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Not A Nice Man

by [Adrienne D. Cornelius](#)

"You like me because I'm a scoundrel. There aren't enough scoundrels in your life."

"I happen to like nice men!"

"I'm a nice man."

-- Han & Leia, ESB

* * * * *

"Well, Chewie, if we're lucky we'll be able to head outta here in the next couple'a days."

Han Solo's voice rang with satisfaction as he walked with sure strides toward the entrance that led from the hanger deck into the depths of the Massassi temple on Yavin 4. His eyes never rested as he continually scanned the immediate area for any sign of threat, his well-honed sense of caution unrelenting although he was supposedly among allies.

The sky outside the hanger was darkening quickly as Yavin slipped below the moon's horizon, its radiant glow fading as it marked yet another day ending for the beleaguered Rebel Alliance. Han sighed. Another day closer to the final evacuation of Yavin and, he glanced around the hanger that was scurrying with motion, the Rebels were still attempting to scrounge together enough functional ships to off-load their precious base.

He shook his head, thinking of the organizational meeting he'd slipped into with quiet stealth only a day ago. His presence going unnoticed in the back of the room, he'd listened as the bureaucrats had debated endlessly over just how the evacuation should be handled. He'd watched with silent disbelief as argument after argument was presented, dismissed, and was re-presented.

He smiled slightly as he remembered the bewildered blue eyes that had unerringly met his from across the room. The kid had a lot to learn, but he'd gotten a crash course on how things didn't get done when they were discussed in committee.

His smile edged into a smirk as he replayed the shocked and outraged glowers he'd received when he, Han Solo, a no-account smuggler and hero-by-default, had rudely broken into the meeting with just that pithy observation. Luke had hidden a grin behind a suddenly raised hand while, from another part of the room, a pair of dark brown eyes had pinned him. Shooting him a stare that was at first narrowed in irritation, the Princess had pressed her lips together hard to stifle her own threatening smile, her eyes darting away to hide the amusement glinting in them.

He grinned as he recalled the way she had quickly buried the laughter dancing in her gaze and had taken advantage of the distraction and uproar his unwanted opinion had created. With quiet but unyielding firmness, she had gained the attention of the people in the room who were not screaming bloody murder about his snide comment. These few, Mon Mothma and Crix Madine among others, were the ones who truly realized the danger the Alliance was in and who wanted to make a swift decision.

As the upstart Corellian was unceremoniously escorted from the council room, he'd caught a glimpse of Princess Leia's face as she turned for a brief moment, her eyes catching his. The wink he gave her was unsurprisingly cocky but, knowing that his interjection into the meeting had given her the opening she'd needed, Leia didn't object to the gesture.

Instead, she'd surprised the smuggler by flashing him a quick smile and a wink of acknowledgement in return. She was beautiful when she let herself react naturally instead of playing the part of the Senator Princess, Han let the thought drift across his mind briefly before he quickly relegated it to the depths of his subconscious. He ignored the nagging little voice that whispered quietly into his mind. Who are you kidding, Solo—she's beautiful—period.

Next to him, Chewbacca watched the play of emotions that flitted across Han's face. They would never have betrayed the pilot's thoughts to someone who didn't know him well, but to Chewbacca, they were only too easy to read. His teeth flashed in a Wookiee grin as he recognized the faraway glint in the pilot's eyes.

That glint, coupled with Han's unconscious grin, afforded Chewbacca with much amusement. The knowledge that Han Solo would be highly embarrassed, totally outraged, and even more defensive if he knew that his thoughts were being telegraphed so loudly to his Wookiee sidekick sent a spurt of devilish glee through the pilot's friend. Chewie briefly considered letting Han know but then shook his head. The subtle hunt is the one most enjoyable, the Wookiee proverb sprang to mind.

Hiding his smile at the thought, Chewie decided to have a bit of fun at his partner's expense. His blue eyes suddenly pinned his friend with a deliberately suspicious stare. He was careful to erase any laughter from his expression as he lowered a wry observation that was sure to pry beneath Han's shielding and get a reaction from him.

"Yeah, yeah. I know." Chewie's hidden hilarity raised a notch as Han's gaze suddenly went into evasive maneuvers. "I just wanna make sure we've got everything running without a hitch on the Falcon before we jet outta here."

A loud crash from across the hanger echoed deafeningly, overpowering the knowing chuckle from the Wookiee as he matched his friend and partner stride for stride. Although his friend's amusement went unheard, the laughter dancing in the seven-foot tall anthropoid's gentle blue eyes earned him a glare and a sneer from Han.

"Look, furball, I dunno what you think is so funnyà"

Chewbacca bared his teeth and snorted a few words. Han Solo stopped in his tracks, rising temper bringing gold-flecked sparks to his hazel eyes as he rounded on his friend. "I am not stalling!" he yelled indignantly, planting his hands on his hips and leaning back so that he could glare up into his partner's face. "Why in the nine hells would I wanna stall? You think a rundown Massassi temple on this backwater planet is where I want to be?"

The knowing smirk on Chewie's face raised Han's temper another notch but, before he could open his mouth to continue, Chewie let out a groaning chuckle and elaborated at length. The barks, yowls, growls and grumbles were incomprehensible to most humans, but to Han Solo, they were as clear as plassteelàand as unwelcome as a Mynock infestation.

His eyes narrowed with temper, Han took a step nearer the tall Wookiee and jabbed an accusatory finger under his snout. "I am not stalling. And I sure as hell'm not sticking around becauseà" He broke off abruptly, fumed a moment, and then re-entered the fray, taking a different tack. "We got our reward, and the supply clerk said they got the parts we needàso as soon as we get'em on the Falconàwe're outta here!"

Chewie stifled a snort as he recognized the typical Solo maneuver. When the enemy gets too close to home, feint sideways and attack from a different angle. He carefully pasted a disbelieving look on his face and gave a grunt that brought an impatient huff from Solo.

"Awwwàjust pipe down, ya furry oaf."

"Ah-hem, excuse meà" The request came from Han's left, the quiet firmness of the feminine voice breaking into Han's determined glower at his partner.

Han blinked twice and turned his head slowly, his hazel glare meeting a steady gaze directed at him. Irritation with the Wookiee rapidly found a new target. His voice was rude and belligerent as he snapped, "What?" His eyes dared Leia to take up the proffered gauntlet of antagonism.

He wasn't disappointed. Her slight frame stiffened, her shoulders going back as cool disdain filled her voice. "You're blocking the entryway, flyboy."

Han glanced to either side of himself, noting with a carefully schooled expression of false surprise the less than half-a-meter space around him and his Wookiee co-pilot. So intent was he on attempting to irritate the haughty bit of aristocracy standing in front of him, he didn't notice the curious tilt of Chewbacca's head as his friend carefully studied the expression on Leia's face. Instead, he turned a sardonic smile on the young woman who was standing expectantly nearby, folded his arms in an obstinate gesture, and widened his stance in a deliberate effort to take up even more space.

With a snide tone of revelation, he drawled, "Well, by the suns, Your Worshipfulness, looks like you're right." Han's hazel eyes sparked with irritation and gleeful satisfaction, knowing that he would be blasted by a scathing retort and welcoming the diversion.

Chewbacca's comment that he was sticking around the Rebels for two very specific reasons had scored a direct hit earlier, but he wasn't about to let the big lug count coup on the accusation's accuracy. A battle royale with the Rebellion's warrior Princess was just the distraction he needed to divert Chewie's attention. And, Han admitted with a twinge of unease as the thought crept in uninvited, it also might just be enough to keep you from thinking too deeply about the real reasons you haven't lifted ship already.

Han blinked, refocusing his gaze on Leia's upturned face. Waiting expectantly for the stinging set-down he knew would be forthcoming, he frowned as the woman before him sighed heavily and closed her eyes in an expression of weary resignation. His frown grew darker as she re-opened them, the brown depths shadowed as they focused blankly on his face. Then, with a shake of her head,

she raised one hand, opened her mouth to speak, thought twice about it, and closed it again, her lips compressing into a thin line.

