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THE PEOPLE OF THE LIGHT

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"Look, Your Royal Rulefulness!" Solo spun angrily on his heels, turning so abruptly that Leia Organa only narrowly avoided colliding with him. "Ord Mantell's the place you need, you ask my opinion, then you dump it like so much garbage!"

Leia flushed a guilty red. It was true, she had asked for Solo's personal knowledge of the isolated world, then gone against the suggestion put forward by the Council. But only because she believed that to support that proposal would mean an end to the integrity of one of the few remaining islands of peace in the galaxy. An integrity she had promised Solo she would protect. "You don't understand what happened at the Meeting," she began. "I didn't mean to..."

"Oh, yes, you did!" Solo turned and continued striding down the ice corridor.

Leia shouted after him. "I was only stating facts!" Solo stopped and punched at a door panel.

"Facts! Ha!" he disappeared into the immense underground hangar which housed the Falcon.

In the empty corridor Leia resisted the urge to stamp her foot in annoyance. Such action had brought icicles crashing down on her more than once, prompting Solo to smirk and tell her she needed 'cooling off'.

Instead she muttered an exasperated 'ooh'. Two technicians appeared in time to give her amused sidelong glances. Embarrassed, she headed back to

work in the Command Center. She had not gone far when she discovered that there had been another witness to her show of temper.

Luke Skywalker emerged from an alcove, the clipboard awaiting her signature tucked under his arm. "Leia! You forgot this." She noted that he was unsuccessfully trying to hide a grin. "Give me that thing!" She scrawled her signature. "Oh, that man is impossible!"

"Han?" Luke asked innocently.

Leia glared at him, then mimicked, "Han?" She continued on her way. Luke fell into step beside her. "Well he does know..."

"He does not!" Leia interrupted. "He wasn't at the Meeting."

"That's not what I meant. He knows Ord Mantell. He's one of very few Spacers ever to go there. He says they could teach and help..."

"I know that! It's all very easy for smugglers! But we have a treaty to uphold! "

"I'll bet the Imperials don't worry about it," Luke mumbled.

"They'd have to," Leia countered. "Otherwise they would never be permitted to leave. That is the Penalty."

"Han says there are ways through the Circle if..."

"Han says! Does it ever occur to you that he can be wrong!? That our agents might know more about Ord Mantell.1 than he does?"

"We have agents on ... ?"

"I never said that," Leia warned as she entered the Command Center. "There will be no mission to Ord Mantell so there will be no need for us to call upon Captain Solo's alleged expertise."

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Two days later the Council came to a new agreement forcing Leia Organa to swallow her pride--even though, as she constantly muttered, she was right and Solo was wrong. But if she must endure the Corellian's gloating she would not do so alone. Luke Skywalker would accompany her in facing Solo. He seemed an appropriate escort since he had been chosen, because of his adherence to Jedi philosophy, to accompany her to Ord Mantell. It was just her luck that Solo was the only pilot who could take them there.

Together she and Luke marched to Solo's stronghold, he eager and cheerful, she fuming with suppressed anger. They found Solo perched precariously, high atop the Falcon as he worked on the scanner dish. Leia nudged Luke. "Call him."

"Me? You know how he hates to be interrupted when he's..."

"Oh, damn them!" Leia scowled. "First they ask me to turn down his suggestion, then they change their minds! Why don't they do their own dirty work?!"

"None of them are beautiful women," Luke whispered.

Leia heard. She blinked at him in surprise then her anger returned. "Shows how little they know about that... that ... nerf-herder! He hates me!"

Luke was shocked. "That's not true!"

Leia looked shame-faced. "Maybe not, but you'd never know it by the way he behaves toward me."

Luke wondered if he dared point out that she wasn't exactly tactful in her choice of words either. Solo's shout saved him. "You two come all the way over here just to have a private conversation?" he taunted. "Free entertainment. Don't let me interrupt."

Startled, they looked up. The Corellian was obviously enjoying his joke. He wiped his hands on a rag and began climbing down. Privately, Leia enjoyed the show of strength and agility as Solo swung from the bracing, dropped to the hull, then slid down the access ladder. He stood smirking at her as if he could read her mind.

Leia blushed and stammered, "I have a proposition for you..." Solo leered. "...from the Council," she finished with a glare. "May we come aboard to discuss this? These are matters which should not be mentioned where they could be overheard."

Solo raised an eyebrow. "Don't trust your own troops now, Your Royalness?" He waved toward the ramp. "Please, do grace us with your charming company."

Leia lifted her chin and strode bravely into battle. Luke followed the stiff back of the Princess silently. Solo whispered, "You think you'll need a chaperone, huh?" Leia bit down hard against an angry retort. Of all the hardships she tolerated in the name of the Rebellion, Solo was the most insufferable! As she had expected,

Han made sure he did not miss the least chance for revenge. After what seemed an eternity of humiliating pleading for his help, Solo leaned back in his chair, placed his hands behind his head, winked and said, "It's a deal. Oh ... and I told you so!"

Leia flinched. "Indeed you did, Captain Solo. I will inform the Council. Check with Supply for any equipment you need to complete the Falcon's repair."

"And they'll foot the bill?"

"That is the agreement, but only if you complete your part of the bargain."

"No problem. Told ya I got contacts on Ord Mantell. They have to have some off-world goods. But only the very best get a contract with them."

"They must be desperate," Leia muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing. You will be ready by 0600 Third Day?"

"No sweat. I'll take off on time ... if the crew isn't late."

"Luke and I will be here well before time." Leia turned to leave. Luke was staying to help with the transport of repair supplies.

"Not too early," Solo called after her. "I'll be busy ... ahh, you know, saying farewells."

Those parting words ensured that the atmosphere aboard the Falcon was both chilled and explosive for the duration of the flight. There was very little conversation that involved either Princess or pilot. Luke had long ago given up trying to play peacemaker between the two, so he put the time to good use, learning more of Chewbacca's language. He also meditated as Ben had instructed him, and trained hard with his lightsaber and remote. The common room was the only compartment big enough for this activity--unfortunately. Leia remained entrenched in her cabin studying the customs of the aloof Mantellians. That left Solo and Chewbacca as his audience. Solo was making a show of playing holo-chess, but Luke could sense his irritation, and even hostility, build as the training session continued. It made it very difficult for Luke to concentrate and, as a

result, he did not do well--wearing the bruises to prove it. Each of his startled yelps was met by a snicker or a knowing smile from the smug Corellian. Finally Luke's temper erupted.

"You think you can do better?!" he yelled at the Corellian. "Try it!", He extended the lightsaber and was instantly surprised to see a hint of something in Solo's eyes he had never expected. Fear. "Han?"

Solo stood quickly,, ignoring Chewbacca's protest. "I gotta-go check the auxiliaries."

Luke's annoyance swamped his indecision. "Are you afraid to touch a lightsaber?" he challenged.

Solo whirled, his eyes dark and glowing with anger. Luke took an involuntary step backward, but the Corellian followed, snatching the lightsaber from his grasp. To Luke's utter astonishment, Han activated the blade, and while refusing to do battle with the remote, demonstrated a remarkable classic series of parries and thrusts, all with the fluid grace of a dancer. The performance ended and Solo passed the weapon back. He was almost to the cockpit door before Luke recovered his voice. "Wait!" he called. "Why didn't you tell me you knew how to use a lightsaber? Where did you learn? Who taught you?"

If the fury in Solo's eyes had startled Luke earlier, it chilled his blood now. "Enough." the pilot said quietly. The door slid shut behind him. Luke turned to the Wookiee. "Chewie?"

It would not be right for me to tell you things that Han considers private.

