperial Command Center, which also housed the infirmary. He and Marklin had been watching the place all day. Luke had to admit that getting in might be easy enough, but getting back out with a weak, probably confused Solo would be more difficult. He had to come up with some sort of plan...and soon!

He almost jumped out of his skin as an alarm blared within the Imperial H.Q. Blaster fire sounded somewhere nearby. "What now, Luke?" Marklin called worriedly.

"Come on!" Luke decided. "I don't know how he did it, but I have a feeling Han's escaped."

They raced quickly through the lengthening shadows, following the sounds of battle. Suddenly there was silence. Luke prayed that meant Han had eluded his pursuers. Approaching a courtyard, he peered 'round the corner and saw Solo slumped against a wall in the partial shelter of a stairwell, his blaster held in a limp hand. Two Stormtroopers lay unmoving against the opposite wall.

Luke called to Marklin to give him cover, then rushed to his friend, afraid that he'd been wounded in the skirmish. But as he came to a halt beside Solo, he found no further sign of injury other than the bloodstained bandage about his head. As he bent over him, Han's eyes focused and he raised the blaster shakily. "No, Han! It's me...Luke!" the young Jedi pleaded. "I'm your friend. I'll help you get away from these Stormtroopers."

"Friend?" Han was thoroughly confused. The last he knew, he'd been drinking in a cantina.

"Yes. Come on, quickly. There'll be more of them here any minute. Can you stand if I help you?" He grabbed Solo's arm as the man holstered the weapon.

"Wait!" Solo said as his gaze fell upon the fallen troopers. How had he gotten into the street? Who had shot those Imperials? Had he? He couldn't remember. He looked back at the young man hovering over him. He seemed sincere...even familiar. "What did you say your name was?"

"Luke." The blue eyes darkened with concern. "Luke Skywalker." He tried a smile and Solo looked less suspicious.

"Come on, Luke!" Marklin called urgently. "They'll be closing in! We've got to get out of here now!"

Luke fought to find something that would stir Solo's memory. "Han..." he said slowly. "You don't usually call me Luke. You call me kid."

"Kid, huh?" Solo mumbled. "Yeah, I think maybe I do remember you...a little."

Luke smiled in relief. He took Solo's right arm firmly across his shoulders. "Come on then. Let's get out of here." He staggered and almost went down as Solo swayed dizzily. He stood still, unable to do more than support the man, hoping desperately he wouldn't pass out completely.

"Sorry...uh...kid," Solo said shakily, "don't feel so good."

Luke risked holstering his weapon so as to take a firmer hold on the Corellian. "It's okay. Lean on me. It's not far. We'll make it."

As they lurched away from the courtyard, Solo asked, "Where are we going?"

"Home," Luke answered concisely, needing all his breath to keep the man moving.

"Where's home?" Solo persisted.

Luke sighed, Han had lost none of his stubborn streak. The Falcon...your ship."

"Falcon?" Solo frowned. "Can't remember."

Marklin had raced on ahead; now he returned, pulling up beside them in a rented speeder. "C'mon! Our luck can't hold forever!" he urged. "Move it!"

Luke helped Solo climb in, directing him to sit on the floor in the back, where he wouldn't be seen. "You'll be all right now," he assured, "we'll get you to the Infirmary."

"That's what that other guy said," Solo remembered. "Where did he get to?"

"Who?"

"The weird guy back at the cantina. All in black. Mask and respirator. Couldn't miss him in a crowd. He said he was takin' me to the Infirmary, and next I know I'm waking up in the street!"

Luke stared down at his friend, more concerned than ever. Solo must be have recurring memory lapses if he couldn't remember anything of his time as an Imperial prisoner.

Han was miserably perplexed. "Wish I could remember something! Nothing makes any sense!"

Luke gripped the other man's arm. "You'll be okay. Just hang on."

They rounded another corner and Marklin called back nervously, "Something's not right. Where'd all the opposition get to?"

"I know," Luke agreed. "Maybe Han laid a false trail before he escaped."

"He doesn't remember?" Marklin sounded amazed.

"No. He doesn't!" Han snapped, annoyed as much with himself as with the rebel.

"Uh...sorry, Solo," Marklin mumbled. "I didn't mean anything."

"Forget it," Solo said tiredly, then snorted with weary amusement as he realized the irony of his wording.

Luke smiled affectionately down at the huddled man. "You're already getting back to your old self, Han!"

The speeder swerved suddenly, tossing them to one side and Solo gave a cry of pain and clutched at his ribs.

"Hey!" Luke asked in alarm. "You okay?"

Solo took a careful breath before replying, "I feel like I've been through the grinder! I guess that furry creep musta worked me over real good!"

Luke was baffled, then realized "furry creep" must mean Chewbacca. But Chewie hadn't touched Han's ribs. Solo must have further injured himself during his escape. Thorough examination would have to wait; for now they were too busy keeping an eye out for Imperials. "Stay down," he said. "If we can just make it to our ship without being stopped, we'll be in the clear."

A short time later, Luke watched as Marklin skillfully docked with Solo's modified freighter. He was surprised that they'd been cleared for take-off with a minimum of questions. He'd feared the Imperials would insist on searching every departing ship; but they must believe the escapee was still within the city.

Solo had drifted into a doze in the navigator's chair. Luke helped him out of his safety harness and over to the airlock. The Falcon could make the return journey much faster than Marklin's trader.

"Good luck," the rebel called. "I hope to see you as good as new next time I stop by the Base, Solo. Take it easy, okay?"

Solo seemed not to have heard, or else he didn't have the energy for a response. Luke exchanged an intensely worried glance with Marklin as he said good-bye. Solo's injury had had no treatment since Chewbacca's first aid, and had recently been subjected to rough handling. They must get him help quickly. The Wookiee had told him about the internal bleeding, and all Han had seemed to want to do was sleep. His concern distracted him so much that Luke forgot Solo would still be afraid of his partner.

