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## **A Trip to Chansie**

by [Linda Ruth Pfonner](#)

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### **Part 2**

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Several minutes later the video monitors in all the cells came on, and the Rebels watched as their pilot was chained in the center of the room, his hands manacled to a bar hanging from a chain attached to the ceiling and his feet--his boots were cut off--to rings bolted to the floor. Han could hardly twitch as the bar was raised until his body was stretched just a little, and he was standing on tiptoe to relieve the strain on his arms.

The Imperial disappeared from the camera's view for a moment, and when he returned he had a chrome tube in his hand. It reminded Leia of Luke's lightsabre, but it was a little longer, and much more slender. It had several controls near the butt, and Dodonna swore softly.

"What is it?" she asked uneasily.

"It's a neuronc flail," the General told her, his voice harsh. "He'll be lucky if he's sane when they're done with him."

Leia gasped in horror, and returned her attention to the monitor.

The storm trooper who had cut Han's boots off lifted the knife higher, and cut Han's vest and shirt off his body, tossing the scraps of fabric carelessly aside. Then the storm troopers all filed out, leaving the officer alone with his victim.

"Captain, do you know what this is?"

Han only glanced at the shiny metal rod, not really at all interested. "Your boyfriend's favorite dildo," he guessed.

The Imperial snarled and swung the rod as if it bore a material lash. It cracked across Han's collarbone, the effect tracing down the left side of his chest, leaving a trail of blazing fire along every nerve. Han gasped in agony and his body arced against it. The effect began to fade, and he panted raggedly.

It left no mark on his flesh, and Han realized bleakly that, without the limitations imposed by physical damage, this might go on almost indefinitely.

"I want to know which old man is Dodonna. Which is Willard? Who is that girl?"

"She's my sister."

The flail struck him across the stomach. He tried to double over in pain, but the chains caught him short. His panting lasted a little longer this time.

"Don't lie, Captain. It will only prolong the agony. I once kept a prisoner alive for two months, with sessions like this every day.

"She can't be your sister; you're Corellian, and she's not. What's her name?"

"Lisa."

The lash flicked out again, wringing a half-screamed "Lisa!" from Han. He glared at the Imperial, gasping for breath, his face white. The flail felt like acid, applied from a hot wire.

"Who is she?" came the implacable question. "Be a good boy and tell me. Remember, she's watching. Do you want me to reduce you to tears? I can, you know."

Han straightened as best he could, and looked thoughtfully over at the camera. He had forgotten about it.

"Lisa? This guy just don't hear good. You explain it to him. I'm getting really tired of him."

Leia clenched her fists as the flail punished that insolence, and then continued, again and again. Han never said another word, other than occasional obscenity directed at the Imperial. As the end of an hour approached he finally passed out. Cold water from a convenient hose woke him, but the next blow knocked him out again. After three drenchings the Imperial decided it was not worth the effort of keeping his victim awake. He turned off the monitors before he summoned in his guards.

"Take him back to his cell. That'll give that girl something to think about."

When the monitor clicked off Leia cried out in dismay. She could not tell if Han had died, and she wondered if she would be told.

"Well, I guess that's that," Willard commented, turning away from his screen.

Leia rounded on him. "Will you shut up!" she almost screamed. "They've killed him! He's dead! Leave him alone, now, can't you?" Her voice was shaking with fury and grief and terror: she knew she would be coming for her, next, and she hoped she could be as stoic about it as Han had been.

Dodonna and Willard exchanged bewildered glances. Leia had not even been speaking to Han while they were in space, and she had never shown more than acceptance toward him. Why should his death upset her so much?

The shouting had attracted the guards.

"Quiet in cells!" one storm trooper ordered brusquely.

"Nobody asked your opinion!" Leia snapped, throwing all caution to the winds.

The storm trooper's rifle dropped from high port to aim steadily at her. "I said be quiet."

She tossed her head defiantly. "You can't shoot me--your commander wants to have me tortured to death like my brother, and you haven't got the brains or the courage to disobey him. So don't threaten me, you soulless clone!"

The storm trooper growled and raised his rifle, and she faced him squarely, her shoulders back and her head high, her hands steady on the bars.

"TQR-834, get back to your post."

The order was firm, and Leia turned. Her heart leaped into her throat: the storm troopers were dragging Han toward her. He showed no signs of life, but she did not believe that they would return a corpse to the cell block.

*He's alive! He's alive!*

She retreated to the rear of the cell when they approached, and watched tensely as they unlocked the door and brought Han in.

"Please?" she whispered, "please--put him on the cot?"

One storm trooper glanced at her white face, saw only a distraught teenager, and nodded abruptly. They laid Han face down on the cot and left, locking the cell door behind them.

Leia dashed to his side. By then he was partially conscious: he shivered and twitched uncontrollably, and tried to curl up on the cot. He did not quite have the energy, but lay, half on his side, panting. He stared blankly, exhaustedly.

Timidly, she touched his wrist. "Han..." she began.

