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Hoth Destiny

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The Alliance, Captain Han Solo thought wryly, certainly knows how to choose 'em. Maybe they ought to pick a semibleasurable world for once. I bet the Empire would never think to look there. He eyed his handiwork on the Rebel base's main sensor array, then stood to return the casing to its place. His knees protested the movement after remaining in a crouching position for some time, and Han winced slightly as he stretched and reached for the sensor covering.

As he replaced the bolts to seal the covering, Han pushed his snow-encrusted goggles away from his eyes to survey the bright Hoth landscape without their aid. White-topped hills rose and fell, marring the white planes like waves on an ocean; from his perch atop one such plateau, Han could see to the west the occasional cluster of people and ground vehicles entering or leaving the new Rebel base that had been furrowed into several icy caverns. The Rebels, Han had been told, had worked for over a month to get the base functioning and ready for occupancy, but Han had still worried a little about the stability of the walls, and more importantly, the ceilings. When he had arrived on Hoth a day ago aboard the Rebel medical frigate, he had immediately arranged to see the area that had been readied for the Falcon to dock when she arrived. Han had to admit to being impressed at the strength of the supports and the way the Rebels had hollowed out and prepared the ice cavern for use. He'd been about to examine the base further when Two-Onebee found him, effectively ending his 'tour' of the new Hoth base.

But he was free again, Han thought victoriously, glancing down to tug the last bolt into place. He had escaped once more from Two-Onebee's probing clutches (Han was quite certain the droid knew of Han's phobia of needles

and liked to give him extra shots to torture him and keep him in line) and had promptly cornered General Rieekan to demand a job to do. If he was going to leave this bunch, as he intended, he wanted to make sure he was leaving them (two of them in particular) with working equipment. The weathered General had eyed him in a way that said he knew Solo was not officially discharged from the medcenter, despite the Corellian's claims, but Cartist Rieekan had known Han Solo for nearly three standard years now; rather than arguing with the stubborn man, he'd simply nodded and given Solo a job arranging sensors near the base. Han suspected it was less a generous pardon than an act of necessity - only one quarter of the Rebel forces were actually on Hoth, the remainder making their way slowly here after quick supply runs or weapons raids. Hoth was a safe haven at the present, so the medical frigate and a few officers had been sent directly to the snow-covered planet without any stopovers en route.

Blessing or curse? Han wondered. The bitterly cold wind stung his cheeks and now-unprotected eyes and tugged at the strands of dark hair that had strayed out from his thick parka's hood. Come stay at Hoth, the Rebellion's vacation planet! Be sure to dress warm and bring your own on-planet transportation - at least until the speeders arrived in a few days with the next batch of incoming Rebels, and could be adjusted to the cold. Until then, the Alliance was trying to adapt by taming and training some of the local creatures, tauntauns, for use in patrolling and planting sensors further out on the glacier-covered hills.

Han replaced the tools in his kit, and let his eyes follow the course which the Millennium Falcon would be taking when she returned.

Solo sighed wearily, knowing he should have been the one piloting her on her run, the one to make the contact and retrieve the supplies. Luke Skywalker had been chosen instead to accompany Chewbacca after Solo had been declared unfit for active duty.

Aw, Sith, Han swore, grabbing the kit angrily. Stiffly he made his way back down the hill to the warmed interior of the new Rebel base. I shouldn't be here. Pushing his hood back and yanking the goggles fully off, Han stalked to the surprisingly empty com-mand center, not bothering to pause and pull off the remainder of his snow gear.

He glanced around quickly before sinking carefully into the vacant chair next to the monitoring console and letting his shoulders slump with weariness. Grimacing slightly, Han shifted and punched in the correct buttons to activate the sensor he had just placed.

His swift perusal of the room had shown that the haughty yet intriguing Princess of Aideraan was not lurking about. Good. He was in no mood for

her sharptongue, nor her reluctant pity. Especially not her pity. He didn't need it, and he didn't want it. What he really wanted was to have something useful to do. What he really wanted, despite what he'd told the Alliance brass just a few short weeks ago, was to be as far away from here as soon as possible. Jabba had finally lost his patience, and Han had discovered on Ord Mantell just how many professional and amateur bounty hunters were hoping to get their hands, claws, and tentacles, onto the enormous re-ward the Hutt was offering for one - live - Corellian and his Wookiee companion.

Han slowly stretched his long legs out in front of him, carefully leaning back in the chair and crossing his arms over his chest. As much as he hated to admit it, he'd worn himself out already simply installing some sensors. Han slouched down far enough to rest his head on the back of the chair. He figured he'd be safe enough from the Princess here, at least for a while. The command center should be the last place she'd look for him, and since he'd turned off his comlink, her only options - should she be searching for him at all - would be to send an aide or come looking for him herself. Privately, he amused himself by wondering which she would choose.

A twitch of pain in his right leg turned his thoughts from the Princess. Han frowned and flexed the muscles gingerly, knowing that soon enough the twitch would blossom into a fire of pain that would span from the top of his leg to the tips of his toes. Two-Onebee had assured him that the pain would lessen within a few days and had given him some hefty painkillers for relief, but in the week he'd been suffering, he'd steadily refused them. He couldn't afford to stumble drowsily through a day, not when there was so much to be done and he was so tired already. I knew we should have shied away from Ord Mantell, he thought tiredly. He was sore and utterly exhausted, and not much help to the Rebellion in his current predicament with Jabba. For all concerned, it would just be better if he were on his way.

Well, maybe not for all concerned, he thought with a smile, but the smile was tinged with sadness. Lovely lady, I will miss you, he thought regretfully. Too bad we rarely made it more than ji've minutes without arguing.

True, she had shown subtle sips of concern and pity throughout his slow recovery, but the sardonic part of him reflected that it was merely because she felt guilty he'd been injured on company time, on a mission he hadn't wanted to take part in. So if her concern stemmed from guilt, in essence, I don't need it and I definitely don't want it.

The thought niggled his brain that he was being un-fair to the Princess, and perhaps she was genuinely concerned about him, but it was easier to

believe she only felt guilty, and it made leaving so much easier with no ties harshly broken.

And there was the kid, too. Han swallowed, trying to remember if he'd ever been that enthusiastic, that excitable, that likable. It would be hard saying goodbye to Luke, but the kid would understand. Especially now he had witnessed the brutal efficiency of Jabba's bountyhunters. It had just been too close, even for Han Solo. He was determined to pay off Jabba before he found himself in a situation he couldn't blast his way out of.

Han shifted uncomfortably in the chair, telling him-self he should just give in and go to his assigned quarters and rest. The pain in his leg was rapidly becoming more than a twitch, and he knew that if he was going to move, it would have to be done soon. Slowly Han stirred to climb to his feet, but he simply lacked the energy to move. He was so very tired, and it would be so easy to relent and let the darkness slide over him, soothing him to sleep as easily as a mother, her child. It would be so easy ... and perhaps the dreams wouldn't come this time. So easy... He could ignore the pain until it worsened, he could rest here for a few moments... it would be so easy...

"Han!!" A woman's sharp voice penetrated the wonderful blackness he'd allowed himself to be immersed in, causing him to grimace and try to turn away from the accusing tone. The movement caused the armrest of the chair to dig deep into still-healing ribs, eliciting a gasp of pain. His eyes shot open as he turned as carefully yet as quickly as he could away from the protruding edge. "What do you want?" he asked darkly, swinging a venomous gaze in direction of the voice as he tried to clear his blurred vision and remove traces of fuzziness from an all-too-short nap from his tone.