Puzzled, Han blinked in bemused surprise as he realized that he was now staring at a blank expanse of wall that had been behind the Princess. He turned his head in time to see her slip into the narrow space between his left side and the wall of the temple, her slender form making only the slightest contact with his arm as she edged past him.

His frown was replaced by a scowl as he realized he'd been summarily dismissed and ignored. His arms dropped from across his chest and he planted his fists on his hips. "Hey!" His indignant yelp brought no response from the figure that was steadily making her way across the hanger deck, heading toward the open bay doors.

Something in the set of her shoulders, a tenseness that didn't quite hide the defeated slope of them, erased the scowl of injured pride on Han's face. Confusion, and then concern, took its place. His brows knitted in befuddlement as he spoke in a low mutter to the Wookiee at his side, "Something ain't right here, Chewie"

Chewbacca gave a non-committal lowing moan as he watched Leia's progress across the hanger. Concern laced his own voice when he finally replied to his partner's comment. His blue eyes left the Princess, dropping to find the pilot staring after the woman with genuine worry on his face.

"Yeah—you're right. She should'a lemme have it with both blasters"

As Leia stepped around the edge of the massive hanger bay doors and disappeared into the moon-shrouded night beyond, Solo's expression firmed, his chin jutting with stubborn determination. Impulsive to the last, Solo left Chewbacca's side in a rush.

Two strides away, he half-turned to call back to his partner, "Go on and get the parts from Supply. I'll meet you back at the Falcon and we can work on her tonight."

Chewbacca yowled an affirmative after his friend. Solo raised a hand in acknowledgment, spun on his heel without breaking stride, and rapidly made his way across the hanger. Chewbacca watched until Han also disappeared into the night, then snorted softly. Shaking his furry head, he turned back toward the hall that led deeper into the base, his hunter's stride silent on the stone floor.

A young technician, hurrying through the hall as he headed toward the hanger, paused in startlement as he rounded a corner and came face to face with the giant Wookiee. Nervously, the youth nodded as the hirsute creature gave him a

toothy smile and growled some indecipherable comment almost as if to itself. As the Wookiee gave what could only be interpreted as a resounding chuckle, the surprisingly intelligent blue eyes filled with glinting mirth, the young man flashed him a faint answering smile, then hurried on his way.

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With the unthinking caution of a trained combat veteran, Han Solo stepped immediately to his left as he exited the hanger, disappearing into the darkness next to the brightly lit doorway. Even as he scanned the deepening shadows outside the hanger, he took several more careful steps, three swift strides forward. He changed his direction abruptly, taking a step that angled back to his right, in a move designed to foil any attack that might come at him out of the darkness if an enemy tried to predict his position by his last known trajectory.

The faintly reflective glow of one of Yavin's secondary moons did little to relieve the blackness beyond the circle of light that was the illumination from within the Alliance base. Han stopped moving, standing silent and still. His eyes never paused, checking out each slight movement in the jungle undergrowth. He tipped his head, listening, trying to pinpoint Leia in the darkness.

Jungle noises, twitterings, churrups, squeaks, and rustlings emitted from the jungle to his left. The same noises came from the far side of the temple, slightly less noticeable, but still loud enough to hear. Only directly ahead was the jungle quieter than it should be, the native denizens silent and wary of the being that had passed close by them.

Having pinpointed the direction she had taken, Han stepped forward to the edge of the clearing. Pausing just outside the tree line, he frowned into the depths of the undergrowth, listening again. Faintly, the sound of footsteps reached his ears, heading away from him. Nodding, Han stepped forward, sure that he had located his quarry.

He paused, glancing back once before he entered the darker depths of the jungle. His brows drew down into a fierce scowl as he easily marked and noted the individuals that walked, talked, joked, and worked within the perceived safety of the hanger. Sighting down a mental blaster, he quickly picked off ten different people, targeted easily from the safety of the darkness.

"Fools." His mutter held disgust and he shook his head. As he turned away again, he made a mental note to find and impress upon the deck officer the folly of leaving a lighted hanger bay open to make sitting gral'lks out of his troops.

An evil grin creased his face as he dismissed the verbal dressing-down that had first crossed his mind, deciding that a more direct reprimand might make an indelible impression. With one part of his mind planning his attack, Han

disappeared into the jungle, the rest of his concentration focused again on finding one lone, small female whose footsteps were rapidly disappearing into the distance.

His distraction cost him. Deep enough into the jungle that the glow from the hanger no longer reached him, Han scowled as he realized that there were no longer any telltale footsteps to lead him further. He paused, his own quiet progress through the leaf litter suddenly sounding way too loud in his ears.

Cursing under his breath, Han restrained the urge to stomp loudly through the underbrush and bellow at the top of his lungs for his short but irritating nemesis. With a frown, he eased forward on the cushion of decaying vegetation. A sudden thought, that Her Highnessness had maybe slipped outside to meet with someone, crossed Solo's mind and he paused again.

Han was unaware that his expression had darkened into a fierce glower at the unwelcome thought. "Greatà" His mutter was almost inaudible as he ruthlessly channeled an unnamable, unwelcome emotion into irritation with the diminutive Princess and frustration at his own stupidity for following her. "You're a fool, Solo. A gods-be-damned idiotàyou should have your head examinedà"

Despite his grumbling, Han continued to ease through the jungle foliage. His movements were no less cautious than before, but his mind was no longer fixed in unwavering concentration on the task at hand. A sound, off to his left, suddenly set alarm klaxon's jangling in his head and, with the quickness of a thought, his blaster appeared in his fist.

His eyes narrowed as he strained his ears, trying to identify the short cry he had heard. Easing forward carefully, he glanced skyward as the second and third of Yavin's moons crept higher into the sky, their light casting strange, multi-edged shadows. Worry reappeared in his expression as the cry was repeated, and he angled toward the sound.

His footsteps remained silent as he approached an opening in the jungle canopy. The reflective light of the three moons above bathed the little clearing with an opalescent glow and Han's brow knitted in confusion as he searched the area with a sweeping gaze and found nothing more than knee high vegetation surrounding a large boulder near the center of the clearing.

Scanning the edges of the jungle with a wary gaze, Han stepped forward into the pale moonlight. Sudden motion in the tall, broad-leaved plants next to the boulder froze him mid-step and the muzzle of his blaster swiveled unerringly to cover the area. Narrowing his eyes, he took one more cautious step forward.

The flash of movement came again as a small fist rose and struck the unyielding boulder once more. The faint shimmer of a white-clad arm in the moonlight was

what had drawn his gaze. Recognizing the small form crumpled next to the rock, Han holstered his weapon and took several swift steps forward, concerned that the Princess might have stumbled and injured herself in the darkness. As he began to cross the distance separating them, the strange cry that had drawn him to the clearing was repeated.

"Why?" The word was a heart-broken, wavering wail. Han stopped abruptly.

Totally unaware of the pilot's presence behind her, Leia Organa pounded her fist against the boulder repeatedly. Her small form almost totally hidden by the lush plant-life around her, Leia sat on the ground, her forehead pressed against her upraised knees. She kept her left arm wrapped around them while her right hand rained blows upon the uncaring rock next to her.

Han opened his mouth, intending to call out, but then hesitated. He glanced away, pulling in a deep breath before raising his eyes again. His brow furrowed and his mouth pulled down as he debated whether or not to intrude. A low, muffled sobbing made up his mind for him.

"Hey," he kept his voice soft as he took the final steps to close the distance between them, "Princess."

Han stopped, the toes of his boots just millimeters away from the soft, white material of her robes. "Hey?" He tried again, not wanting to startle her. She remained unaware of his approach, oblivious to his presence as she continued to choke on her tears, curled protectively into herself.

Han stared down at her, his jaw tightening as he realized that, even here, in the depths of the sheltering jungle, in the perceived security of solitude, the Princess was attempting to keep her grief under strict control. The wrenching sobs that escaped her did so without permission. Painfully, they wrested free of the iron-willed control that had kept the young woman functioning throughout a botchedàbut brilliantly conceived, Han reassured himselfàrescue.