He flinched massively, and his arm lashed out, backhanding her hard. She fell back away, landing on her shoulder and rolling.

"Lisa!" came a shout of concern from Dodonna. "What happened? Are you all right?"

She stood up slowly, her hand going to her face, where he had struck her. "He... he hit me!" she replied, her bewilderment plain as she stared at the Corellian huddled on the cot.

Dodonna and Willard were both horrified. It was quite possible, if the Imperial had been using enough power, that Han had gone mad from the pain. If that was so, than the Princess was in a great deal of danger.

"Stay away from him! Don't go near him! He may be insane, Lisa. Don't risk making him violent--leave him alone!" Dodonna ordered.

She cast him a look of utter scorn. "Are you out of our mind?"

"No, but he may be. Stay away from him!"

Defiantly, she returned to the cot, and knelt beside Han. He was evidently in some pain: his breaths were, as often as not, aspirated moans.

"Han?" she called softly, being careful not to touch him. "Han? Are you in there?"

Han stirred, and his head came up slowly.

"Lei-sa," he whispered, correcting his pronunciation in the middle of the word.  
"Lisa? Where...?"

"Yes, it's me. You're back in our cell, Han. Han--why did you hit me?" she asked plaintively.

He frowned. "Whazzat you?"

"Yes."

"Sssorry... I... didn't..."

"You were looking right at me!"

"Lisa? I... I can't see," he admitted grudgingly.

"What?! Oh, Han!" she touched his hand again, and he flinched hard, again.  
"Han!"

"Don't-do-that!" he grated, his voice trembling with the effort he was making to control himself. "Warn me first. Where are you, anyway?" He extended his right hand, and she took it gently in her own. His voice was fainter when he continued.  
"I'm sorry, Lis'. Thought y' were... whasisname. You... y'a'right?"

"I'm fine, Han. You go back to sleep. I think you need it."

He gave her the faintest of grins. "I know it," he whispered. He closed his eyes and relaxed. Without letting go of his hand Leia reached down and pulled the blanket up over him. He nestled under it and was asleep in seconds, his hand going lax in hers.

"Lisa?" It was the General again. He was standing in the front of his cell, trying to see into hers, his expression plainly one of concern.

She flashed him a quick, reassuring grin, tucked Han's hand under the blanket and rose to report to the General.

"Well?" Willard prompted.

"He's quite sane," she told them coolly. "He apologized."

"But why did he hit you?" Willard growled.

She glanced at him and shook her head despairingly. "He thought I was that Imperial."

"How could anyone--" Willard began.

"He's blind!" she snapped angrily.

Dodonna looked thoughtful. "Hysterical blindness, I should imagine. I never saw the flail touch his face. Did you?"

Both his listeners denied seeing any such thing.

General Dodonna nodded with satisfaction. "No opportunity for organic damage, then, but sufficient physical stimulation... I imagine his sight will be normal when he wakes up."

Leia sighed with inexpressible relief, and went back to sit on the floor beside the cot. She studied the unconscious smuggler for a while. *This is all my fault, she decided distractedly. If I hadn't screamed he'd be back at the ship waiting for Luke to arrive. Now he's been arrested, condemned and tortured, all on my account.*

Guilt was a luxury she had never before permitted herself. There had never been time. She knew that everything that had happened to Han here was directly attributable to the fact that she had screamed when Wedge was shot. If she had not, Han would not be here.

But, no matter how hard she tried, she could not convince herself that she was sorry he was with her. She glanced at him, wryly realizing that, although his presence made her feel safer, he was more in need of protection now than she. He shuddered and moaned in his sleep, and she hastened to reassure him.

"It's all right, Han. Take it easy." Only after she spoke did she touch him, and he relaxed again. She picked up his hand, and this time she kept it. She drowsed, sitting against the wall. At that moment they were both safe, and the relief of tension made her sleepy.

Dodonna saw her napping, her head fallen against the edge of the bed, inches from Han's, the pirate's hand held in hers, and frowned faintly out of old habits. Then a more recent memory surfaced and his expression changed to speculative approval.

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Leia was startled to wake up at the sound of plastic hitting the floor of her cell. Four cans were rolling around in the center of the cell. She put Han's hand carefully back on the bed and rose listlessly to see what they were.

Two were water, and two were self-heating travelpaks. Stew. She made a face, and then decided that she was hungry enough to eat anything. She snapped the lid off one 'pak, and the aroma made her mouth water. She wolfed it down as if it were a birthday feast at Deraan Palace.

She was about half done when Han stirred. She swallowed hastily and smiled up at him. "Hi, Han. Are you hungry?" She waited patiently, knowing he was awakening unusually slowly.

He lay flat on his stomach, braced on his elbows, his head bowed. "What?" he muttered, his eyes screwed shut.

"Hungry?" she repeated hopefully.

He shuddered. "No."

"Thirsty?"

"Yes!" he said emphatically, turning toward her voice. "Hey! I can see!"

