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Reluctant Journey
by Kelly Kline

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"Bundle up, troops. We're heading to an ice cube," General Han Solo said with a smile as he boarded the Beta class transport Crusader. "Hope everyone packed an extra set of thermals. Vl'prasa is going to be a cold one."

He sheepishly acknowledged the salutes of his twelve New Republic soldiers snapping to attention. Waving at the winter-clad team, Han quickly added as he stowed his heavy hooded parka in his locker, "At ease. Enough with the formalities. It'll give me a rash. Jenkinson, is your platoon ready?"

"Yes, sir," the young officer answered.

"Good," Solo replied while retrieving a datacard. "Looks like this'll be a short mission. If all goes well, we'll be home by the end of the week. We go in and evacuate the miners and scientists from whatever has been attacking them. It doesn't sound like a hard mission. Jenkinson, is my command team on board yet?"

Again jumping to attention, the officer replied, "Yes sir. They arrived shortly before you. They're in the cockpit, sir."

Attempting to stifle a chuckle, Han could not help but laugh at the lieutenant's regimented behavior. He called over his shoulder as he strode toward the cockpit, "Thanks, Jenkinson. And quit calling me sir; you're making me feel old."

Han continued down the corridor and entered the small cockpit. As he sank into the pilot's seat, he sighed to his copilot Chewbacca, "Now tell me again how I got talked into pulling some settlers off a moon?"

"Because," the teasing voice of Leia Organa called from the corridor, "you can never say no to some people."

As she entered the cockpit, Han threw his arms around her and bantered back, "And what sort of person might that be?"

"Oh, I don't know," she quipped with a laugh, "someone who can obviously wrap you around her little finger."

Giving her a quick kiss he added, "But why do missions like this always involve cold barren moons?"

"Because it would be boring if we went to a planet with power plants and running water," Luke Skywalker joked as he entered the cabin.

"Funny, kid," Han sneered with mock disgust. "Everybody get ready for takeoff. Chewie, let's see what this bucket of bolts can do."

The Crusader touched down on the rough tarmac of VI'prasa's only spaceport, and the crew was immediately greeted by a small entourage of scientists. Han shivered at the freezing wind that screamed in his ear and buffeted the shuttle with frozen pellets of ice. He pulled a thermal scarf around the exposed skin on his face as he followed Leia out of the shuttle.

"General Solo," a gray-haired man said, "I'm Dr. Keteyian, chief researcher here on VI'prasa. I'm glad your team was able to come so quickly."

"We came as soon as we heard the colony was under attack," Han yelled over the howling wind. "The Uhlan should be landing within the hour. Once it's here, we can start loading up the colonists and leave this icebox."

The scientist suggested, "Until then, why don't we head back to my facilities. Your troops must be tired and hungry from your journey." Keteyian gestured to the turbosleds, "I have shuttles waiting for you. We can wait for the Uhlan there."

The troops quickly boarded the sleds in order to escape the stinging subzero climate. Each shuttle lurched forward and began to race toward the cluster of permacrete buildings jutting from the horizon.

Pointing at the large multilevel building belching thick clouds of steam into the frigid air, Leia inquired, "What's that?"

"That's the Rintanna gas processing plant," Keteyian matter-of-factly replied. "It's a molecular cousin to Tibanna gas, and it's been rather popular in the hyperdrive industry. They've been carbon freezing it and selling it by the metric megaton. It's a shame the plant will be closed down after the evacuation. I heard the miners are making a small fortune."

Carbon freeze, Han thought to himself with a shiver and attempted to force back an unsettling chill that threatened to burrow to his core. The mention of those words was enough to rekindle old fears and send his heart racing with anxiety. Immediately he felt Leia's small fingers wrap around his. He acknowledged her silent support as he gave her hand a gentle squeeze. Never again, he promised himself as he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Never again.

"Hey," Leia whispered softly in his ear, "you okay?"

Opening his eyes, he put his arm around her and placed a tender kiss on her temple. He smiled and pulled her closer. "I'm okay, Leia," he answered as he felt her warmth, her strength chase away the frigid memories. "I'm fine."

After the small crew was settled in the main laboratory's cafeteria and occupied with steaming cups of soup and thick chunks of bread, Dr. Keteyian escorted Han and his command team through the bowels of the building. Keteyian

opened the door and gestured to the mismatched chairs scattering the room. "Sorry I don't have anything larger," he apologized to Chewbacca. "Please, have a seat. I didn't want to cause a stir with your troops, but I wanted to talk to you four before the evacuation begins."

Leaning back in his chair and crossing a leg over his knee, Han replied, "So what's been going on here? Fully-armed military teams aren't usually needed for routine evacuation."

"I wish it were a routine evacuation," the scientist sighed. "But I knew it would come to this eventually. Things got out of control."

Puzzled, Leia interjected, "What are you talking about?"

Dr. Keteyian took a deep breath and grabbed a datapad from his desk and opened a file. Turning the display screen toward her, he explained, "The mining facility has been attacked by these." On the screen was a sinewy, bipedal humanoid. Completely hairless, the creature had a leathery exoskeleton and massive jaw supporting razor-sharp teeth. Its wide-set obsidian eyes conveyed a menacing glare, and its powerful forearms were well equipped with talon-like claws.

"What is it?" Luke questioned as they all focused on the small holo.

"It's a graakyr," the scientist replied, "and it's what brought me to the moon. You can say that I'm a bit of a graakyr hunter. My research focuses on them."

"I thought VI'prasa was uninhabited," Han added. "Where did they come from?"

"It is most likely that a colony of them was burrowed under the ice, perhaps in one of the natural caves," Keteyian explained. "A pod of the creatures can lay dormant for centuries. The miners must have accessed them when they were harvesting the Rintanna gas. Come, I have something to show you in my laboratory."

The researcher rose from his chair and escorted the command team to the adjacent

laboratory. Immediately he drew them toward a rectangular glassine tank filled with a yellow acrid preservative. Immersed in the tank were the remains of one of the creatures. Smaller in stature than Luke, it still appeared to be a muscular, dangerous foe.

"It's an adult," Keteyian proudly proclaimed like a father presenting his son to the crowd. "It killed four men before we could take it down."

Stepping forward to take a closer look at the creature, Han asked, "So why have they been attacking the miners?"

"They're aggressive little buggers," the scientist shrugged. "Apparently they require large amounts of protein to reproduce, and have found the humans on the moon a tasty option."

Leia wrinkled her nose in disgust. "Have you been able to stop them?"

As he turned off the light illuminating the tank, Keteyian replied, "Aside from brute force, no. They've killed about twenty of the miners. That's why the guild called for the evacuation. I arrived shortly after the first graakyr was sighted about six months ago. Since then they've been reproducing at such a rapid pace that they will out-number the humans within the next month or two.

"I've been trying to find a way to halt the reproductive cycle. It would be a powerful weapon as four New Republic colonies are having problems with graakyr invasions. Back on Coruscant, I had synthesized an enzyme from a graakyr larva, and in computer simulations it seemed to be the only thing capable of killing the creature. But I only have a small amount of the enzyme left, maybe enough to kill one or two of the beasts. Unfortunately, to make it, I need to harvest extracts from a fetal graakyr liver. However, as I was harvesting it here on this moon, the larva matured into an adult and attacked the lab. I had to destroy it before I could finish the harvest. I don't have the enzyme; I don't have any way to stop them from reproducing."

"Then the faster we get you all off the moon, the better," Leia declared.

"Have all miners alive and dead been accounted for?" Luke interrupted.

"Unfortunately, no," Dr. Keteyian stated. "A handful of them vanished yesterday when they headed into a cave with some farfetched idea that they could destroy the whole pod. They never came out. I would just assume they're dead."