Follow that with a harrowing escape, a nerve-wracking wait to see if she and the planet she was standing on would be blown into oblivion, and a pompous ceremony to bolster the morale of the troops. Top it all off with a stress-filled meeting with a bunch of brain-dead paper-pushers, Han thought to himself, and you have a seething mass of emotion, tamped down by willpower alone.

Han was neither blind nor naiveàhis less-than-ideal upbringing and the following years of roaming the galaxy's seamier side had taken care of those traits in a hurry. He knew that the young woman at his feet had been functioning on sheer adrenaline for entirely too long.

He knew. He'd been there. Ruthlessly, Han shoved a skinny, dark-haired boy back into the dark recesses of memory and clamped the airlock door to his subconscious more tightly shut.

>From a spot near his knees, another low moan, followed by a choked sob, pulled his attention back down to the Princess. He crouched, reaching a hand to the shoulder nearest him, then paused, unsure of his welcome.

Lost in her misery, Leia still did not notice him. She remained huddled into herself, trying to fight back her tears. Only her right hand, fisted against the rock next to her, escaped her tight control. Blindly, she repeatedly pounded the basalt outcropping, her blows as ineffectual against the hard stone as they were against the enemies and memories haunting her mind.

A faint smudge of wet darkness, smeared across the rock's pale surface as Leia lifted her fist for another blow, caught his eye, and Han's uncertainty disappeared. He was intimately familiar with the emotions that were claiming her, understood the anger and desperation that could inflict unknowing self-injury. Reaching around her back, he caught the delicate bones of her wrist in his right hand to keep the next blow from falling.

He felt the wrenching shudders that ripped through her slight form as she continued to try to repress her sobs. The narrow expanse of her shoulders trembled beneath his arm as he drew her hand away from the boulder. Blindly, she resisted, trying to pull her arm away from his grip. He kept a gentle, firm hold on her, and then obeyed the sudden, inexplicable rush of tenderness that raced through him.

Refusing to examine the emotion very closely, Han used his encircling arm to pull her closer while he slipped his left arm beneath her upraised knees. Swiftly, before her dazed mind could register just who was picking her up, he lifted her off the damp ground. Pivoting with a spacer's agility, he smoothly turned while still crouching and sat in the same spot she had occupied.

Propping his back against the boulder she had been attacking blindly, he settled her in his lap and transferred his grip on her wrist into his left hand. As he did, he felt the tensing of the young Alderaani's muscles at the sudden realization that her solitude had been invaded. He felt her suck in a shocked breath and hold it as she fought to stifle her tears and force her raging emotions back under rigid control.

"Oh no you don't, sweetheart," Han's low murmur was as determined as his grip as he enfolded Leia within a cocoon of his arms. Wrapping his left arm around her, he gently forced her to lean into him while his right hand moved to caress the back of her head.

For a moment, her posture stiffened, resisting the offered solace. Then, as his fingers found the rigidly painful muscles in the back of her neck, cupping and encircling it with comforting warmth, her resistance crumpled. With a strangled moan, she turned blindly and buried her face in his white shirt.

Han swallowed hard, staring down at the top of her head. He felt her trembling and, as tearing sobs ripped through her, he released his hold on her wrist and pulled her closer. As he wrapped her in his arms, offering her the only comfort he could, her hand crept forward, rested lightly on his chest for a moment, then clenched into a fist, grabbing a handful of his black vest.

"All gone" The tear-choked voice was muffled, but the despair in it rang clearly in the quiet of the clearing.

"I know, sweetheart" Han's soft reply revealed none of the swirling vortex of memory that was attempting to choke his own voice. "I know."

"Why?"

Even in all his years traveling the galaxy, Han realized, he had never found the answer to that question—a question that was so often asked from the wailing depths of mind-numbing grief. Knowing that he still had no answer for it, the pilot shook his head. Narrowing his eyes, Han gazed skyward into the canopy of stars that, for so many years, had been the only solace for a lost and forlorn Corellian boy.

Convulsive sobbing shook the slight form he cradled on his lap as the Princess finally released the reins of grief, fear, and loss. Pulling her closer, Han swallowed hard. Unconsciously, he allowed one of his own carefully constructed barriers to drop as he began a comforting rhythmic movement, rocking her gently.

Murmuring soothingly to the woman in his arms, Han was unaware that, as he spoke the low-voiced words, he lapsed into the almost forgotten speech patterns of his earliest years. The flowing tones of High Corellian slipped easily from him, mixing with the sound of uncontrolled weeping.

* * * * *

"Hey! Chewbacca!"

Chewbacca glanced up from the ionic inductor he was examining. Turning slightly, he caught sight of Luke Skywalker outside the door to the supply room. Tossing his head, the Wookiee gave the youth a bark of greeting and a wave before turning back to the supply officer.

Picking up the inductor, Chewbacca growled a thank you to the man who waved a laconic hand in reply, already turning to the next pilot leaning against the counter. Chewie turned, noting as he did that the young Tatooine man had slipped into the supply room.

He fixed the youth with a curious stare, tipping his head in inquiry as he read frowning worry on the human's face. Lowing questioningly, Chewbacca stepped aside to get out of the way of another pilot and then moved forward to stand next the Rebellion's newest recruit.

Luke's brows knitted in a frown, his eyes anxious as he glanced quickly around the room, trying to find the tall, dark-haired smuggler that almost always could be located within arm's reach of his shaggy co-pilot. Not seeing him, Luke turned his direct blue gaze to meet Chewbacca's matching one.

"Where's Han?"

Chewbacca blinked, and then relayed the whereabouts of his friend in a string of hoots and yowls. Luke shook his head, smiling wryly at his own inability to understand the Wookiee language.

"I'm sorry, Chewie. I can't understand you." He sighed.

Rumbling a chuckle at the young human's obvious frustration, Chewbacca rested a hand on Luke's shoulder, gently turning him and giving him a slight push toward the doorway.

"I probably should have waited for Threepio at least then you'd be able to tell me where to find Han." As he walked, Luke angled a glance up at the tall form following behind him.

Chewbacca tipped his head again, trying with body language to express himself as he grumbled a soft question. This time, Luke managed to catch the meaning behind the untranslated words.

"Why do I need to find Han?" When the Wookiee nodded, confirming Luke's tentative guess, the young man continued, suddenly looking uncomfortable, "Actually, I'm looking for Princess Leia."

Chewbacca angled a glance down at the youth, attempting without success to hide the amused twitch of his mouth. Luke, not adept at reading Wookiee body language, luckily missed the telltale curl of Chewbacca's lip. Still, color ran high in the young man's face as he admitted, "Threepio said she left the meeting with the Rebel leaders abruptly. I'm a bit worried about her."

Chewie stifled a snort of glee. He kept a hand on Luke's shoulder, steering the young man toward the hanger bay. Swiftly calculating the elapsed time, the Wookiee decided that, by the time Luke found them, Han would have had enough opportunity to infuriate the young Alderaanian woman, if he hadn't already managed it.

With gestures and pantomime, Chewbacca explained to Luke that Han was outside the protective walls of the base, in the jungle. He was gratified to see the concern that flashed across the young man's face at the news.

"Han went outside?" Luke frowned, eyeing the blackness beyond the open door. "Why?"

Again, Chewbacca fell back on his ability to act out events, expansively gesturing to get his meaning across as he told Luke that Han had followed the Princess because she had seemed upset about something. He groaned loudly in frustration as Luke turned a surprised and concerned stare up to him when he finished.

"Han said something that upset the Princess and she ran out there? And he followed?" Luke's tone was more perplexed than before. "Butàwhy wouldà"

Chewbacca tossed his hands in the air, resolving right then to spend more time with the Tatooine youth. If, as he suspected from Han's behavior, he and his partner were going to be spending more time with the Rebels, then he was going to have to teach Luke to understand Wookiean. With an exasperated huff, he firmly turned the young man toward the open door and gave him a gentle shove to get him going.

Luke stumbled, glanced back over his shoulder and saw Chewbacca giving him shooing motions, obviously urging him to follow the pilot and the Princess. Luke nodded back at the Wookiee to show his understanding before turning and trotting toward the night beyond the base entrance.