Luke sighed and sat down at the chess table. "No, of course not. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry. But Chewie, he's good, he's very good. If he had the Force, he'd be as good as me--and he hasn't even been practicing!"

Hesitantly Luke touched the Wookiee's arm. "If he knows someone who could teach me..."

Han's friend and teacher is dead. It happened years ago, when he was about your age. That is all I will say. I warn you, do not ask him about it. The hurt is deep.

Luke nodded solemnly, but his curiosity was hungrier than ever.

Leia sat behind the pilot's seat, listening with grudging respect as Solo completed an intricate personal exchange code with his contact at Mantell Port.

"Good to hear you again, Wes!" he crowed, when the formalities were finished. "keep the beer cold and the garossi hot! I'll be down in a flick of a pru's tail."

"A little more decorum please, Solo!" a laughing woman replied. "Show some respect for my rank!"

"Ha!.", Solo snorted. He switched off, turned and winked slyly at Leia. "Impressed?"

"So far so good," she said coolly. "We're not through Customs yet."

'No problem. You should know the rules well enough after all those hours you spent in your cabin. They're pacifists. They can afford to be with all their psionic powers. Nobody'd stand a chance against them. Follow my lead, don't carry weapons and you'll do fine."

'You missed one," Leia pointed out. "Don't mention the mission or the Alliance. And remember our cover names."

"That's two," Solo teased. Leia glared at him. In mock defense, he raised his hands. "Calm down, Your Holiness, They can sense hostility, remember?"

"They'll sense more than that if you don't remember what I said!"

"You're the ones trained in this MindShield stuff. I don't go in for

Alliance doctors messing with my head. I can't hide anything from them and I'm not even gonna try. That's why I didn't want to hear any details. I can't let anything slip when I don't know anything. I'm staying at the Port Cantina with Wes. I'll get you two through Customs, you do your thing, I'll do mine, and we'll be outta here by sunset tomorrow."

"You may not know the specifics of the mission, but you do know that we're here on Alliance business. That's enough to get us all detained."

"Not me," Solo said sweetly. "I'm innocent. You tricked me. These people are my friends."

"Fine!" Leia snapped. "I wouldn't want to spend the rest of my life in a cell with you anyway."

"No?" Solo leered. Leia looked ready to explode. "Take it easy, Your Royalness. Like I said before, they can't read specifics, they're only interested in intent. You gave me your word that this mission is for information only. That's good enough for me, so they can't read anything nasty from me."

Leia gasped, then turned away quickly. She was surprised by the compliment. She had not thought Solo trusted her so completely. It was a pleasant revelation.

"Han," Luke asked, "are you sure we'll be safe without weapons? I don't like leaving my saber..."

Solo's teasing humor vanished, his brows lowering in a grim line. "Kid, that 'saber of yours will get you killed one day. You're better off without it. Mark my words. Give it up and concentrate on the blaster."

Luke's mouth hung open a moment, at a loss for words. "You can't be serious! I can't give it up. Not if I'm to become a Jedi Knight like my father."

"And where's your father now?" Solo asked softly. "The Jedi are all dead, Luke. You can't bring their religion back to life on your own, and if you even try the Empire'll stomp you like a bug."

"Maybe," Luke agreed, but his blue eyes burned with pride. "You're wrong about the Jedi faith though. It will never die while the Force exists."

"The Force! Pah!" Solo turned back, concentrating on his flight panel. "Ready stabilizers, Chewie, we're going in."

Even with the protection and clearance provided by the Chancellors at work in the Port below, the Falcon was severely buffeted. Solo navigated expertly through the Shoals, known to the locals as the Circle, which isolated Ord Mantell. Leia was fascinated. As they broke through into the atmosphere she saw the swirling, glowing bands close up. "It's true then," she commented. "No one can get on or off planet without a Psi-Warrior's shielding."

„Not 'a'," Solo corrected. "Several. Takes at least ten of them projecting for all they're worth. Sometimes it doesn't work and you have to wait."

"What a lovely world it must be, sheltered from the evils of the Empire." Leia's wistful voice whispered remembrance of Alderaan.

"Yeah," Solo muttered. "So let's leave everything as we find it.'

"Will our mission disturb their neutrality?" Luke asked.

"Not if the Empire doesn't find out about it," Leia answered.

"Do they have agents here?"

"We're not sure. I hope to learn more while..."

"Not sure!" Solo interrupted, turning away to gape at her in angry disbelief. "That's just great! Wonderful! We're goin' out there without weapons and you say you're not sure if some Imp spy isn't lookin' to put holes in our backs!"

Leia flushed. "Even if there are Imperials or sympathizers here, they will not know us as enemies, nor will they be armed. The same laws apply to them."

"You hope." Solo reestablished radio contact as he guided the Falcon into the designated bay.

"Wes!" Solo laughed and hugged the tall, heavy set, blond woman who had run to greet him. She wore dark blue coveralls with a gold shawl slung diagonally from shoulder to hip, neither material concealing a buxom figure. "How long has it been?"

"Too long." She patted his rear and slipped her other hand inside his shirt. "Ord Mantell is a pretty place but it can always use more scenic attractions."

Solo smiled somewhat uncertainly. "Ah ... Wes, I'd like to introduce two friends, Caitra Lasset and her cousin Liam."

Weslina frowned at Solo as if puzzled by his words and mood. But she smiled politely as she bowed and took each visitor's hand in greeting. "It is an honor to meet friends of Han's."

"Then we are equally honored," Leia replied tersely, dark eyes flashing challenge. "You are obviously a very good friend yourself."

The tall Port Officer chuckled. "We've had some good times, right, Solo?" "Ah ... yeah." Solo looked back at the Falcon and gave Chewbacca the all

clear to join them. The wookiee had been standing guard, watching from inside the cockpit, wary of Imperial ambush. "Let's get moving," Solo said. "Caitra and Liam have some trading to negotiate. They were allowed only a two day pass. Can you speak to Customs for us?"

"You'll have to make Declaration," Weslina regarded him thoughtfully, still trying to figure the tension she could sense radiating from him. "You're not carrying weapons and your business is peaceful, so there should be no problems." She took Solo's arm and greeted Chewbacca happily. The wookiee bared his teeth and howled cheerfully. Wes gestured to Luke and Leia, "Customs Office is this way. Follow us."

"Leia," Luke whispered. "How can we Declare when..."

Leia gave him a resolute stare. "The Examiner will pick up any hint of deceit. We're using false names for protection, but he'll be used to that. We've come in answer to a call from a group of Mantellians anxious for outside news. We are not trying to coerce them, only relay information. If they believe we have ulterior motives, they don't have to listen and we'll be free to go. That's the arrangement. Now can you make the Declaration with a clear conscience? If not, you'll have to wait aboard the Falcon.'

"I understand. I'll be all right." Luke nodded.

"I thought you two were in a hurry," Solo called.

They ran to catch up. Together they entered an immense, crystal sculpted archway, which led to a circular room with a high, clear domed ceiling. Ord Mantell's pale yellow sunlight streamed through the center, focusing on the Declaration plate, a slightly up-raised crescent shaped platform. Behind it sat a white-bearded, purple-robed Examiner. He greeted them with the standard salute and signaled that each of the newcomers in turn should enter the light and make the Declaration of Peace.

Solo climbed the two steps to the dais. Then he stood still a moment, showing respect for the aura of golden light which soon surrounded him and which the Ord Mantellians worshipped. He lifted both palms to the Light and repeated the pledge of peace.

The Examiner projected a vivid blue orb of light. Leia and Luke were amazed to see it radiating from a silver crescent implanted in his forehead. It moved forward and settled on each of Han's hands in turn, then returned to its owner. The Examiner opened his eyes, smiled and said, 'Welcome, friend.'

