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Hunt Without Moonlight

by Linda Ruth Pfonner

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Cold. Bone-deep, heart-chilling, brain-numbing cold. He wanted to move, to curl up and cradle what little warmth there was around him, but he could not move. He remembered attempting it once, an eternity or two ago, and the memory of the resulting pain was enough to make him cringe.

Much to his amazement, he could move. It hurt, of course, but it was not impossible. With a gasp of relief that was almost a sob, he rolled over onto his left side and curled up, shivering. He pulled the blankets tighter, and only then realized that he was on a bed. Curious, even through the incapacitating cold, he forced his eyes open.

A blond stone wall, sandy floor ... blank and featureless. The bed was nondescript; dull, earth-colored blankets, dingy grey sheets, a hard pillow. Automatically, he tried to feel the location of this place, and had to swallow hurriedly as bile rose in his throat.

\_Where am I that I can't sense where I am?\_ he wondered groggily, unaware that this was his first coherent thought. \_I'm Corellian; I always know where I am.\_

\_Well, I guess I'll worry about it later. I'm too tired, now. But I wish somebody would turn up the environmental; it's cold in here!\_ With that, he proceeded to shiver himself to sleep.

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When he woke up again, he was still cold, but not as fiercely as before. He was still curled tightly under the blankets, and had no inclination to venture out. Unfortunately, he was not given the choice.

"Sssssoo..."

The word was a sibilant hiss, and he jerked around in surprise; he had believed himself alone. The voice was unfamiliar, and the massively obese being who stood beside his bed was a stranger to him.

"I'm glad you're finally awake, Han," the corpulent being said oilily. "There's no pleasure in sharing company with a being who sleeps all the time."

\_Han?\_ he repeated to himself. \_Han? Is that who he thinks I am?\_ He shivered with sudden horror. \_Maybe it's true... 'cause I don't know my name--!\_

Another word surfaced out of the turmoil in his mind: \_'Solo.' Han Solo? That sounds familiar ... I think that's my name. I wonder who he is, that he knows me. He doesn't sound overly friendly...\_

The other being had apparently not noticed Han's introspection: he was still talking. "...punish you, you know. You were a bad boy, Han, and I don't intend to let the entire sector think I can be grifted by a lousy little smuggler like you. By the time I'm finished with you, you'll be begging for death. And, if you beg prettily enough, perhaps I'll grant you that favor. Eventually." On that cheery note the obese one turned away and waddled out the door.

\_Damn you, Jabba--\_ He stopped short. \_'Jabba?' That's his name; I'm sure of it. Why didn't I know that before? What's the matter with me?!\_ He began to actively fight the fog that separated him from his past. It was a long battle, and he had no idea how long it was before he started getting results.

Parts of his history were more easily accessible than others. He discovered that, as a rule, the older memories were the easiest to uncover. What finally and steadfastly refused to be revealed was, of course, the knowledge he wanted the most: where was Chewbacca? Where was the Millennium Falcon? And how had he ended up as Jabba's prisoner? For these questions there were no answers.

\_One thing I know now,\_ Han reminded himself, trying to cheer himself,\_ is that if Jabba's here, then this must be Mos Eisley. And if I'm still on Tatooine, then Chewie has to be here, too. Doesn't he?\_

The echo answered him, mockingly.

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When he woke up the next time, he was being dragged out of bed. He struggled reflexively even before he was fully awake, but he was no match for the guards, who held him and chained his hands behind his back. They then proceeded to frog-march him out of the cell and down the corridor.

They took him down three flights of stairs into a sub-basement. One look around convinced Han that he did not want to investigate this room too thoroughly; it was Jabba's playroom. Han had heard about the atrocities that Jabba called 'fun'--everyone in Mos Eisley had. His guards chained his hands high over his head to a ring suspended from a chain in the ceiling, and left him there. Han stood up straight, trying to ease the strain on his arms, and cursed quietly to himself.

\_What the hell's going on around here? Why's Jabba so mad at me? I'm damned if I can remember...\_

\_I feel so ... so adrift. Last thing I remember, clearly, is deciding that Jabba was probably going to try and take the Falcon for the money I owe him. Is that what I can't remember? I'd never let him take her without a fight ... does that mean that Chewie's dead?\_

That was a horrible thought, and Han tried to stifle it.

\_Jabba had me taken alive--I wish I could remember how!--and so, maybe he's got Chewie locked up someplace, too. Sure, Wookiees are hard to take alive, and harder to keep, but they must've been using heavy stunners or they never would've got me! I never heard of stunshock impairing memory--and it's never affected me like this before--but nothing's impossible. Or maybe Jabba had me drugged while I was unconscious.\_

He had been having nightmares of being paralyzed, of tears that were not his own, and Chewie roaring in anguish somewhere out of sight. All the light was red, followed suddenly by blackness and the mind-numbing cold. But the dreams made no sense, and he did not connect them to anything real.

The idea that Jabba had drugged him seemed the most logical explanation for his situation. It also sparked an alternative idea of how he might have been captured.

\_Last place I remember was the jazz cantina. If they got to the bartender--paid him to mick my drink... I'm gonna take this up with Erast--after all the liquor I've smuggled for him--!\_

Further speculation was cut off when Han heard Jabba enter the room. The Hutt could not sneak up on anyone; he was much too fat for that, and he wheezed, loudly, with every breath.

"Ssssoooo..."

Han made a decision as to what course of action to take in the space of time between two quick breaths. It was completely spontaneous. He stared at the Hutt for a long moment, then let his eyes unfocus so his expression would look vacant. He did not otherwise move, and he made no effort to speak.

"Solo?"

Jabba's voice sounded a little puzzled, and Han fought down a triumphant grin. He had an idea of what Jabba intended for him--it was not difficult to guess, considering the apparatus and paraphernalia that littered this 'play-room,'--and he knew that a great deal of Jabba's enjoyment of what was surely to come would be derived from Han's outrage and shame.