A frown creased Han's forehead as he asked, "How many went in?"

"I'm not sure," the scientist replied. "About seven men vanished yesterday. You're not thinking about going in to look for them?"

"We came here to evacuate the miners," Han said as Chewbacca agreed with a roar. "I'm not leaving this snowball until I know every one is accounted for. Come on, Chewie; let's get the strike team ready. As soon as the Uhlan lands, I want to send a team into that cave."

Steady!" Luke Skywalker called out from the floor of the cave, firmly holding the rope suspending Leia Organa as she was lowered into the stone and ice cavern. The illumination from her headlamp lit the darkened cave while she slowly descended toward the floor. "Give me some more slack, Han! She's almost to the bottom."

Leia let out a startled shriek as she rapidly fell several meters before the harness strapped around her midsection caught her fall. Instantly, Luke grabbed the rope to slow her descent. "I've got you, Leia. You're not going to fall! I'm going to lower you down the rest of the way."

"Leia!" Han yelled, peering into the cavern, "You okay?"

She pulled off her harness and shot an angry glare toward the small opening to the cavern. "What are you trying to do Han?" she fumed, the light from her headlamp shining brightly in his face. "You trying to kill me or what?"

Han flashed one of his trademark lopsided grins and tried to diffuse the situation. "Take it easy, Your Worship! It was an accident. You don't look any worse for the wear." Softening his tone of voice, he added, "Are you okay?"

"No thanks to you!" she snarled as she readjusted her headlamp. "You going to keep gawking at me, or are you going to come down here?"

Securing himself into a harness, Han lowered himself quickly to the cavern's floor. Once safely in the cave, he turned on his own headlamp and checked the charge to his blaster. From the corner of his eye, he spied Leia's icy stare. "I'm sorry," he quietly admitted, "and I'm glad you weren't hurt."

As he placed his blaster back into its well-worn holster and readjusted the thermal scarf wrapped tightly around his neck, he saw her anger slowly melt away and a slight smile emerge from its wake. "Well, General," she coyly said, "you've got us all down here in this miserable little hole. Now what?"

"Mattern, Sorenson, Kurtenacker, and Lukens are going to keep watch at the cavern opening. Someone's got to stay on top to haul us up. As for everyone else, I recommend setting your blasters on full strength. You never know what we're going to run into down here."

"Han," Luke interrupted, "I'm not sensing any human life further in the cave. There could be something blocking their presence. But I'm feeling some sort of primitive Force aura. I don't recognize it, but it's definitely coming from something down there. It could be a graakyr, so we better all be careful."

Surveying his small battalion, Han added, "You heard him, keep your eyes peeled. I don't want to lose anyone to one of those monsters. Chewie and I'll take the lead. Jenkinson, I want you to carry up the rear and watch our backs."

"Yes sir!" the soldier barked.

Solo turned to Leia and whispered so only that she could hear, "And I don't want you out of my sight."

He could see his breath steam before him as he began the trek into the snaking natural corridors of the cave. Streams of light from the soldiers' headlamps danced on the stone and ice walls. In the distance, a steady sound of dripping fluid echoed in the frozen air. He led his troops down the winding passage and

through a tunnel that opened into a gaping chamber. Chewbacca roared in disgust as the putrid stench of decay permeated the frozen air.

"What's that smell?" Leia managed to say as she pulled her scarf over her face in a futile attempt to stifle the nauseating odor.

"Over here!" Luke called out in the darkness.

Rushing over to him, Han asked, "What did you find?"

Luke ignited his lightsaber, casting a green eerie glow on the ground. "Him," he replied as he directed the light over the corpse of a disemboweled miner. The abdomen was completely torn away. Blood covered the ground in a slick, congealed pool.

Han knelt beside the mutilated body, searching for any form of identification. The unnatural glossy sheen of the corpse's flesh caught his eye. Nudging the skin with the blaster, he gasped with surprise as the nose of the gun sank into the yielding gelatinous elasticity of the skin's liquefied surface. He choked back a sickening wave of bile and said, "Whatever attacked him seems to have dissolved his body. The skin and muscles are mush."

Snapping off his lightsaber as Han stood, Luke said, "I think whatever killed the miner is still down here. We've got to be really careful. I'm not sure what it is, but I'm sensing some sort of life form."

"Luke's right, Han," Leia added. "If we don't find any survivors soon, we better turn around and head back before any of our crew gets attacked."

"I'm not heading back until I know we're not leaving anyone behind," Solo insisted. "Now let's continue our search before any of us change our mind. I say we check a few more kilometers further and then turn around."

No one objected to Han's suggestion, and the strike force trekked further into the unmapped cavern. About a half kilometer below the surface, the team encountered more remains of an eviscerated miner. Like the previous body, its tissues were nothing more than a semisolid pool of denatured protein. Han

stooped and pulled an identification medallion from the body's neck. "Looks like we can identify this one," he stated. "Let's keep going, we've got five more miners to find."

He took the point and led the team through corridor after darkened corridor until the narrow passage emptied into another massive chamber. A breeze rushed through the stone chamber as Han surveyed the dim surroundings. "Looks like the tunnel forks off here," he said, pointing to the two passages on the opposite side of the chamber. "Chewie, you and Luke take Holst, Hopkins, and Kamba down the tunnel on the right. Leia and I will...what the?"

Startled, Han flinched as he felt a cold, oily fluid land on the back of his neck and quickly slide into the tight space between his collar and skin. Shining his headlamp on his glove, he grimaced at the slick black fluid.

"Han, what is it?" Leia asked.

"Something just dripped on me," he answered as he cleaned his glove on his pants. "Nothing to worry about. Come on, let's keep moving."

Han took three steps forward before he had to stop. He closed his eyes, and he felt the room begin to spin and reached for the wall to steady himself. Sweat began to bead coldly on his forehead as nausea began to tighten its grip on his stomach. In the distance he thought he heard muffled voices. He shook his head in an attempt to clear the rapidly growing fog that was choking his mind. His thoughts quickly drifted back to the present when he felt someone shaking his shoulder.

"Han, didn't you hear what I said?" Leia asked as she stopped nudging him.

"Sorry," he mumbled as he began to loosen his scarf and tug open his collar. "I got a little dizzy for a moment. No wonder-it's hotter than hell in here."

"What are you talking about, Han?" Luke asked in amazement. "It's four standard degrees in here. It's freezing. Are you feeling okay?"

Placing her hand on Han's forehead, Leia exclaimed, "Kest, Han, you're burning up! Why didn't you tell me you were coming down with something? Come on, we need to get you out of here."

Somewhat annoyed, Han weakly pushed the princess away. "Quit mothering me, Leia," he sighed and pulled out his canteen. "I'm fine. Probably picked up the flu from someone at Flight Command. Just be lucky I didn't give it to you. I'll be okay. I just need a sip of water."

As he brought the canteen to his lips, the vertigo returned with a vengeance. His canteen skittered across the floor, its contents pouring out in a small, spreading pool. Trying to regain his balance, he stumbled forward. Voices faded and were replaced by the sound of his own rapidly pounding pulse. He closed his eyes for a brief moment to gather his bearings. But no matter what he did, Han could not halt the growing delirium and unsettling weakness threatening to drag him unwillingly into unconsciousness. A wave of claustrophobic panic crashed through him as he found himself struggling for air. Frantically pulling his scarf from his neck, he thought he heard himself gasp, "I can't breathe!"

He snapped his eyes open and desperately searched for his friends. But all he saw was the icy floor rushing toward him as his knees buckled and his vision faded to black.