As they exited the airlock and Han caught sight of him, he reacted violently, pushing Luke's supporting arm away and knocking him to the deck as he drew his blaster.

"No!" Luke shouted as Solo prepared to fire at the Wookiee.

The Corellian hesitated. There was some memory nagging at the back of his disoriented mind. He pushed it back - survival came first. The man in the cantina had told him the Wookiee was a bounty hunter, and he vividly remembered the creature's massive fist striking him. He steadied the blaster again. "All right...kid!" he spat. "Get over there with your bounty hunter partner!"

"What?" Luke was dumbfounded.

"Move!" Han threatened, turning to aim the blaster at him. Chewbacca took the opportunity presented by Solo's diverted attention to fling himself across the entryway. He tackled his friend, taking care to roll with him and cushion his head as they went down. The blaster flew from the Corellian's weakened grasp, and the Wookiee pinned his arms in a gentle yet firm grip as they got to their feet.

"My friend was right!" Han snarled as he struggled feebly against the Wookiee's hold. "You are bounty hunters!"

"Han...please!" Luke pleaded urgently as he too clambered to his feet. "Take it easy! We don't want you to hurt yourself!"

"Why?" Solo sneered, giving up his futile struggle as he became dizzy. "Am I worth more to you alive?"

"You've got to believe us!" Luke begged. "Vader...the man you met in that cantina...lied. We're your friends, we're not bounty hunters!"

"Oh, sure!" Han scoffed, "that's why this shaggy mongrel nearly killed me! Some friend!" He struggled again but quickly stopped as his strength drained completely and his vision darkened.

Hearing this, Chewbacca moaned and lowered his head. He could feel Solo growing weaker, Han had to let them help him.

Luke kicked the fallen blaster into the main compartment and threw his own weapon after it. "Let him go, Chewie," he said softly. Chewbacca hesitated afraid that they might further injure Han if they had to again prevent him attacking them. Realizing there was no other way to prove their good will, he obeyed. Han staggered as his weight was returned to him, but he coldly pushed away the Wookiee's offered hand. Chewbacca slumped back against the bulkhead, feeling

total despair overtake him - perhaps Solo's memory might never return, and even if it did, he might not forgive the accidental near-fatal blow.

"Han," Luke reasoned, "if we were bounty hunters why would we bother to lie to you now? And why would we let you go free?"

Han was confused; his head hurt worse than ever, and he wanted to throw up. He couldn't think straight, wanted only to sleep, but couldn't risk it. "With that thing around," he argued faintly, waving a hand at the Wookiee, "you don't need to secure your prisoners!"

Luke could see that Solo was on the point of complete collapse; they couldn't risk him striking his head as he fell. Desperately, he looked to Chewbacca for help, then felt compassion flood through him - never had he seen so heart-broken an expression. Momentarily forgetting Solo, he consoled the Wookiee. "Chewie, it'll be all right," he said softly, then turned anxiously away as Solo staggered and grabbed at the crash padding to stop himself falling. "Han," he continued calmly, feeling a strange tingling surge of power washing through him so that his own voice sounded distant in his ears. "Han, look at him. Does he look like he wants to hurt you?"

Solo stared hazily at the youth. There was something compelling in the tone of the entreaty. Inexplicably, he felt a warmth of caring, affectionate friendship reaching out to him. His suspicion and hostility gave way beneath its power. He felt a cloud of confusion lift from his mind. Blearily he turned to look up at the giant Wookiee and was instantly shocked at the amount of grief he saw in those gentle eyes. How could he ever have thought the creature was violent? A sudden image flashed through his mind - himself and the Wookiee fighting back to back, protecting one another. In an instant, remorse filled him as he realized he'd hurt the friend he loved and trusted with all his heart. A name formed in his weary mind.

"Chewie?" he called uncertainly, then repeated confidently and with desperate apology, "Chewie! I'm sorry, pal. I never..." His knees buckled, but the Wookiee grabbed him before he could fall. Han remembered those powerful arms supporting him so many times before.

"Han...Han...Little One." Chewbacca comforted, his deep voice breaking with joyful relief at hearing Solo call his name.

Han stiffened as he realized he hadn't been able to understand those words earlier. Another image came to him - himself aiming and firing at the Wookiee as Chewbacca called pleadingly to him and he failed to understand. "Au, Chewie, I shot you! I...I..." He couldn't finish because a tide of darkness washed up over him, and he slumped unconscious into his friend's embrace.

Chewbacca held Solo for a few moments, relishing the reunion. Luke called huskily to him, "C'mon, Chewie, we've got to strap him into his bunk. The sooner we get him home, the better."

The Wookiee nodded, a gentle smile lighting his eyes as he carefully lifted the limp man and headed for Solo's cabin. Changing his mind, he stopped at the acceleration couch. It was close by the cockpit; he'd be better able to keep watch on him there. Gently, he lay the man down, watching as Skywalker carefully padded the injured head with extra pillows. He secured the safety harness, covered Solo with a blanket, then hurried to make preparations for re-entry into hyperspace.

On board Vader's Star Destroyer, the communications and tracking officer watched as the transmitter's bright flash moved across the screen. He stood and approached his commander. Captain Piett, in turn reported to Vader. "My Lord, the homing signal is operative. They have entered hyperspace."

Vader's ominous presence towered over his officer as he replied, "Good work, Captain. Keep a close watch on that screen. Inform me the moment they leave hyperspace. From there we will track them to whichever planet they are currently occupying."

"Yes, my Lord," Piett agreed eagerly. "The fleet is assembled; we will relay the co-ordinates as soon as we have them. The Rebellion will be completely destroyed before they even realize what has happened."

As soon as they had made the jump to hyperspace, Luke returned to Solo. He studied the grimy bandage and decided to redress the wound. Finishing that, and seeing that Solo's face was burning with fever, he poured water into a bowl and began sponging him down. Remembering his complaint of soreness, Luke carefully removed the man's shirt. As he released the last fastening, he gave a sharp, gasping breath, hearing Chewbacca react similarly as, as horrified, they saw the extensive blue-black bruising covering Solo's chest and shoulders.