Leia Organa frowned, whether at the brusque question or the display of not quite covered pain she had just witnessed, he didn't know and didn't care. Partially embarrassed at himself for failing asleep and partly angry at the Princess for awakening him, Han was in an altogether unpleasant mood as he brushed the haunting images from his mind and focused on Organa.

"You're supposed to be in the medcenter," she said uncertainly, sounding like she wasn't sure whether to be angry and frustrated, or upset he wasn't following the medical droid's orders. If he hadn't been so grim, Han probably would have congratulated himself for getting such a confused reaction from the normally unflappable Princess.

"I checked myself out," he growled, still glowering as he attempted to stand without showing how badly he was hurting. His right leg did indeed

feel as if it were on fire and he swallowed uneasily, vying to hang on to his surly mood long enough to get safely to his quarters.

"I was planting sensors on the east ridge," he informed her, smiling just a bit smugly as he added, "Rieekan's orders."

"I'm sure he didn't know you hadn't been officially released," Leia defended her friend quickly, her dark eyes daring him to prove her wrong.

Han would have smirked at her just to get her ire up, had he not been so exhausted. He'd hoped Leia would get the hint that he was not in the mood for another confrontation, or she would be so torqued by his foul mood she would just leave. Han almost felt guilty for treating her this way, she did deserve respect, but at any rate, he would be leaving soon and it was just better this way. She'd be happier with Luke, anyway ... whoa. Happier with Luke? That almost sounded as if he'd thought he had a chance...

Han shook his head, clenched his teeth, and hauled himself upright in the chair.

"I'm fine," he ground out. Or getting there, he mended to himself, but there was no way he was telling Leia that. "Leave me alone."

"Oh, you really look 'fine,' " Leia offered sarcastically, not looking at all like she intended to leave. Han was surprised when her voice softened a little and she said sympathetically, "Your leg's bothering you, isn't it?"

Obvious, Your Worship? he wondered. "Yes. No! No," he faltered at first, then said as steadily as he could manage, "No."

Leia arched an eyebrow that said, Really, Captain? but didn't comment aloud, which irritated Han all the more. He knew he needed to get to his quarters - would it really hurt for him to just take the painkillers once and sleep it off? - but he didn't know if he trusted himself trying to walk with Leia standing there. She wasn't budging; instead, she was gazing at him in classic Leia fashion, arms crossed and glare firmly in place, so he had no choice. Gathering his energy, Han surged to his feet to tower over the Princess and wave one long forefinger under her nose. "I don't need you nurse-maiding me, Princess. Just leave me alone!" He tried to keep from swaying at the sudden dizziness that overwhelmed him, but knew he had failed miserably as his vision wavered then steadied.

Of course Leia noticed it too. "You need more than a nursemaid, Solo," she scoffed. "Look at yourself! You can't even stand without nearly passing out."

"I'm touched you care," Han retorted, turning stiffly to lean against the console beside him. He finally gave up pretense of surliness and allowed the weariness he was feeling to creep into his voice and cross his features. He couldn't believe he'd been such an idiot as to allow Leia to goad him. He was paying for his temperflash now as pain throbbed its aching way up and down his leg and beat a steady rhythm in his head. At this point he wasn't sure he could even make it to his quarters by himself.

Leia watched in concern. It was almost as if a physical wave had washed over Han, leaving him utterly drained in its wake. One minute he'd been all foul temper, in the next she'd watched as his hazel eyes, brightened to an angry green, dulled and greyed with pain. He had almost stumbled as he'd leaned to rest against the console, and Leia was beginning to wonder how much longer the stubborn Corellian could remain conscious, let alone on his feet.

Leia felt a twinge of guilt. She'd been so busy with the move to Hoth that she'd had little time to see Han lately (no matter how much she wanted to, but she didn't plan on telling anyone that) and she'd assumed from his lack of complaints that he was feeling better. As she gazed at him now, really looked for the first time in over a week, she knew her assumption had been wrong.

Though he'd been sarcastic when he said it, his last words hung heavily on her mind, weighed down with the guilt of abandoning a friend in need.

"Han," she said quietly. "I do care. I really do." She added, "You need to stay in the medcenter until Two-Onebee gives you clearance to go."

Solo looked at her again, a touch of wry humor and something else lighting his eyes.

"You care, huh?" His tone was joking, but his eyes were curious.

Leia swallowed back the immediate You know I do that had sprung reflexively to her brain and very nearly to her mouth. Not yet, her mind urged. He had said he planned on staying with the Alliance. There would be plenty of time for ... plenty of time to care later. "Well, uh," she

stammered, then drew herself up straight. "Of course we do. You're a great help to us."

Disappointment replaced curiosity as curiosity fled his eyes, taking with it the strange emotion she couldn't identify and hardening his features. Leia was disappointed as those laughing hazel eyes remained dull and grey, and stunned as Han quirked a half-smile in her direction as he pushed himself away from the monitoring console.

"That's right. How could I have forgotten?" Han turned away from Leia and strode from the command center, praying he could make it to his quarters and not pass out in a corridor somewhere. See? he told himself harshly. You knew.

At last, Leia was too shocked to react. One moment Han had looked as if he was going to faint on the spot, the next he had straightened up and walked out on her. None too steadily, though, she noted with alarm. Suddenly too frightened to leave him, Leia hurried to pursue, nearly bumping into Solo in her haste to follow.

"Han!" He was hunched over, hands on his thighs, obviously in pain as he leaned against the corridor wall. At her sharp tone, his eyes snapped up to meet her face.

"I wish you'd quit doing that," he complained weakly. "Good way to get a blaster bolt between the eyes."

"Ha!" Leia retorted, calling on her training to dismiss panic so she could think clearly. She was shaken at seeing him hurting so. Leaning slightly to put an arm under the bent Corellian's shoulders, she added, "You don't even look like you have the strength to sneeze, Solo, let alone hurt anyone."

Before she could blink, a glint of metal flashed and a wicked-looking vibroknife pressed to her throat, not hard enough to even leave a line, but close enough that she could feel its humming edge just brushing her skin.

"Never," Han's deep voice rumbled softly in her ear, "underestimate your opponent, Princess." He shifted and the knife disappeared, but Leia found it was a moment before she could speak again. Han was gazing at her levelly.

"That's good advice if you wanna hang around awhile."

Leia nodded without verbally replying, berating herself for being surprised by the Corellian's actions. She should have expected something

like that from him. "Come on," she finally managed, tugging to get him standing upright again. He was still half-bent with pain, and she kept a hand on his arm to steady him as she began guiding him down the corridor with slow, shuffling steps. Not for the first time in her life, Leia wished she were taller. She always seemed so slight next to Han's tall frame, and she was having difficulty supporting him. He was favoring his right leg, and she tried to oblige him by leaning into his right side and pulling his arm over her shoulders, but he was refusing to rely on her to hold his weight. Leia was hoping anxiously they'd come across someone in the corridors who could help her with Solo, but the base was nearly deserted, most of the rebels still packing up their previous base on Askalon. The planet had served well as a hiding place, but the swampy land masses had caused several of the droids to malfunction from the green sludge that seemed to infest everything on-planet. Han had complained irritably on Chewbacca's behalf as the poor Wookiee simply could not keep himself clean and had to shower continually. The Alliance command had taken pity on him and had sent the suffering Wookiee on the first available supply contract to spare him further misery. Han Solo had thrown a holy terror of a fit when he had been denied clearance to accompany Chewbacca due to medical reasons, and in the end it was only Han's calm voice of reason - Chewbacca - (certainly nothing Solo possessed could be qualified as either calm or reasonable! Leia chuckled to herself) that could convince the Corellian to remain on Askalon. Leia regretted she hadn't been there to hear that conversation between the two partners.