"It's good to be back, Your Honor," Solo responded. He stepped down from the far side of the dais and passed through a small gate where he was scanned for weapons.

Luke was next. The blue orb hovered a long time over his hands and he shifted nervously. Then it retracted suddenly. The Examiner opened clear gray eyes, his expression uncharacteristically emotional, surprised, curious, proud. "You who Walk the Skies, come forward.'

Luke glanced apprehensively at Leia when he heard his true name used. She nodded reassurance and he obeyed.

The old man stood and touched his fingers to Luke's brow. "It is long since I have sensed one of your kind. Your Destiny is great, Light Bringer. We are honored to have you among us."

"Damn!" Solo swore softly as he overheard.

"Your friend fears for you," the Examiner continued. 'And well he should. He is your Companion in Trial. Listen to him. Go now. May the Light protect you."

"Thank you, Your Honor," Luke replied, staring wide-eyed. He crossed to Solo. "What was that all about?"

"I'll give you one guess," Solo said sourly. Luke remained puzzled and Solo explained. 'He knows what you want to be and the fact that he was afraid to use the word for 'your kind' makes me very nervous."

They watched as Chewbacca passed through. Then it was Leia's turn. The Examiner took even longer with her. When his eyes opened they were dull and his expression showed uncertainty. "Your soul is clouded," he finally said. "You are hungry for justice. All will be well if your hunger is tempered by love and patience. These your friends will provide. Pass. Remember to keep the Peace of the Light within your heart."

"I will, Your Honor," Leia promised sincerely. She gave a huge relieved sigh as she joined her friends. "I'm glad.that's over!"

"Me, too," Luke said.

"My garossi will be gettin' cold," Solo complained, eyeing the two rebels impatiently. "Wes, Chewie, an' me'll be at the cantina if you need us.

Have fun." He turned away, smiling brightly now, a swagger in his steps as he reclaimed Weslina's arm.

"What's a garossi?" Luke called.

"You'll find out if you meet me at the cantina tonight." Solo winked over his shoulder. "If you're lucky, I'll pay."

The Port Cantina was very different from those Solo usually frequented. In fact, the only common feature was the bar and the beer. Everything was clean and bright, huge oval-shaped windows overlooked magnificent gardens. The music was joyful and soothing, the air clear and free of smoky intoxicants, and the patrons, men and women, gaily dressed in colorful brocaded and silk robes and tunics. Everyone laughing and relaxed, and not a weapon in sight. Observing all this, Solo gave a huge satisfied sigh and scooped up some more of his hot-spiced garossi, a native fowl with soft white flesh and a tangy taste.

Weslina, however, did not seem quite as relaxed. "Han," she said after the, had exchanged a few tales of events of the past months, "you know I don't Search with you, but I need to know if my feeling is correct. You are evading the Truth. What is it?"

Solo looked up from his meal and held her gaze, his eyes dark and solemn. "I can't tell you Wes. It might endanger the people I brought here. But I swear we intend no trouble for Ord Mantell."

"Nothing that you know of," Wes corrected. Solo remained silent. She sighed. "Very well, but what you're hiding is more than a smuggler's deal this time. I will trust you, as always, but if harm should befall my home and my people because of your new friends, I will hold you responsible. "Fair enough." Solo nodded quiet acceptance.

"There are rumors that certain Psi-Warriors are using their Talents to buy off-world luxuries" Weslina confided as she returned to her meal.. "That's why I worry --- things have changed here since your last visit."

Solo blinked. "But none of your people are permitted to travel. How and what could they bargain?"

Weslina's blue eyes darkened with fear and sadness and she avoided Solo's gaze, regarding the sundrenched gardens beyond the windows. "Some sell Illegal Channel and Pass," she said softly. "I sense a great Darkness approaching and I feel so helpless." Her voice quavered and she drew a steady breath.

Solo reached across the small table and took her hand. "Relax, Wes. No one can get through the Circle. You're imagining things."

She looked back at him, squeezing his hand gratefully but looking far from reassured. "And what if some of the illegal Channelers are greedy to make contacts with the evil officers of the Empire?"

Solo felt sudden unease course through his veins. This was exactly what he had feared might happen. The sooner he got Luke and Leia out of here, the better. He forced a smile and let go her hand to pick up the wine decanter and refill her glass. "You worry too much. Here, have another drink."

"I'm sorry," Wes apologized as she sensed the anxiety she had caused. "I want this to be a happy time for you. And we should celebrate. The Examiner's Seeing of your friend, the Sky Walker, was wonderful. The Light Bringer, he called him!" she sounded awed, hopeful.

"Yeah, great. Let's drop it..'" Solo scowled.

Weslina frowned. "You do fear for him. He is safe here."

"He's not safe out there, though," Solo pointed skyward. "I wish held forget all this Force stuff."

Wes's jaw dropped. "He knows of the Force?" Her expression brightened like the sun appearing from behind a cloud. "Then he is a Light Bringer!"

Solo was glaring at her, his meal forgotten.

"I will not speak to him about it if that's your wish, but he cannot forget it. It's a part of him, as much as our Psi skills are a part of us."

Solo muttered something under his breath and poured himself another beer from the jug in the center of the table. "It's not fair, Wes. He's only a kid, he shouldn't have to carry that burden. And he's the last of them. He's alone. The old man who got him mixed up in all this hocus-pocus went and got himself killed."

"He's not alone," Weslina said softly. "The Walker of the Skies has you at his side."

Solo slammed his beer-tankard onto the table and other diners turned and stared at him. "I'm not his Guardian!" Solo snapped. "I don't want to watch another friend die like that!"

Wes reached out and wrapped her hands about his angry fist. She began opening the clenched fingers. "You cannot alter the ways of Fate, Han. There are some things you must accept."

Solo drew away from her touch, and took a long swig of beer. "Not if I can help it."

~

"As these records show," Leia continued, addressing the group of ten young men and women who sat cross-legged on the cushioned floor in front of her, "the Empire has destroyed any recourse to justice these Sentients may have otherwise been able to seek." She waved her hand at a series of holographic illustrations of devastation from various worlds. Luke continued to feed the projector with the tiny discs. Their audience reacted with appropriate disgust and horror. "Imperial Governors take their lands, their goods -- even their children. Hostages. The Rebel Alliance seeks to overthrow this system of tyranny, but there'll we can achieve victory quickly. We need all the help we can find."

A young man who wore a band of blue silk about dark, straight, shoulder-length hair, raised his hand for permission to speak. Leia smiled and nodded. This was by far a more polite audience than she was used to addressing.

"It is true our Psi-Warriors could turn the tide of battle," the man said, his voice a smooth, steady tenor. "But to do so would irretrievably corrupt our souls. We could not fight for your cause, no matter that we admire it. Such violence would mean the end of our faith, our way of life."

"The Alliance would not accept your aid in battle, even if it were offered," Leia explained, holding his intent gaze sincerely. "We wish to bring your peaceful existence to all worlds. It would not serve our purpose if we destroyed the only haven safe from Palpatine's darkness."

"Then what would you ask of us?" a woman inquired. "It sickens us to stand by helplessly while other worlds become diseased. Perhaps in time that disease will grow powerful enough to reach even this haven, as you call it."

"That's our fear also," Leia agreed. "Many Jedi were born of your race. They were Guardians of the Light. They were not of the Order of Knights. Theirs was a pacifist order befitting their blood. My companion and I have come to ask you to help us restore the Order of the Light, to use its powers to ask protection for those who fight in the name of the Light."