"Han!" Leia screamed as he limply collapsed on the ground like a rag doll. She yanked her gloves off and felt for his pulse. She rolled him over and opened his coat and undid the collar to his shirt.

"Someone let the team doctor know we have a man down," she yelled, "and that we are going to need medical assistance as soon as we get Han out of here!" Turning her attention back toward him, she stifled a cry as his eyes briefly shot open. An oily black film rapidly slicked its way across the whites of his eyes. Small wormlike undulations appeared to be burrowing under the surface of his skin, vanishing as soon as they appeared. His back arched as he let out a loud wheeze. The same black liquid trickled from the corner of his mouth. Leia grabbed his scarf and reached to wipe it from his face.

"Don't touch it!" Luke yelled grabbing her wrist. "It could make you sick too."

"But what is it, Luke?" she demanded as she cushioned Han's head with his scarf.

"Not sure," he answered, "but it's definitely alive."

Their conversation abruptly ended when Han briefly stiffened. Again his eyes opened, but the black film coating the surface was gone. A moment of clarity filled his hazel depths. "Leia," he whispered.

"I'm right here, Han," she soothed, taking his hand in hers.

"What's happening to me?" he asked.

Desperately trying to hide her growing fear, Leia stroked his disheveled hair. "Hang in there, sweetheart," she murmured. "You're sick, and we're going to get you out of here."

Solo tried to push himself up on his elbows, but instantly met with resistance.

"Take it easy, Han," Luke said, easing him back. "You're in no condition to be hiking out on your own."

"The team..." Han began, but incoherence took over his words as he pointed a shaky index finger skyward. "Gotta look for survivors...up there."

"Han, there's no one up there," she replied as his eyes rolled back in his head and unconsciousness again consumed him. Shining her headlamp toward the murky darkness above she added, "It's just the roof of the cave."

Shocked, Leia dropped Han's hand and stared at the underbelly of the roof. She scanned the entire surface with her illuminator. Hundreds upon hundreds of thick oily patches of viscous slime clung tenuously to the underbelly of the roof. She gawked at the colonies in horror, realizing that they had the same unnatural sheen as the black film that had coated Han's eyes. She gasped as she realized that Han did not have the flu, but rather was infected by a black sticky ball of slime.

"I don't think we're alone," she uttered.

"Look out!" Luke warned as a fist-sized ball of black substance fell toward one of the soldiers. The young lieutenant swiftly jumped out of the way as Luke destroyed it with a blaster bolt.

But before he could react, yet another colony fell from above. It landed on the floor and began to spread in all directions. Stepping over to the oily pool, Luke ignited his lightsaber and pointed it at the viscous puddle. The fluid seemed to flow toward the warm glow of the blade. Yet when he placed the tip of his lightsaber into the pool, it appeared to withdraw from the blade as if it was retreating in pain.

"Quick!" Luke commanded. "Everyone cover up any exposed skin. The colonies are attracted to body heat."

"What are you talking about?" Leia demanded.

"Body heat, Leia," he answered. "When the fluid landed on Han, he was the only one not wearing any headgear. It was attracted to the heat radiating from his head. The fluid was drawn to the heat of my lightsaber. Who knows how many colonies of these things are further down the cave. We need to leave now! I seriously doubt there are any survivors. We're heading back now before those things get another one of us."

As Chewbacca stooped to pick up his fallen friend, Leia warned, "Be careful, Chewie, we don't know if Han's contagious."

Chewbacca roared his understanding and made it very clear he was willing to risk infection to carry his friend to safety. He cradled the unconscious Corellian securely in his massive arms as he began his return trek toward the cavern's opening.

Commander Skywalker, Counselor Organa," strike force physician Nikolai Pietryga said as he emerged from the mining facility's meager infirmary, "he's stable. You can come in now."

Following him down the corridor, they entered the primitive medchamber. Dressed in a pale gray medical gown, Han Solo lay motionless on the narrow bunk. Digital leads on his chest and temple monitored his vital signs, and a winding intravenous catheter fed fluids into a vein in his arm. His cheeks were sunken and wan, and perspiration glistened on his forehead.

"How is he, Niko?" Leia asked.

"He was agitated earlier and having some respiratory distress," the doctor explained. "I gave him a mild sedative, and that seemed to make him more comfortable."

Brushing a stray lock of hair from Han's sweaty forehead, Leia continued, "Do you have any idea what is going on?"

"The medical equipment here's pretty primitive," Dr. Pietryga answered, "but they do have a bioscanner. I want to show you something."

The doctor grabbed the overhead scanner and positioned it over Han's abdomen.

"I performed a full-body scan of General Solo," he explained as he activated the device, "and I found something rather interesting."

He escorted Luke and Leia to an adjacent monitor and pointed to an opaque object on the screen. "I don't have any idea what this is," he explained, "but there's a mass about the size of my fist underneath the General's diaphragm. That might explain his new respiratory problems."

Leia wrapped her arms around herself, attempting to steady her growing anxiety. "Is it a tumor?"

"No," Luke closed his eyes and concentrated on the image on the monitor. "It's alive, but it's not a cancer. It's some sort of sentient being."

As she gazed at the monitor, the mass appeared to wriggle about. Leia let out a startled scream. For a fleeting moment, she thought she made out the features of a skull. "God of Alderaan! What is that?" she cried.

Flashing a puzzled look, the doctor inquired, "You said he got sick right after he came in contact with that oily substance, right? Perhaps he has some sort of rapidly-growing parasite."

"He's infected with a spore," the voice of Dr. Keteyian stated from the doorway. Spinning around Leia demanded, "What do you know about this, Doctor?" "The black liquid," he began as he pointed to the mass on the screen, "is a giant parasitic spore."

"What type of spore?" Luke added.

"A graakyr," the researcher answered as he walked over to the monitor and touched the screen. "And from the looks of it, it has gestated into quite the respectable size larva."

"What?" Leia responded. "I thought they were those large creatures that have been attacking the miners."

Turning to face the princess, Keteyian replied, "They are, Your Highness. But this is an immature graakyr. You see, they need a human host to reproduce. In time it will grow to be as big as the specimen in my laboratory."

Leia placed a protective hand on Solo's shoulder. "So what's going to happen to Han?"

"It will grow inside him until it reaches maturity," the scientist explained.

"I didn't ask about the damned parasite," Leia fumed. "I asked about Han."

Dr Keteyian remained silent for a moment, but then eventually replied, "As it gestates, it will slowly devour the General's tissues. When it finally hatches, it will kill him."

"Those bodies in the cavern," Leia said, her voice wavering, "they were destroyed from the inside out. That's going to be Han, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid so, Your Highness," Keteyian said. "I am very sorry."

"Is there anything we can do for him?" Luke asked. "Can anything such as surgery be done to remove the larva?"

"I wish it were that simple," Keteyian replied. "But the larva is enmeshing itself with the General's own organs. It would be physically impossible to remove the larva without killing him as well. But there may be something I could do."

All eyes were on the scientist. "Are you saying you have a way to stop the gestation?" Leia asked, hope filling her voice. "You said you had created an enzyme to halt the reproductive cycle."

"Unfortunately, the only sample of the enzyme is back in my lab on Coruscant," Keteyian explained. "But there is something I could do. I could use this opportunity to harvest and synthesize the enzyme from the larva inside General Solo."

"Will that help Han?" Leia probed further.

"The procedure will likely destroy the larva," Keteyian said, "but in the process, the General will die as well."

Shaking her head, Leia could not believe what the scientist was proposing. She glanced over her shoulder to catch a glimpse at Han. His chest rose and fell in a peaceful rhythmic pattern. It was hard to believe that a sentient being was slowly destroying his body. She squeezed her eyes shut to halt the growing flood of tears that were pooling in her eyes. She was not ready to surrender

this fight; she was not prepared to concede Han's death. "No, I won't let you do that to him," she whispered as she opened her eyes and a stray tear slid down her cheek.