\_But if I can convince him that the freezing resulted in some organic brain damage--to the point of rendering me totally aphasic and only partially aware of what's going on around me, or to me, I'll've spoiled all his fun. Plus, if the guards figure me for a brain-burn case, maybe I can escape.

\_Freezing?'\_ he repeated the word to himself. He could not imagine where that word had come from. He thought about it for a bit, but before he could arrive at any conclusions, Jabba took a painfully firm hold of his jaw and forced his head up. It took self-control Han had never realized he had to keep from glaring at the Hutt, but that would have ruined the game and given away his little charade.

"Damn you, Solo, answer me when I talk to you!"

But Han simply stared at him, his expression blank.

Jabba growled and dropped his hold on Han, who turned slightly to watch the Hutt for a moment, and then resumed his facade of disinterest.

"I'll make him pay attention!" he heard Jabba mutter. "Slexu--use the flail on him until I tell you to stop."

"Yes, master."

Han had been unaware of Slexu's presence. Now the little lizardoid slithered out from behind something and into Han's field of vision, carrying what Han knew was the flail.

It looked harmless enough--a chromalloy tube about as long as Han's forearm, with a roughened grip and several controls near one end. Then Slexu swung it like a whip, and Han's body arced in involuntary reflex as a lash of flaming agony struck. Basically electrical, the flail activated every nerve in his body practically to the point of dissolution; it felt as if corrosive acid was being substituted for his blood, and then set aflame. The effect died away slowly, and Han hung against his chains, panting, his eyes closed. Slexu waited until his breathing had calmed, and then hit him again.

The flogging went on for hours. Han fought to keep from screaming, but he did not dare set his expectations any higher than that. He began to pray that he would lose consciousness quickly, but that refuge eluded him until he realized, much to his own horror, that he was whimpering his suffering aloud. It triggered a brief struggle as he mindlessly fought the chains that held him. That exertion proved too much for his overtaxed system, and a wave of black oblivion swept over him, ending his torment, at least for the moment.

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When Han fought his way back to consciousness, he was lying on a cold stone floor. He was cold and hungry, and every muscle in his body ached. He forced himself to sit up, swaying with weakness, and looked around dully.

He was in a small stone cell. From information available--his direct sense was working again, but sluggishly--he was only a few yards from the 'playroom.'

\_ Holding cell, \_ he thought. \_ Hungry--is there anything to eat here...? \_ His muscles felt like dead snakes, wrapped around his bones with dry, slimy skin, and he slumped, suddenly no longer able to sit up. Fortunately, there was a wall conveniently close. He leaned on it and crawled,

laboriously, into the nearest corner, so he could have two walls to help him sit up. He panted, desperate for air, too tired to search the cell for food or water, and fell asleep almost immediately.

Unbeknownst to him, Jabba had been watching him. The Hutt had his doubts about this odd behavior of Solo's--the medic he had entrusted the revival to had been sure that Solo had suffered no permanent or lasting damage. The cryogenic hibernation had been perfect, and the melt had gone without a hitch. Solo should have recovered completely.

Yet he had not spoken an intelligible word since he had regained consciousness. Not even the flail had been able to wring a curse out of him.

He had been displaying none of the spirit and fire that had so characterized him before. Jabba frowned and turned off his monitor.

Han woke up hours later. He decided he felt a little better. His body ached, but he thought he might be able to get around a little, now. He looked around the cell slowly--if he turned his head too quickly, it threatened to fall off and roll around on the floor--but he had lived through hangovers worse than this, so he was not worried.

The cell was blank and featureless, except for a light plastic jug in one corner and the equally flimsy plate beside it. Slowly Han crawled there. After feigning a few moments' bafflement as to how to open the simple screwtop, he lifted the jug to his lips and finally quenched his thirst. The water was divinely cool.

He put the jug down still more than two-thirds full. He ignored the greasy mass on the plate. Even the smell of it was enough to make his stomach lurch. The water had numbed his hunger pangs as well, so it was not difficult.

\_'I've likely got Jabba running in circles,\_' he told himself as he crawled back to his original corner dragging the water jug. He made himself as comfortable as he could, curled up around the jug as if protecting it, and pretended to go back to sleep.

\_'I've got to get out of here,\_' he knew. \_'If this is Jabba's headquarters building, then I'm only about half a click from the docking bays. Chewie ... if he is free, he's out there, either looking for me or trying to figure out away to break me out of here.\_'

\_'If he hears any of Jabba's help talking about me, he'll be worried ... but I can't help that. I'm going to plan on getting out alone, 'cause I

don't know how long I can keep up this deception. Chewie keeps telling me I don't often plan ahead--sometimes he's right, but I can't afford it this time.\_

Han shivered. \_Hey, furball--you alive out there someplace? Gods, I hope so ... good copilots are hard to find. But if Jabba had you killed, I'll see what I can do about paying your peaceprice. It's the least I owe you, pal...\_

His guards came for him then, and Han deliberately stopped thinking in subvocalized words. He ignored them until they touched him. His start of surprise was unfeigned--he had had his eyes closed--and he struggled with them briefly. one of them got a nervehold on his right wrist and Han winced as a stifled cry of pain escaped him.

"Cut it out, Solo," one of the guards growled. "or we'll drag you."

Han just stared at the speaker with the same furious, trapped expression common to any predator rendered defenseless.

"Don't waste your breath," the other guard said scornfully. "The freezin' ruined him. I'll bet he don't even understand what we're sayin'."

"Oh, yeah?" The other man studied the immobilized Corellian for a moment. "How 'bout that, Solo? You understand me?"

But Solo's expression did not change, and he made no attempt to speak. The other man poked him in the ribs and Han tried to turn on him, his teeth bared and a growl rumbling in his throat. Then he yelped as the first man tightened the nervehold and forced the struggling prisoner to his knees. He tried to bite the hand that was causing him such pain, but the other guard caught him by the hair and prevented him.