There was a murmur of voices as the Mantellians turned to their partners to discuss such a proposition. It was clear that the idea excited and appealed to them. The spokeswoman stood and presented the group's question. "Would not such aid draw the evil upon us?"

"If the Empire were to learn of it, perhaps so," Leia admitted. "But you're well shielded here and..."

"No," the young man interrupted. "There are spies and traitors among us. That is why we summoned you. We know this meeting is safe only because of our Empathic Sister." He indicated the child-like, red-haired girl who sat in trance in the center of her friends.

"This is true," the Spokeswoman agreed fearfully.

"Then," Leia sighed dispiritedly, "all we can offer in return is a promise of help should your world ever be attacked. It may seem a high price to pay, but you would share in the restoration of peace for the galaxy and all its people."

"There is much to consider. Many of the people of Ord Mantell sense the Dark drawing closer each day. Some evil ones even hide amongst us. I am certain we would find great support if went directly to those in the High Council who suspect such activities and gave them your news. But for now the discussion is ended." Turning to those gathered, the spokeswoman said, "We will continue tomorrow. Go to your homes. Think on these matters when you are shielded." She clasped her hands in Blessing Farewell. "May the Light protect and guide us."

The assembly dispersed. The spokeswoman, in whose home they had met, politely offered 'hospitality to Luke and Leia should they prefer not to return to their starship for the night. They agreed readily and were escorted to their rooms. Yet it was not long before Luke became restless. "I'd like to find Han and share that garossi with him. You coming?" Luke asked after Leia had let him into her room.

Leia indicated a pile of discs and paper on the desk. "I don't know, I've work to do here, and..."

"Please?" Luke eyed her pleadingly. "It's not often we can wander a new city without fear of attack."

Leia smiled, remembering Luke's isolated background. She was used to travel, but he had seen so little of what the galaxy had to offer. "All

right. But I'm not so certain of our safety. Ask Veli for a map and we'll go directly to the cantina and come directly back."

Luke was more than happy with this arrangement, particularly after he stepped into the street. Darkness was sudden and complete on Ord Mantell. As its residents were people who used Psi Talents to find their way at night, they had no need of artificial light. The narrow, stone-walled lanes were fog-shrouded and completely black, save for the occasional pool of yellow light spilling from a homestead window.

"I don't like this," Leia whispered as they entered a silent, completely black alley.

"The dark?" Luke asked hopefully, knowing it was more than that.

"No. There's something wrong."

"Yeah," Luke admitted. "I feel it too. Do you want to go back?"

A winged figure seemed to swoop out of the night and land directly in front of them. Both off-worlders instinctively reached for weapons, but to no avail. They could not see the face of the person before them, but they realized that what had seemed wings was in fact a dark cloak, swirling outward as the Mantellian leaped from the roof.

"It is too late to return," their attacker gloated. "Surrender quietly, Off-worlders and perhaps I will spare your lives."

Leia stepped forward. The man appeared to be as weaponless as were they. "You are of the People," she said challengingly. "Your faith forbids killing."

The Mantellian pushed the hood back from his face. Neither Luke nor Leia could hide their horrified reactions. The facial bones were twisted, pulling pallid skin taut and creating a permanent ugliness. "I'm a Half-Breed," the man said bitterly. "The gentle People to whom you refer never let me forget that. They call me Zeriex -- The Twisted One. It is not you I want.. It's the one named Solo. There's a high price on his head. You, boy, remain as my hostage. You, woman, find Solo. Tell him if he wishes his friend returned unharmed he alone will meet me at Cellos Field at sunrise. Go!"

Neither moved, though Luke cast a quick glance in search of an escape route. There was none. The attacker blocked them, choosing his ambush site well. "And if I refuse to go with you?" Luke asked.

The Half-Breed smiled cruelly. He lifted his hands and bolts of brilliant blue light seared forth. Luke was thrown hard against the stone wall. Unconscious, he crumpled forward onto the damp cobblestones.

Leia bent down to him but was roughly pushed away. "Go now, woman!" the Mantellian warned. "Or you also shall feel my power!"

Helpless to do otherwise, Leia turned and walked quickly into the darkness. At the corner she turned to see the Half-Breed drag Luke up and drape him over his shoulder. Then both seemed to vanish.

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When Solo saw a distraught, breathless Leia Organa hurrying toward him, he knew they were in trouble. When all the laughter and talk stilled as she reached his table and he saw the raw distress in her dark eyes, he revised his estimate. They were in deep trouble. Every Mantellian in the place was staring at them, Empaths stricken and Probes restraining their talents. It was against their code to interfere with the thoughts of an Off-worlder. Only the Examiner was permitted that.

Leia stumbled. Han took her arm and guided her to a seat as Wes poured her a drink. The Princess shook her head, her gaze locking on Solo's.

Fear chilled his blood. "It's Luke, isn't it?" he said flatly. Leia nodded. "Is he alive?"

"Yes, but he's hurt. Some sort of a..." Leia searched for some way to describe what she had seen. "Power bolt."

"A blue light?" Wes asked. "Coming from the fingertips?"

Leia looked hopefully toward the Mantellian. "Yes. It stunned Luke. We didn't have a chance. We had no weapons. We were told we would be safe here."

"Your attacker was a Half -Breed, " Wes concluded. "They sometimes enter our towns -- though it is forbidden to them."

"Forbidden? Why?" Leia asked. "Because they are not physically perfect? This man" she emphasized, "was very bitter about his treatment by your people. Exactly where are his kind permitted to live?"

"There are those living with us who are far from perfect -- as you call it," Wes remained unfazed by the accusation in Leia's eyes. "Physical

appearance means nothing to us. It is the hatred polluting the Half-Breeds' minds that we cannot tolerate. Still we give them their own state beyond the mountains. They are well provided for."

"This is not the time for a political debate," Solo rolled his eyes impatiently. "Where's this guy holding Luke?"

"This is not the place to talk," Wes said, casting a warning glance at the interested onlookers. There was no guarantee all would honor their vows not to use mind-powers to against them. "We will go to my home."

"Right," Solo agreed. "I'll have Chewie meet us there."

Any other time Leia would have complimented her host on the delicate beauty of her carefully chosen decor. Wes' home signified welcome and relaxation, snug with hand carved furnishings, woven rugs, and wall hangings. Tinted windows and skylights reflected starlight and rippling water from the artificial streams and waterfalls in the courtyard garden beyond. It was a home that gave the impression of being the glowing heart of a living forest glade.

Somehow it reminded Leia of Alderaan. That world's serenity had been obliterated by violence. Here, too, the peace was shattered as Leia recounted the attack in the alley and the Half-Breed's demands. She shivered as she finished. Wes hurried to place a woolen shawl about her shoulders. Leia absently nodded her thanks, but her attention was upon Solo. Their next move was his decision.

"A Half-Breed who deals with bounty hunters?" Solo laughed bitterly. "That's a new twist!"

"Your description indeed matches that of the one known as Zeriex," Wes said. "The Enforcers have been after him for many months. He has sampled the novelties of other worlds and the more his kind sees, the more they want. They'll do anything it takes to get it. I'll Summon my friends. In the morning we'll combine our power to..."

"No!" Leia pleaded. "You said these Half-Breeds are sensitive to power build-ups against them. That's why renegades like Zeriex are so hard to track, right?"

Reluctantly, Wes nodded.

"He'd kill Luke before you could prevent it," Leia concluded defeatedly.

"She's right." Solo left the window and gave Wes a reassuring touch. "You can't get involved in this anyway," he said softly. "But thanks for the offer."

Weslina lifted a gentle hand to his face. She smiled sadly. "You've felt this coming for a long time haven't you, Han?"

