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Trying Again

by [Martha Wilson](#)

The rebel base on Yavin's fifth moon was going to pieces.

Repulsar trucks shot back and forth across the formex floor of the primary temple hangar, carrying dismantled sections of everything from hyperdrive repair bays to food processors. Droids scuttled everywhere and human and a few nonhuman rebels bustled past in frantic activity. Most of the X- and Y-wings had already been taken back up to the launch bays in the temple roof and the hangar was crowded now with slow transports, meant for hauling equipment and people to wherever it was the rebels were going next.

Han Solo had a good view. He was sitting on his heels on top of the Millennium Falcon, next to the dish of the sensor suite, watching everyone else scramble. The bay's cooling system had already been dismantled, and he was sweating in the warm damp air. He had nothing to do until they got clearance to lift, and that wouldn't be for some time yet, as far as he could tell.

There was a muted growl from the open top hatch, and Chewbacca's head poked out. The big Wookiee's hair and beard were mussed and sticking out in all different directions. Han thought he looked like a fuzzy porcupod. "No," he told his partner. "They said we lift with the big transports, and most of them are still loading. Go back to sleep."

The Wookiee grumbled that it was too noisy and leaned on the edge of the hatch, surveying the activity with narrow eyes. He was wearing the medal he had been presented with yesterday and was still mildly hungover from the celebrating afterward. The logistics of a short Alderaanian trying to hang a medal around the neck of a tall Wookiee had been too difficult to arrange at short notice, so at the festivities after the formal ceremony Princess Leia had stood on a chair to give

Chewbacca his medal. He muttered another question and Han answered, "No, I still didn't tell anybody we're quits. They can find out when we get our clearance and go hyper -- without waiting for those secret coordinates they're handing out once they make orbit."

The Wookiee sighed, and disappeared back down the hatch tube. Han knew that sigh, and rolled his eyes in annoyance. Chewbacca thought leaving without saying goodbye was rude, and a violation of hospitality, and a dozen other things. Han had explained his reasoning once already and didn't intend to repeat himself.

Heroes one day, liabilities the next, he thought. It was already all over the base that he was a smuggler, and Chewie, whose hearing was acute, had reported that words like _pirate_ and _mercenary_ were also making the rounds. Han knew he didn't fit the Alliance's profile of a new recruit, and supposed that to most of them he looked an awful lot like somebody who would sell them all to the Empire for a quick credit. If anything went wrong with their evacuation, he didn't want to hang around to conveniently take the blame for it. More than that, he didn't want to wait long enough for somebody to come up with the bright idea of eliminating any potential danger. Such things had happened to him before and he had no intention of letting it happen again.

Besides, the uniforms were making him nervous, and the bright-eyed idealism was making him nauseous.

Speaking of bright-eyed idealism.... Han frowned into the distance. He hadn't exactly told Luke Skywalker that the Falcon would be accompanying the rebels, but he hadn't exactly told him the truth, either. Han didn't know why he should feel responsible to Luke. He didn't owe him anything, not anymore. Just because as a new Alliance pilot the kid had every chance of getting dead in the next couple of months.... _You could tell him that, but he wouldn't listen. He wants to be here_, Han told himself. But it wouldn't hurt to find Luke and see what he was doing. He had already finished his preflight check and didn't have anything else to do.

Han leaned over the open top hatch and called, "I'm going to take a walk. Did you hear me?" He waited for Chewbacca's acknowledging snarl and then headed for the rampside of the ship.

Using the maintenance handgrips, he climbed down the Falcon's

side, dropping the last meter or so to land easily on the hangar floor. Somewhere there were doors open to the surface and the smell of wet foliage and jungle decay drifted in on the damp breeze. Dodging repulsar lift carts and scurrying droids and techs, Han crossed the bay toward the far wall and the corridor that led into the base proper.