Han swore as he stumbled again, bringing Leia back to the present. Quickly checking to make sure they were headed in the right direction, she urged him forward. "We're almost there," she said encouragingly, hiding her increasing concern by speaking briskly. He seemed to be moving even slower than before, and his face was pale and strained. It was natural, she assumed, that he'd still be sore and in some pain, but that didn't make it any easier for her to see. Leia was chillingly glad she hadn't seen him when he'd first arrived in the medcenter on Askalon after he'd been rescued on Ord Mantell. What Luke had told her was enough to cause her stomach to lurch and her heart to tighten.

"You're going the wrong way," Han informed her through clenched teeth a moment of slow progress later as she prodded him down the left side of a fork in their path.

"No, I'm not," she said firmly. "The med-center's this way."

"I'm not going to the medcenter," Han replied stiffly. "I'm going to my quarters."

"Han," she said quietly, "please."

Han wanted to argue, he wanted to be obstinate, but mostly he just wanted lie down - anywhere - so he nodded shortly, knowing they were closer to the med-center than his quarters. He was slightly uncomfortable by the look of concern in the Princess' eyes and the stiffness of fear - fear for his health and safety - that marked her rigid movements as she helped him as best she could by supporting his tall frame as he hobbled slowly down the corridor. She looked so open, so scared and vulnerable.

"I didn't scare you with the knife, did I?" he ventured quietly, hoping to erase some of the tenseness in her eyes.

"Of course not," Leia said quickly. "I knew you wouldn't hurt me." In fact, she realized, the only time of late she had felt safe was in Han's presence. Though he didn't like to show it, and likely didn't want her to know it, he had fierce protective instincts that always came to the fore when she was being threatened in some way. The knowledge made her cheeks slightly rosy and brought her thinking along tracks she often tried to ignore where Han Solo was concerned.

Han seemed embarrassed by his quick actions. "I didn't mean to scare you ... Leia." His voice was whisper soft.

At first Leia thought he might be embarrassed of calling her 'Leia,' though she was surprised at how nice it felt to hear him say it, but an inquisitive glance at his face revealed his eyelids were slowly sliding shut, features slackening as he began to release his hold on consciousness.

"Han," she said sharply, shaking his shoulder to bring him back around. His breath hissed through clenched teeth as he started and stumbled, arms clutching his middle reflexively. "Han," she repeated louder, genuinely frightened for him.

"S okay," he muttered, pausing to lean back against the wall and closing his eyes tiredly. He couldn't remember it being this bad before; not only did his leg feel as if it were on fire, but it had spread to encompass nearly the entire right side of his body. Han wanted to curl up into a ball right there and just go to sleep.

"Do you want to wait for a med team and a stretcher?" Leia asked with a calmness she didn't feel.

"No," he groaned, moving painfully upright again.... Most there ... right? ... C'n make it..." His voice was coming in pained gasps, but he forced himself to continue walking alongside the Princess.

"It's not much farther," Leia said gently, helping him along again. "Just around this bend." She resumed their interrupted conversation as if they hadn't stopped at all, hoping to keep him occupied until they reached the medcenter.

"No, Han, no, I wasn't frightened," She grinned wryly. "A very effective way of getting your point across, Captain."

He laughed quietly and continued shambling beside her, pausing every few steps to catch his breath. Leia made what 'small talk' she could until a moment later when they rounded the last bend and were through the med-center doors.

"Two-Onebee?" she called anxiously as Han sighed wearily. Weak as he seemed, Leia wouldn't put it past him to make a bolt for the door, and kept a wary grip on his arm through the thick parka sleeve. "Two-Onebee?"

Han hrrmed and ducked his head, and Leia quickly ushered him to a nearby medical bed, thinking he was in pain. As he lifted his head, she was surprised to see a smile quivering at his lips, one he was evidently trying to suppress.

"Han?" she murmured quizzically, wondering if he'd somehow become delirious.

Smile under control, though his lips twitched as he spoke, Han told her pointedly, "Uh, Princess, unless someone's been here since I 'checked out,' I don't think he'll be answering you."

Leia's mouth fell open and she stamped her foot angrily. "Han! This is serious! What if it had been an emergency?" Glaring, she stalked toward the adjoining rooms in search of the medical droid. Incurable man! Sometimes I wonder why I bother!

"First one on the left," Han supplied helpfully, grimacing as he shifted position, but making no other effort to leave the bed. He stretched out as long as he could, trying to ease the pain somewhat, and sighed.

Leia exhaled in relief as she reached behind the still droid and activated the 'on' switch. The Two-Onebee unit hummed slightly as its mechanics started again, and she directed him out to the main area where Han waited, throwing another glare at the smuggler for good measure. Frowning at her angry look, Han crossed his arms over his chest stubbornly, a What would you have had me do? look plain on his face.

"I had to get out of here before I went crazy," he said defensively.

"Doesn't look like you stayed out for long," she retorted sweetly, grasping for the zipper of his parka and tugging gently. "Come on," she said, less sarcastic as worry again seeped into her voice. "Let's get this snowgear off." A teasing grin blossomed slowly across his face, but she ignored him. "Don't say it," she warned.

Han was all wounded innocence. "Why, Your Royalness, I wasn't going to say anything."

Yeah, I'll bet. She helped him slide the jacket off his shoulders, watching his face carefully for telltale wincing of pain and slowing her movements as they crossed his face. Leia checked over her shoulder as Two-Onebee glided into the main room and was gratified to see its photoreceptors glowing brightly as it came fully to 'awareness.' The droid's metallic blue head swiveled to look first at the Alderaanian, then the Corellian by her side.

"Captain Solo," Two-Onebee began, and Han could almost swear there was a hint of annoyance in that metallic voice.

"Stow it," he interrupted wearily, "I've already been read the riot act by Her Highnessness."

Leia flashed him a glance, then said, "Just check him over, please, Two-Onebee. And make sure you check his head," she added for Han's benefit, "it's the part I worry about the most."

Han smirked. "I'm touched you care."

Leia almost smiled. "I'll be back to check on you later," she said briskly. Turning quickly, she strode the door, pausing hesitantly and turning to look at the Corellian once more. Then she was gone.

Han smiled once, slowly and genuinely, before he was returned to the present by a needle-wielding medical droid.

"Hold still, please, Captain."

Han eyed the droid suspiciously. "And just where do you plan on sticking that???"

It wasn't until the next morning that Leia could make her way back to the medcenter. She was pleased with the way things were progressing in the

establishment of the base, and fervently hoped the Rebels could rest on Hoth while replenishing their rapidly dwindling supplies. With everything clicking smoothly into place, Leia couldn't help but feel hopeful for the base on Hoth.

Now, if she only could feel as hopeful for a certain Corellian...

"How is he, Two-Onebee?" she asked without preamble as she poked her braid-encircled head in the doorway of the medeenter. "Captain Solo, I mean," she corrected hastily.

"Captain Solo is resting in a private room," the droid answered as the Princess entered, evidently searching for the Captain. Two-Onebee assumed the Princess would want a detailed diagnosis of Solo's condition and began to elaborate further, but the droid paused as he realized the Princess had already located and entered Solo's room.

Leia stayed safely in the wash of light spilling infrom the main room, peering into the darkened confmesbeyond, but she was unable to see anything in the dim light.

"He's all right, isn't he?" she whispered, turning briefly back to the droid. Leia allowed some concern to creep into her voice - there was no one present but Two-Onebee to hear the Princess inquiring after the smuggler.

"Captain Solo is suffering from exhaustion and improperly healed wounds, Your Highness. I've ordered him placed on complete bedrest..."