He shrugged. "You're the one who told me I have to learn to accept my fate."

"Are you sure this is the Foretelling?"

Solo scowled. "You know I don't believe that stuff. All I know for sure is that I have a debt to pay. I've owed Teru for a long time." He smiled stiffly. "Hey, it could be worse. I didn't expect to get a reward for paying him back."

"He never wanted or expected payment. You knew my brother better than that."

"Yeah," Solo said, voice hoarse with grief-stricken remembrance, "And that's why I have to do this."

Wes sighed exasperatedly but nodded agreement. "And you consider the reward to be The Sky Walker's life?" Solo nodded. The Mantellian stood and touched two fingers to Solo's brow, immediately above the bridge of his nose. Caressing the place Leia knew they called the third eye, home of the spirit. "Then go in The Light."

When neither seemed ready to explain further, Leia demanded. "What are you two talking about?"

"It's simple," Solo said, turning to her. "Zeriex wants me. Jabba has a high price on my head. I give Zeriex what he wants, he gives you Luke. I escape later."

"I don't believe this!" Leia exclaimed. "You're going to surrender without a fight?!"

Solo slapped his empty holster. "No weapons remember, sweetheart. Bare fists ain't much use against Psi-Stun."

"But," Leia looked pleadingly toward Weslina "there must be another way!" "If there is, we have until sunrise to find it."

"Chewie'll be here 'soon," Solo said with false cheer.

me and him are good at findin' ways outta tight spots, don't sweat it."

"Oh, fine!" Leia flopped back onto the cushioned lounge.

Solo paced back to the window which overlooked the road to the house. Only the sound of bubbling stream water filled the softly illuminated room as everyone tried to think of a better solution. No one broke the silence. Finally Leia stood and went to Solo. 'There's more you're not telling me," she said quietly. "isn't there?" She had always been' hesitant to touch him, but now she needed to express the concern and the admiration she felt for a man who only played the mercenary. She squeezed his arm and, surprised, he turned to look at her. "Please, tell me about Teru. Who is he? What debt do you owe him?"

Solo looked back out at the night. "Was," he answered softly. "Teru was my friend. My good friend. It's my fault he's dead."

Wes had overheard. "No," she protested. "That's not true."

Solo turned and smiled ruefully at her. "I seem to recall us having this disagreement before."

"Because you are stubborn and will not listen."

"Me!" Han looked back at Leia. "Ask Wes about it tomorrow night. She'll explain."

Leia clutched his arm tighter. "I want you to tell me tomorrow!"

He lifted a hand and brushed at the hair framing her face. "We don't always get what we want, Princess," he said gently. "You know that. But we will get Luke. I promise."

"Han...I...," Leia paused. She took his hand and covered it with both her cupped palms, the Alderaanian way of swearing truth and of expressing a greater depth of meaning than the words might convey. "I've misjudged you. I'm sorry."

"Hey, Your Worship!" Solo winked. "Only Corellians never make mistakes!" Leia couldn't help but smile.

~

"Okay, Zeriex; I'm here. Where's Luke?"

Solo stepped into the clearing. He was alone. Dawn light filtered through the trees, dappling the wildflowers and grass about Solo's boots. Beyond the dark wall of forest, he caught sight of the outline of a small vehicle, similar to the one in which he had arrived moments earlier.

"Your friend has been a most entertaining guest," a disembodied voice answered. "I will be sorry to see him go."

At the sound of the response, Leia and Chewbacca came forward to join-n Solo. In unison they faced the spot where they could now hear footsteps rustling in dry leaves. Two figures emerged into the weak sunlight.

"Luke!" Leia called.

"I'm okay," he assured her. But he didn't look okay. His face was bruised, his coat sleeve bloodied and he swayed where he stood, slightly forward of his captor.

"You Izir-spawn!!" Solo shouted at Zeriex. "You said he'd be unharmed!"

The Half-Breed touched a hand to Luke's shoulder and Skywalker stiffened and gasped in pain.

"He feels everyone of your insults, Corellian!" Zeriex snarled, one fist raised for more punishment. "Do you have any more?"

"No," Han said furiously. "Let's get this over with."

"You should have come alone. Perhaps I will kill this weakling.

"Kill him and you'll get only half the bounty!"

Zeriex was puzzled. ".Why is that?"

"Jabba pays only half for dead men. Touch Luke again and I swear I'll kill you or die trying!"

"Han you can't stop..." Luke began.

"Shut up, Luke!" Solo pleaded. "Stay out of this."

Zeriex's pale eyes narrowed in concentration. "I Read your heart, Solo. You mean what you say. I am surprised. Such selflessness is not part of the image you project."

"To hell with my image!" Solo shouted. "Do we have a deal or not?! The woman and the Wookiee are here only to tend Skywalker. I figured he might not be able to make it back on his own. Seems I was right."

The Half-Breed considered, then nodded slowly. "Very well. I have what I want. Come forward Solo..Very slowly. Skywalker will begin crossing the clearing now. Remember I have the power to kill him at a distance."

Determinedly, Han started out. He dared not look back; he was sweating with the effort to shield his thoughts. Luke looked shattered, broken by guilt as he stumbled forward. Yet, he was blameless.

"You were right, Wes" Han whispered, and a shadow lifted from his soul.

"It wasn't my fault." He had been a pawn, as powerless to help his friend as Luke was now. But that long ago trap had been crueller, better planned. It had to have been to snare one with Teru's ability as Psi-Warrior -and a skilled light-swordsman. But Teru had had no one to back him up. Solo came back to the present as Luke drew level with him.

Solo reached out and touched the younger man's arm. "Han," Luke said angrily, "I don't want my life spared if you..."

Solo cut him short. "There are no choices here, kid. Keep your eyes on Leia.and Chewie." He resumed walking forward, eyes locked now to Zeriex's suspicious appraisal.

. "What?" Luke mumbled, but he turned to obey. Then he sensed it. Leia was trying to tell him something. Her stance screamed readiness for action. Solo began talking, distracting Zeriex from whatever the rescue party, had planned. Luke continued to watch Leia. Her hands moved--there was a glint of flashing sunlight on silver. She threw a metallic cylinder toward him.

He reached out only halfheartedly but then the object seemed to come to him of its own accord. It was some kind of strange lightsaber! But how?

"Now, kid!"

Luke spun about and activated the blade as he heard Solo shout. The Corellian dropped protectively to the ground, seeking cover and giving Luke a clear range of attack.

"You deceived me!" Zeriex screamed, almost frothing with fury as he glared down at Solo. "Now watch as I kill your friend!" He sent three bolts hurtling toward Skywalker, but Luke parried instinctively and all three were deflected harmlessly by the shimmering light-sword.

Zeriex's attack paused in pure astonishment. Then he directed his attack toward Leia and Chewbacca, but another woman emerged from the trees. She was one of the People, projecting an aura of protection about the Off-worlders.

"We located your partner!" Wes called. "The Enforcers have arrested him. You have no Channel offworld! There is no way escape. Surrender!"

"No!" Zeriex shouted. "No!" Savage defiance twisted his scarred face even further as he looked down at Solo who was rolling away, set to get to his feet and run for the cover of the trees.

"You, smuggler! You're the cause of this! If I can't have you--no one will! Die!" He poured all his vengeful hatred into one long sustained burst. It soared through Solo's back as surely and lethally as any laser bolt. Solo staggered, fell. The ground beneath him smoked and dry leaves about him erupted into flame as the energy burst continued to burn through him..

"NO!!" Luke shouted, the word raw with anguish. Zeriex remained intent on killing Solo, and seemed not to have heard. Luke charged forward, the brilliant glow of the light-sword leading the way in the forest shadows.