She opened a can of water and handed it to him without getting up. He saw her half-finished dinner and the other water can, and the other can of stew, which amounted to everything in the cell that was not bolted to the floor, all beside her, and did not quite know how to react to her obvious concern: she could have settled down on the other side of the room; anywhere, but she had picked the spot closest to him.

"Sure," she was saying nonchalantly, so he decided he did not have to say anything. "Hysterical blindness is always temporary; sometimes extremely temporary. You relaxed, and it went away. How do you feel now?"

"Lousy. But better." He drank the water slowly, making a face at its metallic taste. He looked up, startled, when the lights in their cell went out. A glance across the corridor at the General's cell revealed darkness there, too. Only the halls were still illuminated.

"Here." Han handed her his water can. It was not empty--he realized that they might not be given any more until some time the next day.

Leia recapped both water cans and then yawned and stretched luxuriously, arching her back like a cat. Han watched her appreciatively.

"Do that again," he teased, odd lights dancing in his golden-green eyes.

Leia froze abruptly, then lowered her arms and pulled herself into a tight little ball.

"Hey, what's the matter?" Han was puzzled. Most of the women he had known had been quite aware that their appearance gave males pleasure. He had been under the impression that all women appreciated being told, however, subtly, that they were attractive.

"Don't..." she whispered, turning wide, pleading eyes to him. "Don't spoil it..."

He was definitely confused. "Spoil what? Lei--Lisa? What are you talking about? What's wrong?" He reached for her, wanting to cuddle her calm again.

But she moved away, out of reach, without taking her eyes off him. "No..." she shook her head. She pulled off her boots and lay down on the floor against the wall.

"Whaddaya think you're doing?" Han demanded.

"I'm going to sleep."

"You don't have to sleep on the floor. There's room up here for two. C' mere." He tossed the blanket back, inviting her to share the cramped little cot.

Leia swallowed convulsively. "No," she whispered.

He studied her intently, though she was just a dark silhouette against the lighted corridor. "Hey, you scared of me?" he asked incredulously. "I said I'm sorry I hit you, and you know why..."

She shook her head. "N-No... it's not you..."

"Then what? It's going to get awfully cold on the floor, sis."

She sat up slowly and leaned against the wall again. "I never told anyone..."

"I think it's about time you told someone," he said quietly. Something had obviously greatly upset her, and he wanted her to be happy.

"On the DEATH STAR," she began slowly, not looking at him, "I don't know how long I was a prisoner; the days ran together. But Vader came in with the mindprobe a lot and... and the same squad of storm troopers was always on duty when he did."

"How could you tell?" Han asked, grinning.

"Voices... operating numbers they used instead of names in conversation... I... A couple of them would stand around in my cell while Vader worked the mindprobe."

She shivered, hugging herself, and Han began to get an inkling of what she was working up the nerve to say out loud. He squirmed over to the edge of the bed and watched her closely. It irritated Han that he did not have the strength to sit up.

"Do you realize," she said icily, "how completely demoralizing it can be to have storm troopers watching while you writhe uncontrollably in agony?"

"I'd love to watch you wiggle," Han teased.

"Stop it!" she shrieked. She choked back a sob. "And... and after Vader left one day three of them came back to my cell and... and..."

Han put his finger gently over her lips. "You don't have to say it--I can guess. It's about the kind of thing I'd expect from storm troopers, too, and I can see why they didn't try it with less than three--you'd've taken them apart."

Leia stared up at him, amazed at his tender compassion.

"Now, then," he continued softly, running his finger along her jawline, "that's all past and done, and it's got nothing to do with now. You're going to freeze if you try to sleep on the floor, and then I won't have anyone to talk to. So, c'mere, you."

She smiled at him timidly. "Is that an order?"

"Sure is, little sister."

It turned out that the cot was not quite wide enough for two people to lie a polite distance apart.

"Roll over on your side," Han said finally. "Face out."

"Okay." She complied, and then flinched when his body touched hers.

"Hey, relax. You're safe from me: Luke's getting too good with that light sword of his for me to get pushy with you."

"Han, Luke doesn't know," she whispered.

"Well, I won't tell him," Han promised, "that's between the two of you."

She shivered, and he drew her closer. She stiffened in mute protest.

"Hey, take it easy. Look, I don't figure it's any fun if the lady's not playing, too: I'm too lazy to want to do all the work. Besides, it'd blow our cover, Sis." He looked

her up and down appraisingly. "Which I'm beginning to regret." His hand wandered excitingly over her body, and she flinched again.

"Stop that!"

"Felt good, didn't it?" he challenged her. "C'mon, didn't it?"

"Yes..." she admitted warily.

Han grinned. She was a strong person, and he did not believe she had been seriously hurt in any way. At the present time, however, he could not be as certain about himself. His attitudes were unchanged, but the flail seemed to have disinterested his body in almost everything; excluding breathing and occasional cautious movement. So, while she was within reach Han decided to test himself.