"See? Just reflexes. No intelligence left. This is just an animal wearin' Solo's body. And the boss is mad about it, too. He paid that bounty hunter thirty K and all he got was a live animal."

Together they wrestled their prisoner out of the cell and down the hall back to Jabba's playroom. Instead of chaining him to the ceiling this time, though, they shoved him into a heavy globular iron cage that was just a bit bigger than it had to be to hold him. He lunged for the doorway as soon as they let go of him, but got the barred door slammed in his face. Baffled by the unbendable, unbreakable bars, Han settled back and tried to make himself comfortable. It was impossible; the cage had no real floor, just the curved bars that formed the bottom of the sphere. He was still too

worn out to really care much, however, and ten minutes later, when Jabba finally arrived, he was sound asleep.

Jabba just studied his victim for a few moments. Then he had the guards report on how Han had reacted to their actions. That finished, he dismissed them. He picked up a meter-long metal pole and poked Han in the ribs.

Han woke up and snarled wordlessly, glaring at his tormentor. Not impressed, Jabba jabbed at him again. Han caught the rod, dragged it into his cage and refused to let go of it. Jabba did not want to let him have it, but could see no way to get it away from him. Infuriated, he pushed it at Han as hard as he could. Han could not hold it against the Hutt's massive weight, and had no room to dodge. The pole slipped through his hands and struck a rib with shattering force.

Han doubled over with a choked-off gasp of pain. Jabba took the pole back gleefully and then, just to gloat, jabbed Han with it again.

"Let that be a lesson to you, Solo," the Hutt crowed. "Don't think you can prevent me from doing anything I want with you. You're nothing but an object in my possession, for me to do with as I will. And I will make you an object lesson for the entire port to benefit by."

Jabba waddled out, chuckling to himself.

Han did not notice. He was too busy trying to force the pain under sufficient control so that he could breathe. It was difficult, but he forced himself to relax, going quite limp on the bars on the bottom of the cage. Then he coughed, and had to fight down a thrill of fright as he tasted blood.

\_\_I'm all right,\_\_ he told himself fiercely. \_\_I'll be damned if I'll let Jabba kill me this casually. Whoever it is that finally hangs up my scalp'll have to work for it!\_\_

But breathing was painful, and he felt himself starting to gasp. He tried breathing deeper, but that hurt. He tried breathing fast and shallow, and that hurt, too. He was so introverted that he did not realize that he was no longer alone until his cage lurched. Fighting back a whimper of pain, he forced his head up to look around.

Four of Jabba's guards were busy hooking chains to his cage. Han just watched them, silent and wary, as they used a small block-and-tackle assembly to suspend his cage from an overhead frame built on a small platform

that rode on repulsors. When they began to push the platform, his cage began to swing around jerkily.

The trip was sheer agony for Han. He swiftly gave up trying to see where he was being taken; it took energy he could not spare. He focused all his effort on not losing consciousness.

The cart stopped. Han looked up and tried to focus through tears of pain. Thus he had time to brace himself as his cage was hung up in the center of the ceiling of Jabba's public office. Han smothered a curse. Half the port would know he was being held as Jabba's prisoner caged like an animal, by sundown that day. A lot of them, he was sure, would come to see for themselves.

\_\_And Jabba, may his slimy soul shriek forever in the hottest corner of hell, will make sure he gets in all the gloating possible.\_\_

"Well, Solo, how do you like your new vantage point?" the Hutt inquired silkily, picking up the rod from the desk. He sauntered over and began to poke and prod at Han from all angles. The cage was suspended about two meters off the floor, and that was plenty of room for the squat Hutt to walk underneath. "Well? Answer me!"

Han did not, of course, except to flinch and then fight hard not to yelp in pain. Sometimes he was only marginally successful.

Han's worst fears were fulfilled: Jabba did little actual business in his office that day, instead hosting an unending stream of gawkers who wanted to see Han Solo in a cage.

The only recompense Han got out of all this was that, freed from his personal behavior code by the sub-sentient persona he had adopted, he could rage and tear at Jabba all he wanted. He did maintain a certain level of dignity--he modeled his behavior on a mixture of Chewie's and of the arrogant old tomcat who had owned the Millennium Falcon when he had first acquired her.

Jabba continually used the prod, especially when Han, weakened by past mistreatment and starvation, began to tire. He would not permit Han even the briefest of catnaps; he wanted all his visitors to see Han and recognize him, as well as know what Jabba had already caused to have happened to the helpless Corellian.

Exhausted, in agony, his eyes ablaze with untrammelled fury, Han fought Jabba all day long. He paid as little attention as he could to the visitors, knowing that, inevitably, although some of them were foes, and

some were strangers, some had to be friends. He did not dare face a friend from behind these bars, for he was sure he would betray himself to someone who knew him well.

\_At least none of 'em was Chewie,\_ he reminded himself tiredly during one of his brief respites as one party of gawkers was ushered out and the next one brought in. \_Chewie'd've gone berserk and maybe gotten us both killed.\_ Han shuddered as the door opened again and a blond teenager with a look of the open desert about him slid into the room. Han did not look directly at the boy, keeping his attention on Jabba as the Hutt sauntered in to begin his show yet again.

Thus it was that Han did not see the look of agony that crossed Luke's face as he studied the Corellian captive. He barely restrained himself from attacking the Hutt right then and there and freeing his friend.

\_Oh, Force, Han...! What's he done to you?!\_ Luke clenched his hands, feeling them tremble with the force of his fury, sensing the physical power of the prosthetic hand, knowing he could kill this obscenely fat being with one blow and break the bars away to free Han. \_But we'd never get out of the building. I am alone here ... Han wouldn't be much help...\_

He had seen the vivid bruise on Han's side, and noted, with uneasiness, the blood on the Corellian's lips and teeth as he snarled and fought against his tormentor.