The blade swooped down, slicing through Zeriex's back. The Half-Breed's energy bolts vanished and he toppled, eyes still narrowed with lustful hatred even in death.

"Han!" Luke sobbed. Shocked, he dropped to his knees, beat out the flames, then rolled his friend onto his back. Solo's eyes were closed, and he seemed not to be breathing. The wound was even larger at its exit point high on the man's chest. Solo's face was as gray as the dawn and smeared with leaf mold and mud.

Tears blurring his sight, Luke helplessly brushed away the dirt. Solo's eyes flickered open but showed no focus, his lips twitched as he struggled to find a smile or say something. But blood trickled from his mouth and his eyes glazed over, mirroring the leafy canopy above. His head rolled limply on Luke's supporting arm and he exhaled one long sighing breath, shuddered and lay still.

Thundering across the field, Chewbacca arrived only in time to witness his partner's death. He threw back his shaggy head and howled agonized grief. "Wes!" Leia begged as she too arrived and fell to her knees beside Solo and Luke. "Help him! He's not breathing!"

"I am not a Healer," she said sadly, eyes brimming as she looked down at the Corellian. "It is a death wound. I feel his spirit lifting from the flesh."

"NO!" Luke shouted in utter, adamant denial. Somewhere within he heard Kenobi's voice and images flooded his mind. It was as if a well-spring of knowledge had suddenly opened to him. The source had been there all along, but Luke had never known how to tap it. All the terror and grief left his heart, and Luke relaxed, nodding and smiling. He lay the palm of his hand to Solo's brow and drew on the Force energy flooding free within, began channelling it to Solo, searching for damage, taking over vital functions.

Leia stared, watching as Luke jerked suddenly as if Zeriex were again torturing him. Life seemed to drain from Skywalker's face and he sat as still as if turned to stone. "Luke?" she reached to touch him.

"No." Wes quickly pulled her back. "Look. Han is breathing again."

Leia and Chewbacca turned to see the slow rise and fall of Solo's chest. But his breath rasped and gurgled liquidly. Blood was still running freely from the horrific wound and trickling too from his mouth, evidencing damage to the lungs.

"The Sky Walker is indeed Light Bringer," Wes sounded awe-struck. "He has formed a Healer's Link. He is breathing for Han. Yet he cannot prevent the blood-loss nor can his own strength last. He is untrained. We must take them both to the Place of Renewal. The healers there will know what to do. Chewbacca, carry Han, but hold him so Luke can reach him. Keep pace with us as we guide Luke. His contact with Solo must not be broken. We must get them into the carrier without breaking the Link."

~

"Well?" Leia asked impatiently as the surgeon finally, emerged from the Renewal Center's operating room.

"He will live," the silver-haired doctor answered with a smile. "Provided he receives intensive care for several days." Leia, Wes, and Chewbacca exchanged greatly relieved congratulations. But the old surgeon's next words dampened their happiness. "It is Skywalker who we are concerned with now."

"Luke? Why?"

"He has formed an unusually strong Healer's Link with his friend, but he is untrained. We are having difficulty bringing him out of the bond. There could also be danger to Solo."

"In what way?" Wes asked anxiously.

'Physical contact has been broken, but not spiritual. Skywalker is untrained and he has formed a very unusual bond. We cannot unravel all its paths without causing Solo to go into shock, yet Skywalker's own metabolism is beginning to show the effects of the wound.'

"What can you do?" Leia asked, unable to hide her concern.

"We have sent for the best of our Psi-Healers. One will support Solo while the other reaches Skywalker. Then they will attempt a separation. Once Skywalker has regained consciousness, we will offer him further training in Healing. Such a gift should not be wasted."

The surgeon turned as the Casualty Room doors opened. Luke was brought out, but he remained as rigid as before, seated in a wheelchair. Behind him came two orderlies carrying Solo on a stretcher. Solo's face was drained and lifeless. He was connected to a respirator and drainage tubes were running from his heavily bandaged chest.

"Primitive medicine by your standards, I know, Lady," the surgeon apologized. "But for us, you must understand, such methods are rarely necessary. Because your pilot is an Off-worlder, and because of the unusual nature of Skywalker's link, there was no other way we could prevent his death.

"I do understand," Leia answered. "Thankyou for all you have done for him." She followed the orderlies down a long corridor and the surgeon walked with her. "Given the circumstances, you've performed a near miracle. I was afraid Captain Solo wouldn't survive the journey here."

"Yes, it was a near tragedy," the surgeon agreed. They stopped outside Solo's assigned room. "Skywalker has been controlling Solo's body functions all day. I hope our Healers can reach the lad, his strength cannot last much longer."

Two lean but vital-looking people approached down the corridor. One was male, the other female, each was garbed in golden silk with the red Flower of Life emblazoned above their hearts. Healers. The woman bowed politely. "You are ready for us?" she asked in a soft controlled voice.

"Yes," the surgeon replied. "You know the situation. May the Light guide you."

Both Healers bowed again, then entered Solo's room. Leia, Chewbacca and Wes followed, watching curiously as the Healers took up their positions. They sat cross-legged on benches beside their patients, one taking Solo's hand, the other Luke's. They then joined their free hands, closed their eyes, exhaled and slumped limply forward.

"They seek contact," the surgeon explained. "we must not disturb them."

"Come." He turned and led the small group into a nearby waiting room to keep their vigil.

Leia awoke instantly as a firm but gentle hand shook her shoulder. She had fallen asleep amid the floor cushions strewn about in the waiting room. She blinked and squinted up at the person bending toward her. Dawn light glistened on the gold of the woman Healer's robe.

"Your friend, Luke, is awakening," the woman said. "He will need you."

Leia stood quickly. "Is he all right?"

The Healer smiled. "He is a special young man with a great destiny. There is little that could prevent him from fulfilling it. He will one day be a Master."

"..A Master Healer or a Master Jedi?" Leia asked but the woman only indicated she should proceed down the hall. "It is forbidden to reveal that which has been discovered in Healing Link. Already I have said too much."

They entered the room and found Chewbacca and Wes already there. Leia was greatly relieved to see that Luke did indeed look much stronger. His eyes were open, yet he seemed disoriented. Before going to him, Leia checked on Han. His condition did not seem to have altered. The male Healer was still in contact with him.

"Solo is being well cared for," the woman assured. "He too may awaken soon. He fights the Healing Sleep. This is not good. Come, take your friend's hand."

Hesitantly Leia stepped forward and took Luke's hand.

"Leia?" he asked groggily. His eyes focused and his expression suddenly changed to one of surprise. "What is this place?"

Before Leia had a chance to answer, fear washed the drowsiness from Skywalker's face and he jumped to his feet. "Han! Where's Han?"

Quickly Leia turned him toward the bed. 'He's safe. Look.'

Shaking from the sudden movement, Skywalker stared down at the man who lay peacefully asleep. "Han?" he repeated uncertainly. He reached out to touch him.

"No," warned the female Healer. "Do not disturb him. My friend is giving him strength."

Luke turned toward the slim, copper-haired woman. "You're Aleith? The one who guided me?" She nodded in response. "Then I must thank you. I wasn't sure what to do next. I didn't know how to break the Link, or even if I should. But I was so tired." He paused, studying her intently, then added, "You gave me so much strength, but you don't seem drained.'

Aleith smiled. "I have been trained for this task all my life. You did exceptionally well for one with no experience. You have a great gift, but you need an instructor."

"You can teach me?" Luke's eyes widened excitedly.

"Of Healing, yes. Other skills must be taught by other teachers. For now you must rest. Perhaps this afternoon I will show you our Healer's School."