Dr. Keteyian placed a hand on her trembling shoulder. Defiantly, she shrugged it off. "Princess," he stated, "you don't understand. General Solo will die whether or not I harvest the enzyme from the larva. Think of the good this enzyme would bring for the other New Republic colonies that are battling the beasts. With this enzyme, I may be able to wipe out all graakyr infestations in the entire galaxy."

"I said no!" Leia exploded. "I won't let you treat Han like a laboratory animal!"

"But Your Highness, his sacrifice will potentially save the lives of millions," the scientist proposed.

"It may, but Han never consented to be a part of your deluded experiment!" Leia seethed. "Now, you said there is a sample of the enzyme back on Coruscant. I think we should transport him there and test the enzyme on him. It looks like that's his only chance."

"Unfortunately, the average gestation for a graakyr is about thirty-six hours," Keteyian interjected. "Coruscant is five days via hyperspace. It would hatch before you reached Coruscant. General Solo would die, and the graakyr would likely kill everyone on the shuttle."

"So you would rather kill him here instead?" Leia sarcastically fired.

"Look," the soft-spoken Dr. Pietryga interrupted, "General Solo is my patient, and he is still very much alive. I will not let anyone conduct any experiments on him. He's very ill and needs his rest. Now if you all are going to continue to argue, I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

But Dr. Pietryga's request for peace and quiet came seconds too late. A groan echoed from the narrow bunk, and Han weakly called out Leia's name. Rushing to his bedside, she captured his hand as he attempted to tug the oxygen tubing

from his face. "Leave it there, Han," Leia gently instructed. "It's helping you right now."

"What happened?" he inquired. "Where am I?"

"You're in the infirmary."

"Where's Chewie?" he asked.

"He's helping to evacuate the miners," Leia explained. "It was all we could do to keep him from tearing the waiting room apart. He's worried about you."

"Leia," he uttered as his eyes came into focus, "you've been crying. What's wrong, sweetheart?"

"Something happened in the cave," she began as she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, "something that's made you really sick." Unable to continue, she covered her mouth with her hand and began to uncontrollably sob.

"What is it, Leia?" he asked as he placed the palm of his hand on her cheek. "Come on, you can tell me."

"That dark stuff that fell on you," she sniffled, pausing to find the right words to explain the situation, "it was a parasite. And now...now there's something living inside you."

"What type of parasite?" he asked in between hacking coughs that ripped through his body.

Delaying her answer, Leia took a tissue and dabbed the blood-tinged spittle from his lips. She never imagined that she would ever have to tell him that he was dying. "A graakyr," she whispered.

Remaining silent as her words sunk in, Han answered after several long seconds.

"No one else caught it, did they?"

"No," she sniffled. "No one else got infected."

"Good," he sighed as he closed his eyes and began to cough. After he finally caught his breath, he added, "It's pretty bad, isn't it? I'm dying, aren't I?"

Leia could no longer speak. Her words were trapped in a silent snare in her throat. She bit her lower lip as she forced herself to nod and answer his question. The sorrow was too much for her. Even facing a terrifying unknown, Han still managed to worry more about his team than himself. Again, tears were stinging her eyes, but this time, she could not stop the floodgates. Her grief poured out as she tightly squeezed his hand. "I'm so sorry, Han," she murmured. He brought a hand up to his face and covered his eyes, but he could not hide his true emotions from her. An anguished sigh escaped his lips. She did not know how to respond. No words of comfort could soothe the sting of this news. Yet she managed to place an empathetic hand on his forearm and offered her silent support.

"How long?" his muffled voice asked from beneath his hand.

"I'm not sure," she answered. "Maybe thirty-six hours."

"Han," Luke said as he approached the bunk, "we're not giving up on you just yet. If we can get you to Coruscant, we may have a chance at beating this thing."

Han pulled his hand away from his face and managed to give Skywalker a slight smile. "I ain't dead yet, Luke," he joked, fear darkening his eyes. "But I doubt I have that kind of time."

"There may be a cure back in Keteyian's lab on Coruscant," Luke continued. "Now if we could only slow the graakyr's growth."

Dr. Pietryga stepped toward the bunk and suggested, "We have a portable bacta tank on board the Uhlan. It may help prevent further organ damage and might buy General Solo a bit more time."

"Good thought," Keteyian arrogantly interrupted, "but you are forgetting the physiology behind bacta. It promotes cellular growth. It would accelerate the graakyr's gestation by at least threefold, and your general would certainly perish before you ever reached Coruscant."

"What about medical stasis?" Pietryga asked the scientist. "We've used it back home to transport critically injured soldiers. If stasis suspends General Solo's metabolic functions, it is conceivable that it would also halt the graakyr's."

Snickering, Keteyian again grimly replied, "Provided we had a stasis isolette. The medical equipment on this moon is limited to what you see here. And, believe me, this mining facility was far too cheap to include the luxuries of bacta or stasis. You're lucky there's a bunk and IV fluids."

"Mining facility," Luke whispered to himself, hope brightening his eyes as a wide smile spread across his face. "Why didn't I think of this before? Han, we've got a way to get you home safe!"

"How?" Han asked as Leia helped him into a more upright position.

"I know you're not going to like this, but hear me out. It may be your only chance," Skywalker warned. Taking a deep breath he continued. "There's a carbonite processing plant. It wouldn't be stasis, but hibernation is pretty much the same..."

Han was shaking his head back and forth before Luke could finish his sentence. "No," was all he could say to interrupt. His eyes widened with fear, and he grabbed Leia's hand to stop his own from shaking. "I think I'd rather take my chances with the graakyr."

Leia leaned forward to whisper in his ear. "I know you don't want to do it, but it doesn't look like we have a choice."

Before he could answer her, Han collapsed forward and wrapped both arms around his midsection. An agonizing groan escaped his lips, and his body was

wracked with painful, wrenching coughs. His face paled as he struggled for each gasp of air. He continued to cough until he heaved a thick clot of blood into a small bedside basin. Only then was he able to draw a deep breath.

"Give me some room!" Dr. Pietryga ordered.

"I'm not leaving Han," Leia informed the physician as Luke and Keteyian retreated away from the bunk.

Ignoring her, Pietryga swiftly increased the flow of oxygen to the tube under Han's nose. "Lay back, General," he calmly instructed, "and take some slow, deep breaths."

"It's okay, Han," Leia reassured as she smoothed his hair, waiting for the crisis to pass. "Just do what Niko says."

Pietryga repositioned the scanner above Han's abdomen and assessed the mass growing inside. Merely surveying the surface of his skin did not reveal the immature graakyr that was beginning to displace his internal organs. Unlike before, well-defined vertebrae and limbs were now visible on the view screen. A tortuous blood vessel snaked away from the beast and anchored itself to a large artery in Solo's abdomen, siphoning the Corellian's blood and pumping it through its own rapidly beating heart.

"Damn," Pietryga cursed under his breath. "The graakyr has doubled in size." Walking back to the monitor, Keteyian added, "And its respiratory villi are invading his lung tissue. That's why he's coughing up blood. Well, General, you sure know how to pick them right. Looks like you have a rapid grower."

"Get out!" Leia hissed as she stared down the deluded scientist.

Before Keteyian could argue, Luke escorted him to the door. "This isn't the right time to be joking about anything," he chastised. "Han isn't just our commanding officer; he's one of our closest friends. If you are not going to help us right now, I think it would be best if you waited outside."