\_He's not talking ... this isn't right. Han's acting like an animal. He should be cursing Jabba, or taunting him...not acting so much like a beast in a cage...\_

Luke remembered what Lando had said, then: that the carbonfreeze had never been intended for use in cryogenics--that was not its purpose. \_What if Han's really been seriously damaged... I hope it's just his speech center! Maybe he can learn his way around that. But he's acting like he doesn't even know he's a sentient life-form!\_

\_This will kill Leia,\_ he realized suddenly. \_She messaged that she was on her way; she'll be here in a day or two. If Han's really as damaged as he seems to be, I'll ... I'll kill him before she sees him like that--!\_

Luke left the room without looking at Han again--the sight hurt too much. He went back to the Falcon, sneaked aboard and sat, huddled with misery, in the engineer's seat on the bridge. It was nearly half an hour before the ship's copilot found him there.

\*Walker!\* Chewie barked in surprise. \*Why are you here? What did you find at the Hutt's?\*

Luke just shivered, and Chewbacca felt a thrill of terror.

\*<y brother ... he is not dead--?! The Hutt has not killed him... ?!\*

"No," Luke shook his head. "He was alive when I left..."

\*Then what is wrong? I do not understand you."

Luke looked up then, and Chewie noted two things: the boy's eyes were filled with pain, and the chair arm under his hand was bent and twisted where his prosthetic had clenched with more-than-human strength.

\*Walker, tell me what you found!\*

"Han's alive," Luke told the Wookiee, his voice unintentionally harsh. "It's like we heard at the cantina: Jabba's got him in a meter-diameter globecage hanging from the ceiling in his office."

\*Is he hurt?\*

"He's in pain," Luke responded somewhat indirectly. "From the mark on his side--he's wearing his pants, but his shirt is just ribbons, and there're scars on his upper arms from the binders--from the bruise on his side, I'd say he's got at least one badly broken rib. There's blood in his mouth; it may've hit his lung. There's no other physical damage that I could see..."

\*Then why are you so upset?\*

 Chewie wanted to know. \*There must be something else.\*

"Chewie..."

\*Tell me!\*

Luke's shoulders slumped. "All right. Chewie, I think the freeze destroyed his mind."

The Wookiee's jaw dropped in horror. \*What--?\*

"He's ... he's acting like an animal, Chewie. He didn't know me--I know he saw me! But he just watched Jabba. All the time. Jabba kept poking at him with a stick; jabbing at him, hurting him. And Han never once tried to dodge it; it was like he didn't realize that it would hurt until it did."

He never said a word, either. He wasn't silent--he growled. But no words."

\*My language?\* the Wookiee hazarded a guess.

Luke shook his head. "I don't think so. He wasn't... articulate. It was just sounds of rage and pain. Nothing else."

Chewie whimpered wordlessly.

"We have to get him out of there, Chewie. And we have to do it before Leia gets here. We can't let her see him like that...! It'll kill her! If he's incurable ... then I think we should kill him before she knows we found him alive. We can just tell her that the freeze killed him...or that Jabba had him shot... Anything but this truth!"

Very slowly, very reluctantly, the Wookiee nodded. \*Very well. But we will send the other one for a doctor before we make any decisions--neither of us is qualified.\*

Luke managed a faint smile. "Okay. Y'wanna break him out tonight?" Chewbacca nodded vigorously. "Can we do it without Lando?"

Chewie nodded again, this time showing his teeth. He still had not forgiven Calrissian for betraying them on Bespin, and he had made a private vow that if Han was dead--or worse than dead, as Luke feared--then he would kill Lando as a peaceprice; a bribe to the Shadowland's guardians for Han's eternal peace.

Lando heard them talking then, and joined them. He did not notice the sudden coolness both Tatooinn and Wookiee exhibited, for neither of them had been overly friendly.

"What's going on?" he asked. "Is Han okay?"

"No," Luke said shortly. "We need you to go and find us a medic. we are going to break him free. Get a medic with some experience in cryonics and in organic brain damage. The freezing has apparently hurt him a great deal. He may not live."

"Oh, no..." Lando whispered, horror-stricken.

"Oh, yes. Go now. Chewie and I will go get Han out. We'll meet you here. Be here."

"All right. I'm gone."

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Eventually Jabba tired of his games, and it occurred to him that if he gave his newest pet a chance to rest and recover a little, it might last longer. So he gave the orders, and went off to his own evening's diversions.

Released from the display cage, held at bay by shock-prods--Han tested their efficiency only once!--the four guards unlucky enough to be designated for this duty slipped a chokenoose over Han's head with a pole, and held him with that while they tied his hands behind him. Confident that they had him under control, they led him back to his original cell, left him a bowl of cereal dampened with water, and his water jug, which had been refilled, and tied his leash to the wall before they freed his hands. As a parting gift, one guard kicked him in the groin, and dropped a blanket over him.

It was a long time before Han could find the strength to sit up. The blanket was a welcome gift, and he held it clutched tightly around him. It was not enough to keep him from shivering, but Han suspected that at least part of what he was perceiving as chill was, in truth, shock. He was not thinking in words; he was dazed and the habit of the day was with him, still. Thinking at all was a chore--all he was certain of was that he was imprisoned and he wanted out!

Enough rationality remained, even in his pain-blurred awareness, that he forced himself to eat what he could of the cereal, and drink a comfortable share of the water. Then he pulled the noose off his throat, and, with a wolfish grin, untied the simple square knot with which the guard had fastened it to the wall. Now he had a length of heavy fiber cording beyond the strength of any human to break, and almost two meters long. He slunk to the door and whined as he had managed not to do all day.