Years of experience were very helpful, and before Leia realized it Han had pulled her underneath him and she was being deeply and unhurriedly kissed. She struggled for a moment, and then realized that it was hardly necessary. Han was exhausted, and she could feel him weakening. She kissed him back shyly, surprised at herself, and broke it off before he had to. She decided it was time for her to say something. Even in his exhaustion he was talented, and she smiled up at him mischievously.

"I'm surprised some enterprising girl hasn't snagged you for herself," she said slyly, watching him for reaction.

Han laughed and caressed her again. "Why do you think the FALCON's so fast?"

Leia giggled and cuddled up against his chest trustingly. He tucked her into the protective curve of his body and let himself relax.

"G' nigh', sis," he murmured tiredly.

"Good night, Han. And thank you."

But Han was asleep.

Leia did not sleep immediately. She felt incredibly secure in his arms, and for a while she just lay there, relishing his affectionate embrace. *He likes me. He likes to watch me move, just because I'm female. Gods know I'm not accustomed to thinking of myself as female!* Han was the most blatantly, swaggeringly male man she had ever met, and there had been times when his virility had frightened her. *Maybe that's why I was so hostile to him from the beginning, she mused. To make him keep his distance.*

Even at the awards ceremony, when Luke had acted properly in every respect, Han had cut capers. Admittedly, he had kept a careful eye on Luke to be certain he was performing properly for the crowd. But he had winked at her! Her smile, she remembered, had become reproving.

*I treated him like a precocious boy; one about Luke's age but extremely pushy. But Han's not a boy, at all. He's a man.*

She could feel Han's body warm against her, his thighs firm behind hers as they nestled together like spoons, and the sensation was comforting. She was not alone in this cell, as she had been aboard the DEATH STAR. Han was a barrier around her, blocking everything out, and, even though she realized that he was far more in need of comforting than she at this time, she slept confidently, tucked under his chin.

Dodonna had been watching, silently intent. He could guess what was happening when he saw Han flip the blanket back. He did not think the Corellian was foolhardy enough to seriously try to make love to the Princess in a cell, but a little fooling around would only be good for her. She had always been an affectionate girl, but after her captivity on board the DEATH STAR she had had periods of withdrawal; times when she watched the casual affection of others with wistful pain. He had seen how she had kept Luke at a distance, though his growing adoration was as obvious as his intentions were honorable. Maybe Captain Solo, in their common extremity, could break the barriers which the Princess was building around her heart.

Willard noticed Dodonna's intentness eventually, and looked across the corridor in time to see Han bend to kiss her. The Commander leapt to his feet, intending to shout, to break up what he saw as an unmistakable rape. Dodonna grabbed him and clamped a hand hard over his mouth. It was only a few moments before Han wilted into sleep. The Princess's satisfaction with her position was as undeniable as the pilot's unconsciousness, even from across the hall.

Willard indicated physical surrender, and Dodonna released him.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" Willard hissed. "That damned Corellian was all over her!"

Dodonna was infuriatingly calm. "And if she had objected, we would have been able to tell."

"If?!" Willard gasped incredulously. "How could she not object?! She's Pr--"

"Don't say that!" Dodonna cut him off sharply. "That Imperial doesn't know who she is. He obviously doesn't believe that she's really Captain Solo's sister, but we'll keep him ignorant as long as we can. Now, she's in no danger from Solo:

he's in no condition, believe me. And if she had objected to his advances she would have been able to fight him off easily. You and I could not help her in any case. So, relax."

The truth in Dodonna's words did not make them any easier for Willard to accept. But he subsided.

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Leia awoke in quiet darkness. She rolled carefully out from under Han's arm without disturbing him, and tiptoed away to the facilities in the corner.

She was standing beside the cot, thinking about how tired she was not, and how she might be able to get back into bed without waking Han up when she heard footsteps out in the corridor: steps that lacked the metallic clanging sound of the storm trooper guards'. This was obviously the middle of the night--their visitor could not possibly be the Imperial colonel?

It was not. This was a rather nondescript man about Han's age but much grimmer. Over each temple his hair was worn away, and there were calluses on his wrists and jawline that betrayed him: he was a storm trooper out of armor.

He stopped outside the Princess's cell and stared at her. "Not so high and mighty now, are you?" he sneered.

Leia froze. The voice was familiar: allowing for the helmet's distortion, this was the storm trooper who had threatened her that afternoon. She watched, motionless, as he moved out of her sight briefly. The lock on the door of her cell clicked, and she shivered. She was helpless and she knew it. She had no weapons, and she would be no match for the trooper physically.

She glanced miserably at Han, still deeply, soddenly asleep, and shivered again. He was in no condition to be of any help; she doubted, privately, that he could even sit up. And, if she woke him, he would try to help her; of that she was certain. She would just get him hurt worse, perhaps killed. And if he lived, he would have to watch. She could not face that, and so she held her peace.

The trooper came back and slipped quickly into her cell, closing the door behind him so she could not slip past him and escape.

"Not so quick with your tongue now, huh? Sass me now: c'mon. Try it." He advanced on her slowly, and she backed away just as slowly. "You know, you got me a week of Arms and Armor maintenance as discipline. I hate A-n-A, and my platoon leader knows it. And it's all your fault, and you're going to pay for that."