"Bastards!" Luke swore. "Why did they beat him like this Chewie? He couldn't tell them anything! They must have known that! Look at this; he's been systematically worked over! I don't know how he found the strength to escape!"

The Wookiee grunted savagely, then howled his honor-bound pledge of vengeance.

"It takes a while for bruises to develop." Luke pondered, "they much have done this to him yesterday. But why, Chewie? Why?"

The Wookiee could only shake his head sorrowfully. He hunted in the medical kit and passed Luke a tube of soothing lotion. As Skywalker began applying it, Solo flinched, moaned and opened his eyes.

"Easy, Han," Luke said softly. "You're safe now." He noted happily that as Solo's gaze settled on him, there was a flicker of recognition in his eyes.

"Luke...kid?" he mumbled. "I remember you now...sort of." Solo managed a wry smile.

"That's great!" Luke returned the smile. "Just rest easy; we'll have you as good as new in no time."

Chewbacca reached out a soothing hand and gently patted Solo's arm, smiling hesitantly down at him. He asked a shaky question.

"Of course I forgive you, fuzz-brain!" Solo chided with gruff affection. Seeing guilt still entrenched within the blue eyes, he gripped the furry hand and said firmly, "Chewie, it was an accident; now forget it, okay?"

The Wookiee growled softly, looking rather abashed.

"Good," Solo replied. "I don't wanna hear another word about it." He lay silently as Luke continued applying the lotion. There were some very tender spots, and though Skywalker was careful, Solo had to fight back an occasional sound of pain. Suddenly, he remembered that he had almost shot his partner, again. He did groan then.

Luke looked at him apologetically. "I'm sorry. I'm nearly finished. I've got to try and get some of this swelling down."

Han smiled reassuringly. He still couldn't remember the details, but he knew they too had shared in many battles. Skywalker was a good friend. "It's not that, kid," he explained, then turned to the Wookiee. "Chewie, I'm the one who should ask forgiveness."

Chewbacca gave a grunt of laughter and added some teasing words.

Solo smiled crookedly. "Okay, I'll try to forget it, too." He winked. "I'm kinda good at that lately!"

"Han," Luke asked as he finished tending the man's chest, "do you think you can roll onto your side a little? I want to take a look at your back."

"Sure." Han gasped as he rolled onto his right shoulder and fiery pain shot through it. "Shit!" he cursed. "My shoulder feels like it's on fire!" He shifted to take the weight from it, gritting his teeth over the pain.

Luke didn't respond immediately; he was speechless with shock and anger as he became fully aware of just how severely Solo had been beaten. The man's right shoulder was badly swollen and inflamed; angry red welts spread from it to the neck, upper arm, and lower back. Shoulder to hips was a mass of bruising. "Han," he managed at last, "why...why did they beat you like this?"

"Who?" Han asked, assuming it was another of the blanks in his memory.

Luke was taken aback; he hadn't expected that response. "The Imperials, of course."

"Oh, yeah. Vader found me, didn't he?" He paused remembering, then grunted in disgust with himself. "He sure conned me pretty good! But I can't figure why he bothered. Talking isn't exactly his style."

Luke scowled. "He wanted you alive, he had to take you without a fight. He'd have known any further injury would be dangerous. He couldn't get anything out of you dead! That's what makes this beating all the more senseless. It doesn't add up. Can't you remember anything after Vader captured you?"

"No," Han frowned, "don't think so...wait!" He concentrated; his head stabbed at him, but he persisted. "Think I can remember something. I must have come 'round for a few minutes in the Imperial Infirmary. I remember feelin' real thirsty. Think I musta been mumbling for water, but nobody heard or cared. I spotted a water pitcher on the table beside my bed, and I reached out for it. Hell! The pain in my shoulder damn near killed me! I dropped the water. Yeah...I remember now! The Imp doctor was madder than a skinned Jawa! He started yellin' at the orderlies somethin' about my bein' supposed to be out of it. He came over to me and jabbed me with a hypoinfuser, and the next thing I remember I was out in the street and you were with me."

Luke was only all the more puzzled. None of the pieces fit. Why beat him and then take him back to the Infirmary and keep him under sedation? How had Han escaped? "Do you remember shooting those Stormtroopers just before I showed up?"

Han concentrated again. "No...I couldn't see much past the end of my arm. I never noticed them until you mentioned them."

Rapidly becoming alarmed, Luke felt a familiar sensation of unease growing within him. "I've got a bad feeling about this," he muttered.

"You have!" Solo snorted. "I've got a bad feeling all over!"

Luke smiled wryly as he returned to work on Solo's back. Again he was sickened at the evidence of the vicious beating. The warning feeling grew in intensity until his muscles became taut with anxiety. He halted his swabbing.

"What's up?" Solo, asked, painfully rolling on to his back to find Luke staring blankly at the bulkhead. "Kid?" he frowned, sure he'd seen that look before and it always boded trouble.

"Something's not right," Luke replied with a certainty that sent a chill down the Corellian's spine. "We can't go back to Base yet. I'm sorry, I know you need a doctor badly, but we just can't. I don't know why...I can just feel danger."

Han was about to ask further questions but was interrupted by an irate Chewbacca. Luke understood only a few of the angry words, but easily caught the meaning--Chewbacca was not prepared to risk any delay. Luke opened his mouth to try to explain, but Solo reached out and tugged firmly at the ranting Wookiee's fur.

"Chewie! Chewie!" he shouted. "Shut up and listen, will ya? You should know the kid's hunches always work out right. We can trust him. Give him a chance to..." He gasped and dropped his hand suddenly as agonizing pain shot through his shoulder, spreading to sicken his stomach and make the room appear to spin about him. He screwed his eyes shut and clenched his teeth over the pain.