After two or three repetitions of the plainly pain-filled sound, one of the guards came to investigate. As soon as he opened the door to check on the prisoner, Han had the rope around his neck and was choking him, garotte-style. In a minute, the guard went limp, and Han deliberately crushed his throat before releasing the body. He picked up the guard's assault rifle and slung it over his shoulder, intending to use it later.

The same tactic led the other guard to his death; Han did not care to fire the rifle unless he absolutely had to, for it would bring more guards. He slipped out of his cell, locking both bodies inside, and began a silent progress toward an exit. He found it unnaturally difficult, for the direct-sense that he, as a full-blooded Corellian, relied upon instinctively, had no data about the outer reaches of this huge sprawling

building. He followed halls and corridors that slanted upwards, for he knew that he had been in a sub-basement, and that no building on Tatooine was more than one level above the sand.

It seemed strange for his escape to be this easy ... he had not yet seen another guard. As soon as that uneasy feeling manifested itself, of course, he saw one.

However, this poor unfortunate was already dead. Han could not tell what had killed him without investigating the body, and he had no inclination to try. All the sight of the body meant to him was that there was someone else here, killing Jabba's guards. That was a laudable occupation, but Han knew he did not have the strength or the stamina to indulge in it now. He just stepped over the body and slipped out the door into the street.

It was night. Han was pleased, for darkness made hiding more simple. It never occurred to him that he had not thought about it before. He was in such pain, and so confused by it, that he was functioning primarily on instinct.

It was instinct and habit that kept Han skulking in shadows, wary of every being he came near, alert for pursuit, always watching everything. He was not at all sure about which direction to take, although he was unaware of the reason for it; the freezing had blocked his direct-sense until he was defrosted. Since it was, functionally, an inertial-displacement system, it could not lead him anywhere except back into Jabba's prison, where he had been awakened.

He knew he had been here before; this was, recognizably, Mos Eisley space-port. But, since he had always used his direct-sense to find his way around, his memories of landmarks were sketchy and vague. His direct-sense gave him unclear images and confusing data, and he was swiftly stumbling in circles.

Finally he saw, through pain-blurred vision, an abandoned storefront with a broken doorbolt. With a sob of relief, he half-fell into the cool darkness. Panting, fighting to retain consciousness long enough, he found some shelter behind the counter and collapsed there, sure that no one could see him from the door way.

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Chewbacca led Luke through the shadowy corridors of Jabba's headquarters, moving with a combination of memory of the layout and tracking Han by scent. They had killed several guards, and Luke was nervously aware that someone was bound to find a body and raise an alarm at

any moment. But there was nothing he could do about it, so he said nothing to his companion.

Suddenly Chewie stopped, and Luke nearly trod on his heels. "What's wrong?"

\*Nothing!\* Chewie yipped. \*Han went by here--alone, and armed! I can smell the hot metal of the blaster. He has escaped!\* Without another word, the Wookiee turned and started tracing the fresher trail.

Luke, too, felt a terrible relief. "He can't be hurt as badly as I thought, then ... not if he killed a guard and stole his blaster. I was never so glad to be wrong about anything in my life!"

\*Me, too!\*

When they got back to the entrance, they arrived at the same time that the guard they had killed there was discovered. The man's relief was kneeling beside the body of his fallen comrade, and looked up just in time to get a bolt in the face from the Wookiee's bowcaster. Luke and Chewie charged out, not caring if they were noticed now.

There was no pursuit. It worried Luke, but Chewie reassured him absently. \*Do not worry. It means they have not yet discovered that Han is gone. They think we tried to rescue him but failed, for whatever reason. By the time they think to check his cell, we will be long gone.\*

"Are they really that stupid?" Luke could hardly believe it.

Chewbacca shrugged. \*The Hutt never hires anyone more intelligent than himself for service therein.\*

"Lots of sandpeople and Denebian slime devils in his employ, huh?" Luke grinned.

Chewie bared his teeth in a Wookiee smile and nodded.

But after another half a klick of back streets and alleys, Chewie was no longer so confident. Han's trail was aimless, meandering between old buildings, and once he found a spot where Han had rested against a sandy wall, leaving a smear of blood behind.

Luke was frightened, and confused. "Chewie? where's he going?"

\*I do not think he knows...\*

The trail had been freshening steadily, and Chewie knew they were catching up. When he spied the door standing ajar, he cried out in relief.

\*There! He must be there!\*

Luke was faster--before Chewie could stop him, the youth had dashed into the doorway. "Han! Han, are you in here?" A blaster bolt nearly parted his hair, and would have struck him, except that he slipped on something on the threshold and fell to his knees. "Han! Don't shoot! It's me! Luke!" Another shot smacked into the wall near his head, and Luke cowered behind a fallen table. "Han! Cut it out! I'm Luke!"

His answer was a short volley that broke off suddenly when Chewie, who had had to duck through the door, straightened with a roar. \*Han! Do not shoot!\* They heard the sound of a blaster clattering to the floor, and Chewie localized it immediately. He was on his knees in front of his partner in a moment. What he saw horrified him.

Han was half-crouched, half-braced against broken furniture on the floor behind the counter. He was pale and shaking, and his face was smeared with blood. When he looked up at Chewie, he was wild-eyed and panting, but at the sight of his copilot, he relaxed instantly.

"K'hun, Chewie," he sighed breathlessly. "Took you long enough to catch up. Where in hell've you been?"

\*Looking for you,\* Chewie said bluntly. \*For the past hour I have been trailing you from the Hutt's.\*

Han sagged a little farther, smiling weakly. "Sorry..." Chewbacca had to move quickly to catch him as he collapsed, finally unconscious. The Wookiee scooped him up in his arms and turned toward Skywalker, who was staring, patently stunned.

\*What's wrong?\*

"He's ... he's fine. Isn't he?"

Chewie shrugged carefully. \*Except physically. And except for why he kept shooting at you.\*

Luke swallowed hard. "Well, at least he's not as hurt as I thought he was. C'mon--let's get him back to the ship."