The corridor was wide and high, shaped from huge slabs of heavy rock, stained with the creeping moss that seemed intent on burying the place again. It was just as busy here, pilots and techs racing back and forth, power couplings sparking overhead as installations were dismantled, droids underfoot everywhere. Several members of what was left of red squadron jogged by, wearing flight suits and obviously getting ready to lift. Two of the younger ones recognized Han and saluted, and the Corellian just managed to keep a straight face and nod cordially in return. He hadn't been around military types in a long time; at least, not on such amiable terms. He couldn't believe that it would last.

As he passed the entrance to one of the command centers, Han noticed there was attention of a not quite so casual sort being directed at him from a group of people gathered there. There were five or six of them, only a couple with rank tabs on their collars but Han knew top brass when he saw it. They were talking to the new general, the one who had arrived during the celebration last night and who had been hailed like a savior. Rieekan, that was his name. Everybody had thought he had been killed in the destruction of Alderaan.

He was middle-aged for a human, squarely-built, standing there in rumpled fatigues, as mild-looking as somebody's nice old uncle. _The absolute antithesis of an Imp general,_ Han thought. Rieekan was the only one whose head hadn't turned when Han came down the corridor. The others were watching him thoughtfully, not with actual hostility, but Han read suspicion on several faces before he casually glanced away. Well, he had figured he was real close to overstaying his welcome.

Han turned the corner and came face to face with Princess Leia Organa. _Or chest to face,_ Han thought, as the diminutive woman stepped back, stiffly putting a polite distance between them. She was dressed for the evacuation in an ordinary coverall and vest, but still managed to look as good as she did in formal robes. Maybe even better, Han decided. "Captain," she greeted him formally.

"Princess."

She cleared her throat. "So you'll be leaving with the transports?"

"Looks that way," Han admitted, trying to keep a lid on his annoyance at running into her. He didn't know why this woman got to him the way she did. As planetary royalty she should be too arrogant to speak to most of the people she worked with here; as a rebel leader she should be a starry-eyed idealist, all talk and no practical action. Instead she talked to everybody, giving the techs and support personnel as much interested attention as the officers and pilots. As for her competence, Han had the distinct impression that she could have run the Corporate Sector Authority from a portable comm terminal.

Unable to help himself, he had spent most of last night's celebration watching her without being obvious about it, though there had been several curious female rebels who had done their best to capture his attention. While he had eventually allowed one of them to capture quite a bit more than just his attention, it had been Leia Organa who had been in his thoughts when he woke this morning.

Now she appeared to be at a loss for conversation, though it would have been easy for her to nod dismissively and go on her way. Instead she cleared her throat again and said, "I want to thank you again--"

"Don't," Han interrupted. This was her official Princess/Senator face, and of all the aspects of her he had seen so far, the one he liked the least. He leaned casually against the wall. "I've been paid, that's all I'm interested in. I already told you that."

Her lips thinned and the look in her eyes became steely. "When we reach the rendezvous point, I'm sure we can find something for you to do. I can't promise all of our commissions will be so lucrative, however."

"We might have to renegotiate, then, your worship." The Princess/Senator face was beginning to give way to the Leia Organa, annoyed woman face. He liked that one much better. To complete the transformation, he added, with a half-smile, "I don't come cheap."

She hesitated. From the sudden gleam in her eye he could tell she had a good one primed. He waited, daring her to let him have it. She smiled wistfully and drew breath to speak just as the door behind her slid open and Commander Willard stepped out. "Princess, we need you in--" He saw Han and stopped, eyeing the Corellian thoughtfully. "Sorry, did I interrupt something?"

Han left her to answer, pushing away from the wall and continuing down the corridor.

He went down the rock-cut steps that were just a bit too high for human-sized bipeds, then through a short stone hall, badly lit now that most of the generators were being shut off. He turned the corner at the end and almost ran into Luke, who was ducking out of a doorway and loaded down with a crate of dismantled parts. "Han!" Luke acted like he hadn't seen him in years, instead of a few hours. "I've been looking for you."

"Yeah, well...." Han found himself uncomfortable with the exuberance of the greeting, but Luke didn't give him any time for it.