Yeah, right, Leia thought with amusement. Carefully she scaled the lights up to a quarter brightness, enough to bathe the room in a wann glow and allow herto see the room's occupant.

Solo was lying on the medical bed, clothed in a sickbay tunic and draped with a heavy thermal, his body twitching in a restless sleep. The quiet hum of machinery was the only sound, and the heavy smell of antiseptic pervaded the air, as it always did in medical areas.

Feeling braver, Leia edged closer to the medical bed, studying the weary face below her. She was stunned by how worn and tired the Corellian looked, even in his sleep.

Oh, Han, she thought wistfully, do you never know peace? Very, very gently, she reached out to place a feather-light touch on his forehead, smoothing back hair that had been lightened under Mantellian suns. It seemed she did nothing but argue with this infuriating man, but as she

looked at him now, her heart smiled with the one emotion she had squelched since Aideraan had been destroyed, taking with it not only her family, but the man she had loved.

Leia bit back the tears, for tears would bring neither him, nor her lost family, back to her. He would no longer be grieved for, but he would not be forgotten. Just like her family and friends, and Aideraan. Hesitantly she withdrew her hand, but as she did Han mumbled something in his sleep and his hand flicked over the thermal, grasping for something beyond his reach, perhaps his blaster. His forehead creased in frustration as his hand came up empty and his murmurings became agitated.

Carefully, Leia slipped her small hand into his searching one, stilling its movement even as she reached with her other hand to resume gently brushing through the hair that persisted in covering his forehead. Han's body calmed as he relaxed, and Leia gazed at their interlocked hands in wonder. It seemed so ... natural, so perfect. A princess and a smuggler.. Leia smiled, grateful for this one touch of gentleness between them. If it was all they had, she would remember it forever. Her smile turned into a begrudging, lopsided grin. Too bad Solo's not even conscious to know it! They got along so well when he was unconscious.

Leia looked around to make sure no one was in earshot, then gave Solo a suspicious glance to make sure he was indeed sleeping and not awake and listening. Satisfied he was truly asleep, she moved her fingers from his forehead to gently clasp the callused hand that held her left hand prisoner.

A princess and a smuggler. The words stuck in her mind, and she nodded just slightly, still wearing a crooked grin. "It could work, you know," she admitted. And at times she thought she wanted to make it work. But she was so confused! One moment all she could do was argue with his brashness, the next she simply wanted to see a genuine smile spread across his face, warming her heart as Aideraan's sun had warmed the grassy knolls of her home planet.

"Luke..." she began hesitantly, vying to put her feelings into words, "Luke is so enthusiastic about life, so likable. But he's too predictable. I always seem to know what he's going to do before he does it. And I know exactly what he's thinking."

Leia paused, directing another look at the Corellian to make sure he was still safely ensconced in slumber. It was so much easier to just say these things to him, things she had wanted to tell him for a long time, when he couldn't hear her. If only she could work up the courage to do it when he was awake.

Ignoring that line of thought, she continued, "And Wedge is sweet and interesting, but I've known him since I was twelve! But you, Captain," Leia sighed, "are an enigma. You're such a contrast! Brave to the point of foolhardiness, quiet but brash, smart, take charge," she sighed again. Not to mention' she groaned to herself, good-looking, and he knows it...

Han Solo was stumbling to consciousness slowly. He felt like he'd been asleep for a week but hadn't really slept the entire time. His blurred vision drifted in and out, and he blinked a couple of times to clear it, wondering why he couldn't move and why his ears were roaring like Jabba had belted out the entire seventy-six verses of 'The Attributes of a Hutt' directly into them.

As his vision cleared a little, he realized he must still be unconscious. Not much else could explain the fact that Leia Organa was sitting by the bedside, clasping his hand firmly, and sporting the most lopsided smirk he'd ever seen anywhere but in a mirror. Her eyes were fixed on some far point and she was speaking - it was probably a pity he couldn't hear what she was saying. With a face like that, it had to be interesting.

She smirked. "Wouldn't Luke be shocked to hear me saying this to you? Wouldn't you?"

"Hey, Your Worship." The croaking voice was faint but amused, and definitely Han Solo's: "That's an interesting look you've got there."

Leia Organa gaped, jaw smacking the floor as she dropped Han's hand and quickly wiped the lopsided smirk off her face. That rat!! He was awake!! she fumed. That would be just like him, the little weasel! She could feel her face burning crimson, but she couldn't form any coherent words to tell Solo off. Ooooh!! How dare he listen in on her private thoughts??

Leia stamped her foot angrily and stalked out of the room, mumbling under her breath about pigheaded Corellians and idiot princesses who ought to know better than to...

Han cast a confused look at the entering Two-One-tee, who had witnessed the Princess' furious departure and decided it prudent to see if his patient was still alive. "What'd I do now??"

Leia stalked down the corridor, alternately glaring at anyone unfortunate enough to get in her way and feeling bad about it, but too angry to do any more than continue glaring. Still, the part of her mind versed in diplomatic training automatically noted the names of people she glowered at and stored them so she could apologize at a more convenient time.

"Arrogant . . . stubborn . . . entirely too cocky," Leia growled under her breath. She hoped that by now the embarrassed blush had dissipated, but by the heat in her cheeks wasn't counting on it. How humiliating. She should have known better than to trust a pirate.

"Talking to yourself, Leia?"

The voice of her beloved friend and advisor startled Leia from her muttered tirade. For the second time in less than ten minutes that infuriating blush was back, and Leia began to reply, but Rieekan cut her off, his eyes twinkling.

"Solo, again?" he questioned innocently.

Leia glared. "Yes, 'Solo, again.' That man..." she trailed off, clenching her small hands into fists.

"How is he?" Rieekan asked, genuinely concerned. When the Rebel team had brought Solo back to Askalon from Ord Mantell, Rieekan hadn't been entirely sure the young man would live through his injuries. But Solo had assured him that Corellians 'were virtually indestructible.' Well, he was coming close to believing that.

"Evidently surviving," Leia growled. It always amazed Rieekan how easily Solo could get the Princess' ire up.

"We almost lost him, you know," he prodded. Her expression softened marginally.

"I know," Leia admitted. "I wish I had been there when they- "

Rieekan shook his head. "No, you don't," he said gently as she looked at the ground. "It was bad, Leia."

"I should have stayed," Leia near-whispered. "Perhaps I could have--"

"Leia," Rieekan said firmly, "There wasn't anything you could have done."

"He shouldn't have sent me away!" she said angrily. "I should have stayed," she insisted quietly.

"Leia, Solo and Luke sent you away to protect you, because they care about you."

"Don't they think I care about them?" Leia demanded, head snapping up to meet Rieekan's eyes. Her brown eyes were dark with anguish and hurt as she tried to comprehend why she'd been sent away when she was sure she could have helped somehow, prevented their injuries to Han and his team.

"Leia," Rieekan said patiently, "Of course they know that. But they had to do what they thought was best for the team and the Alliance - and you." Rieekan almost smiled as he recalled a very indignant Leia Organa returning from Ord Mantell in the company of some of Solo's smuggler friends. She'd tried everything she could to remain with the team, including pulling rank on Skywalker, but as Solo cheerfully commented, 'he didn't have a rank in the Alliance, so Her Royal Rudeness couldn't order him around.' He'd ignored the diminutive Princess and simply asked Chewbacca to return Leia to the base, which the Wookiee had reluctantly left his friend to do. Leia had been incensed, launching tirade after tirade upon her return, and Solo's 'friends' - all but Chewbacca, of course - had promptly deposited their cargo and turned tail for Ord Mantell, probably never to ship for the Alliance again. "Don't be angry at them, Leia," he added. "They were trying to protect you."