* * * * *

Han could tell the exact moment that Leia became fully aware of where she was and whose arms were embracing her. She stiffened. With a wry twist to his mouth, Han began counting down. Ten, nineà A ragged indrawn breath shuddered through the Princess' body. Eight, sevenà Ever so slightly, she began to ease away from him, her movement cautious as she attempted to pull the shredded remnants of her dignity around her.

Six, fiveà Shifting further away from the chest that she had unabashedly sobbed upon, the young Senator raised her hand to her face and, head still bowed, scrubbed the tear tracks from her cheeks, unaware of the smears of blood that

were left behind by the abraded skin of her hand. Four, three— Han could feel her gather herself to rise.

He eased the pressure of his arm around her shoulder, subtly allowing her the freedom he knew she was going to seek. Two, one— On cue, Leia surged to her feet, her movement graceful despite her haste. She took two quick steps away from him, and then paused.

"I—" She cleared her throat, keeping her back to him as she raised her hand again to wipe away tears. Embarrassment and chagrin were evident in her tone as she spoke almost too softly for her voice to carry. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't've—I mean—"

With an agile economy of motion, Han silently stood. Understanding her unease with her emotional outburst didn't make it any easier for him to banish the unexpected tenderness he still felt for the brave young woman who was attempting to hide again behind royal dignity.

His own unease with the unwanted emotion quickly translated into a typical Solo move. He resorted to sarcasm. "Hey—don't worry 'bout it, Your Highnessness. Any port in a storm, right? I guess even us commoners can be useful sometimes—" As soon as the words left his mouth, Han regretted them.

Leia turned her head long enough to shoot him an irritated glower. The affront in her voice was plain when she spoke. "I think I'll return to the base, now, Captain Solo." The haughty Princess was back, the young Alderaani's tone coolly dismissive as she began to walk away.

Han's eyes narrowed in anger that was, for once, aimed at himself. Reaching out instinctively, he snagged Leia's upper arm, halting her. "Wait a minute." Han wrestled with conflicting desires. Half of him wanted to release her as soon as he stopped her—let her run from him. The other half, his less sane half, he thought snidely to himself, wanted this encounter to end on a less antagonistic note.

Leia turned, trying to wrench her arm out of his grip as she did so. He kept his hold on her easily and her eyes flashed in sudden anger as she lifted them to his face. The light from the three moons did nothing to hide the ravages of her earlier bout of sobbing. Tear tracks were still easily seen and the spiky wetness of her lashes cast jagged shadows as she peered up at him.

"Look, I'm sor—" Han's inelegant attempt at a rare apology was cut off by a spate of coldly enunciated words.

"If you don't mind, Captain," her tone was biting, "I'd like to leave now."

Han scowled, his temper rising, his stubbornness following close behind. He tugged her closer. "Sorry, Your Worship," he smiled at her, a fierce baring of teeth that did nothing to hide the irritation in his own face. "I ain't done yet." His tone clearly implied that he wasn't going to release her until he was good and ready.

The delicate jaw that she angled up at him was thrust pugnaciously forward as the Princess gritted tightly, "Well, I am."

"Huh uh, Your Royalnessànot yet. I got something to say to you and you're gonna damn well stick around until I'm done."

Fury flashed in the brown eyes that glared up at him. "How dare you!"

* * * * *

As a woman's voice, raised in anger, sounded close by, Luke stopped his search. His eyes widened before he shook his head in exasperation. Han and Leia must be sniping at each other again. A slight smile flitted across his face at the thought. He turned and started walking, not questioning the fact that, in the denseness of the jungle, he was able to pinpoint the correct direction to take with ease. The light from the three moons hovering above filtered eerily through the heavy canopy of leaves and Luke noticed a brighter glow ahead of him.

He strode swiftly forward, and then paused as he reached the edge of a small clearing, letting his eyes adjust to the brighter light. Glancing around the open space, he took a half step forward, raising a hand as he recognized the forms of Han and the Princess. He halted abruptly, frowning.

* * * * *

Knowing Leia was teetering on an emotional precipice, Han expected a slap to follow her outraged yelp. He braced for the blow, knowing that the fiery spirit he'd teasingly mentioned to Luke in the Falcon's cockpit wouldn't allow her to take his high-handedness without lashing out, either verbally or physically.

He swiftly found he had underestimated her. He caught sight of the clenched fist flying toward him a split second before it connected. He jerked his head back, managing to soften the worst impact of the blow, but stars still went nova behind his eyes.

Whoa! There's obviously a banked fire under that icy veneer of royalty, Han thought with some bemusement. Blinking, he shook his head slightly and then, with the lightening reflexes that had made his speed-draw legendary in some circles, he caught her wrist as she drew back to strike again.

"Oh no you don't, sweetheart." Han knew the endearment would fan the flames higher, but he was unable to resist using it. He yanked her closer, and then transferred his grip so that he held both her wrists captive in his left hand.

Infuriated by the ease with which he restrained her, the spitfire in front of him growled something that sounded suspiciously like a foul Alderaani curse and attempted to inflict damage a bit lower. Han dodged the blow, ignoring the spark of reluctant, amused admiration for her courage that rose within him as he focused instead on making sure that she would listen to him.

He gave another tug on her captured wrists, pulling her off balance so that she stumbled into him. "Lookà" His voice was gruff. A movement a few meters away near the edge of the clearing caught Han's eye and he broke off.

Narrowing a wary stare at the spot, his right hand dropped to rest lightly on the butt of his blaster, ready to draw and fire within a split second if the motion turned out to be a threat. His tense fingers relaxed as his eyes first picked out the human silhouette and then identified Luke as the youth stepped further into the moonlit clearing.

The young man's thoughts were as transparent as the emotions on his face while he glanced from Han to Leia's struggling form and back again. Han met the sudden flare of suspicion and outrage in Skywalker's blue eyes and flashed a quelling scowl at him in response. Glaring a warning to the youth, Han raised his hand in a gesture telling the young man to back off.

He didn't really expect Luke to heed the warning and was mildly surprised to see him halt, the moonlit blue of his eyes falling on Leia. The accusation in Luke's eyes eased into wary concern, his gaze darting between Han and Leia again.

The captive Princess suddenly stopped twisting her wrists in an effort to escape. "Let go of me." The frigid cloak of dignity was back as Leia lifted her chin to glare at Han with regal disdain. Only the faintest of quavers in her voice betrayed her still roiling emotions.

Tearing his eyes away from Luke, Han met her glare with a direct, sober gaze. His eyes searched hers for a long moment before he shook his head. "Not until you hear me out, Your Worship." His tone brooked no argument.

"No. Now." She argued anyway, her voice a growl. "Letà meà go... rightà now." She held herself rigidly, her temper firmly enough controlled to keep her from physically attacking him again, but the words were snarled.

Han shook his head in frustrated exasperation. Peripherally, he was aware of Luke edging closer, but he kept his full attention on the irate young woman in front of him. "No." His voice was flat, uncompromising.

As she yanked again at her wrists in response to his refusal, he thrust a finger toward her face to distract her. Prudently, he kept it out of reach of her teeth, the thought crossing his mind that he'd have a hard time pulling off a successful speed-draw if he were minus a good inch of the digit.

"You listen to me this time, sweetheart," Han knew his voice was rougher than it probably should have been, but he was unable to gentle it. "Listenàand understandà" Tension, born of the memories that rose, unbidden and unwanted, from within the depths of his own mind, almost closed his throat. He could hear the strain in his own voice, but could do nothing to ease it.

"You couldn't have done anything to stop itàyou got that?" Seeing the flicker of doubt in the dark eyes that suddenly turned up to meet his, he repeated firmly, "There was nothing you could've done that would've changed a damn thing up there."

She was listening, Han noticed. Her attempts to wrest free of his grip had ceased and she stood quietly. He knew his words hadn't convinced her-only time would finally ease the guilt he knew she was struggling with-but she was listening. He dropped the accusatory finger when he realized that he was still jabbing the air near her face and, growing uncomfortable with the confrontation, released his hold on her wrists.

Unexpectedly, before he could pull entirely away, he felt her fingers close around his own, clutching his hand as if it were a lifeline. He watched as her eyes grew distant, turned inward into memory. The haughty mask of aristocracy was gone, leaving behind a beautiful--and very young--woman who had endured more in the past week than most people had to endure during a lifetime.