As Luke was closing the door, Dr. Pietryga whispered, "If we're serious about putting the general back into carbon freeze, I had best get on the comm with one of the doctors at the Fleet Hospital to see if we can somehow prevent the hibernation sickness. I don't think anyone this critically ill has ever been frozen before, and I don't know how the General will react to the side effects of the freezing process."

Luke leaned toward the physician and replied, "You do that, and we'll work on Han."

"We'd better act soon," Pietryga added. "General Solo is fairly stable right now, but I don't know how long he'll stay that way."

Luke strode back over to Han's bunk. Leia maintained her position beside Solo. No longer clutching his abdomen in pain, Han was again resting comfortably. His respiration had slowed, and he was no longer gasping for air. "I can't do it, Leia," he explained as she tugged the blanket over his chest. "You don't know what you're asking."

"I'm asking for a chance," she whispered. "This thing's going to kill you if we don't do anything."

"But the carbon freeze isn't a guarantee," Han pointed out. "It may kill me too."

"I know," she sadly acknowledged, "but I'm not ready to give up yet. Please, Han, let us get you back to Coruscant so we can help you."

"But carbon freeze!" Han paused as a chill raced through him. Long lost sensations from Beshpin—the suffocating madness of the alloy swallowing a scream, the frigid blackness of peering into the sightless void, the numbed yet keen awareness of a living death known as hibernation—flooded his consciousness. He shuddered as he recalled the platform sinking below him and the hiss of the carbonite closing in around him. He rubbed his hands roughly over his eyes to dash away the unwelcome memories. "There isn't a day that goes by that I don't think about it. You don't know what it's like, Leia, to have everything you know suddenly vanish."

"No I don't," she replied as she took his hand and gently kissed his fingertips, "but I've been there after the nightmares. I know what an impact it's had on you."

"What if I don't wake up?" he asked, recalling how the carbonite temporarily halted his life. It had been Leia who had welcomed him back from the brink. Her words of comfort had eased him back from the madness of hibernation. But now he was not sure if words were enough to get him through this ordeal.

"You will wake up, Han," she reassured. "I was there when you woke at Jabba's, and I'll be there when you wake up back on Coruscant. I know this is hard for you. I wouldn't ask you to do this if there was another way. Please, Han, don't let the graakyr win."

Han folded his arms over his chest as he silently contemplated his fate—the inevitable, slow death from the parasitic graakyr or the vague unknown of carbon freeze. His hands began to tremble, and he grabbed his arms to hide them from Leia. It was time to make a decision. After a few moments, he forced himself to nod. "I'll do it," he answered, his voice barely louder than a whisper. "Let's get this over with before I change my mind."

The antigrav repulsors of the medical bunk groaned to life as Han was transported from the confines of the factory's infirmary to the cavernous carbon freezing facility. In the short time that it took to locate Chewbacca, contact the Fleet Hospital, and prepare the facility for the freezing process, the graakyr had drained the remaining energy reserves from his body. Merely sitting was an exhausting challenge, and he struggled to draw each breath. As the creature grew, it consumed more and more of Han's blood to keep up with its own metabolic demands. After a sanguisynth transfusion and a liter of IV fluids, the pink returned to his cheeks, and he did not feel nearly as lightheaded. Nevertheless, he could not shake the bone-aching fatigue that kept him reluctantly flat on his back.

He fought to keep his eyes open as he felt his lids grow heavy. Every time he closed them, he feared they would never open again. Over his shoulder he heard Leia's comforting voice, "Just a little further," she soothed. "We're almost there."

Han steeled himself for the upcoming journey home. Again a reluctant participant in a carbon freezing experiment, he fought to keep his anxiety in check. Familiar sensations rekindled memories of a carbon freezing facility in Cloud City. The acrid scent of Rintanna gas wafted through the air, its odor reminiscent of betrayal, a tearful farewell, a frightening unknown. Peering down the corridor, he half-expected to hear the rasping mechanical respirations of a masked Sith Lord.

I must be crazy, he told himself as the doors to the processing plant snapped open.

An unmistakable roar echoed in the cavernous room, and a rush of russet fur approached the medical stretcher. Chewbacca's voice resonated concern as he hovered over his friend.

"I've really done it this time, Chewie," Han weakly croaked, slipping his hand into the Wookiee's massive paw. Cracking a smile, he cursed the strange twist of fate that returned him to a carbon freezing platform.

"How should I know if it'll work?" Han coughed. "If it doesn't, this'll be one short trip."

Chewbacca immediately interrupted him. Again the Wookiee was bombarding him with questions.

"Of course I don't want to! Kest, I don't have much of a choice, now do I?" Solo snapped as a flush of anger and frustration swept across his face.

Gathering his composure, he immediately apologized for his outburst. "Hey, pal, sorry I snapped at you.

"Chewie, I want you to do me a favor. You too, Leia," Han swallowed and collected his thoughts. "Nobody knows what's gonna happen after I go under, and I don't know if this enzyme or whatever will do the job. If it doesn't and that thing still lives, I want you to destroy it. I don't care what happens to me. The graaky needs to die."

Chewbacca quickly responded in a series of grunts and roars.

"Well I don't think the Clan had this in mind," Han scoffed.

"What did he say?" Leia asked.

Han remained silent, his icy defiance directed at the Wookiee. Again Chewie growled his displeasure. Unable to ignore Chewbacca's blue-eyed stare, Solo finally sighed, "Fine, I'll tell her." He turned to Leia and elaborated, "He said Never say die, the Falcon Clan's war cry."

"It's a good battle cry for your family," Leia responded. "Now I want you to stop worrying and relax, okay?"

Before he could answer, Han let out an anguished wheeze, and he firmly gripped the bunk's siderails. "Not again," he muttered through clenched teeth. He relaxed only after the sharp jab of pain released its grip on his innards. Shifting to a more comfortable position, he softly answered, "It's hard not to think about it."

"I know," Leia whispered. "I know you're scared. So am I, but you are going to have to trust us."

The opening to the chamber hissed open, and a gust of air followed Luke

Skywalker and Nikolai Pietryga as they approached the stretcher. "Good news," Luke smiled, "everything has been worked out back on Coruscant."

"The Fleet Hospital is preparing for the General's arrival," the doctor added. "Keteyian's assistant Rikar Hackbarth will be meeting the shuttle. He'll administer the enzyme as soon as the carbonization process is reversed."

"What are we waiting for?" Han asked as he shifted uncomfortably in his bunk.

"Before we initiate the freezing process," Pietryga answered, "I want to give you your first doses of the antihibernation sickness medications. They should help with some of the blindness, nausea, and muscular atrophy. You didn't have any problems with them last time, did you?"

Han shook his head as he recalled a sand-covered Lando Calrissian fumbling with the tiny vials of medication shortly after a hasty departure from Tatooine's Dune Sea. "No," he mumbled. "The meds made me a little groggy, that's all."

Dr. Pietryga began to inject the medications into Han's intravenous line as Luke said, "Groggy is good, Han. We've figured a way to make the freezing process less traumatic for you."

Skeptical as always, Han shot Skywalker a pessimistic glare. "Traumatic," he coldly chuckled. "You have no idea. So what do you have in mind?"

"Dr. Pietryga can sedate you prior to the process," Luke elaborated. "You'll be asleep for the entire thing."

Stepping forward, Pietryga added, "Think of it like surgery, General. When you wake up, everything will be over. You won't remember a thing."

"And if you do," Luke interrupted, "Leia and I'll be there. Just reach out with your mind. It won't be like last time. I know your aura. You won't be alone this time."

"Thanks, Luke," Han softly replied. Turning to Leia, his mood turned more sorrowful. "Well, Your Highness, I guess this is it."

She blinked slowly and nodded. "Don't get all mushy on me," she managed to smile, "I'll see you soon."