This evidence of suffering only made the Wookiee all the more determined. Solo couldn't interrupt this time, he no longer had the strength. Luke was also alarmed at the Corellian's deterioration. Perhaps Chewbacca was right. Ignoring him, he rummaged in the medical kit and called to the Wookiee, "Get me a mug of water! Quick!" Chewbacca left off his lecture to obey.

Finding what he wanted, Luke turned back to Solo who was lying very still, breathing harshly and unevenly as he battled pain, his eyes still closed, and his jaw set. Gently, Luke lifted Solo's bandaged head. "Here," he instructed, "swallow these. They'll ease the pain."

Solo obeyed groggily, doing no more than open his mouth so Skywalker could drop in the pills. He was too sick to so much as open his eyes.

Luke was alarmed. Solo's pallor had increased, making a vivid contrast to the bright red points of fever high on his cheeks. Carefully, he eased the now sweat-drenched head back to the pillows. Anxiously, he lay his fingers against the carotid pulse. It was weak and fluttering rapidly. Instinctively, Luke lay his left hand softly across Solo's forehead. Immediately the pulse steadied and became

stronger. He sighed in relief as the Corellian's color improved and his eyes flickered open.

"I'm okay," Han assured faintly as the pain suddenly eased and his vision cleared to reveal two very worried faces hovering over him. Vaguely, he decided those were by far the fastest acting pain pills he'd ever taken. "I don't feel too bad now, honest."

In spite of the reassurances, Luke was very worried. He fought to ignore the warning signals he'd received; Solo was failing too rapidly to allow him time to play out a hunch. "I'm sorry, Chewie," he said turning to the Wookiee, "you're right. We have to get him help, fast!"

"No!" Han objected as his own instincts for trouble jabbed at him. "There's something wrong here. I remember the look on that doctor's face just before he knocked me out. He was real pleased about some secret or other, he looked at me like a fel-wyst before the kill. Turned my blood to ice! They're up to somethin'. We can't go back until we know what it is."

"But, Han..." Luke was about to argue, then he paused. "Wait! I've got an idea. We'll bring the Two-One-Bee unit out here to you. He can fix you up and then maybe you'll remember what happened back there."

Han nodded. "Good thinking...if the Base'll go along with it. They might not want to risk their surgeon droid on a house call."

Luke sighed as he turned to enter the cockpit. "Han," he admonished sternly, "when will you ever get it through that thick skull that people care about you! C'mon Chewie, show me how to patch through to Base."

Solo lay quietly considering Skywalker's words as he heard the change in the Falcon's engine tone and felt the jolt as they dropped back into normal space to send the message. Maybe the kid was right—at least it was obvious Skywalker cared for him. But there was someone else, someone he wasn't so sure about—a woman. A hazy image came to him of a fragile-looking young woman with lustrous copper hair pinned severely back about a delicate, yet determined face. Her eyes, those eyes, attracted him so much, at once concerned and relieved when he and Chewbacca returned from each of their perilous flights, and yet, flashing with a haughty arrogance at his offhand manner. He remembered many exchanges of sharp words, yet words somehow at odds with the underlying emotions.

His head was aching badly again. Disgustedly, he pushed the images from his mind, telling himself that the knock must really have rattled something—since when did it matter to him what anyone thought of him, much less if they cared? His shoulder was now throbbing so savagely as to make him feel sick to his

stomach. He returned his efforts to remembering what had caused that injury. It was more than just bruised, that was for sure! The pain was coming from deep within the muscle. And the biggest puzzle of all-how had he escaped? When he had wakened in the Infirmary he'd certainly been in no condition to go anywhere, let alone fight his way out of an Imperial H.Q.!

His ponderings were interrupted by Skywalker's return. "Well," he said smugly, smiling down at him, "they're on their way. Should be here in a couple of hours."

"Okay, okay," Solo grouched. "Don't rub it in! I've been thinking, Vader's got to be up to something. I keep almost figuring it, then I lose it again."

"We'll work it out. You just take it easy, okay?"

"Yeah, sure. But it's really bugging me that I can't remember anything about how I escaped. I seemed to be thinking clear enough when I woke up in the Infirmary, and now I remember you 'n' Chewie okay, so why is it all a blank from the moment that Imp stuck me with that drug?"

"I know," Luke sighed, "it looks like you were unconscious from that moment until when I found you in the street."

Solo grunted disbelievingly. "I couldn't have escaped if I was out cold!"

"You don't remember shooting those Troopers," Luke summarized, "you could hardly stand, and we met no opposition getting you off-world. Vader must have let you go."

"What?" Amazed, Han moved to sit up, gasped in pain, and hurriedly relaxed again.

"Lie still, will you?" Luke admonished. "I know it sounds crazy but it must fit Vader's plan somehow. Maybe he intended following us when we picked you up..." Skywalker's face grew suddenly pale. "Oh no...maybe he planted a homing beacon on Marklin's ship! He's not going straight to Base, but I'd rather contact him and have him run a scan."

"Yeah," Han agreed soberly. "If they were usin' me as bait it all makes sense. They must be tracking that ship."

Luke paused before entering the cockpit again. "One thing still doesn't fit-why they worked you over like that."

Han sighed, resisting the urge to shrug. "You know the Imps, kid; that's how they get their kicks!"

The young Jedi nodded grimly and left to send his message. He was relieved to find Marklin still orbiting Inavine, waiting for his contact as ordered. Marklin assured him that he would run a scan immediately and transmit the findings within the hour. Luke returned to Solo, alarmed to find Chewbacca covering him with an extra blanket as he shivered with fever.

"Come on, Solo," the Wookiee was urging, "you must rest. No more fighting to remember. Relax and save your strength."

Exhausted, Solo nodded weary agreement. "I am kinda tired," he admitted as he eased back against the pillows. "Guess I will get some sleep."

Solo was alternately burning and freezing as the fever took a stronger hold. Luke shared a worried look with the Wookiee, both of them praying that Two-Bee would hurry.