Sudden concern brought renewed weariness to Luke's face. "But what about Han? I don't think I should leave him."

Aleith took Luke's hand reassuringly. "He is safe with Talak. You may visit him later. It has been a long night for us all. Would you please share Dawn-Meal with me?"

Everyone but Chewbacca accepted the invitation. He was adamant he would not leave his friend. Eventually the Wookiee gave in after some persuasion, and a promise that the Meal-Room was just down the hall. As they began filing from the room, Solo gave a low groan. They all stumbled over one another in their haste to reach his side.

Talak was awake and looking at his patient with some irritation. .."He fights me," the male Healer explained to his female counterpart. "He is very strong-willed. He worries for his friends. I have decided he will rest better if he speaks to them for a moment."

Solo groaned again, tossing his head as he struggled against pain-killers and his own weakness. Leia placed her hand to his forehead in an attempt to steady him. "Relax, Han," she said firmly. "We're here with you. We're safe. You must sleep."

Instead Solo fought to open his eyes. Finally he focused upon Leia's concerned face. Behind her he could see an equally worried looking Wookiee. He tried to speak but could manage only a rasping sound. Aleith poured a small amount of blue-green liquid into a tiny cup. Gently she lifted Solo's head. "Slowly. A few sips. No more."

Solo obeyed. His eyes brightened and some color returned to his cheeks. "L-Luke?" he asked thickly. "Is ... Luke...okay?"

Skywalker touched Solo's shoulder from the other side of the bed. "I'm here, thanks to you. I owe you again."

With effort Solo turned and smiled at his friend. "No ... we're even," he insisted. "You brought me back. I dunno how. I was sure..." He winced and closed his eyes for a moment. "Sure thought I was a goner. What happened to Zeriex?"

"I killed him." Luke took no pride in the answer.

"Good for you." Solo's voice faded with weakness. "Is Wes here?"

"Where else would I be?" She went to him and stroked the sweat-tangled hair away from his face. "Looks like fate will have to wait this time, huh?"

Solo nodded slowly. "Do you have to pay Penalty?"

"I don't know yet. The first concern was to tend to you. Don't worry about it now. You must rest."

"Enough talk," Aleith insisted. "Talak?"

The Healer nodded and took Solo's hand. "You have been reassured," he said sternly. "No more struggling. Sleep now. Be healed."

The Corellian seemed far too exhausted to resist. He was deeply asleep within moments.

"He looks so pale," Leia said worriedly.

"You need not fear for him," Aleith assured. "Come, we must eat."

The remainder of that day was a rewarding time in which Leia accepted a pledge of aid from the Rebellion's Mantellian friends, and Luke discovered a whole world of learning opened to him. Chewbacca stayed at the hospital and Wes returned to work at the Port. They gathered together again for the evening meal and there was much happy chatter as each reported the day's events. Chewbacca's news was the most welcome. Talak had informed him that now that Han was open to help, he was making a remarkably swift recovery. He no longer needed the respirator and would be able to talk with them again later that night.

Trouble found them on the morning of the third day when their passes expired. Customs Officers asked probing questions and it was impossible to hide the circumstances of Solo's wounding. It was decided they would be held on charges of peace-breaking and wrongful declaration. Further investigations were pending. Leia was afraid that if her clandestine meetings with the newly formed Rebel cell were uncovered she and her off.-world companions would be interred for life, forbidden Channel away from Ord Mantell.

Such was the penalty for Interference, the means to ensure that the disturbance of Mantellian tranquillity would spread no further. Weslina was luckier. She was found guilty of using her power only for protection. For this the penalty was a fine of 200 gea. So the second evening meal was a much more solemn affair, the only cheerful words spoken concerning Solo's continuing improvement.

Aleith could not help but giggle over her partner's growing- exasperation. Now that Solo was more often conscious, Talak was having a rough time. "He'll have an impossible task when Han finds out we might all be stuck here for life," Leia commented glumly.

"Surely they wouldn't ground Han!" Wes protested. "It would kill him faster than any laser wound."

"he has been a good friend to Ord Mantell," Aleith added. "He has brought us many urgently needed improvements, medical supplies and much more."

"Fore-sight," Wes teased. No one laughed. "Come on, relax. I'm sure once the details of Zeriex's attack are explained you will be allowed to leave."

//You don't know it all,// Leia thought sadly. //We don't stand a chance.//

"I am afraid that will not be so," a deep voice said behind them. It was the Examiner. He was dressed in white robes with green embroidery on hems and sleeves. He did not wear his signet of office, indicating that this was not an official visit. Everyone stood as a sign of respect and did not reseat themselves until he had drawn up a chair and joined them.

"There are those amongst the Enforcers who seek to keep you here," he explained heavily. "It grieves me deeply to tell you that some of them are imperial agents, perverted by Palpatine's Darkness."

"You're certain?" Leia asked. "We suspected but we had no evidence." The old man nodded. "It is the reason I permitted your entry even though I knew your intent was to find support for the Rebellion. Your cause is of the Light and it appears that your people must teach us the ways of war, and of politics if we are to survive these dark times. You cannot do this if you are imprisoned here. The evil ones do not yet know of the Light Bringer. If they discovered him..." The Examiner lifted his hands helplessly. "At the very least they would ensure that he remained trapped here. At worst ... I will not speak"

".How close are they to finding us?" Luke asked.

"By tomorrow eve. That is why I came here tonight. I am scheduled on duty at the Port at dawn tomorrow. My friends and I will see you are given safe Channel off-world."

Wes straightened in surprise. "You would risk Penalty?"

"There is far more at stake here than my position," the Examiner smiled.

"And I am an old man. Also, I can help more if I am out of public attention." He looked across at Leia. "I would like to join your contact

group. Perhaps I may establish an illicit Channel to counter the one bringing the Imperial spies here."

"You would do so much?" Leia asked hopefully. The Examiner simply smiled and nodded. Leia took his hand. "Thank you. Your help will make all the difference."

"But what about Han?" Luke asked.

"It is true that he is far from strong enough for space travel," Aleith agreed worriedly. "Unless..." She fell silent, considering.

"Unless what?" Luke prompted. She gripped his hand. "unless I spend all night teaching you how to resume Link will him to support him, should he need it."

"This is possible?" The Examiner asked. "I was afraid my plans might endanger my good friend, Han."

"It is more than possible with Luke as the student," Aleith assured.

I will do the piloting, Chewbacca added. He grunted mischievously.
Although, you may have to tie Han down first.

"That I'd like to see!" Wes laughed. She quieted as she added. "I will miss you all.'

"Then come with us," Leia suggested. "We'll need a contact and an emissary for your people at the base."

"I'd enjoy that. Thank you. It is a very generous offer considering the way you feel about Han."

"What do you mean?" Leia demanded.

"Never mind," Wes smiled. "Let me assure you that there is no need to worry. You don't have to be a telepath to know that no other woman will ever..."

"You must not reveal so much." the Examiner warned.

"I am sorry, Honored One." Wes bowed her head.

"Come'. the old man continued. "We have much to prepare if you are to leave at Dawn Light."

~

The light was still dim and a gray, and a wet fog swirled about their ankles as the small troop crossed stealthily from the Customs Office toward the Falcon. Luke and Wes carried a complaining Solo on a stretcher. Chewbacca led the way, feeling naked without his bowcaster, his nostrils flaring as he hunted for a scent of the enemy. Leia followed behind, alert for possible attack.

Sudden bright light blinded her and harsh voices shouted a warning.

"Enforcers! Stand where you are! Prepare for ID inspection!"

"Run!" Wes called. "Chewie!"

The Wookiee had already turned about. Solo struggled up onto an elbow and reached up to his giant partner. Quickly Chewbacca scooped him up.