Leia's eyes lowered and Rieekan read their unspoken thought. "Leia, you couldn't have protected him." Her chin jerked up, set to deny it, but her shoulders slumped and she shook her head.

"I know." Rieekan took her hand and held it firmly. "Leia, you must stop feeling guilty. No one blames you for anything that happened, not Solo, or Skywalker, either. What's done, is. Don't let the guilt and what-should-have-beens eat at you, or you're no good to anyone. Understand?"

A ghost of a smile pulled at Leia's mouth and she nodded.

"Good." Rieekan grinned. He knew he shouldn't ask, but it was interesting to see Leia's reaction. "So, what did Solo do this time?"

Rieekan ducked to avoid the small, royal fist swung in his direction.

The object of the Princess' ire lay flat at his back, staring upwards and wishing for the umpteenth time someone had thought to carve tiles into the ceiling of his room. At least counting them would pass some of the time.

He wriggled uncomfortably, trying to find a more pleasant position. His entire right leg had been numbed, dulling the pains that still traversed it on occasion, but rendering him immobile in the process. He remembered now, gloomily examining the ceiling, why he'd neither taken the painkillers nor stayed in the medcenter until he was officially released. I would have made it if Leia hadn't found me, he thought darkly.

And speaking of the Princess...

He was still puzzling over her abrupt departure. Maybe she'd been embarrassed about being caught offering comfort to a smuggler. Nah, that didn't sound quite like her. Maybe... Maybe she'd been embarrassed being caught offering comfort to him. Han smirked. A princess and a smuggler? That was an interesting thought. Nah, it would never work. She probably likes nice, respectable men.

Still ... he remembered the fear in her eyes as they stumbled down the corridor to the medcenter, the gentleness with which she had guided him.

Solo, you're imagining things. That painkiller must have gone to your head. Han frowned. She was feisty, bright, brave ... and every inch a princess. He didn't stand a chance with her. And it's better this way. You're outta here as soon as Chewie gets back if you want to keep your hide.

In a way, he was glad the Wookiee wasn't on Hoth right now. Chewie would be spewing out how selfless it would be to return to the Rebellion after paying Jabba off, blah, blah, blah, and how they couldn't just leave when they were needed etc., etc., etc., and Han was stuck flat on his back with no way to avoid the Wookiee. Chewie would seize the opportunity, Han knew without a doubt. It had happened before; Han wasn't about to let it happen again.

Han scowled. I am outta this bed before Chewie gets back, he thought determinedly. And he was peevishly glad Luke wasn't around, either. The kid would give him that kicked-puppy-dog look, that wide-eyed gosh-you're-the-best-Han! expression.

"You are coming back, aren't you, Han?... Han mimicked in a high-pitched imitation of Luke's voice." "Yes, Han," he tried for Leia, putting a strident note in the tone. "We need you." And what was with this 'we' stuff, anyways? Didn't she ever think for herself.... 'We'll provide spare parts for the Falcon.'" Yeah, and she only needed them after being shot up on some stupid mission bound for failure anyways! (privately, Han suspected Bothans weren't exactly the best intelligence officers around.)

Han was working himself into a bad mood and he knew it. He felt a little guilty for poking at his friends, but didn't they know he would likely end up a very dead Corellian if he didn't pay Jabba soon? There was nothing more to be said. As soon as Chewie returned with the Falcon, Han and his co-pilot were AWOL.

But until then ... Han groaned involuntarily as he recalled Two-Onebee's diagnosis. Two days' complete bedrest (he checked the chrono: only 32 hours and fifty-seven minutes to go), minor physical therapy to readjust his leg, nothing overly strenuous for at least two weeks. Ha. He'd have the whole, long flight to Tatooine to rest. Two-Onebee had rubbed the need for bedrest in by assuring Han it would have been unneeded had the Corellian simply stayed in bed until officially released. Hmmph.

Glaring alternately at the chrono and the ceiling, Han considered his options. Obviously another escape was out of the question; the minute he left the bed without Two-Onebee's permission, the hapless droid would call security or simply inject him with a pain-killer/sedative strong enough to knock him out for a week. Bad plan. He could call Leia for some company, but she was already torqued at him about something - and this time, he really had no idea what it was - and what would he say once she got here anyways? Provided she came at all, that was. Ah, here's what he could do: engage Threepio in some meaningful conversation. But, he realized, the droid was with Luke and Chewie.

Han sighed. Out of options. Han wondered absently how he was going to pay the medical fees for this little side trip. He and Chewie had enough saved up to pay off Jabba (with interest) and keep the Falcon gassed and running. That was all they could manage with the meager funds the Alliance could provide for them. Han didn't dare seek a contract until he'd paid off Jabba; that was asking for trouble and a quick pinpoint of the Corellian's location.

No, the Rebels would probably just assign him work to do until the debt was paid - most likely all the jobs they didn't want to do themselves, then they'd snicker at him behind his back as he indexed X-Wing parts or cleaned up after the Tauntauns. Han Solo, zoo maintenance patrol, and his faithful friend Chewbacca, tester of X-Wing safety harnesses.

Han glowered at the tireless ceiling. Not in this lifetime, Partner.

Rieekan finagled Two-Onebee out of some sitting time, and entered the small medical room quietly, stopping just out of Solo's line of sight to study the Corellian for a moment.

A fierce glower marred a pale face - and Rieekan had spent enough time in hospitals to know exactly how Solo felt - lips pressed tightly together to prevent the escape of a sigh; a clean medical tunic covering a new scar on Solo's right side; a brace to reset an improperly-healed right knee. Solo was poking listlessly at his 'dinner,' and Rieekan wondered about the nutritional value of the mass of gelatin on the plate. As if the atmosphere wasn't disheartening enough already, heaven only knew what they were feeding the poor man to strengthen him. Although, the Corellian ought to be used to the interior of the medical bay by now, and have all the food they served identified by smell alone. Rieekan sighed and shook his head. Smuggling was a dangerous business. As was rebelling against an Empire.

"Coming in?" a voice smirked by way of greeting. "I'm afraid I can't rise to greet you, but I'm dying from boredom here and could use some company." The last part, it sounded to Rieekan, was tinged with a bit of hope and took all intended sarcasm from the greeting.

Rieekan covered a smile. "I might if you stop trying to burn holes in the ceiling with that glare." Solo laughed and waved wryly toward the chair Leia Organa had occupied the day before.

"Sure, General." Solo's brow creased. "When did you get here? Any word from Luke and Chewie?"

Rieekan nodded, settling himself into the chair. "Skywalker and Chewbacca checked into the Askalon base just before I departed. Everything went smoothly and they should arrive on Hoth in another few days with the supplies." Rieekan noticed this news seemed to sober the Corellian more than cheer him. Frowning, he asked, "How're you doing, Solo?"

Solo released the tiniest of sighs. "Confined to bed for another--" a quick glance at the chrono "--thirty hours and thirty-nine minutes. Sir. And," he heaved a disgusted sigh, "wishing I could get back to cooking my own meals. They weren't all that great, but," he prodded the greyish, slimy mass on his plate, "this is like eating raw clam!!"

Rieekan covered the slight smile that was pulling at the corners of his mouth. "I see. Well, I'm sure Two-Onebee had good reason for ordering bedrest, Solo. You've hardly had time to recover from your injuries on Ord Mantell," he added more seriously.

"It wasn't really that bad, General," Han said quietly.

Rieekan snorted. "Of course not Solo." He caught the Corellian's eye and added, "I'm just glad the Princess wasn't there to see when they hauled your mangled body back to the base."

