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Into Shadows

by [Skye Rutherford](#)

All around, the structures of a civilization tumble in on itself. Buildings groan as foundations buckle under subterranean stress. Beams and girders screech inhuman cries; collapse in final, mountainous tidal waves of dust clouds. Glass explodes into showers of deadly hail or drops from frames to becoming lethal javelins. Damaged utility lines add to the chaos. Water gushes from broken pipes and reservoirs, all adding to the flooding in the street, carrying with it debris so mangled and twisted that most of it is unrecognizable. Power cables whip and thrash in the heated, hurricane-force wind that wails like a thousand dying rancors. In snaking patterns, the cables send sparks in the air, adding to the fires that burn out of control; there is no one to fight it. It is every one for themselves. It is a state of sheer panic that cannot be imagined or conceived, only experienced. Even at that, it seems impossible, unbelievable. The noise of such utter destruction, the screaming of people hopelessly locked in this terror, is a roaring in my ears like nothing I've ever heard before or will again. The planet, Serpidal, cries in its death throes. But in all of this, somehow, the only voice I'm aware of, even above my own screams, is that of my best friend.

Suspended in the air like a bird riding a thermal draft, the Millennium Falcon waits for its first mate. Battered and bloodied, he remains. The air combusts in fireballs; the ground heaves beneath. An eruption--- so strong it threatens to split the bulkheads of the ship--- takes him down. He's vanished! Suddenly, I can't breathe. Can no longer scream. My eyes, burning from the heat of the fires and wind, search the nightmare scene below me. Finally, I see him, clambering to his feet on legs that tremble with the effort but somehow manage to support him. Head thrown back, he bellows a Wookiee curse, shakes his broken, blood-caked fists in the direction of the descending moon. Against the howling wind, I cry out for him, still reaching. Begging. I want so badly to refuse to believe any of this is happening. Suddenly the Falcon rumbles, shudders in agony and lifts away,

struggling to take flight. Though the loading ramp recedes and refugees hang tightly to my legs, imploring me to leave him, I can't. The wind swallows my voice. I can feel them dragging me up the ramp, pulling harder and harder, hanging on. But he's so close now. Too close to leave behind. Above the deafening sounds of destruction, I hear his final bellow to whatever cruel and unjust Fate that has allowed this to happen. As if in answer, he's struck by fire, consumed in a blaze that engulfs, turning his blood-matted coat into tendrils of flame and smoke. He is still shaking his fists at the planet's moon...still defiant. Right before my eyes, he's snatched away. Gone forever. The ramp is nearly shut now and suddenly, for an instant, I see his bones turned black, then white and he is no more. If anyone asked, I would swear the Falcon's straining engines cry for him.

Pulled inside, the ramp secured, a silence surrounds me. All I hear is a pounding in my chest. From the refugees crammed onboard, a hundred pairs of eyes stare. A hundred faces gape. I can't say anything. There is only a name, resounding in my mind, echoing in my heart: Chewie!

It took me a couple of minutes before I'd realized I hadn't screamed his name out loud. Not for the first time, I'd woken up shaking in a cold sweat. Again and again it haunts me, relentlessly invades each minute, never mindful of whether I'm awake or asleep. Never letting go. Always gripping at that one particular moment that I wish I could forget, but can't. And never will. I feel like a doomed sailor in a raging storm, swept overboard and pummeled by ferocious waves. Hammered under, pounded down to a dark memory. Into shadows... Maybe the flashbacks, dreams, whatever they are, wouldn't be so bad if I'd only done something else on Serpidal. There had to be something, just one thing that could have saved him. Then Chewie'd be alive and I'd've never had to explain anything to his family, never had to have told them he wouldn't be back. Ever. Well, at least that's over now. If Leia hadn't been there...I don't know. I think I might've gone to some out of the way place--- Tatooine or somewhere--- and drank myself to death. Hah! Who am I kiddin'? I'm doin' a pretty good job of that right in my own house. I don't why Leia puts up with it. Or me for that matter.

Shifting left, I tried carefully not to wake her. Fool! She sleeps little more than you do. Instead of trying to disappear in a bottle of whiskey, you ought to be helping her convince that idiot, Borsk Fey'lya, and the council that the Vong are real. If Chewie were still here, you'd be fighting in the thick of this mess. If he could see you, he'd tell you to get off your drunken ass and get busy. Hell! Your own kids have more guts than you! Some hero...