As he studied Leia's upturned face, a sudden surge of tenderness and possessive protectiveness welled within Han, terrifying in its strength. Whoa! Jet back, Solo. What the hell? Quailing in the face of the unexpected emotion, Han did what he had spent most of a lifetime trying to do--he threw up deflector shields and dove into evasive maneuvers.

He gave a lop-sided smile, unaware that it didn't quite reach the depths of the banked tragedy in his own eyes. He missed the searching look she gave him as he lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "The way I see it, Princessàyou play the Sabacc hand you get dealtànothing you do can change it." He tried to inject the old, familiar care-worn note into his voice and was surprised when the correct tone was hard to find.

"All you can do is hope the randomizer don't rearrange the cards on you when you've got a good handàand cross your fingers for luck and bluff when you got a bad one." He saw a slight frown crease the Princesses brow as she blinked up at him, confusion entering her eyes.

After a moment of silence, she surprised him by following the analogy. Her tone was thoughtful and soft, not much more than a whisper as she added with a slight nod of understanding, "You can either choose to play the game throughà or foldà" Her eyes dropped suddenly before she bowed her head, tears once more starting to cloud her voice as she continued in a soft whisper. "Quit playingà permanently."

Han's fists clenched, hearing the dark emotions that shadowed her quiet words. Only then did he realize that, despite his attempt to pull away from her, his fingers had disobeyed him, refusing to release the small hand nestled in his own. As his hand closed tighter around hers, an inarticulate sound escaped Leia, Han was unsure whether it was a wordless moan or his name.

Her shoulders shook as her emotions ambushed her once more. "Why? All those peopleà A whole worldà" Leia raised her free hand, trying unsuccessfully to stop the words. Through the shaking fingers she pressed to her mouth, another wrenching sob escaped. "How can là"

Han whispered a curse and gave in, pulling her to him once more. Wrapping her again in the haven of his arms, he dipped his head to press his chin against the darkness of her hair. "How can you go on livingà" he finished the question for her, hearing the echoes of a young voice-the cry of long-gone, Clan-bereft teen-in his mind as he spoke, "When all of them are dead?"

He felt the shudder that ran through her as he voiced the words that she had been unable to speak. It shook her from head to toe and, for a moment, he regretted his own blunt nature. Then, he pulled in a deep breath. "I don't know, sweetheartà you just do. You go onà or you fold. We don't have any other choicesà none of us do."

His eyes, focused on his own past, fixed blindly on the jungle as Leia wept into his chest. A motion nearby brought him back to the present, his eyes meeting Luke's as the youth stepped closer. The suspicion and faint anger in the young man's gaze had disappeared entirely, concern replacing them as the overheard conversation revealed the depth of Leia's despair.

Han held the young man's steady gaze as Luke stopped an arms-length away, offering his support silently with his calm presence. An eerie sense of completeness threatened Han as he stood with Leia in his arms and Luke by his side. He froze, transfixed with equal parts longing and fear, wanting nothing more than to preserve the moment forever while also wanting to break away, to turn his back and double-time it back to the familiar comfort of his ship. Caught between the conflicting urges, Han hesitated.

In his arms, the slight weight of the Princess suddenly doubled as, in her renewed grief, her legs gave way beneath her. She began to slowly crumple to

the ground, Han's arms the only support for her sorrow-ravaged form. The moment of Han's indecision faded.

I'll leave tomorrow, he assured himself, jettison all this emotional baggage and head for clear skies. He'd done it many times before. He could do it again. But, for now—for tonight, he decided, I'll stay. Keeping a solid grip on the young woman in his arms, Han lowered himself carefully back down next to the boulder, letting her take comfort in his embrace.

He closed his eyes, hearing Luke as the kid moved to stand next to them both. The slight rustle of disturbed leaves next to him and the quiet presence that sank to sit on his right brought Han's gaze around. He met Luke's eyes squarely and was surprised to find a slight smile gracing the young man's lips as he nodded encouragingly at the smuggler.

He should be radiating jealousy like a Hutt gives off stink, was Han's distracted thought even as he frowned repressively at the youth. Luke answered the gesture with a knowing smile and a bemused shake of his head that deepened the smuggler's scowl. Ignoring the look, Luke turned his gaze back down on Leia as the violence of her sobbing eased slowly, tapering off into ragged breaths and un-regal sniffs.

As she quieted, both men remained silent, waiting patiently for her to regain her royal bearing. She surprised them both by remaining still, seated in Han's lap, cradled in his arms. For a long moment the three of them let the quiet of the night soothe the ragged edges of their emotions. Then, her voice broke the stillness, the sorrow in her tone deep, but lacking the shattered brittleness of earlier.

"It's my fault"

"No, it's not." Han's response was swift and firm.

"It is," Leia insisted, the guilt in her voice clear.

Han shook his head although, with her head resting on his chest, her eyes downcast, he knew she couldn't see him. "No, sweetheart, it isn't. And that'll be the hardest thing for you to accept." Next to him, Luke remained silent, but Han could hear the movement as he turned slightly, angling his body to hear the exchange.

Han could feel the weight of the youth's gaze, but he kept his own attention focused on the woman in his arms who was now shaking her own head in denial of his quiet statement. He jostled her gently in reproof, intending to insist again, but she broke the silence first.

"They wanted to break me. That's why they did it. If I hadn't been there, Alderaan would've still beenà If I'd fought them more during the interrogationà thenà" A sob broke through.

Han sighed. "Interrogation, huh?" His voice was weary, cold with the knowledge of Imperial procedure, clinical. "Mind probe?" He questioned, almost positive of the answer. "Drugs?"

"A-a-" He felt the quaking tremors run through the Princess's body before she managed to whisper, "Among other thingsà" A hint of the shame, terror, and helplessness she'd endured colored her tone.

Something within Han raged silently at the thought of what she wasn't able to say. Next to him, an inarticulate sound escaped Luke. He flicked a glance to his right, meeting the incandescent blue wrath in the younger man's eyes.

Careful to keep the emotion out of his voice, Han continued to speak. "If you'd fought them more, Leia," In his seriousness, he dropped the teasing nicknames that he enjoyed using to rile her, "Then you would've been dead long before me 'n' Luke showed upà"

"I know. But, if I hadà" The whisper was heart-broken, "Maybe Alderaan would still beà"

Han knew where her thoughts were heading and broke in with swift ruthlessness. "Yeah. My guess is that maybe they wouldn't have bothered Alderaan." He heard Luke's sudden intake of breath at his blunt pragmatism and felt the shiver that ran through Leia. His voice grew fierce as he continued, "Alderaan might've survivedàbut another world would've died in its place."

"Impsà" Han hesitated, his lips thinning at the thoughts running through his head, the memories. "Sooner or later, sweetheart, they were gonna make an example of someone somewhere. That's how they work, Princess." Cold finality flattened his voice, the ghosts of long-dead trust and crushed ideals lurking in his words. "They had the firepower, and they needed to let the galaxy know it. Any of one of the worlds close enough to the Core to make an impression could've been their target."

"If you had given in up there," Han's voice was firm as he continued, not allowing Leia any time to refute his words. "If you hadn't been as strong as you wereàif you'd given them the information they tortured you foràthen your Rebellion would have diedàlike Alderaan did. And after that, how many more worlds?"

He paused to let his words sink in and was gratified to feel the utter stillness in his arms that indicated that Leia was listening closely. "If you'd died up thereàlet them kill youàthen Alderaan might have survived." He took care to emphasize the

word. "But, even out on the Rim it was common knowledge—even in the most backwater places—that Alderaan was suspected of rebel activities. The Empire might've gone after it anyway, just to prove a point."

Her shuddery intake of breath sounded loud in the clearing and Han paused, waiting to see if she would speak. Instead, she remained silent. Luke, however, spoke softly, his voice distant, his eyes staring fixedly at a point past Leia's shoulder. "There was nothing you could have done, Leia. If you had followed a different path, then Han and I wouldn't be here—the Rebellion would have been doomed—and the Empire would have won."