Solo scowled and ducked his head to break eye contact with the other man, but Rieekan had caught the flash of emotion in Solo's eyes. "Yeah, I'm sure Her Holiness would have been just heartbroken."

"Solo," Rieekan said warningly. Solo sighed and allowed the sarcasm to drop from his tone.

"Sorry, General." He was utterly serious in his next statement. "General, as soon as Chewie gets here, we're packing up for Tatooine. I've got some debts that need paid, and soon."

Rieekan nodded. He'd been expecting this for sometime, though he admitted to himself he'd hoped it wouldn't come to this. The Rebellion was losing a great asset in Solo and Chewbacca, and ... how will I tell Leia? he asked himself. Talking with her earlier had only convinced Rieekan that the Princess was quite developing - or had quite developed - feelings for Solo. He'd known Leia all her life, and had only seen that light in the young woman's eyes once before, the light that was now brought to her eyes by a man even more stubborn than she, a firebrand Corellian with a gentle heart and a teasing nature.

"You're a good fighter, and a good man, Solo," he said quietly. "We'll miss you."

Solo quirked an odd half-smile. "Not everyone, General."

Rieekan's comlink chirped, and he rose to leave. "I need to make sure the shield doors are closed until morning. Take care, Solo," he said gently.

"General," Solo said softly. "I'm dyin' of boredom in here. Could you..?" Rieekan had never heard the young man beg, but Solo was coming awfully close with more than a hint of desperation in his tired voice. Rieekan paused and offered a very close imitation of a familiar lopsided grin.

"I'll see what I can do," he promised, and Solo nodded his thanks as he settled in to rest for the night.

The next morning found Solo feeling worse than the day before. The dreams had yet to recede or lessen in their intensity, and as he surveyed his reflection in the fresher's mirror, he could only sigh and shake his head.

He looked awful.

Turning to Two-Onebee, who had assisted him to the fresher, he croaked, "I need a shower."

Thirty minutes later, he was again scrutinizing himself in the mirror.

Hair freshly washed and combed, stubbled chin shaved... He couldn't do anything about the dark circles under his eyes, however, or the cloudiness confusing their hazel depths. Or the fact that he had to be assisted everywhere by Two-Onebee - not that there was anywhere to go besides the fresher and back.

"So," he asked, draping an arm carefully around the droid's metal 'shoulders,' "when do we start the therapy stuff?"

"Soon, Captain," the droid promised, whirring and clicking as they shuffled into the main room. Han slowly hoisted himself back onto the medical bed. True to his word, Rieekan had dug up some-thing useful for Han to do while confined to bed for another ... nineteen hours and seventeen minutes. Han swung the food table around so it rested near his lap and retrieved the small tools from the kit on the bedside table.

Two-Onebee watched disapprovingly - this wasn't complete bedrest, but Han smiled ingratiatingly and returned to his work. Maybe rewiring power boxes wasn't working on the Falcon (okay, so it definitely wasn't), but it was better than nothing at all. And it was better than cleaning up after the tauntauns.

Leia Organa absently poked at the rations on her plate. She had finished all of her assigned tasks, and any others she could find, but for now she had simply run out of things to do. Carlist had all but forced her to come down to themess and eat, but, as she had feared, with no work to occupy her, her thoughts had naturally turned to Han Solo. Nearly five days had elapsed since she'd helped him to the medcenter, and she'd not seen him again after her first rather short visit. Well, she ought to have known better. After knowing Han - Captain Solo, she corrected herself - for nearly three years, she really ought to have known better. But she thought she had known better.

Leia sighed. It was all too confusing - a reaction, she found, that she had learned to easily identify when she was around Ha- Captain Solo.

Her comlink chirped and she thumbed it on. Rieekan's voice informed her that they were receiving a transmission from Luke Skywalker and Chewbacca. Gratefully abandoning thoughts of Han Solo and her uneaten dinner, Leia hurried to the command center.

Luke Skywalker's boyish face filled the vid-screen. Leia tried not to notice how his face lit up as she entered his line of sight, but offered him a slight smile.

"Commander Skywalker," Rieekan nodded to the young man.

"General," Luke began, "we've run into a problem." Luke looked off-screen, and Leia heard a deep growl from Chewbacca and then Threepio's high-pitched voice translating. The Jedi-in-training nodded and turned back to the screen. "The port stabilizer's out, General. The cargo's secured, but it's going to take us a few more days to reach the new base."

"Someone'll have to tell Solo," Rieekan murmured quietly.

"I'll ... I'll tell him," she offered quickly, ignoring Rieekan's smile. She smiled a well-done to Luke and turned quickly on her heel, striding out the door. Great, Leia. What was she doing? After her last departure, she was certainly going to be fodder for Solo's teasing nature now. If she walked fast enough, perhaps she wouldn't think about what she was doing. She was just delivering a message. A message from Luke. She was just delivering a message from Luke....

"Carefully, Captain."

Two-Onebee chided gently, watching the Corellian slowly stumble across the Sick Bay, working his newly-healed knee back into shape. Han cast an irritated glance in the droid's direction.

"I am going carefully!" Solo snapped testily, wobbling slightly as his concentration broke. Hastily he moved his weight to his good leg, but not quickly enough. He went crashing to the floor in a heap.

Stifling a groan, Han glared upward at Two-Onebee accusingly before latching onto the table above him with both hands and hauling himself to

his feet. He flexed his sore knee then determinedly took another halting step.

"Captain, you need to rest now," the droid said patiently. Han threw yet another glare at the droid. Not a chance. Chewie's comin' today, and I'm gonna bewalking before he gets here. He tried another slow step, but he was indeed getting tired. However, he refused to quit. Days of forced inactivity had him more restless than usual, and Han was itching to do something. He couldn't wait until Chewie and the Falcon arrived. His closest friend, his own bunk, and his own schedule was all he was asking for. It didn't take much to keep HanSolo happy. And, if it wasn't too much to hope for, some real food.

But right now, he would have been happy just to get away from Two-Onebee's sadistic clutches. Han concentrated solely on putting one foot in front of the other long enough to make it to the opposite side of the room and convince the medical droid he was fine.

"Han?"

His concentration shattered and he tumbled to the floor. Blinking, he glared hazily at this new threat to his well-being. Leia Organa. He should have known.

"Yeah?" he answered, as dignified as possible. He didn't dare try to get up again with her standing there, lest his attempt end in failure. He only hoped she would hurry - Sith, but the floor was cold!!

Leia's brow furrowed. "Are you all right?"

Han smirked as if it were really the oddest question he'd ever heard. "Yup."

One delicately-shaped eyebrow arched. "And you're ... resting?" she asked, sounding amused.

Han sighed and looked around for something he could use to pull himself upright. In the end, it was Two-Onebee.

"What do you want?" he asked, rather sharply. It was, Han had to confess, embarrassing to have the woman you'd tried to protect watching you fall flat on your face attempting to walk across the room.

Leia frowned. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Fine."

"Well, you look terrible," she said, in a pitying tone Han did not want to hear.

"Thanks," he said shortly. "Any other encouraging comments?" He didn't mean to be quite so rude, but she always did seem to bring out the worst of his sarcastic nature.

Leia's eyes dropped to the floor. "I came to apolo-gize."

Apologize? Han wondered. What for? "Um, okay," he said lamely, wracking his brain for anything she'd done that could be considered needing an apology.

"I shouldn't have stormed out the other day," Leia mumbled, then straightened, eyeing him and daring him to challenge her sincerity.

"Oh," Han said, thinking that he'd been so drugged on painkillers that he couldn't recall her ever visiting him here before.

Leia crossed her eyes, looking for all the worlds like she was waiting for him to say something, perhaps offer something in return. Han racked his brain for something, anything to say to appease her.