Figuring I might as well get up, my hand slid across the smooth skin of Leia's bare midriff and at once her hand covered my own, fingers entwined, holding me there. No words; she's said 'em all. And more. Hours ago, she stood in the room, wearing a sheer, floor-length, caftan she'd admired one day. Without her knowing it, I'd bought it for her, not so long ago, a 'private' anniversary gift. Just out of the

fresher unit, hair damp and hanging loose all around her, she'd caught my gaze and smiled tentatively, not sure whether to intrude on my mood. For the first time in weeks I'd felt compelled to let her take me far away, nearly begged her to. Setting aside my shot glass---half filled with the strongest Corellian whiskey money can buy---I'd gone to her. In complete love for me, a wise-ass pilot with more faults than anyone had a right to, she took me. The expensive caftan was suddenly a pool of garnet silk around her delicate ankles. Her seal brown eyes never strayed from me and as I picked her up, I marveled---as always---at how something so light in weight can carry so much strength. I don't know what I'd do without her. The only worse than losing my best friend or one of my kids, would be losing Leia. In her embrace, surrounded by her, feeling her slide against me, straddle my hips, she leaned forward, planted kisses on my mouth, face, throat, chest, making me burn in a way only she has the power to. She made me think only of her. Feel only her. I couldn't tell if it was the alcohol haze or just the fact that we hadn't been together like this since before I'd left for Sernpidal, but for a while nothing but us existed. She took her time and then, sharing the gasp I'd let out, slowly took me deep inside her, wrapped me in a blanket of warmth that went beyond anything physical. Because she knows me so completely, she could sense that I wanted to bury myself in her soul. Moving like a gentle, lapping wave, she whispered words of love, promised that everything'd be all right...just let her take me away. If only I could.

Once again, unbidden, the nightmare on Sernpidal invaded. This time violating the most private part our lives. Against my chest, Leia's breath exhaled in a shudder. In a stupid, feeble gesture, I drew back the heavy waist-length curtain of cinnabar hair that draped around her and exposed one shoulder. " I'm sorry," I told her. She'd kissed me again then, whispered, " It's not your fault." Years ago, before marriage, I'd once told Wedge Antilles that I didn't deserve Leia. I still don't.

Over the last few weeks, she's given time, words, comfort...all with no seeming help to heal the loss of a friend I feel I've betrayed. Left to die. My shame and guilt are so strong that I haven't let her help. Damn me! I haven't even told my son that he's not to blame for Chewie's death. If the Yuuzhang Vong are responsible for the death of my best friend, I alone am to blame for the emptiness in Anakin's soul. It's the greatest sin I've ever committed. Worse, I can't find the words or the strength to put it to rights. And yet, despite everything, Leia understands. I've never known sorrow to be so draining, so consuming. Because she understands that, has experienced it, Leia remains next to me, a rock on a beach of shifting sand. She and Chewie were a lot alike. She has every right to be angry with me. I sometimes wish she would point a blaster at me and tell me to get my act together. But she'd never give up that easily. Not like I have. Han Solo, a hero of the Rebellion... I could almost laugh. Never felt like any hero. And now, I don't know what I feel like. I just don't want to feel. I'm beginning to wonder why Leia ever agreed to marry me, but then, I was a different guy. Or was I? Until Chewie died, I'd considered myself a lot of things, most of them not

worth mentioning in polite circles. But 'coward' was never one of 'em. Considering everything I'd ever done, I'd never let anyone I cared about down. Never let my best friend die.

Needing to get some air, another drink, I'd begun to roll away. Leia's hand held fast though and I didn't need to see her tears to know they were there; we've been far too close over the years and we read each other well without always needing visual proof. As I moved away, disengaging myself from her slender body, she said, in a hushed voice, " I wish I could make it different."

That all too familiar phrase, born in a moment of uncertain fate and later used so often in playful enticement but always in knowing love and shared trust, I answered, " I know." I wondered, did that now sound as empty to her as it did to me?

Leaving what I should have held to, I started to say something to her. And then decided not too. Instead, I bent down, retrieved the caftan and laid it carefully at the foot of the bed, treating it like a piece of fine, thin china. My gaze settled on her again. "Leia," I began and she looked at me, knowing I wanted to say so much. But I've never been good with those kinds of words. "Nothing."