"My Lord," Piett reported nervously, "we are now receiving a stationary signal."

Vader strode quickly to the tracking screen. "Well, what are the co-ordinates?"

"My Lord," the officer stammered, "there are no systems at these co-ordinates. It is no more than deep space. Perhaps the freighter's drive system has failed again and they are working to repair it?"

Vader clasped his hands behind his back as if to restrain the urge to attack his subordinates. He recommenced his pacing of the bridge. "Perhaps, Captain, perhaps. Report immediately when they are underway again."

The Dark Lord's continual pacing, combined with the tension of awaiting the order to attack the rebels, was having an unsettling effect on the Imperial Commanders on the bridge. Vader scarcely noticed. He was deeply involved in his thoughts. He was sure that the rebels could not possibly have discovered the implant, they did not have a doctor on board the Falcon, and even if they did, it would unlikely to be noticed. Vader himself had inspected the surgery performed on Solo-the incision was all but invisible, but he had ordered the man further "damaged" so as to aid its concealment and provide an explanation for the pain.

Still he had the uneasy feeling that the Force was working against him, and the source seemed to be the same one that he had last felt during the disastrous Death Star battle. There was no point in taking the fleet to the given co-ordinates. The implanted beacon would detonate and destroy all on board the Falcon should it be tampered with. He must be patient. As soon as their repairs were finished, they'd return to their Base. Their concern for the Corellian's health would see to that. Yes, compassion was a fatal weakness; it would result in the

complete destruction of the Rebellion. Vader performed his duties without any such hindering emotion. He had long ago learned to crush any such human frailties within himself. His soul belonged to the Emperor now.

Anxiously, Luke flipped the communicator toggle, and the flashing stopped as Marklin's decoded voice filled the cockpit. "Luke there's no sign of a homer...besides Vader couldn't have known which ship to bug before we found Han, and he didn't have the chance afterward. It doesn't make sense. He must know we run a routine security check before we make the final jump to base-ever since Yavin."

Luke had come to the same conclusion during the past hour. In a way he'd hoped Marklin would find something; it would have eased his still growing sense of alarm. Now he realized Vader must be up to something even more sinister. "Thanks, anyway," he called back, "I guess we'll just have to stay put here until we figure it out. Maybe after the surgeon has seen to Han he will be able to tell us something."

"Hope so, Luke. How's Solo doing?"

"Not good. He's developed a real monster of a fever."

"Well," Marklin said, "I hope Two-Bee can help him. Let me know how it goes. Out."

"Will do. Out."

Luke returned again to Solo to find Chewbacca still maintaining his vigil. Han was drenched in sweat and tossing and moaning in fevered sleep. Chewbacca sponged him down continuously, but it didn't seem to be helping. Luke sat by the Wookiee and waited.

Some time later they felt the dull thud as the rebel ship docked with the Falcon and exchanged relieved smiles. Luke left Solo and went to wait impatiently by the airlock. He was very surprised by what he saw when the door slid back.

"Leia!" he cried. "What are you doing here?"

Princess Leia Organa had had plenty of time to prepare a suitable reply; she hoped it would sound convincing. She summoned her most authoritative voice and answered. "Any threat to Rebel Security is my concern, Luke. I must make sure it is safe for the Falcon to return. We're urgently awaiting that shipment of weapons. The attack on Gargatha can't go ahead without them."

Luke tried unsuccessfully to hide a smile. He knew where the Princess' true concern lay. He'd watched with both amusement and exasperation over the past year as the haughty senator and the supposedly calculating mercenary had continued their verbal sparring matches. Their arguments were becoming less and less effective in hiding the obvious affection they felt for each other. Luke wondered only how much longer it would be before they'd be forced to admit to their true feelings. That would be an interesting moment! A sudden pain-filled image flickered on the edge of his mind—Leia's face taut with grief as she called something to a bound and grim-faced Han. He shook his head, desperately wishing these visions would leave him be.

Leia stood scowling at him, then sighed. For a supposedly naïve farmboy, Luke Skywalker was alarmingly astute. "All right," she admitted, her voice softening as concern flooded it, "so that's not the only reason. How is he?"

"Not too good, I'm afraid, Leia," Luke replied, unable to hide his anxiety. "He's asleep now, but he's burning with fever, and he still doesn't remember things clearly."

Leia turned as Tow-Bee exited the airlock behind her. "Come on," she instructed, and they hurried to Solo's side. Leia stood leaning against the crash padding of the cockpit entry, gazing worriedly at the sleeping man. She resisted the urge to go to him and cool his fever-flushed face. What was it about Solo that shook all the barriers she'd so carefully constructed around her emotions? Sighing, she admitted silently that they were two of a kind, both with a stubborn, courageous pride and fierce independence that would not allow them to reach out to one another. She shook her head ruefully as she watched Two-Bee continue the scan of his restlessly tossing patient.

"Well?" she asked impatiently as he finished. "How bad is it?"

"I will have to operate immediately to relieve the pressure on the brain, there is still some bleeding," Two-Bee explained, even his mechanical voice sounding concerned. "It will be risky while he is still running such a high fever, but it would be even more dangerous to leave it any longer. I do not understand what is causing this fever, this type of injury should not be responsible for it. He is showing all the signs of severe infection, yet the scan reveals that the wound is clean and beginning to heal correctly." The droid paused, then asked. "Has he complained of any other pain?"

Luke sighed. He'd dreaded the moment it would become necessary for Leia to see the terrible evidence of the beating given Solo. Haltingly, he informed the droid, "He's been beaten pretty badly but there are no other wounds." Luke heard Leia's shocked intake of breath, but plunged on, "He's complained of severe pain in his shoulder."

As the droid removed the blanket and exposed Solo's torso, Leia could plainly see the massive, purple-black bruising. She began to shake with anger, quietly cursing the Emperor and all his minions.

With Chewbacca's help, Two-Bee moved Solo onto his stomach in order to better inspect the swollen right shoulder. The droid produced a probe and lightly touched it to the swelling. Even so gentle a touch caused agonizing pain. Solo cried out and woke with a start.