"I want to tell you something, but I've got to take this up first." Luke was up the corridor already, starting backwards up the stairs, showing more dexterity than

most ordinary Tatooine farmboys should have. Dressed in rebel fatigues now, he also looked a lot less like a farmboy. "Wait for me, okay?"

"Okay, okay." Luke vanished up the steps, and Han shook his head at youthful enthusiasm and leaned in the archway to wait. The stone blocks in the walls of the large room were covered with moss and being gradually pried apart by the omnipresent vines trying to reclaim the temple for the jungle. It held the simulator and the other training equipment for the pilots, and there were several frantically working techs dismantling things and carting parts away. Wedge Antilles and a couple of others were the only ones working on the simulator, and Han was a little surprised they had waited so long to tear it down. Besides being the most expensive piece of equipment in the training area, it was the most vital. The simulator was no substitute when it came to real combat experience, but training time in it could make the difference between life or death in a tense situation.

Antilles swore and threw a hydrospanner back into the tool kit, searching for another size. "I'd like to know who the hell melted these clamps into place."

"Wedge, I've got to go," one of the techs protested. "I'm supposed to be helping in the command center right now."

"Okay, go," Wedge said irritably. He found another size of hydrospanner, forced it into place, and he and the other tech both struggled with it. After a few moments, they gave in, breathing hard.

"We can't cut the clamps off?" the tech suggested.

Wedge shook his head. "It needs them to hook on to the transport rack. There's no other way to move it. The big repulsar carts that could lift it without 'em are too big to get down here. Damn!" Wedge stood up and kicked the recalcitrant machine.

"Leave it," someone on the other side of the room suggested.

"We can't leave it," Wedge said, sounding anguished. "Where are we going to get another one?"

Han rolled his eyes. Wedge had obviously never had to worry about getting large objects into small cargo holds, using lifters not designed for the purpose. He told himself he was only doing Luke a favor; if the kid was going to survive long as a fighter pilot, he would need time in this simulator. He pushed away from the wall. "Antilles, let me take a look."

Wedge glanced up, surprised, then stepped aside. Han checked first to see if the clamps were really melted shut. They were. "That's funny," he muttered.

"I don't know who did it," Wedge said. "He must have been trying to give the unit more stability. I'd like to kill him."

Han stood to undo the latches on the hatch and lifted it. The leather seat inside was old and worn and the reconditioned air trapped in the fake cockpit smelled of old sweat, plastic, and ozone. He gestured Wedge closer. "This unit breaks into four modules. The connections are under those plates there and there, and under the support rack at the bottom. Each module is small enough for a droid-lifter to get down the hall and up the stairs. Then--"

"Then cut the clamps off the rack and replace those from the supplies onboard ship! That's it! Thanks, Solo. I didn't even know the damn thing came apart."

Somehow, in the confusion, Han ended up helping with the dismantling, though he had meant to go back to being an impartial observer. They had taken two of the modules down with the help of droid lifters, and Han found himself sitting on the floor with Wedge and a selection of tools, trying to save as much of the clamps as possible, taking the place of the other tech who had been dragged off to some new emergency. Luke had returned and was helping them by getting the droid lifters into position and fending off the people who kept trying to take away the overhead lights.

Han was dimly aware of a conversation going on around him -- techs and other support personnel were coming in and out all the time, though most of the equipment had already been taken away. Then someone said, "Captain Solo. That's some ship you've got." Han wiped sweat off his forehead with his sleeve and glanced up at the speaker. Another face he recognized from the celebration last night. It was a Colonel Degoran, or something like that, who had arrived with General Rieekan. He was big, older than Han by some years and looked like an upper-class Alderanni. He was smiling in a way Han didn't particularly like.

Han said, "She does what she needs to." He thought about standing, since he disliked this man looming over him, but knew that might possibly be misinterpreted as respect and decided against it.

"Those quad-mount cannons give you considerable firepower. For a freighter," Degoran added, his tone casual.

"And man, did we need it," Antilles muttered, from his position under the partially dismantled simulator. "That was one firefight I didn't think I'd live through."