He stopped talking and advanced on her determinedly. He tried to pin her against the wall, but she ducked under his outstretched arm and fled to the other side of the cell.

"Come back here!" he growled.

He caught her by the wrist, but she bent and bit his hand as hard as she could. He yelped in surprise and pain and let go of her. Then he swore viciously and grabbed her. He pinned her against the wall of the cell, holding both her wrists in one hand, and slapped her cruelly again and again. Her head rocked with the blows, and tears of pain and despair blurred her vision as she tried to bring her knee up to hit him.

Then he let go of her and fell down.

Leia blinked the tears out of her eyes and stared, uncomprehendingly, at Han. He was leaning against the wall as if he needed the support, but she still could hardly believe her eyes.

"I... I wasn't sure... I could... hit him... right," Han panted. "Why didn't you yell?"

She just stared up at him, dazed, and his expression changed to one of concern.

"Lisa? Are you all right?" He let go of the wall and reached out to her with a trembling hand.

At his touch her paralysis vanished, and she sobbed helplessly. Puzzled, Han just held her, stroking her hair, not really believing what was happening. He had not believed that Her Royal Highness, the Senator Organa of Alderaan, knew how to cry.

"Hey... hey, it's all right, Lis'. Cut it out. You're not hurt, are you?"

She shook her head and sniffled. She blotted her tears on her sleeve and looked up at him, her tear-reddened eyes worried.

"Han, what are they going to do to you for this?"

He offered her a rather lop-sided grin. "Kill me. Which they've been planning on doing, all along. Don't worry about it."

"Don't worry about it?!" she repeated incredulously. "How can I not worry? This is all my fault! If I hadn't screamed you'd be back at the ship waiting for Luke and Chewie! Now you're here, and they're going to kill you, and it's all my fault!" She refused to cry any more in front of him, and she turned away apologetically.

"Hey!" he growled, spinning her around to face him. "I don't take orders from anyone! Anything I do, I do because I wanted to! Nobody's responsible for anything I do except me! Nobody!"

Leia looked up at him, pale and shaking, obviously still exhausted, and could not help but smile at him.

"You," she stated, smiling through her tears, "are incorrigible."

"No, I'm Corellian," he grinned. "Why didn't you yell?"

"Yell to who?" she spread her hands wide. "More storm troopers, to watch and laugh? No, thanks. I...I didn't think you'd be able to help; I'm sorry."

"You oughta know better than that," he growled.

"I said I'm sorry." She looked up them, sudden hope flaring in her eyes. "The door's unlocked! Let's escape!"

He turned toward the door with a shadow of his usual catlike grace. "I'm in favor," he said with a wolfish grin. "Let's go!"

He slid the door open and slipped out, looking both ways up and down the corridor. He waved Leia out, and they set off for the nearer intersection. He could not move fast, and Leia, walking beside him, wondered how far they would get.

They were three cells from their goal when a patrol walked past the intersection behind them.

"Halt!" the storm trooper shouted, aiming at the fugitives.

"God-damn!" Han snarled, not bothering to look as he shoved Leia ahead of him. "Run, damn you!"

"Halt!" the storm trooper repeated. They did not obey, so he fired. The cylindrical blue beam lanced out and felled Han. Leia pretended she had not heard the sounds of the stun beam and Han's collapse, and only ran faster, trying to make it to the cross-corridor before the trooper could shift his aim.

She did not make it.

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She woke up back in her cell, alone. There was no sign of Han, and the corpse had been removed. She struggled to her feet and staggered to the bars of her cell.

"Where's Han?" she cried, her voice cracking. "What have they done to Han?!"

Dodonna looked at the distraught Princess stolidly and pointed back into the cell.

"Look on your monitor."

She turned to look and sucked in her breath in horror.

Han was unconscious or asleep, though she suspected the former, lying on a tabletop. His wrists and ankles were tied down, but there were no other bonds. As she watched, he stirred and tried to roll over. The binding prevented him, and he frowned in momentary confusion. A quick look around explained his situation adequately, so he sighed and went back to sleep.

He had only a few minutes of relaxation before the Imperial colonel came in. He awakened his prisoner with a light tap of the flail across the bare soles of his feet, and Han came awake gasping for breath. When he saw his visitor he swallowed hard and forced his breathing to slow.

"You do know how to irritate me, Solo," the colonel said cheerfully. "Your obstinacy and your combativeness, shall we say? Surely you knew you could not escape, and killing that soldier was unforgivable."

"I don't suppose you care," Han answered slowly, his voice hoarse with pain and weariness, "that he was trying to get up the nerve to rape my sister."

"It doesn't matter what he was trying to do: prisoners of war have no civil rights," the colonel spat. "I have decided to stop wasting my time with you. I suspect the girl is the weak link in this chain of silence, and she seems to exhibit an admirable concern for you. So we'll see what she says, now."