Han frowned uneasily, hearing the ghostly echo of a crazy old man in the distracted certainty of the young man's tone. He felt Leia stir against his chest as she became fully aware of Luke's presence. Her head lifted slightly and he knew she was looking at the young man.

He steeled himself for the return of the dignified Princess, ready to release his hold on her at the slightest hint of resistance. Mildly surprised when she seemed content to remain where she was, Han studiously ignored the niggling pleasure that her trust in him evoked.

"They're gone, Luke. My family—friends—" The grief in her voice was tangible. "All of them—gone—and I—" She swallowed hard. "I feel so alone—" Her murmur barely carried to the ears straining to hear her.

"You aren't alone, Leia," Luke countered urgently, his face and voice earnest, yearning, and holding his own sorrow.

Heartache, Han knew from talking with the youth a few days ago, which was born of his own recent losses. We're three of a kind here tonight. The stray thought curled out of the depths of Han's mind before Luke's voice distracted him again.

"Han and I—We—"

"Yeah, sweetheart—" Han's voice was gruff as he interrupted, an irrepressible urge taking control of his mouth before he could rein it in. "We ain't much, but you got us."

Luke shook his head in mild exasperation at the smuggler's less-than-eloquent interjection. When his eyes lifted to take in the Corellian's wry smile, Han returned the look with a shrug and eased his hold on Leia even further, sure that his comment would be the one to drive her away.

He blinked in surprise when she remained where she was, a warm weight pressed against him. She reached out with her left hand, offering it silently to Luke, while she shifted enough to slide her right arm around Han's waist beneath

his vest. Han tensed, suddenly uneasy with the embrace, but his initial urge to flee soon gave way to a curious sense of rightness.

Luke's desert-tan fingers closed over the slender hand offered to him, gripping it firmly. Han met Luke's eyes, a long moment of silent communion that somehow sealed the growing sense of friendship between them as they both offered comfort to the grieving Princess that had brought them together.

Han tore his gaze away, growing uncomfortable with the naked emotion on the younger man's face. He turned his eyes skyward and shifted his shoulders slightly against the rock, settling in. He could sense Luke doing the same even though the kid remained cross-legged and still, only his arm and hand linking him to the young woman for whom they were both willing to wait all night to recover.

The silence stretched long between them, comfortable and comforting. As the night rustlings and stirrings provided a quiet counterpoint to his thoughts, Han found his gaze drawn to a bright cluster of stars hovering low above the trees. His eyes picked out the third star from the center with ease and, with his stare focused on Corellia, he found his mind drifting, recalling half-remembered words in a language he'd almost forgotten.

"Mi k'varith a'su'lo." The husky whisper of Han's voice in the silence brought Luke's eyes to him. The note of desolation in the smuggler's tone also brought Leia's head up. Her eyes met Luke's as they listened to the unfamiliar words. "Me a'Vech, me a'vechaàya atani fal'asa?"

The words had a solemnity, the singsong quality of a sacred chant, that were at odds with the normally cocksure smuggler who was speaking them in an aching whisper. "Va'ar. Mi eta' a'su'lo."

Lost in memories, Han remained unaware that his soft voice had gained him his comrades' full attention. He remained silent for a long moment, jaw clenched. Then, unable to refuse the demanding urge to utter the rest of the words, he sighed deeply and his baritone again carried quietly into the night.

"Me a'Vech, me a'vechaàya sulan a'me v'challa. Mi a'telle ya." The archaic language forms of High Corelli slipped easily from his tongue, but Han's voice broke slightly as he continued, "Mi eta' a'su'lo."

Luke watched tears well in Leia's eyes. Though neither of them knew the meanings of the words Han spoke, the raw emotion in his voice, revealing a pain that hovered just within his control, reached both of them. The recital continued, the lyrical quality of the words increasing as Han's voice continued to keep the silence at bay.

"Me a'vecha, me a'Vech...Vech re'fa in'sula mi. Re'fa ni'sula mi. Mi eta' a'su'lo." Han swallowed hard, suddenly realizing that he had been speaking the words aloud. He pulled in a deep breath, wanting to fall silent, but unable to deny finishing the rest of the ancient chant.

It's fitting. If the words can offer even the smallest comfort for these two who've lost as much as Han stopped the thought before it could finish, his jaw clenching. Then, he nodded reluctant permission to himself, allowing the Corellian boy to step free of the binders the Corellian man had placed on him years ago.

"Me a'vecha, me a'Vechàmi k'e'na. Mi a'nee varith. A'teran ye a'me varin." His voice firmed and grew resonant as he finished, "Mi eta' k'a'su'lo."

A long silence followed the final words. Broken only by the sounds of the night, the quiet stretched between the three until Leia's voice softly intruded, "Thatàthat was beautiful." A puff of air and a slight jolt of the chest she was leaning against was her only answer as Han gave a silent huff of wry amusement.

Undeterred by his silence, Leia spoke again, "Corellianàwasn't it?"

Han stiffened. Defenses flaring again, he shoved the boy-of-memory back into his prison, slamming the door forcefully shut. He felt the Princess's arm tighten around him, offering him comfort. Han shook his head in uneasy bemusement at the turnaround, but finally answered, his voice a gruff grunt, "Yeah."

Luke's voice was dreamy and distant as he softly inquired, "The words, Han, what do they mean?"

"Yes," Leia's voice short-circuited Han's initial reaction, which was to dismiss the young man with a blithe answer. "It sounded like aàa song. What was it?"

Han sighed. He tipped his head back, resting it against the rock behind him as he tried to stifle the screaming case of wary nervousness that tore through him. Finally, he answered, keeping his eyes closed as he spoke. "It's an ancient Corellian ni'sarràa chant-song." He translated the new word for them. "It'sàa warrior's songàità" He hesitated, and then tried to evade the Luke's question. "It doesn't translate well to Basic."

Luke's voice was resolute, demanding, and it held a hint of fond amusement that told the smuggler that he knew Han was dodging his request, "Try, Han."

"Please?" Leia's soft plea was Han's undoing.

With another sigh, the smuggler made the attempt, stumbling slightly as the ancient language resisted translation. "a'Vechà a'vechaà That's

like a family blood-kin Clan." He paused, unhappy with trying to translate each word, and then he tried again, his voice low as he began speaking, "I cannot continue to go on alone. My Clan my blood-kin where are you now? You are gone"

Han made an impatient noise, frowned in thought, and then found the right word, "Destroyed."

Leia and Luke remained still as he fell silent, struggling with the meanings and with the emotions the words resurrected. Then, Han finally managed to gather the words he needed. Softly, he recited the ni'sarr again, in Basic, his voice gaining surety and strength as the words came more easily.

"I cannot go on alone

My Clan

My blood-kin

Where are you now?

Destroyed.

I am alone.

My Clan

My blood-kin

You remain in my heart.

I would join you.

I am alone.

My blood-kin

My Clan

Blood-oath keeps me.

Duty binds me.

I am alone.

My blood-kin

My Clanà

I cannot follow.

I must go on.

Your spirits go with me.

I am not alone."

A long moment passed with no words to fill the silence. Han cleared his throat, refusing to open his eyes, unwilling to meet the weight of the intent gaze that had fallen on him from his right. Leia's arm around his waist tightened, but he couldn't bring himself to glance down into the brown eyes that he knew were turned upwards, focused on his face.

"I am not alone." Leia repeated the final words in a voice choked with sorrow, the message of the song sliding into the empty space in her heart.

"No, Princess," Han's voice was equally soft as he repeated the words himself, making a slight change to affirm her words. As he switched to his native language, the exotic tone of the High Corellian lent them the force of a vow, "Ya eta' k'a'su'lo." His eyes opened, falling to rest on the glimmer of light in the night sky that was Corellia.

"No, you aren't alone, Leia." In Basic, Luke's words echoed Han's, his quiet assurance loosing the young woman's emotions again.

She rested her head against Han's chest and wept, softly. There were no choking sobs this time, just a quiet flow of tears that brought a measure of peace. Again, silence filled the spaces between the three of them as each of the friends allowed the comfort of being together ease past sorrows.