\*Lead, Walker. I will follow.\*

\*\*\*

Lando was pacing frenetically underneath the Millennium Falcon when they arrived. His eyes lit up when he saw them, but turned bleak again when he recognized the limp body the Wookiee was cradling so very carefully.

"What happened to him?" Calrissian demanded.

"Did you get the medic like we said?" Luke counter-questioned.

"Yeah," was the hurried response. "He's on his way. So is the Princess. Her ship is landing in half an hour."

"Damn." Luke paused for a moment, indecisive, and then turned to Chewie. "Get him aboard and do what you can. Lando, I'm going to seal the ship. You stay out here. Let me know when the medic gets here, but I won't let Leia aboard. You tell her that."

"She'll kill me!"

The expression in Luke's eyes was, plainly, 'What is that to me?' "You have your orders." The Tatooinn followed Chewie up into the Falcon and raised the ramp, leaving Lando gaping in the sand beneath the ship.

Luke followed Chewie into the little freighter's sickbay, where he helped the Wookiee cut Han's shirt off him and pull off his pants. Han was still unconscious, and his breathing was distinctly labored. Chewie fitted a respirator over his face and adjusted the oxygen pressure until Han relaxed.

"Is he going to be all right?" Luke was torn between two emotions: he sincerely loved Han, as the older brother he had never had, and the older friend that he had lost when Biggs died; but now, between them, was the undeniable fact that Leia had finally decided that she loved Han. Luke resisted the jealousy he felt, considering it shameful, especially when he loved both Han and Leia as friends. To keep his mind off that, he concentrated on how frightening it was to find Han so reduced. Han had always been so sure, so confident, always in control of any situation, apparently indestructible.

\*I think so.\* Chewie's answer startled Luke--he had forgotten the question he had asked. But he listened as the Wookiee continued. \*This rib, with the corresponding lung damage, seems to be his only real injury. But I want to talk to him before we let the Princess see him.\*

Luke's comlink snapped on then. "Yes!"

"Luke," they both heard Lando say plaintively, "the medic's here."

"Okay, Lando. I'll let him in. Stand by."

Luke left, and when he came back, he had the medic with him. The medic, a human, rather nondescript, let them describe what they knew was wrong with Han, and then he chased them both out and locked the cabin door. Bewildered and worried, Luke and Chewie tried not to pace as they waited. It seemed to Luke that even the Battle Over Yavin had not taken this long--and he only then remembered that the fight had been less than an hour old when he had destroyed the Death Star. \_But I've got to talk to him before Leia gets here!\_ Just as he decided that he would surely go mad if something did not happen to relieve his tension, Han's cabin door opened, and the doctor emerged. Luke leapt to his feet.

"How is he? Can I talk to him, now?"

The doctor was visibly weary. "He'll be fine in a week or so. The rib is fixed--it took a while to find all the pieces; it'd been shattered like glass. He is very weak--I drained almost two units of blood out of his chest before I could find and seal the hole in his lung. I replaced some with neutral plasma, but I don't carry whole blood--it's too perishable. He'll just be very tired for a week or so. Keep him quiet and make sure he eats."

"You know not what you ask!" Luke told him, masking his relief.

The doctor grinned wearily. "He's not too coherent, altogether, but it's only to be expected. Jabba used a neuroflail on him, and a lot of his nervous system is still in shock. If he seems a bit disoriented, chalk it up to that."

"No organic damage from the freeze?" Luke inquired curiously.

The doctor shook his head. "Not to my knowledge. None of my instruments showed any."

Chewie made a sound that was indescribable except that it plainly indicated relief. He went into Han's cabin, leaving Luke to pay the medic.

His partner was lying in a reassuringly familiar comfortable curl on his bunk, his back to the wall, apparently asleep.

\*Han? Are you awake?\*

Tiredly, Han blinked open his eyes and looked up at his partner. "Hi."

\*How do you feel?\*

"Stomped flat and hung up to dry."

Chewie chuckled. \*When you joke, I know that you are all right.\*

"Who's jokin'?"

There was a silence then that stretched out long enough for Han to perceive it as uncomfortable. "Chewie? What's the matter?"

The Wookiee sighed. \*Han, why did you shoot at the Walker? He is not an enemy.\*

Han blinked at him. "What are you talking about?"

\*When we found you this morning. The Walker got inside the place first, and you kept shooting at him, even after he had identified himself. Why?\*

"Not only don't I know what you're talking about, but who's this 'Walker' character?"

Chewie sighed. \*That's what I was afraid of. Han, what is the last thing you remember before you woke up as Jabba's prisoner? Do you remember how he got you?\*

Han looked thoughtful. "Except for dreams that were all somebody crying, you screaming, and all the light red, the last thing that was real was sitting in the jazz cantina, thinking about Jabba trying to take the Falcon."

\*What date?\*

"Huh? Seventeen, oh-four, one-oh-eight. You know that..."

\*Gently, gently ... today is four, twelve, one-ten,\* Chewie said simply.

Han went completely white. "One-ten?!" he repeated in a horrified whisper.

"One-ten?!! Chewie, what in the name of Lehrer's happened to me?! Jabba..."

\*--is only indirectly responsible, Han. He offered a bounty of thirty K for you, alive. Boba Fett collected it about a month ago.\*

"I only remember three days at Jabba's. What did I miss? How did Fett manage to take me alive? He's good, but he isn't that good."

Chewie found himself thoroughly reassured by Han's cocky response. This was as it should be. \*I will tell you, but it is a very long story--after all, you're missing seventeen months. When the Walker comes in, he will expect you to know him. What shall I tell him? He will be here shortly--he was very worried about you, for he saw you at Jabba's.\*

Han grinned. "And he bought that act?"

Chewie nodded, showing his teeth. \*I was almost sure you were faking.\*

"I'll be asleep."