"Leia," Han said, whispering so only she could hear, "If I don't make..."

Covering his lips with her fingers, Leia interrupted him, "Don't talk like that, Han. Everything's going to work out."

"If I don't," he continued, "I just want you to know that the only thing I'll regret is not keeping my bond promise to you."

Speechless, Leia blinked, and a silent stream of tears coursed down her cheeks. She moved closer to him and asked, "What's stopping us?"

"What?" Han asked.

"Bonding," she replied, wiping the tears away with the back of her hand. "We can bond right here and worry about the paperwork later. Luke and Chewie are here; they can be our witnesses."

"Are you sure this is what you want?" Han asked. "I thought you wanted the big fancy ceremony with the pretty dress and flowers and everything."

Taking his hand, she answered, "There's nothing I want more right now. Our family is here, and that's all that matters."

Han's face brightened with a smile. "That sounds like a wonderful idea."

"But what, how do we go about it?" Leia asked

Luke approached the stretcher and suggested, "Just speak from the heart. The right words will come to you."

Nervously tucking a loose tendril of hair behind her ear, Leia searched for just the right thing to say. For one of the few times in the young orator's life, she struggled to compose her thoughts. Simple words could not describe the love she felt. Taking a deep breath, Leia took his hand in hers.

"Han," she began, "I...We...Stars, why can't I do this? I've never been so nervous in all my life."

He brought his palm to her cheek and softly caressed her lips with his thumb, gently silencing the stammering princess. "Relax, Leia," he reassured. "You're acting like a blushing bride. It's okay; take all the time you need. It's just us here."

She flashed him a coy smile and looked down for a moment. Regaining her composure, she cleared her throat. "Han," she repeated, "We are here tonight to pledge our hearts, our souls to each other.

"As the Force is our witness, I, Leia Organa, offer you my eternal love. I promise to honor you, cherish you, now and forever. I vow to stand by your side in both times of happiness and times of trial. I'll never turn my back on you. I bond with you freely, promising you honesty, compassion, and understanding. I love you, Han. I don't want you to ever doubt that. Time and space will never keep us apart."

Ignoring the aches and pains of his rapidly weakening body, Han struggled to an upright sitting position. He pulled the oxygen tubing from his face and wanted to temporarily forget about the graakyr, the carbon freezing chamber, the terrifying unknown. Grasping Leia's trembling hand, he held her palm over his rapidly beating heart. "I've never been one for speeches," he explained as he gazed deeply into her eyes, "but back on Corellia, my clan believed that when two people bond, their hearts join and beat together. Until I met you, I never thought I'd be making this promise to anyone. But you changed all that. "Leia, I would be honored if you would be my bondmate. You were the part missing from my heart. And now, I feel complete. In return, I offer my undying loyalty and promise to always be faithful to you. But most important, I promise to love you for every last day of my life."

"If I don't make it out of this mess, I'll die happy knowing I had the opportunity to join with such a wonderful person. And for that, Leia, I thank you."

As Han finished his impromptu bonding vows, Chewbacca rushed over to one of the junior officers and grabbed the lieutenant's white thermal scarf. Hurrying back to the medical bunk, he wrapped the fabric tightly over Han and Leia's intertwined hands, forming a delicate knot that linked the couple together. "What's this?" Leia asked.

"It's part of the Wookiee bonding ritual," Han explained. "It was part of Chewie's bonding to Malla."

Chewbacca interrupted and explained further, elaborating on Han's answer with a series of barks and growls.

Han smiled and Chewbacca and then turned back to Leia. "He says to tell you that our souls are forever tied together."

"Thanks, Chewie," Leia answered.

Han undid the marriage knot and unwrapped the scarf, freeing their hands. He gently placed the scarf over Leia's head and draped it over her shoulders like it was a sacred veil. Drawing her close to him, he enveloped her in a fierce embrace, his lips searching out hers. The tender kiss conveyed the unsaid words that their bonding oaths could not say. She rested her head on his shoulders, and he cherished the moment, wishing that it would never end.

Luke approached the bunk and announced, "It's time. Han, are you ready?" For a fleeting moment, Han ignored him. He hugged Leia tighter and squeezed his eyes shut. "I don't ever want to let go," he whispered in her ear.

"It'll be alright," she answered as she kissed her husband's temple. "Remember, our souls are now tied together."

Han took a deep breath and finally answered Skywalker. "Yeah, ready as I'll ever be. And Luke, thanks for trying to help. Who thought I'd ever get near one of these contraptions ever again?"

"Everything's going to work out fine," Luke asserted. "I can feel it."

"I hope you're right," Solo sighed.

Chewbacca let out a mournful howl and enveloped Han in a furry embrace. "I know," Solo answered, "I'll be okay. The princess, she's your honorsister now. Take good care of her until I come back. You hear me?"

"General," said Dr. Pietryga, "I am about to administer the sedative. If you could lie back, we'll begin."

Han felt his heart pound against his chest as he eased back in the bunk. He could not back out now. But part of him wanted to hop off the stretcher and run far away from this nightmare of a reality. Leia's hand gripped his as he took a deep breath and tried to drive the anxiety away.

"Now you might feel a little burning sensation as I inject the sedative," Pietryga warned as he injected the medication into the IV line. "It won't last long. The dizac will kick in quickly and you'll start to get pretty sleepy." Solo flinched as he felt the drug enter his veins, and his eyelids quickly grew heavy. He gave Leia's hand a squeeze and searched for her warm, brown eyes. The sedative circulated through his veins, and his limbs began to feel as if they were filled with permacrete. The whirring sounds of the carbonite facility faded from his consciousness, and he began to float in a sea of numbed awareness.

Fighting this rapid journey into a drug-induced oblivion, he forced his eyes open. With a glassy, unfocused gaze he made out the fuzzy features of his wife. Far in the distance he thought he heard her comforting voice. "Don't fight it," she soothed. He closed his eyes and gave her a slow nod as he felt her lips brush across his forehead. He attempted to say something. What, he could not remember. The thick blanket of slumber enveloped around him before the words could escape his lips. As he began his journey into the blackness, he heard Leia's words whisper in his mind, "I love you."

"I know," he mumbled, awareness giving way to nothing.

Dr. Pietryga quickly surveyed his patient, checking Han's vital signs. He disconnected the intravenous line from Han's arm and lowered the stretcher's safety rails. Untying the gray medical gown, Leia slipped Han's arms out of the sleeves and removed the gown, leaving him only clad in a pair of loose-fitting shorts. "No sense keeping this on him," she explained. "It'll be soaked when they unthaw him."

When Leia was finished undressing Han, Dr. Pietryga gently retracted Solo's eyelids and squirted several drops of a clear solution into each of the

Corellian's hazel eyes. "Hopefully the drops should prevent any further ocular degeneration," he stated. "There, it looks like we're ready to move him to the platform. Lieutenant Jenkinson, could you give me a hand and help me carry him over to the device."

Leia stepped away from the stretcher and headed to her brother's open arms while Jenkinson and Pietryga lifted a motionless Han from the stretcher. His head lolled back, and his arms dropped limply to his sides as they carried him to the awaiting carbon freezing platform. Positioning him carefully on his back, the two men stepped away from the platform. A carbonite technician standing next to the machine's control station called out, "All clear!"

Leia felt Luke's arms tighten around her. "Was it like this last time?" she heard him ask.

"No," she sighed, "It was worse. Stormtroopers chained him, and Chewie was going crazy. It was awful; he was awake the whole time. He knew what was happening to him. This seems more humane, but I still can't believe it is happening. Why now? Why him? Carbonite scares him more than anything."