Leia could resist no longer. She dropped to her knees beside the Corellian and picked up his dangling arm, wanting to take the weight from it and ease his pain. She thought he had cried out in his sleep and was embarrassed to discover he was awake. She blushed as he was carefully returned to lie on his side facing her, and his feverish gaze met hers. She lay the injured arm carefully beside him, feeling a strange hurt as his eyes showed no recognition of her.

"Han," she inquired softly as the droid and Wookiee moved back. "How do you feel?" She drew the blanket about him as he shivered. "Two-Bee is here."

"My shoulder hurts," he mumbled, then studied her face intently.

Leia felt suddenly self-conscious. She looked away from him, watching the medical conference going on behind her. Her hand still rested on the blanket at his side and she felt him stir, then his left hand closed over hers. When she looked back, she found him smiling softly up at her. She could not hide her relief and pleasure as she realized he had recognized her. Her eyes shone as she smiled back. "Well, Flyboy," she said gruffly, "I see you've managed to get yourself in trouble again!"

He grinned lopsidedly, then frowned, concentrating fiercely for a moment before he said hesitatingly, "Leia?"

It was the first time Leia had heard him use her given name. It struck a chord deep within her that made it impossible to deny her feelings for him. "Yes, that's my name," she answered huskily as he looked questioningly at her. He continued staring at her in such an open, sincere manner, totally lacking in the normal defenses that they practiced, that she was unnerved. She turned away again, this time seeing that Chewbacca was assisting Two-Bee with unpacking surgical equipment Luke had carried from the other ship. She was aware that Solo had not released his hold on her hand.

Han was puzzled by the depth of her reaction to his use of her name. Slowly, full memory of their relationship returned, and he was embarrassed as he recalled that he always addressed her only by some teasing title or other. She was a Princess and Senator, and he a smuggler. He thought he'd best make amends. "Well, Your Highnessness," he tried a cheeky grin as she turned back to him,

"didn't do to bad, huh? This shipment should make really give your suicidal friends something to play with, don't ya think? 'Course, I'll have to up my fee now, with repairs and all."

Leia found it difficult to suppress a smile. So, he wanted to cover his blunder. His pretense at solely mercenary interests couldn't fool her this time. "In spite of the fact that your fee is already far too high," she said with gentle amusement, "you will not provoke me into an argument not. Discussion of payment can wait until you are well again."

Tryin; t'...get out...of it...huh?" Solo's teasing was lost to bouts of shivering which caused maddening pain in his swollen shoulder.

Leia noted fearfully that his grasp on her hand had weakened and he was having difficulty focusing his vision. "Han," she advised, urgently abandoning all the usual strategies between them, "please rest." Gently she lay her hand to his forehead, stroking back the sweat-tangled hair. She was afraid he'd tease her but he only closed his eyes, allowing the comfort of her touch. She was alarmed at how hot he felt, and how little strength he seemed to have left to him. She was relieved to see Two-Bee approaching, his preparations apparently completed. As she moved back to make room for him, Solo opened his eyes.

"All right, Captain," the medical droid said in his soft, soothing voice, "I will give you an anesthetic now." He extended both a sterile swab and a hypo-infuser, deftly inserting it into a vein in Solo's throat.

"That was good timing," Solo mumbled, trying to find his normal taunting manner as he looked up at Leia. "Just when we were...gettin'..." His voice trailed away as his eyes slid closed again. The pain left his face as the injections took rapid effect and his body slackened into deep unconsciousness.

Leia's relief at seeing him eased quickly gave way to anxiety as she turned around and caught the dark concern in Luke's eyes. "What is it?" she asked.

Two-Bee answered, "I will also have to operate on his shoulder," he said smoothly, "there is something embedded there that is causing the infection. Those Imperial doctors obviously care nothing for sterile conditions!" His tone was remarkably human as he expressed his disgust.

"But...why?" Leia began.

Luke interrupted the droid, hoping it would sound better coming from him. "I'll tell her," he said softly.

"Tell me what?" Leia demanded fearfully.

Luke began hesitantly. "We don't want to alarm Han, he's weak enough without giving him another shock." He drew a breath before continuing. "Vader has implanted a homing transmitter in Han's shoulder."

"What?"

Luke moved to her side. "That beating would have been to give him an explanation for the pain of surgery. Vader must have really believed that Chewie did attack Han, and he thought Han'd put all the bruising down to that."

Leia stared back at the pale, unconscious Corellian, her anger seething hotly through her as she imagined what had been done to him. "Only Vader would be so cunning and malicious as to use an injured man like this! He must have expected that we'd rush Han straight to Base Hospital. Thank the Force you were suspicious, Luke. We've had the entire Imperial Fleet on our doorstep in a matter of hours!" She broke off as a frightening thought occurred to her. "Luke..."

"Yes, I know," he sighed. "Vader knows where we are right now. We can only hope he doesn't get impatient and decide to check us out before we can remove that transmitter." Luke knew his next request would be refused, but he had to try. "Leia, you should go back, take the other ship and..."

"No!" she interrupted. "Two-Bee will be finished soon. We've waited here this long, a little while longer can't make much difference. Besides, there's another reason I came along. I've had surgical nursing experience. Two-Bee will need my help during the operation."

Luke was about to insist, but he was distracted as Two-Bee finished setting up the surgical table and sent Chewbacca to bring the patient.

Leia hurried to sterilize her hands and make herself ready. As she put on a surgical mask, she looked up at Luke, all the horrible memories of her past experience flooding back. "Will it ever end?" she asked him quietly. "So many people have suffered. Will we ever have peace?"

Another brief vision hung just beyond Luke's full comprehension. This one he did not push back, but instead fought to hold, to draw strength for both himself and Leia. It was a joyful vision, he saw the four of them, himself, Leia, Han and Chewbacca, laughing while all around them was the sound and glow of a victory celebration. "Yes, Leia," he heard himself intoning prophetically, "Yes there will be peace."