\*All right.\*

The door opened then, and Han buried his face in the pillow and relaxed.

Luke studied the smuggler's quiet form for a moment. "Chewie? Is he all right?"

The Wookiee nodded. \*I think so. He's asleep, now. He's very tired.\*

Luke looked disappointed. "What about what I saw at Jabba's, Chewie? If he's hurt ... what'll I tell Leia?"

\*Tell her he has been sedated. I will talk to him when he wakes up and I will tell her when she can see him.\*

"All right. But she won't like it."

\*I don't care,\* the Wookiee said bluntly.

"I know," Luke said softly. "Your first loyalty is to Han."

The Wookiee nodded solemnly and Luke, with a parting glance at the recumbent and motionless figure on the bed, left the tiny cabin. Chewie followed him to the door, checked to make sure he was out of earshot, then closed and locked the cabin's door. Then he went to sit beside the bed. \*He's gone.\*

Han rolled over slowly. His broken rib did not hurt, especially since the doctor had glued all the fragments of it back together, but he remembered the pain too well. "He's just a kid. What's his name?"

\*We've known him for a year and a half. We met him in the jazz cantina that last day. What do you remember?\*

Han concentrated. "The band... gettin' drunk 'cause I couldn't think of anything else to do--we needed ten K to pay Jabba and we hadn't a hint of another job."

\*You were at your favorite booth in the back. I was at the bar. Do you remember the fight we saw?\*

"Fight... Rinx and that Redaufite he travels with."

\*Yes,\* Chewie nodded. \*But past tense.\*

"Yeah ... that old man killed Rinx, and lopped off the Redaufite's arm with a lightsabre. Okay... let's see...you dragged him over to see me ... and that kid came with him. What's his name ... Luke...Luke...Skywalker!"

\*Yes. And the old man? I can't even begin to pronounce that!\*

"Obi-Wan Kenobi."

Chewie raised an eyebrow at the perfect confidence of that response. \*Excellent. Then what?\*

"We left." Han gnawed on his lip. "Chewie, I feel like I know all this stuff, but I'm gonna have to go in and pry it all out manually before it will admit that I know it!"

\*Tell me the story,\* Chewie suggested. \*I will tell you if you've left anything out.\*

Slowly, laboriously, Han fought and struggled with his recalcitrant memory. Sometimes one scene would unlock weeks of detail ... other times he had to struggle for every moment, but it all came clear until he got as far as landing the Millennium Falcon on Bespin. He could not even remember if Lando Calrissian had been there.

\*He was there,\* Chewie growled.

"Chewie? Why can't I remember this part at all?" Han was trying to sound calm and rational, but his tone was a touch too shrill to be normal.

\*Softly... You were tortured. The Dark Lord had you chained to a scan-grid for more than an hour.\*

Han shuddered; he had heard of what a scan-grid could do to a man.  
"That explains it, then; doesn't it?"

The Wookiee nodded. \*The shock very often erases memories of the time immediately before and after. Do you remember anything of the time we spent on Bespin?\*

"No!"

\*Sshhh ... you mentioned a dream you had. Describe it again.\*

Han cocked his head to one side, puzzled. "Whattaya want to hear that for? 'Twas only a dream..."

His partner shook his furry head. \*Not so. I think it was a memory. Describe it.\*

Han had to close his eyes to think. "Everything's red; it's the light. I can hear you roaring--I can't make out the words..."

Chewie shuddered. \*I don't think you ever learned vocabulary like that...I'd forgotten that I knew it.\*

"Did that really happen?" Han asked, surprised. "Where are we?"

\*In the carbon freeze chamber in the industrial complex in the lower levels of Cloud City.\*

"Someone's crying..."

\*She was crying inside,\* Chewie agreed. \*She never shed a tear where the Dark Lord or Lando could see.\*

"That's Leia crying?" He thought about it very hard. "Why's she crying?"

\*Because your 'friend' has just announced the Dark Lord's intention to put you in the carbon freeze.\*

Han went utterly still, his eyes staring at nothing. The entirety of the scene came clearly into view. He was staring at Leia while he stood on the cover of the carbon-freeze. Chewie was right; she wasn't crying. But he could see her agony, and feel it as if it were his own. Then, suddenly, she moved. "I love you--" "I know..." He shuddered; she was terrified, and all her pain was for him. He felt the platform beneath him began to

sink and he gasped, trying to draw air into horror-frozen lungs that refused to work.

\*Han--!\* Chewie shook him hard once and peered into his eyes, worried. \*Are you all right?\*

Han stared up at his partner, sobbing for air, his eyes dark with terror.

He swallowed hard, trying to get his breathing under control. "I... I remember...He forced out the words, still gasping. Chewie made a small sound of understanding and gathered his friend into his arms. Han just hung on, burying his terror in his partner's thick fur. Eventually he began to relax.

\*All right now?\* the Wookiee whispered.

Han sat up and dragged his wrist across his eyes, blotting the last of his tears away. "Yeah," he husked. "oh, gods, Chewie... !"

\*Sshhh... It is over now and it will never happen again. Your Princess grieves, you know. She hardly dared let herself believe that you might survive--everyone else she has ever loved has died; most at the hands of the Empire. It seemed so unreal to her that you, alone of all, should survive.\*

Han scrubbed his hands over his face. "I think I remember somebody saying something about her coming here?"

Chewie nodded. \*She should be here any minute, actually.\*

"Is she all right?"

\*She will be, when she sees that you are. She hasn't been sleeping well--she had nightmares every night.\*

Han was startled. "How'd you know?"

Chewie shrugged, smiling faintly, with only the tips of his fangs showing.

\*The trip back to rendezvous was tense. The Walker we kept sedated--he had fought the Dark Lord and been hurt. She would not be more than civil to your friend. So it was to me that she turned for what solace she could bring her-self to seek. I do not think either of us got a full night's sleep until we made rendezvous.\*

"Oh, really?" Han's eyes were snapping with amusement now, all the horror gone. "Should I tell Malla she has a rival?"