"I wish I had the answers, Leia," Luke replied, "but I don't. I'm sorry."

The dimly lit chamber came alive with an eerie orange hue. The grated metal floor glowed with the intensity of burning embers as the machinery roared with activity. Wisps of steam seeped from every corner of the large room, and the distinctive pungent odor of Rintanna gas permeated the stale air.

Leia tightly gripped Luke's arm as the technician called out, "All systems go! Initiating freezing sequence!"

With the flip of a small lever, a high-pitched whine ripped through the chamber and the small platform started its slow descent into the darkened pit below. Han remained motionless, oblivious to events around him. Unlike before, his face did not convey silent terror, but rather relaxed slumber. A childhood Alderaani prayer found its way into the folds of Leia's memories as Han's body dipped below the surface of the main floor.

Chewbacca let out a plaintive howl as plumes of thick steam billowed from the center of the room. The chilling gas was, no doubt, engulfing the sleeping Corellian, flash-freezing his tissues and slowing his body to a hibernating standstill. With a blinding flash, liquid carbonite poured from an overhead spout and filled the pit, the alloy intermingling with the Rintanna gas and encasing Han in an impermeable metallic block.

Leia let out a small gasp. She clutched her chest as she felt the ache of her bondmate's heart slowing to a stop. Reaching out with her rudimentary Force abilities, she searched for his aura. She allowed herself a sigh of relief when she finally found him floating in the intangible darkness. Probing further, she was relieved that the aura, though weak, was a constant entity. "He's alive," she whispered.

Closing her eyes, she focused on the warmth of his soul. She grabbed hold of it with her own mind and imagined his smiling features, his laughing eyes. She probed further and sensed a placid indifference radiating from his being. Blissfully unaware, she thought to herself, relief washing over her. Before releasing his aura back into the swirling eddies of the Force, Leia sent her bondmate one last wave of encouragement. "I'll be waiting for you," her voice echoed in the darkened void.

Breaking her Forcelink with Han, Leia opened her eyes as the large jaws of the hydraulic crane were plunging into the darkened pit to retrieve the massive silvery slab. Steam continued to evaporate from the block's metallic surface. An icy chill filled the room as the frozen slab was carried overhead and placed upright on the grated metallic floor. A technician gave the carbonite block a shove, and a resounding clang echoed throughout the chamber when the slab crashed to the floor. Leia knew Han could not feel the impact of the alloy striking the ground, but she could not help but flinch as metal smashed against metal.

Immediately Leia rushed over to the carbonite block and kneeled beside it. Clutching the makeshift ceremonial scarf close to her heart, she waited nervously as a technician adjusted the settings on the side of the slab and studied the readout.

"I am reading two life forms," the technician announced. "One human, one unidentified. Both in perfect hibernation. Stasis sequence complete."

Leia gazed at the etched features of his face peering beneath the surface of the silvery alloy. Tentatively, she crept closer to lifeless slab. Reaching out, she immediately drew her hand back to her body as if the carbonite would sear her flesh if she touched it. "What are you afraid of?" she muttered to herself. "It's Han." She drew in a deep breath and was determined to make contact with her entombed bondmate. She again reached out and placed the palm of her hand on his carbonite-covered cheek.

Her eyes widened as she felt the smooth icy surface of the slab. She did not expect it to have such a cold, empty feel to it. She traced her finger along an ear, his jaw, his silenced lips. She was relieved that his features were not frozen into an agonizing, fear-filled grimace as they had in Cloud City. His eyes were shut, his hands resting peacefully at his sides. Gone was the tension, the halted protest, the stifled scream. It was a comforting contrast to the death mask Leia had seen chiseled in another effigy in Cloud City. Wiping away a stray tear with her scarf, she rose to her feet, never once taking her eyes off the encased image of her husband. "We're going home, Han."

We should be landing soon," Luke quietly said as he entered the small cargo hold of the Crusader, the soft whir of the hydraulic door stirring Leia from a restless sleep. Keeping a lone vigil beside the frozen effigy of her husband, she rarely emerged from the cramped hold during the voyage home. In her hand she clutched the shimmering thermal scarf from their hasty bonding ritual. "Entering the Coruscant system?" she asked as she slowly turned to face her brother, her face a mask of stoic heartbreak and fatigue.

"Yeah, should be touching down with in an hour," he answered. "Just received a message from the Fleet Hospital. They're ready." Kneeling beside his sister, he placed a hand on her knee. "And how are you doing?"

"Fine, she sighed, "just tired."

Luke turned to the massive block of carbonite and ran a hand along its cool, smooth surface. "I haven't felt any stirrings," Luke noted. "He doesn't seem to be aware of his surroundings."

"Unlike last time," she added as she wearily rubbed her eyes with the back of one hand, her memories flooding with Han's descriptions of his previous agonizingly aware internment in the alloy. "Thank the Maker."

"What did he look like last time?" Luke asked. "Could you see his face?"
Leia remained silent, slowly covering her mouth with one hand. A new surge of tears stung her eyes as she recalled seeing his masked face for the first time in Cloud City. Three years had passed, but still the emotions were as raw and tangible as they had been then. "Yeah," she whispered, squeezing her eyes shut in a futile attempt to ward off the emotions brimming to the surface, "I could see it. It wasn't like this. More like a death mask capturing him the moment he knew his world ended. His face was twisted with pain...fear."

"I'm sorry, Leia," Luke returned, "I wish I'd been there for you two. I can't imagine what it was like to go through that."

Gripping the scarf tighter, she pushed aside the ugly recollections. "Nothing to be sorry for," she stated. "Besides, it's all in the past. Right now, I'm more worried about the future. We don't know what's going to happen to Han when they unthaw him."

"Always in motion the future," Luke replied, reciting his teacher's wise musing. "I wish I could see into the future, but I can't." Wrapping his arms around her, he drew Leia into a warm embrace. "Looks like we'll all face that last journey together."

Leia nodded and acknowledged his support. Turning back to the slab of carbonite, she resumed her silent vigil.

Luke sat beside her for the remainder of the journey home. The Coruscant sky was a warm wash of amber, the sun dipping below the horizon as the shuttle entered the atmosphere. Lights twinkled from the buildings far beneath them. The massive Fleet Hospital grew larger as the Crusader made its approach. Leia jumped with a start as the shuttle touched down on the tarmac and the ramp opened. A throng of Solo's troops silently escorted his effigy from the hold, the exhausted soldiers faithfully flanking their entombed leader like an honor guard as they headed toward the awaiting team of physicians.

Leia quickly followed them out of the shuttle with Luke and Chewbacca bringing up the rear. She gasped in horror as a mass of physicians clad in yellow isolation suits and clear masks swarmed around the metallic slab. Hand-held scanners were thrust in her face while the technicians assessed her and the Crusader's occupants. Pushed aside by the gray-gloved hands, she fought her way back to Luke and the frozen effigy of her husband.

"Where are you taking him?" Leia asked, her brow knitting into a frown.

"Leia, this is Dr. Fecht," Luke yelled above the din. "He's going to oversee the unthawing process."

Extending a gloved hand and firmly shaking hers, the doctor said, "Don't worry, Counselor, the General is in good hands. We've received the enzyme from Dr. Hackbarth, and he'll be assisting on the infusion."

"I want to come with you," Leia insisted. "I need to be there when he wakes."

The physician shook his head. "I'm sorry, but that's not possible," he answered. "We're moving the General to a level four isolation unit for the unthawing and enzyme infusion. We cannot allow any visitors in the quarantined areas, but we'll keep you abreast of his condition."

Leia felt her brother's protective arms encircle her shoulders as a technician's voice echoed over a loud speaker, "Attention passengers and crew of the Crusader and Uhlan, you are to proceed to the waiting turbolifts. You will be escorted to isolation for decontamination."