After long moments, Luke turned from his contemplation of the night sky in which Tatooine could be faintly seen and glanced at the two next to the boulder. He smiled as he saw the ever-watchful gleam of Solo's eyes catch his motion, the Corellian turning his head slightly in question. His own eyes dropped to the Princess, half expecting her to be watching him as well. He smiled in mild amusement at what he saw.

"She's asleep, Han." He whispered.

She had been for long minutes-Han had felt the sudden relaxation that claimed her when she'd slipped into slumber. "I know." Han's low reply barely carried to the other man.

Concern laced Luke's voice as he studied Leia's pale features and the bruised flesh beneath her eyes. "She's exhausted."

"Yeah." Though the Corellian's response was monosyllabic, his tone and the tip of his head as he angled his own glance at the Princess transmitted his own concern.

Glancing at the moons, Luke gauged the lateness of the hour. "We'd better be getting back to the base. It'll be dawn in a few more hours."

"Yeah. I guess you're right, kid." Han nodded before adding with a wry grin, "Before my hairy partner decides that Her Holiness and I have tried to kill each other and you got caught in the crossfire. He's liable to have base security out stumblin' around in the dark tryin' to find us."

Han gathered Leia closer, preparing to stand. He didn't question the urge to rise as gracefully as possible so as not to jostle the sleeping woman. As he gained his feet, he glanced down into Luke's upturned face. Surprised to see the kid staring at him solemnly, Han frowned, "What?"

His frown deepened as his abrupt question caused a smile to spread across Luke's face. Suddenly feeling self-conscious, Han narrowed his eyes and grumbled, "What's so funny?"

"You." The kid's response was not reassuring.

Han's scowl grew formidable. "Whaddya mean, farmboy?" He injected as much scorn as he could manage into his tone as he squared his shoulders belligerently.

Unfazed, Luke's chuckle drifted to Han on the night air. "I meanàyou try so hard to act the mercenary, Hanàso mean and heartlessàbut underneath it allà" The young man's voice gained a note of bemused exasperation, "You really are niceà"

"Ha!" Han interrupted him, snorting in derision. "Nice?" His scowl was fierce as he shook his head in denial. "Don't bet your credits on that, kid."

"Right, Han." Luke's tone was patently disbelieving.

Han tried again, injecting a sarcastic edge to his voice, "Nice is for wet-behind-the-ears farmboys like youà"

Luke's amused observation cut across Han's insult, "Nothing on Tatooine is 'wet', Hanà"

"Don't try to be funny, Junior," Han growled repressively, glowering.

"Right, Han." Luke's tone was too bland.

Somehow feeling that the kid was still laughing at him behind the overly innocent expression on his face, Han threatened, "I am not nice. Got it?" He briefly regretted the burden in his arms, wanting to emphasize his statement with a jabbed finger.

"Right, Han."

Luke was definitely biting back a smile, Han noted with an inward wince. Han's answering grumble was in Corellian but, considering the chuckle that answered him from the Luke-shadow, Han surmised that the Tatooine farm-boy was worldly enough to have at least had one brush with the gutter form of the language.

Desperate to shore up his image, Han growled, "Don't just stand there, Junior. Why don't you do something useful—like use that glorified glow rod to cut us a path through this junk."

"Right, Han." Correctly reading the smuggler's irritation when a wordless snarl was the only response to his goading, Luke flashed him another teasing smile and stepped out of reach, pushing his way into the jungle ahead of Han.

* * * * *

Han strode into the cleared area in front of the base hanger-bay doors, skirting the half circle of light. He could hear Luke following close on his heels as he reached the edge of the door, unseen and unnoticed by all within the hanger.

No, Han amended, not all. A shaggy head rose, black nose testing the breeze as blue eyes scanned the darkness. Chewbacca set down the set of cables he was working on and took a step toward the door before pausing under the shadow of the Falcon's cockpit.

"Sitting gral'lksà" Han scowled.

"Huh?" Luke glanced from Han's narrow-eyed glower, to the hanger bay, and then back again, the question on his face transparent.

"Look at 'em, kid. How many of 'em could we pick off from here? You, me, and two blasters—without them knowing it and before someone found enough brains to shut the damn door?"

Luke trained a wide-eyed stare on the bustling activity that continued inside while he and Han remained unnoticed and unseen in the darkness outside. He frowned.

Han nodded. The kid was thinking. That was good, maybe with a few pointers, he'd be able to start thinking like a wanted man. Start thinking in a way that's gonna keep him alive.

Han shifted the slight weight in his arms. "C'mon, kid. Let's get her inside. I'm gonna head to the Falcon."

"The Falcon? Why not take her to her quarters?" Confusion laced Luke's voice.

"Because, Junior," Han tipped his head to eye the youth with a sardonic twist of his lips, "Her Highness hasn't deigned to tell me the location of her quarters." A sly leer slid across the Corellian's face, erasing the grin, "Yet."

He stifled a laugh as the younger man flushed at the innuendo in his voice. Good, Han thought, see if you think I'm 'nice' now! He pushed a bit further to cement his image. "Of course," he deliberately eyed Luke with a coolly calculating, speculative gaze, "Maybe she's already invited you to visit. You wanna lead the way?"

Han tamped down a sudden flare of something as Luke's hot flush grew even more noticeable and he stammered. "I...uh...um..."

"Well?" Narrowing his eyes, Han gauged the youth's expression with all the attentive seriousness he would have given the long-dead Gallandro.

"No," Luke managed to sound both wounded and annoyed in the same breath as he huffed out his reply, "I don't know where her quarters are, Han."

"Well then," Han couldn't restrain a smile at the news, but he managed to turn it into a cocky grin before Luke could see the real relief that spawned it, "I don't think she'd care much for being carried through the hanger deck like this—and I don't wanna hafta wake her up—she looks like she needs the sleep—so—" Han let his voice grow condescending, "The Falcon's our best bet. She's close, her ramp's down, and we can get to her without being seen if we need to."

As Luke stared for a long moment, tipping his head and frowning thoughtfully at him, Han quirked a goading eyebrow, "Well, Junior, what's it gonna be?"

Abandoning his obvious attempt to reconcile the two faces of Han Solo, Luke sighed, "Let's go for the Falcon."

"Right." Pleased with his success at sidetracking Luke's hero-worship, Han finally got serious about getting the Princess into the relative privacy of the Falcon.

"C'mon, kid, walk ahead of me and no one will see who we got here. Andàtake it easyàact natural." Luke shook his head at the admonishment, rolling his eyes in exasperation. Han pretended not to see.

Stepping out together, the two men entered the brightly lit hanger and made their way swiftly over to the Falcon. Chewbacca moved to greet them, his eyes falling with concern on the Princess' form cradled in his partner's arms. He growled a facetious question to Han.

"No!àI did not resort to stunning her, you big oaf." Han scowled up at his partner as he started up the ramp to the Falcon's interior. "If I was gonna stun everyone who irritated me with smart-ass comments, you'd spend most of your life unconscious!"

The Wookiee roared a laugh at Solo's quip and his partner hurried to hush him. "Quiet down, furball." Han increased his pace, bringing himself and his burden into the safety of the Falcon's hold. "She's asleep." He ignored the Wookiee's sarcastic rebuttal to that obvious observation.

Han moved across the common room and used his elbow to key open the door to his own quarters. Carefully, he lowered his burden onto the bunk, smiling slightly as the Princess sighed and shifted without waking, snuggling deeper into the softness of the pillow. She drew her hand up to rest next to her head and Han winced.

Leia's blows, raining in frustrated grief on the boulder next to her, had bruised and torn the flesh of her fist. The delicate skin, marred by a raw and still-oozing scrape, was an angry red that promised to turn into a painful bruise.

Without conscious thought, Han turned and reached for the small cabinet inset into the bulkhead of the cabin. When the door hissed open, he automatically caught the objects that fell from its over-stuffed confines and set them absently on the table next to the bed. With the ease of long practice, he picked the med-kit out of the chaos within the cabinet and triggered the door to close.

Turning back to the small form on the bed, he sank to gingerly sit on the edge of the thin mattress. He opened the med-kit and plucked three items from its depths before gently reaching for Leia's hand.