I crossed the room, palmed the transparisteel door open to the private, master-suite balcony. The light breeze was chilly. Like I could care. Leaning on the waist high wall, I looked out at the city. From this height, one can see the lights of the buildings stretched for miles: up, down, outward. They're almost like stars...a silvery veil against the night. I've always felt looking at the night sky was calming sort of view. But it doesn't matter, I wouldn't accept such consolation any more than I can my wife's. Or our children's. Or Luke's and Mara's. Or our friends. I still hear the catch in their voices when they say Chewie's name or offer words of sympathy. I see myself in my kids as they still fight back tears. Even Luke, who, in all his Jedi insight and wisdom, can't seem to believe Chewie's gone either. The first time I saw him after Sernpidal, he looked more shattered than I'd seen him since Mara's illness began. Or after he put his father's body on a funeral pyre back on Endor. Or after old Ben Kenobi died so many years ago...

Here and there the lights of Imperial City flickered and danced. A lone air taxi skirted among the towering spires. I tried to hang on to its image, but the memory of Sernpidal casts its shadow. Again. I'd nearly choked on the whiskey as once more, I saw Chewie, still cursing to a blood red sky. Still the noble friend, loyal shipmate, honest partner that I'd laughed and argued with, fought enemies and endured hardship with, trusted with not only my own life, but those of my family. For more than half my life he was all those things. By all rights I should've died first. Years ago. He's the reason that I've survived too many mishaps and more close calls than anyone has a right to. *You big fur ball. I never told you how much I cared about you. You were gone before I could thank you for saving my son's life.*

Leia's words echoed softly in my mind, *"I wish I could make it different."*

Just then, without looking, I'd realized that she'd stepped through the sliding doorway. As she'd drawn closer, I'd welcomed the feel of her small hands in mine and as she'd nestled herself against my back. I'd brought her arms around me. It was comfortable to just remain like that, her way of letting me know she wouldn't let go. No matter what. Typical. "I keep seeing it over and over," I told her. "I wish it would stop."

"It will," she promised, brushing her lips between the lower points of my shoulder blades. "You have to believe that, Han." Unable to say anything, I'd merely nodded, breathed a sigh and brought her hands up and kissed the palms.

After a time, I'd led her back to bed. She was so tired---no thanks to me. Waiting until I heard the rhythmic breathing, telling me she was sound asleep, I'd moved away again and quietly got dressed. Spotting the shot glass I'd set aside, I bolted back the last of the whiskey. For a moment I'd just stood there, staring at the thick blue-green glass; the remaining drops of the amber liquid slid to the bottom. *Your slipping*, I told myself. *Right down to the dregs*. Funny...I hadn't felt this way since I'd been court-martialed out of the Imperial Navy. The charge: dereliction of duty, striking a senior officer, inciting a riot. All committed while assisting and abetting in the escape of a slave laborer--- a Wookiee. Funny how that big 'walking carpet' changed my life. I started to throw the glass against the wall but it would have woken Leia so I handed it to Threepio when I got downstairs. Miraculously, he didn't say anything. Just stared as I left the house. Hell, if I didn't know better, I'd swear that tin-plated, priss of a professor felt sorry about Chewie too. Droids! Go figure.

Traveling mainly on foot among nearly deserted commerce malls, through silent parks and cloisters, I struck out for the only place that offered total privacy... but not peace. It rained for awhile but I didn't care; it kept things quiet in a weird sort of way until finally, I reached the docking bay of the Millennium Falcon.

And here I am. I access the locking code and the boarding ramp extends. For a long time, this was the only home I'd ever had. The first that I could really say had truly been mine. She has a different feel now. Like a part of her soul is missing. I know it is, because mine feels like that. Climbing the ramp, I think I hear something. Nothing loud really but it's enough to catch my attention. Pilots, even the lowest pirates and smugglers believe hangers and aircraft are often haunted. I wonder. Did I just hear some errant sound that passes in deserted buildings? Or was it the Falcon, breathing out a cry for a noble friend that will

never return? Standing here, listening, I pat one hand against her carbon scored, reinforced-steel skin. "I know..."

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