"Apology accepted," he offered somberly.

Leia looked angry for a moment, but instead of elaborating, she merely switched mental tracks, leaving Han wondering if it'd really been the right thing to say. "We've received a transmission from Luke. There's been a slight delay, and the Falcon won't be arriving for another two days." She delivered the message hastily then cringed, anticipating the Corellian's reaction. Han handled it rather well for having been in a bad mood already. When his tirade of growling and swearing had calmed down a bit, Leia primly stepped out from behind Two-Onebee. Han glared at her as if she were personally responsible for the delay, forgetting about apologies and responses for the moment.

"It's not my fault," she defended herself "It's your hunk of junk!"

Han put all his remaining energy behind the glare he shot at the Princess. To his credit, she actually shrank back a little. "My 'hunk of junk'?? Let me tell you something, Your Worship--"

"Captain Solo, you must rest now," Two-Onebee's flat voice interjected. Han wanted to groan. Of all the humiliating times to be told he needed to take a nap. Right in the middle of a good tirade.

"You shut up," he scowled, "or I'll use you to weld the Falcon back together!"

"Oh, Han, it's only another few days delay," Leia interjected, sounding exasperated. She seemed to have garnered a little composure from Two-Onebee's interruption.

Easy for you, Sweetheart, Han thought darkly. But he couldn't bring himself to tell her he'd be leaving for good as soon as Chewie arrived. He couldn't make himself look into her dark eyes and say he'd never becoming back; for some reason, there was a strange lump in his throat when he thought of saying goodbye to Leia Organa. Even though trouble for him always followed close behind her, he was becoming less and less inclined to leave her every day. And she, like Luke, seemed to have no regard for personal safety. Who was going to watch out for the two of them after he and Chewie blasted off this miserable snowball? It was more than Han wanted to think about at the moment, and suddenly he felt extremely weary.

"I'm gonna lay down," he stated in a tone that clearly said Two-Onebee's 'suggestion' had nothing to do with it.

"Do you need help?" Leia asked quietly. "No," Han growled, "I'm fine on my own, thanks." The voice in his head that sounded suspiciously like Chewie hrmmed in his ear again.

Leia drew herself up regally. "I was just leaving, then."

Oh, k'ala. What was he doing?? "No, Leia, wait-" Han began, trailing off reluctantly. She'd come down to apologize and deliver a message from Chewie, the least he could do was be civil. And besides, it was just plain boring and, well, lonely down here. Leia half-turned to face him again.

"Yes?"

"You really ... I mean..." Han faltered, then sighed. "Princess, I'm sorry. I'm goin' stir-crazy in here alone. If you stay for a while, I promise I won't argue." Hed elivered this with what he hoped was a contrite look on his face.

Leia nodded. "I can stay for a few minutes," she said quietly, glancing at the medical droid.

"Thanks," Han said sincerely, "but do you mind if we sit?" By sheer determination alone, he managed to get from the main room to his bed without failing, though he did have to keep tugging on the baggy medical clothes to keep from tripping over them.

Leia smiled as she followed, thinking how remarkably childlike Han looked padding around in clothing that was a size too large. But, Leia sighed, we don't have much. We can hardly custom-size clothes for everyone. Though with all the scrapes Han's gotten into, I'm surprised we don't have something in his size. He'd probably ruined them all, she surmised. But, there would time enough to find medical clothes Han's size - she was quite certain he'd be needing them sometime in the future.

"Hey," Han said, a hint of teasing in his tone, "You really do look better like that, Princess."

Leia realized he'd already made it to his bed and was grinning at her standing there with what she imagined was a rather goofy smile settled across her face. Ignoring the slight blush that threatened her pale complexion, she settled into a chair by the bedside. It was quiet, then, for a moment as neither knew just what to say.

Finally Han spoke: "So, Chewie'll be here in two days?"

The corners of Leia's mouth turned down. Well, what did you expect, Leia? A heart-to-heart? Men. "Yes, if all goes well."

"What was the delay?" Han asked, pulling a small tray of instruments toward him. Leia frowned, wondering where he'd come across those and how he'd gotten out of Two-Onebee's no-work rule. Well, it was a rule she'd violated often enough during her few stays in the medcenter. She half-smiled then, anticipating his reaction; not cruelly, but amusedly. "The Falcon's star-board stabilizer blew. They're limping back."

Han sighed. "I should've gone."

"Oh? You think you could have prevented it?"

He gave her a chilly look. "Of course."

Don't insult the Falcon or her pilot, Leia reminded herself. It could turn a for-once sociable Solo into a cold Corellian in a heartbeat. Corellians, she had learned over a nearly three-year acquaintance with Han, were extremely personal about both their vessels and their skills.

Determined not to slide into another argument and thereby terminate her remaining time with Solo, Leia simply nodded. Han snorted in amusement and dropped his head back onto the pillow.

"Thanks," he said quietly.

Leia shot him a questioning look. "For what?"

Han shifted to look at her, eyes serious. "For bringing Luke's message. You could have sent an aide down just as easily. And," he hesitated, "I'm sorry for being rude to you out there."

Han Solo, quietly apologizing for his behaviour? Well, it had taken awhile, but there was a bit a progress in his manners. If only he would stay that way for briefings and meetings. She smiled ruefully. "Apology accepted."

Han nodded, cracking the tiniest of smiles, then turned away to busy himself in his work.

Only occasional small talk passed between them during the remainder of her stay, but Leia was content to just sit with him. She took a quiet leave when, despite Han's stubborn efforts to remain alert and awake, his bright eyes began to slide slowly shut and his breathing deepened. Touching his shoulder once, she left the medcenter.

She didn't see Han again until just before Luke Skywalker and Chewbacca were due to arrive. Another transmission from Luke had assured them that the Falcon would be planetside by 1500 hours, and Leia was scurrying around to have everything ready for the Falcon's arrival. She had intended to walk down to the medcenter and inform Han, but a quiet murmur passed between the two female techs at the communications board, and Leia lifted her head to see the object of her thoughts enter the command center. His stride was deliberately casual, but even from this distance Leia could tell he was not striding so much as limping quickly, favoring his right leg. He was back into his Corelli-striped trousers and dark jacket, blaster snugged in its holster and resting on his thigh. His calf-length boots clumped across the

floor. Spotting her, he made his way over carefully. Leia ignored the whispering of the two techs, which halted sharply at Solo's arrival by her side.

"What are you doing out of the sick bay?" she demanded before he could speak. He, in turn, ignored her.

"How soon?" he demanded. "Who told you?" she demanded. It registered somewhere within her that the reason she was angry he'd already been told was because it deprived her of the chance to deliver a piece of news that would undoubtedly make him smile and alight the eyes that had dimmed since Han's 'incarceration' in the med-center. She sighed a little inside at missing the opportunity to see a genuine smile from the Corellian.

"Rieekan," Han said shortly. "How soon?" Too soon, echoed in his head, but it had been three years - three years too long.

"About thirty minutes," Leia said resignedly. "Now, will you please go rest? We'll let you know the minute they're in sensor range, if you wish."

"Later, Princess," he retorted, though not rudely; he was both anxiously awaiting and dreading the Falcon's arrival.

"At least sit down," Leia prodded. Rieekan, sparing a look at the worried Princess, drew Han aside.

"Why don't you go to your quarters and rest? I'll send ... someone over with a message soon as they've docked."

Han shook his head. "I'm fine." He noticed Leia casting furtive glances in their direction, no doubt straining to hear what was being said. Dropping his voice a pitch, he added, "I'd rather wait here, General."