The Princess stirred restlessly at his touch. Softly, he murmured a reassurance, "Shhh!" Han paused for a moment, unsure if she would wake up. When she appeared to slide back into a deeper sleep, he turned her hand gently to be better able to reach the wound.

Carefully, he sprayed the area with an analgesic. He waited until he heard Leia's soft, sleepy sigh of relief as the pain faded before he reached for the second item he'd pulled from the medkit. The light hiss of the antibiotic spray sounded loud in his ears, but didn't bring any movement from the young woman.

He smiled and shook his head in bemusement at her exhausted lack of response. There had been many times in his life when a sound just as quiet had generated a swift and violent reaction from him—despite his own exhaustion and pain, and much to Chewie's dismay. Han's smile faded into a frown at the thought and he paused as he reached for the third item.

His eyes focused on Leia's sleeping features, viewing the innocence that managed to shine through the exhaustion and battle-weariness. Shadows darkened his hazel gaze as he let his eyes roam over her face, the words he had spoken in jest to Luke suddenly replaying in his mind. Do you think a Princess and a guy like me?

Han's lips twisted into a sardonic curl. Right, Solo? He shook his head and snatched up the synth-flesh bulb. He kept his touch gentle, not letting his annoyance at himself be transmitted through his fingers as he ran the bulb over the torn flesh.

He held her hand for a moment, waiting for the protective film to dry. Unwillingly, he compared the delicately boned fragility of her fingers to his own large, space-tanned grip. With a faint smile, he remembered the blow she'd landed on his jaw earlier. Like her small fist, the feisty Princess was stronger than she looked.

Leia stirred again, and Han belatedly realized that he'd tightened his grip on her fingers until he was holding her hand firmly, caressing the back of it with his thumb. Swiftly, before she could awaken, he released her, carefully setting her hand back on the pillow near her head.

Leia shifted uneasily and Han rose to his feet. A frown creased the young woman's brow and a faint sound, a tiny whimper, escaped her. Han, watching her restless movements, spoke in quiet reassurance, "Shhh, get some sleep, Princess."

Leia's movements stilled and then a sigh escaped her. Rolling onto her side, she tucked her left hand beneath her cheek and drew her knees up with a soft sound of contentment.

Han grinned and shook his head, unaccountably touched by the trust inherent in her unconscious actions. Grabbing the blanket wadded haphazardly at the foot of the bunk, he gently drew it up over the curled form, his smile growing more open as she murmured something unintelligible, sighed softly, and slipped into a deeper slumber.

He turned away after a long minute and stopped in his tracks.

"What in the nine hells are you two staring at?" Defensively, Han glowered at the two beings standing in the doorway. Chewbacca wrinkled his muzzle at his friend, not having to say a word to convey his amusement and approval. Han scowled ferociously at him. Luke tried hard to stifle his own smile, dipping his head to avoid Han's glare.

"Aahhhhhhà" Han waved a dismissive hand at them both, his frustration escaping him in a wordless growl.

He pushed past both of them, deliberately jostling the Wookiee hard with his shoulder as he passed him. "C'mon, fur-face."

Luke blinked at him in surprise, turning to follow the smuggler's progress across the Falcon's hold. "AhàHanàwhere're you going?"

Han ignored the puzzled expression Luke turned to him. "Got a little lesson to teach. C'mon Chewie, I'll need your help. Bring your bowcaster."

"Han?"

Han flashed a cocky grin at the sudden escalation of worry in the young man's voice. Enjoying the moment, he called back to Luke as he strode toward the lowered landing ramp. "Hey, don't worry, kid. I'll be right back." As an afterthought, Han offered, "Hell, its late. Why don'tcha bunk down here for the rest of the night if you want. There's another cabin just aft of mine. Or else the force couch is pretty comfortableà"

"Uhàokay, Han."

Han's grin widened at the nervous edge to Luke's voice. With Chewbacca striding behind him like a silent, furry shadow, Han stepped off the ramp and flashed a quick glance around the hanger deck. Hazel eyes narrowed on his target as the deck officer conferred with two mechanics in an open area between an X-wing and a dilapidated snub fighter. Snub fighters! Han snorted in disgust. The Rebellion was hurting worse than he thought.

He turned to Chewbacca, dismissing the issue of the sub-standard equipment the Rebels considered their top defense. "Okay, Chewie, here's what I wanna doà"

* * * * *

Pandemonium reigned within the hanger bay. Mechanics and techs dove for cover, droids squealed and scurried in confusion, pilots cursed wildly and

followed the example of the repair crews. Luckily, the lateness of the hour ensured that the panic spread only to the few teams still working in the hanger bay.

The hapless deck officer, pinned by blaster fire so precise that he was unable to move from his exposed position, quaked with terror. His eyes searched the darkness beyond the hanger bay wildly, trying to find the source of the attack.

The barrage, which had somehow managed to miss hitting him, and had somehow avoided damaging anything valuable, suddenly stopped. Unable to give voice to more than a garbled stammer, he gaped in utter disbelief at the two forms that entered the light from beyond the night-cloaked jungle.

Irate shouts began to echo from the edges of the hanger bay where the other personnel had taken cover. The first figure to emerge from the darkness ignored the furious cries, appearing sublimely oblivious to them. The second figure, waving a bowcaster threateningly at the most vociferous objectors, roared back at top volume, the Wookiee bellow ringing throughout the hanger.

As the Corellian smuggler that had so recently been honored as a hero of the Rebellion strode with single-minded purpose towards him, the deck officer's jaw dropped. Struggling to regain his lost composure, he managed to suck in a breath with which to blast the older man even as Solo stopped directly in front of him. Before he could utter a word, Solo pushed closer and jabbed a hard finger into his chest.

"Think about thisàboy." Han could feel his jaw clenching around the words as he glared into the pale, frightened face in front of him. The damn fool kid can't be much older than Luke. "Me 'n' Chewie there could'a had you, and almost every single one of the techs, fried just now."

His voice was hard. "We could'a been in and back out'a here with two ships, and could'a destroyed the restàall before you figured out who the hell'd killed youà"

The slowly gathering group of techs, mechanics, and pilots exchanged uneasy glances as the truth of Solo's words hit home. Vaguely aware of the audience he'd gathered, Han let his words carry. "Nowàyou're young. The way I figure it, you're only young onceà"

His eyes swept the group before he pinned the inexperienced deck officer with a narrow-eyed stare, "But then, you're only dead once tooàso if you wanna reach an age other than young and dead, you might just wanna start thinking a little more defensivelyà" Han jerked a thumb over his shoulder to indicate the still-open bay doors.

Sarcasm was thick in his voice as he continued, "And if you happen to think 'dead' is better than 'young', then you might wanna consider the men who're under your command, kid. 'Cuz I can lay odds that there's not one of 'em that's gonna agree with you."

The deck officer met the glacial hazel eyes that were boring into his own. Swallowing hard, the young man darted a glance over Solo's shoulder to the darkness outside the hanger that suddenly seemed a lot more threatening than it had only minutes earlier.

Nodding shakily to indicate his understanding, the deck officer swallowed hard. "Y-y-yessirà" Straightening his shoulders, he turned his gaze on another young man wearing pilot's orange who was staring at Solo with mingled fury and admiration. "W-wedgeà"

The chastened young man stopped. Then, he cleared his throat and when he spoke again the nervous edge to his voice had disappeared, replaced by a tone of command, "Wedge, make sure the bay doors get closedà" He flicked a quick glance toward Solo. "Immediatelyàand post a sentry just outsideà"

Han's grin was feral as he nodded his approval. Without another word, he pivoted on one heel and directed his steps toward the bulky, beat-up freighter crouched near the entrance to the hanger bay. Behind him, Chewbacca paused.

Glancing from his partner's retreating back to the deck officer who was also staring after the smuggler, the Wookiee shook his head in bemusement. It was a good lesson, he thought to himself, but the cub's method of teaching leaves a lot to be desired. The sound of the bay doors closing broke him out of his musing and, with a comradely pat on the young deck officer's shoulder, Chewbacca started out after his friend.

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end part 1

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