Leia recognized the Force working within her young friend's soul, and she felt reassured, secure and ready for what was to come. "Thank you," she whispered, and he smiled back at her.

Two-Bee stood to one side as Chewbacca carefully placed his friend face down on the operating table. Then he moved in, and swabbed at the pilot's shoulder. Next, he extended a laser scalpel and activated it. The tip for the glowing knife slowly approached the man's back, closing in on the exact spot Two-Bee had programmed for.

Luke almost jumped at the strength of the Force warning that jolted through him. Instinctively, he reached out and grabbed the droid's descending arm. "No! Wait!" he cried urgently.

"What?" Leia voiced all their puzzlement. She was further startled to see Skywalker's face beaded with sweat, and his eyes unfocused. "Luke," Leia asked steadily, "tell us what you see."

"There's something else in there." Luke mumbled, his voice sounding hollow as if coming from a great distance. "An explosive," he finished with an effort. His eyes returned to focus and he staggered, waving an unsteady arm, looking for support. Chewbacca hurriedly helped him to the seating nearby.

Two-Bee stood frozen, unmoving, the glowing scalpel still poised above his patient's back.

"An explosive!" Leia repeated, horrified as full realization reached her of the depth of Vader's sadistic scheming.

Luke sipped at the water the Wookiee handed him, then said weakly. "Yes. Vader wants to make doubly sure of harming the Rebellion. This way, he'd still have the satisfaction of killing Han and anyone else nearby."

"We've got to do something!" Leia said desperately. "Han might die from blood poisoning if we don't take that implant out soon."

"I know," Luke frowned in concentration. "There's got to be a way."

Two-Bee deactivated the laser and rejoined his human companions in pondering the problem. After some interminably long, strained minutes of silence, the droid completed his computations and a thorough second scan of the implant. "If I may suggest," he spoke up, "I believe I have the solution. I am eighty-seven point nine percent certain of the safety factors involved. I may be able to remove the device without causing it to explode."

"How?" Luke prompted.

"It would mean major surgery. I would have to remove the entire latissimus dorsi muscle by making an incision through each end of the connecting tendons. If I then withdraw the entire muscle still intact, the weapon should not detonate. The

movement involved would register as no different from normal arm activity. A muscle transplant could be made later, but there would necessarily be a long period of therapy and convalescence before full function is returned to the shoulder and arm. The present risk is that the shock of such a major operation may be too much for him in his weakened state."

The trio exchanged intensely worried expressions. Luke spoke for them all. "We don't have any choice. We'll have to try it." He sighed, eyeing his friends, his gaze settling on Leia. "Anyone who doesn't have to be here should leave." As expected, neither of Solo's friends made a move.

"Two-Bee will need me here now more than ever," Leia insisted as he continued to look pleadingly at her. She added quietly, "And so will Han."

Luke gave up. "Right. I'll signal Commander Wylins to disengage and return to Base."

Later, after further intensive preparations, the droid returned to his work, skillfully using the laser scalpel, now positioning it away from the center of the angry red swelling. Luke winced but was too afraid to look away as the knife descended. He was thankful that the surgeon wasn't human, there'd be no adrenalin to make him tremble too. He glanced across at Leia. She was incredible, composed and calm beneath the surgical mask, going competently about her work, checking vital signs and occasionally using a vacuum tube to suction away any blood where the laser had failed to cauterize immediately. Two-Bee's arms were a profusion of instrumentation as he complete the last retraction of obstructing flesh and began ever so cautiously to withdraw the inflamed muscle.

Luke tensed, then let out a relieved breath in unison with Chewbacca as he watched the muscle come smoothly free of the body. Now they could all see the malignant gleam of metal. Only the transmitter was immediately visible; a slight protuberance of additional circuitry was the only evidence of the detonator, which was cleverly concealed and disguised. Vader had covered all possible avenues of early detection. Carefully, Luke took the covered specimen dish now containing the muscle and its embedded threat, carried it to the airlock and dispatched it into the vacuum of space.

He returned to the operation in time to watch the droid close the incisions. Next came heavy padding and bandaging, wound again and again about Solo's back and shoulder, his arm strapped immovably across his chest. Luke reached up and wiped the sweat from his brow, sharing a triumphant smile with Leia as she looked up at him. "You were amazing!" he complimented in awe. Embarrassed, she looked back to her work.

Luke turned to the medical droid. "Thanks, Two-Bee. Do you think he's strong enough to withstand the jolt if we jump to hyperspace? The longer we stay here the greater risk Vader will show up."

The droid ran a further scan before replying. "He has come through the operation remarkably well. If he is firmly secured on the acceleration bunk, I can see no reason why we cannot leave. It would be safer to operate on the head injury back at Base. There, I can also begin work on the muscle transplant. I'd prefer to stabilize him before he undergoes any further surgery."

As soon as Solo was strapped carefully down among a mound of cushioning, Chewbacca gladly punched in the co-ordinates for home. The Falcon leapt smoothly into the streaks of light, taking her Captain to safety.

Skywalker emerged two hours later to help Chewbacca with re-entry to Hoth, and found Leia still sitting vigilantly by Solo. She and the medical droid monitored for the least change in his condition. As Luke came closer he was pleased to see the patient stirring. He watched as the Corellian's bleary gaze again registered Leia's presence. Solo struggled to find his voice.

Leia restrained him gently. "Shh," she said softly. "Rest." She exchanged an exasperated glance with Luke as, in his typically stubborn fashion, Solo refused to surrender.

Finally, he managed the one faintly questioning word, "Vader?"

Leia shook her head ruefully. So that was why he'd been fighting the sedation. She should have thought to reassure him immediately. "It's all right now, Han," she explained. "We're safe. We're on our way. We found out what he was up to. He can't harm us now. We'll tell you about it, later. You must sleep now, all right?"