"I'd prefer you didn't," Rieekan said bluntly, and Han's eyes widened. "For the Princess," Rieekan explained in a low tone. "Every minute you spend here she worries more and more you're going to fall flat on your face and be right back where you started - confined to the medcenter. So, for her sake if not your own, would you please try to rest somewhere??"

Han released an exasperated breath, but snuck another look at the Princess. Rieekan was right - she'd become noticeably more agitated since his arrival at the command center. "Fine," he said dryly. On his way out, he chuckled the Princess' chin. "See ya, Sweetheart," he drawled teasingly, offering her a half-smile for her worries. Leia stared after him, then back at Rieekan.

"How'd you do that??" she demanded. Rieekan merely smiled.

He managed to get through the welcomes without stumbling or passing out, much to the Princess' relief. She had given Han her word she wouldn't inform Chewbacca of the Corellian's difficulties - it was really the only way to assure he would remain civil to her - but that didn't keep her from strongly suggesting that Chewie keep a close eye on his friend after Han had retired to his cabin for the evening. Chewbacca had understood and dealt with the incorrigible pilot before on matters of bedrest and 'taking it easy,' and gave her a reassuring growl and pat to her shoulder that calmed much of her worry. As much as Han complained about it, Chewbacca was the only one Han would allow to do any semblance of 'nurse-maiding' when the Corellian was ill or wounded. She left the Falcon that evening feeling more reassured than she had in many long weeks.

Chewbacca had agreed that it was time to return to Tatooine. As they worked to repair the Falcon and ready her for the trip, Han alleviated the last of their 'debts' to the Alliance by doing minor things (under Chewbacca's watchful - and irritating - eye) such as placing sensors and rewiring more power boxes; the Rebels were always short of hands, and Han felt he was doing the last thing he could to protect Leia and Luke by helping Skywalker plant the remaining detection sensors across the icy plains.

And then, there was no longer a reason for delay. The Falcon was ready, the sensors were in place, and Han still hadn't broached the subject of Jabba to Luke or Leia Organa. He was taking a last trip with Luke to check the markers, then it was time to inform Rieekan and help Chewie close up the shop. Han Solo's and Chewbacca's association with the Rebel Alliance was about to come to an end.

Before signalling Luke that he was ready, Han took Rieekan aside.

"General," he said quietly, "I haven't told Leia yet about me and Chewie leaving." He offered a smirk but failed miserably. "She probably won't be too disappointed, but..." Han paused. Funny, it hadn't been this hard when he'd rehearsed it earlier a dozen times. At Rieekan's encouraging nod, he soldiered forward, "General, if you could keep an eye on her for me, and Luke, too. I ... I won't be back."

Rieekan nodded soberly. "There's always a place for you and Chewbacca here, Solo. Think about it. Report to me when you're finished with the sensors."

Han smiled weakly. "Sure, General." He straightened and gestured to Luke, who immediately joined him.

"What was that all about?" Luke queried, having watched the low-voiced conversation between Solo and Rieekan but unable to hear any of it.

"Noth---" Han started to brush it off before realizing he needed to be totally honest with his friend.

He took a deep breath and faced Luke. "Kid," he bewondering why he hadn't rehearsed this scenario yet, "You know I got debts to pay, big ones. You were Ord Mantell."

The liveliness drained from Luke's open face, leaving a usually cheerful expression somber. "Yes." It had often bothered the Jedi-in-training to know that friend possessed such a large bounty on his head, and how the Corellian had seemed to be uncaring of it -- until Ord Mantell. Luke had often wished Han would just make the little side-trip to Tatooine and pay Jabba, but he also knew it wouldn't be just a 'little sidetrip.' In all likelihood, they wouldn't see Han again after he repaid Jabba ... unless Chewbacca could convince him otherwise. "But you'll be coming back -- Chewie'll see to that," Luke smiled for his friend's benefit.

"Yeah." Han sounded unconvinced. "C'mon, kid," he tugged at Luke's shoulder, suddenly uncomfortable. "Time to saddle up."

"Han!"

Aw, now what?? Han wondered. Leia was coming towards them briskly, and Han caught the smile that formed on Luke's face. He sighed.

"Yes?" Leia looked at Luke pointedly until, taking the hint, Luke mumbled something about getting the tauntauns ready, and continued down the corridor alone.

"I'm in a hurry, Your Worship." He needed totell her he was leaving, had to, but for some reason the words wouldn't force their way past the lump in his throat.

"Han, I," she glanced up at him, locking her eyes with his, "I want to thank you for all the work you've been doing here lately. It's meant a great deal to ... to us."

The sarcastic 'Just paying my debts, Lady,' died on his lips. He stared at her for a long moment, then vevery gently brushed the back of his fingers

across her cheek. She didn't flinch away. His face was devoid of any hint of teasing or a smirking grin, totally empty every expression but an earnest look that pulled the wariness from his features and lit his eyes with green and gold. Worry surfaced within her as every nuance his expression and posture seemed to echo one thing: I'm sorry. But sorry for what? Sorry for breaking her walls? Sorry for giving gentleness at the least expecttime? Sorry for letting her into those thick defenses, if only a little? Why are you sorry? she wanted to ask, but the sheer openness on his face prevented the words from escaping her mouth. They stood, frozen, for a heartbeat more, then Han turned abruptly and started off down the corridor, not his usual jaunty stride, but a slow and tired walk, as if something weighing on his mind had weighted his feet as well. She wanted to walk with him, follow him, but she was rooted to the spot. By the time her feet caught up to her brain and pushed her down the corridor, Han was inside the tauntaun area, heading for his favorite mount. She watched through the clear barrier as he gently soothed the animal, readying it for yet another foray into the cold.

She didn't turn when Rieekan came up behind her, and didn't look away when he followed her gaze to the man leading Luke into the bitter chill to check the rest of the sensors.

"Leia," Rieekan said quietly, "there's something I need to tell you about Han."

Epilogue

A tousled head poked into the command center, then, spotting its objective, disappeared to re-emerge as Han Solo in his entirety. He strode into the room, making a beeline for General Rieekan. Watching him, Leia felt her heart plummet to the very bottom of her boots. He had betrayed her. She turned away, feeling ill in her soul, as Han and Rieekan conversed in low tones. She didn't want to talk to Han, she didn't want to look at him, but she had to know if he would return. After three years, he was leaving. She snuck a glance over her shoulder. Han was shaking Rieekan's hand, and with a last look turned away. Leia hastily turned her attention back to her console, and suddenly Han was facing her, and all her anger and betrayal - still she wondered about the betrayal she felt - came rushing to the fore, leaving her grieving inside, but she carefully schooled her features into a mask as cold as the ice surrounding them.

"Well, Your Highness, I guess this is it."

Three years of arguments, tumult, fighting back-to-back, and...friendship gone in a debt owed to some slimy crimelord. She wanted to remember him in a happy way, she wanted to cherish the time they had had together, but she could only feel angry at him for leaving them. "That's right," she said coldly, determined not to let any emotion slip through her voice.

His face contorted -into a mocking grimace, so unlike his warm smile. "Well, don't get all mushy on me. So long, Princess!" And he was gone, stalking back to his ship to finish the last-minute repairs. Leia was torn between staying to wait for Luke's message or following Han. She couldn't bear to let Han go without an explanation, and, ignoring the knowing glances from those in the command center, she hurried into the south passage to follow the Corellian who had turned her life upside down and was now walking out of it forever.

"Han!" she shouted, condemning herself for reacting at all but plunging ahead to draw level with Corellian, who had turned to wait for her.

"Yes, Your Highnessness?" he asked briskly with mock-politeness.

Leia swallowed. "I thought you had decided to stay."

End

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