"Halt or we will attack!" the voice screamed. Psionic energy bolts sent sparks flying from the tarmac.

A low humming sound suddenly mixed with the blasts and Wes looked up awe-struck as she saw Skywalker wielding the light sword again.

"Keep moving!" Luke yelled at her. "I can't..."

He said no more, distracted by blasts from another direction. It seemed that the Enforcers had decided to concentrate on him. He whirled and leapt, deflecting the shots which would otherwise have killed him, or reached his friends who had gained the shelter of the Falcon's ramp. Wes sprinted after them.

Luke deflected another volley', then turned and ran, weaving, toward the ship. The Force warned him of imminent danger and he dove forward, rolling smoothly, then coming swiftly to his feet, rendering harmless the laser bolts coming from Imperial weapons. He dove and rolled again as he felt the ramp swinging upward beneath him.

He landed in a breathless heap on the deck beside Solo. The Corellian had been gently, but unceremoniously, dumped there as Chewbacca charged toward the cockpit. By the look on his face Han was not amused. Luke struggled to conceal a smile.

The rumble of powerful thrusters reverberated through the deckplates and Solo gasped in pain. Luke reached out to steady him.

"Nice goin' out there, kid," Solo said weakly. "You did pretty good with Zerix, too. Maybe those light swords ain't so hokey after all."

Luke smiled proudly. "Come on, I've got to get you to your bunk. Chewie'll have my hide if I tell him you're not secured for takeoff."

"That'd be interestin'!" Solo grunted as he tried to push himself up. "No!" Wes warned sharply as she emerged from the cockpit. "I might have known I couldn't trust you to do what you're told! You'll rip open the wound- seal, you idiot. Luke, help me lift him."

"Idiot, huh?" Solo growled hoarsely, but he was too weak to disobey. "She only calls me names 'cause she loves me," he explained as Skywalker propped him up on the other side.

"You're getting fat,,Solo," Wes taunted

"Told ya, ". Solo got in the last word. "She loves me a whole lot."

Wes and Luke had just finished strapping Han into his bunk when Leia called from the cockpit, "All set back there?"

"Yes. Captain Grouch is all neatly tied down," Wes replied.

Solo heard the Princess' laugh. He glared at the Mantellian who in turned poked her tongue out at him.

Luke remained solemn. "I hope the Examiner has that Channel open for us," he muttered.

Solo overheard. He jerked against the safety straps. "We got no Official Channel?" Any alarm in the words was muted by clenched teeth. "No problem," Wes mimicked as she reached out to force him back down.

But Solo had already collapsed, "Oh sure. Wonderful," he muttered. The take-off was of necessity very rough. Then came the buffeting of a weak Channel through the magnetic circle. Beads of sweat formed on the Corellian's brow, his face becoming more and more taut and white, his eyes screwed shut.

. Luke and Wes watched worriedly as the warning came through from the cockpit and they wondered if Solo could remain conscious during the hyperspace jump.

However, Chewbacca's huge hands were deft and gentle and the Falcon responded with the smooth trajectory of the creature for which she was named.

"That's my baby," Solo whispered.

Wes hurried to the washbasin, dampened a cloth and began bathing, his face.

"That's good, Wes," he murmured, then found the strength to open his eyes and give her a mock scowl. 'Now if you can just do something about your attitude problem."

Any response from Wes was interrupted as Leia appeared, breathless and anxious. "That was rough. How is he?"

"Still talking," Wes said dryly.

."He's got to rest," Luke stated firmly. "Aleith taught me how to make sure he sleeps."

"Oh, great!" Solo muttered, but he was too exhausted to protest further as Luke reached toward him.

"Wait!"

Surprised, everyone looked up at Leia. She appeared self-conscious but nonetheless determined as she sat on the edge of the bunk.

Solo watched her with a weary mix of amusement, curiosity and something deeper, more private, that he tried to hide but was betrayed by a hint of hope. He opened his mouth to make some wisecrack, but was silenced by the earnest, softly shining eyes that held his gaze.

Slowly, Leia picked up Solo's hand, repeating the formal hold she had first used with him at Wes' home. "Thank you, Han," she said, trying the same formality in the tone of voice, but finding it tremulous instead.

Suddenly very nervous, she broke the eye contact. "You were right. Ord Mantell was the place we needed. The Mantellians have agreed to support us passively. The Order of Keepers of the Light has been reinstated."

Solo grunted, seemingly unimpressed, but actually struck dumb by the apology and the pressure of the small, warm fingers about his hand. He wished she would look at him as she had done before. Then he was surprised when instantly her gaze returned to him. That special something that had

made his heart race was now veiled. He was both disappointed and relieved at the familiar scolding..

"But you never mentioned having old debts to pay," Leia teased.

"So what?" Solo said. "You admitted I was right. Does this mean you'll listen to me in the future?"

Leia smiled. "Maybe." Impulsively she lifted his hand and held it to her lips. She saw her own delighted, shy surprise mirrored in his eyes, then self-consciously she broke the contact and stood. "Luke's right,"

she said with her usual authority. "You should sleep." She moved toward the door.

Skywalker gaped at her, then turned as Solo called,

"Hey, kid!" Attention gained, the Corellian winked. "The reward was worth it."

Luke gave a somewhat forced smile, then he lifted the laser sword from where he had dropped it on the wallshelf. "All I want to know is where this came from," he declared.

Solo's strength seemed to have deserted him with Leia's touch. He closed his eyes wearily. "I got a story to tell you kid," he whispered. "About a friend I had once. But it'll have to wait. I'm beat."

"I wonder why!" Wes responded, concern overlaid with sarcasm.

Luke felt suddenly guilty at having allowed his patient to become so enervated. "Everyone out," he ordered. "I've got some Healing to do!"

Solo's eyes opened in mild alarm. "You're gonna practice on me?"
Luke nodded and smiled.

Wes took Leia's arm companionably. "Come on, show me where the galley is. I want some breakfast and then the grand tour. I always wondered what kind of mess Solo lives in."

"I heard that," he called faintly behind them and they laughed as they walked up the corridor.

"That was Teru's light-sword, wasn't it," Leia said.

"Yes. I loved my brother very much." Wes drew a sighing breath. "He was one of the last of the Keepers." She seemed to know Leia was about to offer sympathy and so changed the subject. "Did you know Han's grandmother was Mantellian?"

Leia shook her head, eyes wide with surprise.

Wes smiled. "A most remarkable woman. let me tell you all about her...."

Somewhere on Coruscant a message chip was relayed to the Emperor. he closed his gnarled fist about the disc, shattering it. tiny silver shards escaped his fist, glittering in the dull light of the throne room.

"A Jedi lives!" Palpatine hissed. "The son of Anakin Skywalker." He chuckled evilly. "He will be mine -- or die at his father's hands."

Sitting beside a sleeping Solo aboard the Falcon, Luke suddenly jerked as though a giant fist squeezed at his heart. Solo moaned. "Luke? Luke!" he called urgently.

Luke struggled to go to him, his hand touching Solo's shoulder. The pressure suddenly eased, the pain gone from his chest. Solo returned to sleep, but Luke was fully alert, blue eyes wide and fearful in the darkened cabin.

Kenobi's words returned to him. "Your destiny lies along a different path to mine."

Luke shivered. he picked up a spare blanket and wrapped it about himself. But the chill came from within and there was a sudden image of a vast, snowy plain, a howling blizzard.

"Help me, Ben," he whispered. "Help me."

And faintly he heard a strange reply in an oddly accented voice. "The people you have found. Now come to the Master you must. Yes, yes. Come to me."

END

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