Leia stepped into the crowded lift. She looked over her shoulder at the encased body of her husband as it was being loaded into a separate carrier. She uttered a silent goodbye before the doors slammed shut. Han was yet stripped from her again.

From her days in the Rebellion, Leia was accustomed to the communal freshers on the Alliance's countless battle cruisers, but nothing prepared her for the humiliating experience of a decontamination shower. "Please remove all garments and step into the cubicle," an attendant flatly instructed.

Her cheeks flushed with anger. "I can do it myself," Leia snapped. "I've taken showers before."

Furious, she silently stripped off her layers of clothing, glaring at the female attendant as she handed her each article. Completely undressed, she waited for further instructions.

"The hair," the attendant added. "Undo the braids. All the strands must be thoroughly cleansed."

"Anything else?" Leia seethed as she released her cascade of curls from their braided confines.

"No," the woman replied. "The shower will cycle automatically. While you decontaminate, I will dispose of your belongings and bring you new clothing."

Leia's eyes widened with concern. "What are you planning to do with my clothes?"

"Why incinerate them, of course," the attendant answered. "They're potentially infectious."

Her mind immediately went to the tattered white scarf. Her heart ached at the thought of losing it. "You can't be serious!" she interjected. "The graakyr's not spread that way. There's nothing on the scarf."

"Only following protocol," the woman retorted. "Besides, we don't know if you weren't infected with any other microparasites."

"Look," Leia huffed, "nothing is on the scarf, and I'm not ready to part with it!"

"Protocols, Counselor," she replied coldly, "we have protocols we must follow."

"To Hell with your protocols!" Leia yelled. "I'm not going to let you destroy it. It means a lot to me. Look, my husband may die. If he does, this scarf is the only thing I have linking me to him. Can't you decontaminate it, irradiate it or something?"

Chuckling, the attendant said, "The newsfeeds are right. You're quite the fireball. I'll see what I can do. We occasionally preserve items. I'll see if Infection Control will be willing to make an exception."

"Thank you," Leia sighed, stepping into the sterile shower cubicle. "Now if you don't mind, I have to get decontaminated."

Her first instinct was to hold her breath when a fine mist began to fill the shower stall, its pungent odor chokingly similar to the insect repellent she had used on Endor. She coughed as the mist permeated her lungs, and she gagged on its nauseating taste. Realizing that she had not slept in days, she wearily rubbed her grimy face. Praying that a stream of steaming hot water would follow the disgusting spray, Leia closed her eyes and unsuccessfully tried to blot the recent events from her mind.

"Thank the Maker," she muttered aloud as the mist stopped and soothing warm water began to flow from the overhead nozzles. Leia combed her tangled tresses with her fingers, allowing the water to soak her hair and cascade gently down her aching back. The thick steam felt wonderful against her skin, and she relished the soothing contrast of the cool tiles beneath her bare feet. The shower was a brief respite from the nightmare of the past few days.

But this peaceful solitude did not linger for long. Leia let out a startled cry as she opened her eyes and frantically looked around the tiny cubicle. Her breaths came at ragged gasps, and a freezing, searing pain shot through all of her limbs. Feeling weak in the knees, she feared she was going to pass out as her vision turned gray. She reached out with one hand and leaned against the cool wall for stability. Terrified, she doubled over as she felt the slamming agony of her heart stopping. Or was it Han's heart starting?

"They're unthawing him," she uttered. She had always had an intangible connection with him, but never before had their Force-link been this strong. She cried out in pain as Han's limbs, his organs warmed back to life. She was feeling every sensation he was experiencing—tissues screaming for oxygen, blood

pumping through an awakened heart, a once dormant brain demanding sensation. His fear was her fear, his torment hers.

At that moment, his aura was surrounding her, enveloping her. Yet his mind was still walled off. "I'm here, Han," she called into the eddies of the Force. But she did not hear him answer. Something was preventing him. Something awful. The graakyr. Its faint, menacing aura held Han's in its clutches. It dug further into his core, refusing to release the Corellian from its grip. It too had survived the carbon freezing process.

"No!" she whimpered. She could not stop his presence vanishing into the shadows as quickly as it had appeared. "Come back." Despair quickly crept into her heart, filling her core with an icy emptiness. Even while he was encased in carbonite, Leia could still feel Han's weak aura. But now he was gone, his being absent from the ever turning waves of the Force. Never before did she feel so utterly alone. Slowly sliding to the floor, she could not stop the wave of sorrow that was quickly overcoming her.

She hugged her knees began to rock back and forth, the pounding and unrelenting flow of water drowning out the sound of her heart-wrenching sobs. "Please," she pleaded to unseen gods, "don't take him from me."

Slowly, his consciousness surfaced from the darkest depths of sleep. Hovering in the unseen plane between slumber and reality, Han Solo allowed his awakening senses to gradually take in his surroundings. For a brief moment, he thought he was back in the carbon freezing facility on VI'prasa. Are they gonna put me to sleep or what? But he quickly realized that the freezing process had already been reversed as a warm kiss of sunshine caressed his face. The processing plant did not have windows. He was somewhere else, some place safe and inviting.

Waking further, he felt his muscles call out, aching from inactivity. How long had he been asleep-days, weeks, months? At that very moment, he did not care. He had the rest of his life to fill in the gaps. He assessed his surroundings further. He was certain he was not dreaming. The sensations were far too real to be a trick. Unwilling to open his eyes, he welcomed the soothing touch of the cool, crisp sheets covering his bare skin. Was that the sound of a ceramiplast mug being set on a table? The snap of a datapad closing and the rustling of loose flimsies reached his ear.

A door hissed open, and a woman's voice whispered, "Sorry to disturb you, but it's time for his meds." His arm tingled as something was infused into a vein in his hand. "I'll be down the hall," the voice added. "Call if you need me."

"Thanks," a familiar voice quietly responded.

That voice! He knew he had heard it before. It was comforting and gentle. Han struggled to burn the last vestiges of fog from his mind as he focused on that voice. It called to him, beckoning him to finally wake. Inhaling, he instantly recognized a wonderful intoxicating scent. The sweet perfume was delicate like fresh j'hana blossoms, reminiscent of warm embraces and whispered affections. Only one woman wore that distinctive scent-his wife.

But would he see anything when he opened his eyes? The carbonite had stolen his eyesight before, and he was not sure if he was prepared to face the blindness again. Yet he had nothing to lose this time. Here goes nothing, he thought to himself. Slowly his eyelids flickered open. The room was a blur, but gradually things came into focus. The makeshift bridal scarf rested next to a datapad on the windowsill, and golden rays of sunlight cast long shadows on the wall. A small smile crept across his face as he made out his wife's beautiful features.

"Hi," he managed to softly whisper.

Joyful tears glistened in Leia's eyes as she placed a palm on Han's cheek. "Welcome home," she smiled, her voice wavering with emotion.

The graakyr! He panicked as memories of the monster came flooding back. He inhaled sharply, riding the wave of anxiety that crashed through him.

"It's okay," Leia reassured. "It's over. The graakyr's dead. The enzyme worked."

Drawing in another breath, Han exhaled slowly as he realized that the hideous beast was no longer painfully burrowing into his diaphragm and hindering his ability to breathe. The parasite was no longer inside him. It was gone. The enzyme had done its job. Indeed, the long unseen journey home was complete.

"I told you I'd be here when you woke up," she added with a smile.

Nodding, he acknowledged her promise kept. Covering her small hand with his, he closed his eyes and reveled in the simple pleasure of her touch. Home. He liked the sound of that. There was absolutely no other place in the galaxy that he would rather be.

End

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