Chewie laughed and then feigned innocence. \*Your lady,\* he conceded, \*but she slept in my cabin that trip. All she could do in your cabin was cry.\*

"But she's all right, otherwise? She wasn't hurt in the escape?" The Wookiee shook his head. "How'd you an' her get loose, anyway?"

\*Your friend broke us free. He had finally made up his mind that the Dark Lord was evil.\*

"Took him long enough."

Chewie bared his teeth. \*He has been both guilty and afraid since, you know. The fact that your lady refused to talk to him didn't help. He does, I believe, honestly regret what circumstances forced him to do. He is afraid that you will hate him.\*

Han was about to answer when they both heard a loud dispute erupt outside the cabin door. One voice was female, and so shrill and penetrating that they could almost make out her words.

\*Now how did she get aboard?\* Chewie wondered aloud. \*The Walker said he would seal the hatch so she could not get in.\*

"I told her the code. "

Chewie was startled. Then he was dismayed as Han tossed the blanket aside and swung his feet to the floor. "Hand me a pair o' pants, will ya?"

Automatically, the Wookiee moved to comply. Then he grinned wickedly. \*She likes you without them.\*

Han hit him with the pillow. "You furry voyeur! Just give me those pants!"

\*Yes, sir!\*

"And watch your mouth." Han put the pants on, even though he had to sit down to do it because he could not balance well enough yet. He grabbed the shirt he saw hanging off the edge of the bed and shrugged it on, leaving the front open. He ran his fingers through his hair, saw his reflection in a burnished chrome panel he had long ago placed there for that purpose, and grimaced.

\*Useless effort,\* Chewie commented.

"Shut up and come over here."

Chewie obeyed and Han pulled himself to his feet and used the Wookiee for balance until he got to the doorway. Then he let go of his partner and caught hold of the door frame.

\*Are you all right?\*

"No," Han admitted with rare candor. "But don't you dare say anything!"

\*I don't want her yelling at me when you collapse!\*

Han's grin, becoming strained with effort, turned predatory. "Don't worry about that." He pushed the door aside and moved to stand in the doorway, leaning on the jamb. "Will you two shut up?" he complained. "How do you expect a guy to get any sleep around here?"

The combatants froze. Luke dropped the Princess's wrists; obviously he had been struggling with her.

Leia tore herself free of the Tatoonn and threw herself into Han's arms, not caring that she thus betrayed herself to everyone. Nothing mattered but that he was there, alive, and reasonably intact.

Han just held her folded against his chest, feeling her self-control crumble. He rested his chin on top of her head and closed his eyes to isolate himself from everything except her. When she seemed to have run down a bit, he spoke softly, tipping her tear-stained face up so he could study those dark eyes.

"Hey, now," he whispered huskily, oblivious to their audience. "Is that any way to welcome me home?"

"I'm sorry, Han, but I couldn't help it--nobody would tell me if you were all right, or what was wrong with you, or what'd happened to you, and my imagination just made it worse...!" She got that all out in one breath, and he kissed her to calm her down a bit. Then he grinned wanly.

"How could they? Luke didn't know; some of what happened I'm not real clear on."

"Only some of it?" Luke asked hesitantly. "Han, are you really all right? Really?"

Han nodded. "Ninety-nine percent. What you saw at Jabba's was an act I decided on to spoil Jabba's fun. It worked, too."

"Was it all an act?" Luke inquired skeptically. "You didn't recognize me when I was there."

"No, I didn't," Han agreed. "My memory was all messed up, but Chewie and I've got it mostly cleared up, now."

"Mostly?" Leia whispered, frightened all over again. "What don't you remember?"

"From right after we landed on Cloud City to just before--" he stopped there, unable to continue. Leia hugged him tightly.

"Han--?"

He shuddered, then shook off the nightmare and smiled at her. "Hey--I'm all right. Honest. it's just from the scan-grid; that blurs memory both before and after. I'm okay."

Leia shivered. "I wish I couldn't remember that!"

He hugged her tighter. "Hey. I'm all right. Forget about it." "I wish I could..." Her voice trailed away when Han's hold on her shifted; she cried out in fright when he wavered, catching himself by leaning all of his weight on her for a moment. "Han--!"

"I'm all ... right... !" he gasped. "it's ... just..." He started to fall and Chewie caught him.

\*You are not entirely all right, and you are going back to bed!\*

Han was too busy trying to catch his breath to reply. Chewie half-carried him back into his cabin and put him to bed. Luke and Leia followed, and waited until Chewie had him settled and Han had relaxed a little.

"The medic told us you'd be really weak for a while, Han," Luke explained softly. "It's just loss of blood; you'll be fine as long as you get enough rest and food."

Han smiled without bothering to open his eyes. "I'm too ... tired ... to...eat... "

Leia sat down beside him on the bed. "So go to sleep," she

whispered, taking his hand. "When you wake up, we'll be in hyperspace, on our way back to the rendezvous, and the Paladin's medic will check you over. All right?"

Han was falling asleep, and it felt too good for him to fight it. "Sssurre," he murmured, slurring his words exhaustedly. "If you keep Lando away frommm th' controlsss ... bastard never could steerrr..."

"Okay, Han," Leia laughed softly. "Chewie's in command until you're fit again. Rest easy. "

"Uh-huh..." she heard him murmur. His grip on her hand went slack. She laid his hand on his chest, then leaned back against the bulkhead, her eyes closed.

Chewie pushed Luke out, albeit gently. The Tatoonn did not protest.

\_She looks so happy,\_ he realized reluctantly. \_Well, I guess if she couldn't love me, I'm glad she loves Han. I know he'll take good care of her. And he'll understand if I sort of hang around a lot...\_

end

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