Leia couldn't help but smile as he managed a cheeky wink before lapsing into unconsciousness.

It was some days later before Solo was well enough for visitors, other than Chewbacca who had refused to leave his side, and with whom the doctors were too afraid to argue. Two-Bee assured them all that the latest operation had been a complete success, and the pilot would soon make a full recovery. Luke and Leia entered the Infirmary to find that the Wookiee had at last deemed it safe to return to the Falcon for some desperately needed sleep. Leia also noted happily that Solo's was the only occupied bed in this ward. The attack on Gargatha had

gone far better than they could have hoped, the weapons supplied by the Corellian and his partner making all the difference. They'd missed Solo's smuggler's skills on the return journey with the stolen fighter parts; but Skywalker's X-wing squadron had performed magnificently in providing cover. Now the badly needed replacement parts were safely stored in the ice hangars beneath the Base.

Leia's ponderings were cut short as Solo called to them. "About time I got some visitors! Somebody better tell me what's goin' on in the real world or I'm makin' a break for it!"

The two young rebels smiled happily as this evidence of returned strength and spirit. Solo was sitting up, propped by a mound of pillows, his right arm strapped firmly across his ribs, and his shoulder heavily swathed in bandaging. Already, he looked thoroughly bored and restless; the medical staff was going to have its hands full.

"How are you feeling, now?" Leia asked as she pulled a chair close to his bed. She tried for an objective, detached tone, and failed miserably.

"I'm fine, thanks..." he paused considering his form of address. No he couldn't say 'Leia'. "Your highnessness," he finished. The image of her tender, worried face watching him, seemingly every time he struggled to consciousness over the past hazily remembered days returned to him. She did care. Now, what was he going to do about it?

"Han? Are you sure you're okay?" Luke asked worried by the long silence from his normally garrulous friend.

"Huh?" Solo blinked and looked up at him. "Oh, yeah, yeah, sure, kid." He paused, then amended, "Well, I am kinda confused. How come I get knocked on the head, but then I wake up with my arm less than useless?"

Luke sighed. "That's quite a tale."

"Well, I ain't goin' anywhere!" Solo groused.

Luke's expression darkened as he held Solo's gaze. "You remember how we were trying to figure out what Vader was up to? Why he let you escape?"

"Yeah."

"He had a homing transmitter implanted in your shoulder with a detonator primed to explode if it was tampered with."

"What? OWW!" Solo cried as he jolted upright in utter shock.

Leia being closest quickly reached out a restraining hand and gently but firmly pushed him back against the pillows. "Will you please keep still!" she ordered. Hurriedly, she removed her hand from his chest, but allowed it to fall on the covers beside him, pretending not to notice as he closed his fingers over hers.

"Can you run that by me again, Luke?" Solo asked, still stunned.

"Vader wanted to use you as a walking homing beacon," Skywalker repeated gravely. "And he covered himself by adding the detonator."

"Kreth!" Solo swore. "And I actually thought he was trying to be friendly back in that cantina!"

Leia gaped. "You didn't!"

"'Fraid so, Your Worship!" Solo admitted ruefully, giving her a crooked smile. She looked away self-consciously. Han frowned as another thought occurred to him. "How come we didn't all get blown to cosmic dust, then?"

"That's why your arm's strapped," Luke explained. "It's going to be as good as new," he added before continuing, "but Two-Bee had to remove the entire shoulder muscle so as to get the implant out safely. He says your new muscle has transplanted well and your shoulder will heal soon."

Solo stared at him a moment, then muttered, "Oh great! There goes my profit margin! Transplants don't come cheap. Is the Alliance going to cover this?"

Luke and Leia swapped rueful smiles at Solo's unfailing ability to turn even this hazardous turn of events to mercenary considerations. "No charge," Leia said smoothly. "We owe you. The attack on Gargatha was a complete success."

"Good." Solo squeezed her hand and again she looked away. "Hey!" Solo continued, "Can't ya just picture His Gruesomeness' face when he found nothing but empty space at those co-ordinates!"

Even Leia giggled over that, admitting to herself that Solo was definitely the only man who could get her to laugh at anything concerning Vader.

Solo's satisfaction vanished abruptly. "Wait a second!" He eyed each of his friends in turn. "You two didn't hang around for that operation, did you?"

"Well..." Luke drawled nervously. "Sort of."

"Dammit! Oww!" Solo hurt himself again as he instinctively moved forward to admonish this rash action from his companions.

"Solo!" Leia snapped. "I'm not going to warn you again! That transplant will never take if you keep jumping around like this! Be still, or I'll call the orderly!"

"Okay, okay, Your Holiness!" he glared, the pain and his confinement annoying him further. "Don't get all fired up!" She glared back at him, and he winked and said, "I'll be good, I promise."

Leia blushed and tried to pull her hand free, but he mischievously, he tightened his hold, and she surrendered.

Luke smiled as he watched this interplay. "I guess Leia doesn't want you to undo all the good work she and Two-Bee started on your shoulder," he told Solo. Leia gave him a furious glare, and he flinched and looked away.

"You're kidding!" Solo exclaimed, remembering only at the last second to keep still. He looked back at her, and found she was busily studying the pattern on the tiled floor.

"No," Luke explained. "You were lucky she was there. Leia's had surgical nursing experience. I'm not sure Two-Bee could have managed without her."

Solo was stunned into silence for a long moment. He released his grip on her hand, allowing her the freedom to remove it from within his if she wished. He was very pleased when it remained where it was. He gave a grateful squeeze, then said, "Look...uh, Luke...Princess. I don't know what to say."

"That's a first!" Leia commented dryly.

Silently, Han thanked her for making it easier for him. "Yeah, well, how about thanks." He gave each of them a sincerely grateful gaze, then added threateningly, "But if you ever do anything like that again..I'll kill you!"

Luke and Leia immediately caught the unintentional pun. They struggled a moment, then gave in to their laughter.

"What did I say?" Solo groaned.

END

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