The colonel gestured to the doorway off-camera, and a low humming sound could be heard. Then a large black spherical droid floated in on an antigrav.

Han glanced at it disinterestedly. He did not know what it was, and he did not really care.

Leia, however, was horrified at the sight of it. "Oh, no," she whispered. "No... don't do that to him! Not to Han...!"

"Lisa!" Dodonna called sharply, worried by her sudden pallor. "What's the matter?"

"That... that... thing!" She gestured helplessly at the monitor. "It's a mind probe!" She sat down on the cot that was still disarranged where she and Han had been

asleep together so recently. She drew up her knees and tried not to watch, but she could not tear her eyes away.

The colonel efficiently injected something into Han's forearm. Han tried not to flinch when he felt the needle, but was only moderately successful. The colonel stepped back to wait for the drug to take effect, and busied himself programming the droid while he waited.

Slowly Han relaxed as the drug made any movement just too much effort. His mind was clear, though, more clear than he had felt since his capture; almost painfully clear. He could not keep his eyes open, but his mind was working at double or triple its normal activity rate.

A mental image grew of a sinuous, slimy, black worm. It grew longer and longer, larger and larger, and started gnawing away at Han's very mind. He stiffened, and Leia bit her lip hard. It was starting, and she knew what this felt like. The worm ate in deeper, chewing away at the barriers Han set up before it, unstopably eating its way deeper. The sensation of being raped by something utterly disgusting and horribly not-quite-alive-but-almost began to grow in Han's thoughts, and he began to seriously fight his bonds. The drug made the smallest movement a major effort, but the unspeakable horror helped him fight back.

His teeth were bared in a soundless snarl, his eyes screwed shut as he fought an interior battle against the invader. He never noticed when the Imperial left.

Leia watched, riveted to her seat, shaking with sympathetic horror. If she closed her eyes she could feel it all over again.

After a long, long time she noticed that Han's struggles were becoming noticeably more violent. His wrists began to bleed from cuts as he thrashed against the metal binders.

The drug's wearing off, she realized, much to her own relief. It's almost over, now. Just a little while, Han: it's almost over...

But the colonel did not return, and as the drug's sedative effects wore off, Han fought harder. The machine never relented. His breath came in sobs, and blood ran down his fingers to drip onto the floor. He moaned, tossing his head from side to side, trying to get away from the probe, but the machine was adamant. As the drug disappeared from his system Han's moans grew louder and louder, until he was quietly, exhaustedly, screaming.

"Shut it off!" Leia moaned at the screen. "Shut it off! You're killing him! Shut it off!"

"I'll shut it off," came a silken voice from the hall.

She whirled.

The Imperial Colonel stood there, staring at her searchingly. "I'll shut it off," he repeated, "when I find out what I want to know."

Leia was shaking with remembered horror, but her voice was hard and icy.

"You go to hell," she said distinctly. She turned back to the screen in time to see Han go into a violent series of convulsions. She watched coldly, dry-eyed, as, when the spasms ended, he went very limp. If she looked very closely, she thought she could see him breathing, but the only definite movement on the screen was the trickle of saliva from the corner of his slack mouth and the blood that continued to drip off his fingers into puddles on the floor.

She bowed her head in silent mourning. *At least they can't hurt him any more than that!* Then she squared her shoulders, threw back her head, and turned to face her captor.

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Luke and Chewbacca were frantic with worry by the time Captain Ziggrew decided the PALADIN's complement was prepared and ordered the assault. They insisted on being part of the rescue detail, and the captain could not deny them.

The first thing Leia knew of the assault was the trembling of the floor beneath her feet. She grabbed the bars of her cell door for support as the planet seemed to rock slightly. She had no fear of earthquakes: the Empire was not foolish enough to risk the loss of one of its bases to the forces of nature. But the colonel looked around wildly and left her staring after him as he ran out.

"What's wrong with him?" Dodonna voiced everyone's confusion. No one answered.

The Rebel X-Wings fired their salvo at the hangers where the Imperials kept their fighters and transports, to prevent any attempts at airborne escape or defense. When the rocking died away this second time, Willard suddenly leapt to his feet.

"That's no earthquake," he exclaimed in delight, "that's cannon! The base is under attack! It must be the PALADIN!"

Leia glanced up at the ceiling wistfully. *If only they had come an hour ago, she wished sadly. Han would be here with me.*

It was only a few minutes later that the prisoners heard blaster fire up the corridor, accompanied by loud, continuous roaring. The Rebels were all nonplussed, except Leia.

"That's Chewbacca. I suppose Luke's with him," she explained listlessly. She went back and sat down on the cot to await her rescuers.

She heard Chewbacca's bellowing get louder, and she was not surprised to see Luke at the door of her cell, his face flushed with excitement and his lightsabre brilliant in his hand.

"Hi. I'm Luke Skywalker. I'm here to rescue you," he grinned. But his grin faded when she did not return his merriment. She got slowly to her feet and trudged to the bars. By the time she got there, Luke had cut the door open with his lightsabre and was holding it open for her.