Han saw Luke glance over at them from where he was altering the programming on the droid lifter, his expression uneasy. He had picked up on the undercurrent of Degoran's implicit question as readily as Han had, and he knew about the Falcon's smuggling compartments. They had an audience now too. There was a mixed bag of rebel personnel in the room, from pilots to droid techs, all trying to

accomplish last minute tasks but apparently still with the time to slow down and watch this impromptu interrogation. And Han had no doubt that was an apt description of what Degoran meant to accomplish.

Watching Han thoughtfully, Degoran said, "Of course, I was told you were a great help in the battle. Still, that's an awful lot of firepower for a small commercial ship."

Han shrugged. "I don't exactly travel the protected lanes." _Oh, gee, Solo, do you have boarding clamps on that "freighter" too? And how many passengers have you spaced?_

Degoran's eyes hardened, just a trace. "But what does a light stock freighter need with those kind of guns?"

"Can't be too careful, these days," Han said easily, and decided to make a preemptive strike. "Some pirates'll board anything, even an independent freighter that can't carry enough cargo to make it worth their time." He had to be careful; it wouldn't do to show too much expert knowledge on how much cargo a ship had to be carrying to make it worth a forced board.

"That's right," Luke contributed, angling the anxiously beeping droid-lifter into position so Degoran had to step back. "Back home the insystem mail ships were always getting boarded and they weren't carrying anything really valuable. There was one time--" Luke launched into an enthusiastic story about some insystem pilot he had known from Tatooine.

A pilot and a couple of techs who had come in for the last of the equipment were drawn into the story and started to add anecdotes of their own as soon as Luke paused for breath. Degoran frowned, but the subject had been effectively changed, and if he tried to go back to probing at Han, it would become obvious to everyone in the room exactly what he was getting at, and he seemed to want to avoid that. For now, at least.

Han decided to take the opportunity for escape. Sparring with Degoran might be entertaining but since he didn't mean to stay with the Alliance there was no point to it. In a few timeparts the Falcon would be gone and Degoran could speculate on her past and future activities to his heart's content. Han tossed the tools back into the box and said, "Antilles, I'm leaving. I've got a launch window to get ready for."

"Oh, sure." Wedge answered, still more than half under the simulator. "Thanks for the help, Solo. I don't know what I would've done without--"

Han left, not wanting to hear the rest of it. He was beginning to feel guilty, and he didn't know why. He didn't owe these people anything, any of them.

Han was almost to the steps up to the main part of the base when Luke caught up with him again. "Han, Wedge said to be careful of Degoran. He said Degoran used to be in charge of customs and shipping at Forsalisport, before he joined the Alliance. He had a lot of trouble with Corellian pirates there, before--"

Han swore. "Kid, I'm not a pirate." _Not anymore, anyway._ There were a lot of things he wasn't anymore that the Rebels wouldn't be too happy to hear about. Being accused of being a pirate was probably the least of his worries, or at least that's what he told himself.

"I know that. But that's what Wedge said." Luke glanced up and down the temporarily empty corridor, to make sure no one was close enough to overhear. "After you've been with the Alliance for awhile, and Degoran sees that they can trust you, it'll be all right."

"Yeah," Han said noncommittally. Sometimes he felt that Luke lived in a whole other space-time continuum from him.

"Oh, what I wanted to tell you. I'm not just a recruit anymore; I've got a real slot on Red Squad."

"That's great." Han tried to look enthusiastic. Most of the experienced pilots on Red Squad were dead. He knew from brief observation that Antilles was one of the best left alive, and he had maybe a year on Luke, if that. _But the kid's a real natural at it, maybe he'll make it._ Maybe. It depended on how long the rebellion lasted. At least Luke wasn't stuck on the other side. Being an Imperial pilot had one advantage; the discipline and living conditions on the cruisers were so oppressive it was almost a welcome relief by the time you finally bought it. "Just take care of yourself, okay?" He added, then mentally winced. _Yeah, sound like his mother. That'll help._

"Sure. There's a lot I still need to learn. The X-wings are so specialized, not as much like the T-16s as I thought. There was a couple of times there I thought I was going to be in real trouble."

Only a couple? He is a natural. "Your reactions are all set for upper atmosphere flying. Once you get some more time in vacuum it won't feel so different."

"When we get to the rendezvous, will you give me some pointers?"

"Sure." There was guilt, again. _To hell with guilt._ If Luke bought it in his next battle, or if the Imps finally got Leia Organa into a corner she couldn't fight or think her way out of, Han didn't want to know about it. "I've got to go."

"Okay. See you at the rendezvous."

Han went up the stairs and found the corridor completely empty. Instead of heading directly for the bay, he found himself ambling toward the command center again.

The corridors around it were deserted now, and the command center itself was empty, stripped right down to the ancient rock walls, the only sign of human occupancy the lights left in the overhead rack and the few places where plastic sealants had been used to cover inconvenient holes in the walls. It was a much bigger room without all the equipment and consoles crowded into it.

Han realized he had come here hoping to run into the Princess one more time, and shook his head at his own folly. _You are getting way too sentimental in your old age, Solo. It's going to get you killed_.

There was a sputter from a power coupling somewhere nearby, and the lights went out.

Han decided to take that as a sign to make his farewell to the Rebel Alliance, and started for the door back into the corridor, reasonably confident of its location in the dark.

Later, he remembered that he had heard a quiet step behind him, and he knew he must have turned around, but that was all.

Han opened his eyes to a blinding light and blurry figures leaning over him. He didn't remember anything, not where he was, and not how whatever had happened had happened. Nearby someone was yelling, and he couldn't make the words make any sense. His head hurt like somebody had used a powered mining pick on the back of his skull. Like somebody was still using it.

Panic hit him in a rush with the memory of being attacked, though he still didn't know who or how. He found he could move his arms, and tried to push himself up on his elbows. A shadow loomed over him suddenly and somebody heavy pushed him down again, pinning his shoulders. Reflex took over. Han had been in the kind of flight training where they put you in a vacuum chamber and gradually let the air out, and if you didn't perform the tasks they assigned while this was going on, they didn't let the air back in at all. He didn't need to be able to see or think coherently to fight. Han grabbed the man's wrist, broke the hold and twisted, bringing his knee up. He felt a solid hit and the man was off him. He struggled to sit up again and someone else grabbed his arms in a considerably stronger grip, pulling them back over his head and pinning him down again.

Before he could react there was suddenly a small firm hand in the center of his chest, and Leia Organa's voice said gently, "Han, don't struggle, we're trying to

help you." To whoever was holding him, in a tone of iron command, she added, "He's just disoriented. Let him go and he'll stop fighting."

How did she know that, Han wondered. The tight grip on his arms was released and he relaxed. He still wanted to sit up, but Leia was in the way. She said, "You've had a head injury, and you've got to hold still and trust us, all right?"

He snorted, and that hurt. But to make the point clear he added, "Like I have a choice."

"That's better," Leia said, for some reason. Over her shoulder she yelled suddenly, "Where's that damn meddroid? Who's bringing it?"

Han closed his eyes, since seeing everything in a blur was distracting. He wanted to say something about the fact that it almost sounded like Leia cared, but what came out instead was, "You know, this really hurts."

"I know," she said, sounding like she really did. "Who did this to you, Han?"

The question confused him more than it should. _Don't you know?_ He wanted to say. Then there was more noise, more voices, a droid's humming servomotors. He thought he heard Luke but the words went by too quickly for him to make sense of. Someone was saying something about the Falcon, and he really wanted to hear that part but it wouldn't come clear either. Then someone else was saying, "...no time. We'll have to get him on one of the transports, then transfer to the frigate."

The frigate? Han thought. He said, "No, don't..." then reality drifted away again.

Han's next return to consciousness was a good deal less painful. He gradually became aware of the muted hum of machines, of an antiseptic smell as a sharp taint in the air mix of an unfamiliar ship. _A ship in hyper,_ he thought. He lay on a padded surface and could feel the muted thrum of a drive, vibrating up through it from the deck. He could hear voices somewhere nearby. The different parts of his brain seemed to be waking up at different times, with the area that controlled voluntary muscular action reporting in last; it felt like ages before he was able to open his eyes.