"Leia? You're not hurt, are you?" he asked worriedly.

She shook her head. "No. They never touched me--well, never officially. Luke, I think Han's dead. Or, at best, we'll wish he was." His body may still be alive...but is his mind? But she could not say that.

Luke paled, but he hugged her briefly when she stepped out of her cell. "What did they do to him? And where is he? Chewie can't find him."

She held his hand tightly. "They mind-probed him, Luke. I don't know where he is."

Luke frowned. "You were mind-probed. Why do you think it killed Han?"

She shivered. "Because they didn't turn it off when the sedative wore off. Look." She pointed to the monitor, and both her rescuers stared in speechless horror at the unnaturally quiet body they saw there.

"C'mon," Luke said tonelessly, his eyes dark with horror. "We've got to find him."

"We'll need the colonel who's been running things," Leia said briskly. "He'll know where that cell is. He set the probe on Han and came down here to watch. He did that to Han to make me talk; he knew he wouldn't get anything out of Han."

+++

The other prisoners were freed by Rebels who came later--Luke and Chewbacca had totally forgotten them, and Leia had paid them no attention since Han fell under the probe. They followed hall directories to the base headquarters wing and found the base commander's office easily.

A detail had been especially designated to capture the commander's office, and the colonel had been captured when he tried to get there. He was sitting on his own office couch, now, his hands bound behind him, his ankles lashed to the couch's leg. He looked up and then froze when Leia swept majestically into the room, followed by Luke and Chewbacca. He quailed inside when she glanced at him.

Zigbriew, as senior Rebel officer, was already entrenched behind the colonel's desk, but when he recognized his visitor he rose hurriedly to his feet to bow his respect.

"Your Highness? I trust you are unharmed?"

"Yes, Captain. Thank you." She stared at the Imperial colonel, and then, slowly, walked over to stand in front of him.

"Where is Han?" she hissed, not trusting the timbre of her own voice.

He was in their power, and the colonel could see no point in angering them further. "Down the hall in room 17," he answered quickly.

Leia glanced at Zigbriew as she heard Chewbacca whine and dash from the room. Luke stood by her side, content to be with her.

"Keep him available, Captain," she said remotely. "I may want to talk to him again later."

"As Your Highness wishes," was his formal reply.

Luke fell in step behind her, automatically taking the position of a bodyguard rather than an escort as he accompanied her out of the office. They did not break into a run until the door closed behind them.

The colonel looked warily at Zigbriew. "'Highness'?" he asked briefly.

Captain Zigbriew's smile was triumphant. "She is Her Royal Highness, Princess Leia Organa of Alderaan, sometime Senator, President of the Rebellion's High Council, and the Heart and Voice of Justice. Take heart," he concluded sadistically, "when the Alliance tries you for what you've done here, she has the right to be your judge."

The colonel shuddered and gave up all hope. "I had her locked in the same cell with that Corellian gunfighter who tried to rescue her. He said she was his sister. I didn't believe that, but I never suspected..." He let his voice trail away, completely at a loss.

+++

Room 17 was easy to find. The door was standing askew where it had been torn partially off its hinges, and there was a loud moaning audible from within.

Chewbacca had freed Han's feet by the time Luke and Leia got there, but he hesitated at touching the wrist cuffs: they were caked with blood that had just barely coagulated. If the binders were moved the wrists would start to bleed again, and, from appearances, Han could not spare the blood. He was, however, unquestionably, breathing and alive.

"Oh, my God," Leia breathed. She stood beside the table and stared down at the Corellian's lax-jawed face. "Han?" she whispered. "Han?"

Luke swallowed hard and drew his lightsabre as he approached the table. Chewbacca bellowed furiously and shoved him so hard he staggered, placing himself protectively between his captain and the glowing Jedi weapon, snarling horribly.

"Chewie! Relax, Chewie. Mercy killing might very well be a mercy to him--but I just want to cut him free."

Leia reached out and slowly, tenderly, ran a finger along the line of Han's jaw, stroking his cheek, and remembering, with a pang, how he had touched her like that. But Han did not react, and she had to choke back a sob.

Luke wielded his lightsabre carefully, and Han was free in only moments.

"Chewie? Pick him up, and we'll find a medic." Luke deactivated the lightsabre, hung it on his belt, and caught Leia's hand in his. "C'mon."

The pilot was a dead weight in his partner's arms, but the Wookiee carried him easily, cradling him like a sleeping child.

Leia stared for a moment. Han looks so small and vulnerable in Chewie's arms... She shivered and let Luke guide her out.

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The Rebel medic was less than reassuring. "I don't know," Tole said wearily. "We don't use mind probes, and we know almost nothing about them."

"We never will use them," Leia vowed. "He was fighting back every second, but eventually he went into convulsions and collapsed. He hasn't moved since."

Tole shrugged. "Most of the diagnostic equipment here was deliberately destroyed before our teams got this far. He may be simply in withdrawal--from an intolerable situation, you understand- -or he may not have a mind, any more. I don't have any way to tell. All I can suggest is to put him under constant supervision and observation for some days--at least until we're organized enough to risk sending him back to base for more thorough testing. If this was a life-threatening emergency, I would recommend immediate evacuation. But he seems to be in physical stasis as well, so a few days' wait probably won't make very much difference. And, as I said, he may come out of it on his own. I just can't predict."

Chewbacca whimpered, and Leia's hand tightened on Luke's. Tole eyed the worried trio speculatively.

"You know," he said slowly, "it's an accepted medical fact that comatose patients show a higher revival and recovery rate when they are cared for by close friends or family."

Leia did not hesitate an instant. "I have nothing more important to do than helping him recover, doctor."

"Me, either," Luke chimed in, and Chewbacca nodded his agreement vehemently.

Tole nodded thoughtfully as he finished bandaging Han's wrists. "All right. I'll assign you all quarters upstairs in officers' country; the rooms are bigger. Three beds and a few extra mattresses?" he grinned speculatively at the Wookiee, who bared his teeth in a smile of agreement.

"Sounds good to me," Luke said.

"And me. Thank you, doctor," Leia finished solemnly.

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And so it was that Luke, Leia and Chewbacca missed the first week of Chansie's deliverance from the Empire. General Dodonna was rather impatient with the Princess, but there was very little he could do about it, and he knew it. Willard wanted to order her and Luke back to work and Han and Chewie offworld. Dodonna told him, in no uncertain terms, how impossible it was to order Leia Organa around, and also, just what her response to those orders would be.

After four days in that room Leia was so depressed that she worked out a rotation schedule with Luke and Chewbacca and went back to work. She did not feel very guilty; the schedule was good, and Han was never alone. But he was never far from her thoughts.

On the sixth day Luke, who had gone back to work when Leia had, was assigned to a system patrol. It would keep him away from Han's side for a day and a half, and he did not want to go. Leia sighed wearily.

"Go ahead, Luke. I don't think it will matter." Han had not moved in nearly a week, and she was beginning to despair. Luke went, albeit reluctantly.

That night, since Luke was gone, Leia shoved her bed up against Han's. She had not told Han about those moments of intimacy she and Han had shared in their cell, but she decided to try to recapture a little of it, now.

After all, she thought glumly, nothing else has worked.

Chewbacca eyed these preparations with interest. Over the years he had seen Han make a lot of conquests, but this was ridiculous!

Leia settled down on her own bed, waiting for Chewbacca to fall asleep. When she was certain that those rumbly snores were real she squirmed over and curled up with her back against Han's side. She breathed a silent prayer as she put her hand in his lax one and went to sleep.

It had been like being caught in a dark nebula with no instrumentation. He had no way of knowing where he was, where he was going, or if he would ever get there.

At first there had been a tremendous agony that had dominated his universe. Then slowly, the pain had healed, leaving only its memory, and the comforting darkness, which swiftly came into paramount importance.

It was rather comfortable in the darkness; he would not have been dissatisfied to stay there forever.

But then, slowly, it became plain that there was more than the darkness. He was unsure about how he knew, but he was quite certain that there were other beings with him. They were not enemies, either: their constant presence was greatly reassuring.

Slowly he began to fight his way clear of the darkness.

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Consciousness returned reluctantly, and in slow layers. There was a surrounding silence that felt warm and happy. He was lying in a soft bed, covered with warm blankets over him... and there was someone else sharing that warmth with him. He fought against his own numbness, slowly discovering that the Other was female and sound asleep.

Han opened his eyes to darkness, wondering where he could possibly be. Then a snore tried to vibrate the paint off the walls, and he grinned.

*That's Chewie*, he knew immediately. Surprised at how much actual effort it took, Han rolled his head over to see who it was sharing his bed.

*Leia?!*

Her hand was in his, and he could not find the strength to do more than squeeze that hand.

*Wake up! Wake up, damn it, and talk to me!*

She stirred sleepily, realized what had awakened her, and woke up fast, rolling over onto her stomach to look at him.

"Han?!" she gasped. "Han!!"

He grinned weakly. "Hi," he whispered, that being the most he could manage. "What's new?"

"You," she answered just as quietly, her eyes shining with a light older than time.

Han smiled happily and relaxed, understanding. He looked around the room curiously, and she anticipated his question.

"Officers' quarters, Imperial base. Dodonna's using the commander's office, and that colonel is chained in our cell."

That was welcome news. "Since when?"

"Since he put you under the probe. This morning'll be the seventh."

"A week?!" he gasped, shocked. There had been no sensation of duration in the darkness.

Leia nodded, suddenly solemn again. "We...we were beginning to wonder if you were ever going to wake up," she admitted, avoiding his gaze.

"I've... never... slept th'... whole night... when I've... got... company..." he whispered tiredly.

She grinned, leaned over, and kissed him.

"Go to sleep, Han. Everything's okay, now, and we'll still be here when you wake up. You'll never be alone."

"Okay..." He did. It was true.

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