He was in a ship's medcenter, quiet and softly lit, a high plated ceiling arching above. There seemed to be no one immediately around him; it might be safe to move. He managed to turn his head, and saw blinking scanner units, a deactivated Two-One-Bee droid, and the bays of a big diagnostic comp. It was certainly cleaner and better equipped than the port and hub station medcenters

he usually ended up in. He was on a life support table, still mostly dressed, though his gunbelt, boots, and vest had been removed. He wasn't restrained in any way, and there weren't even any shackles on the table, a typical Imperial addition to the standard equipment. That was a good sign, at least. But if everything was okay, then Chewbacca would be here. _So where the hell is he?

—

Then he spotted three humans moving around down at the far end of the bay, two men and a woman in the light brown fatigues of the Rebel Alliance.

The Rebel Alliance. He knew where he was now, at least.

His head ached, but merely at monumental hangover level, and not the intense pain that was his nearest and dearest memory at the moment. Moving slowly, to keep from drawing the techs' attention, he gingerly touched the injured area on the back of his scalp. There was a lump there, a nasty one, and he could tell where the skin had been broken. Scalp wounds bled like crazy, too. They must have cleaned the blood out of his hair when they had treated the wound, but it still stained his shirt. He must look like something that should be lying in a downport waste dump.

He looked at the techs again. _If the Rebels did this to you, why bother to put you in the ship's medcenter? Why not leave you in the brig, or back on the base, until you bled to death?_

Grimacing, he propped himself up on his elbows. He looked around for his gunbelt, hoping someone had carelessly set it aside somewhere nearby, but no such luck. The sleeve on his right arm had been torn open and there was a pressure IV tube inserted in the vein.

Memories were coming back in splotches. The night at the rebel base, the conversation with Leia in the corridor, finding Luke in the training room, and some obnoxious jerk of an Alliance colonel hinting about the Falcon.... The Falcon. Chewie must be with the ship. If he wasn't.... Well, she was too valuable, for the spare parts if nothing else, for them to just leave behind.

He found the medication dispenser in the side of the table and, keeping one eye on the techs still busy at the other end of the room, checked to see what it was pumping into him. Squinting at the label on the ampule and waiting for the letters to swim into focus, he saw it wasn't a tranquilizer or anything nasty, but a stabilizing solution, meant to hold off concussion. He could do without it, then. He pulled the pressure needle out of his arm. He heard the alarm beep on a nearby console a second too late.

The techs turned in surprise and the lights and photosensors on the Two-One-Bee unit activated, the droid straightening and swinging around. Han meant to

hop off the table, but when he sat up, the entire bay seemed to rock violently, and he ended up just sitting there, holding his head. Then the Two-One-Bee was looming over him. "You disconnected the medication," it said, the mild, flat voice still managing to sound accusing and reproachful.

One of the techs was standing nearby, speaking into a comlink. "Yes, he's awake now. All right."

Han managed to lift his head. The expression on his face must have been indicative of his mood, because the tech took a step back. "What ship is this?"

"The Tantavie IV. We're in hyper."

"I know we're in hyper. Where's my ship? Is she in convoy?"

"The freighter?"

No, the battle cruiser. "Yes, the freighter."

"I don't know."

He doesn't know. Well, he wouldn't, he's a medtech, Han told himself.

Across the length of the bay the main doors slid open and Han started, which made his head hurt worse. It was Luke and Leia, and Han was mad at himself for the amount of relief he felt.

"How do you feel?" the Princess asked as she walked up to the table. Her brow was furrowed with worry and she seemed even a shade paler than normal. Luke didn't look particularly happy either.

"Where's the Falcon?" Han countered.

Luke and Leia exchanged a look, and Han stopped breathing. Luke glanced at the Princess, then said, "The Falcon took off from the base after we found you. She didn't make any contact with the controllers and she didn't join up with the fleet before we went hyper. No one saw Chewie before she took off. The word about what happened to you spread pretty fast, but nobody spoke to him and suddenly the Falcon just took off--"

Leia took up the story. "One of the things we're afraid of is that the person who attacked you went after Chewbacca and took the ship," she said bluntly.

Han closed his eyes, trying to lock down any outward show of reaction. Some of it must have gotten through, because Luke grabbed his shoulder, probably in the belief that Han was about to fall off the diagnostic table. Han shook him off and

opened his eyes again. _Just take it one thing at a time._ "The person who attacked me? Don't you know who it was?"

"No. One of the techs found you in the Command Center in pretty bad shape," Luke said. "You don't remember what happened?"

"No. When I woke up I didn't know where I was." Han swore mentally and thought _Stop talking, right now. Let them tell you things, not the other way around._ No need to let them know exactly how messed up he was. He rubbed his temples cautiously. His headache was leaving the monumental hangover range and edging back up into the screaming level. The only way Chewie would have let somebody take the ship was over his dead body.... _Don't think about that, not right now._

"The situation's worse than we thought, then," Leia was saying. "We were hoping you could tell us who did this."

Han shook his head. There were a lot of people who wanted to see him dead, for reasons that had nothing to do with the Death Star or the Rebellion. He could think of a dozen in the Corporate Sector Authority, at least, but none of them had mysteriously appeared on the base. What he wanted to know was how it had been done. "The hatches were sealed. How did they get in?" He didn't sit in any port with his hatch open, not unless he or Chewbacca were right outside. And not with a considerable sum of marketable specie on board, the reward for rescuing the Princess from the Death Star. "They couldn't have blown the hatch and still lifted off. They must have gotten him to open it." In a commercial port Chewie's native caution would have kept him from opening the hatch to anybody he didn't know, especially with Han not there and so much money on board; shipjackers were too common. But on the rebel base, with the evacuation going on, and somebody in Alliance uniform who looked like he had a reason to be there outside....

The bay doors slid open again and Han looked up. Not good. He recognized Degoran first, and then the man with him. General Rieekan. _Oh great, I rate a general._ Things were not getting better.

Rieekan nodded to Leia as he walked up, then he leaned one hand on the end of the life support table and looked at Han. The General's expression was impossible to read, and Han wasn't sure how far he could trust his own perceptions right now anyway. He thought about trying to get down off the table again, but considering the way the medical bay kept shifting around, a phenomenon no one else seemed to be experiencing, that probably wasn't such a good idea. He decided just sitting there and looking pathetic was the best course of action, besides being about the only one available to him at the moment.

"Captain Solo," Rieekan said, "Can you tell us what happened to you?"

"No," Han said, warily. "I was heading back to the hangar, and that's the last thing I remember." Something wrong with that, now that he thought about it. But the phantom memory faded as soon as he tried to concentrate on it.

"You stopped at the Command Center," Rieekan prompted.

"Yes, but nobody was there." Han had noticed how even and calm Rieekan kept his voice. Good technique, useful in interrogation of subjects you didn't want to scare, at least just yet.

"You didn't see who struck you."

"No." Han caught a flash of memory, and added, "The lights went out and I started to leave."

"Somebody pulled a power coupling apart, just outside the other doorway," Luke said. "We didn't have much time to look around but we found that. And we found what he hit you with."

"What was it?" Han asked, curious in spite of everything.

"A piece of steel pipe."

Yow, Han thought. But there were a lot worse things to hit somebody with than pipe. Something with a sharp edge, for example. "He didn't plan it, then. He grabbed whatever he could find." The words were out before he remembered his decision to keep his mouth shut.

"That's what Leia thought, too."

Rieekan looked thoughtful and started to say something, but Degoran interrupted with, "What about last night, Captain Solo?"

"Huh?" Han stared at him. Degoran had kept quiet up until now, and he should have known that was too good to last. _Last night? Nothing happened last night._ At least he didn't have to fake confusion.

Her voice hard, Leia said, "I thought we agreed that we wouldn't go into that just now."

"I'm in charge of the investigation, your highness," Degoran said, his expression cold as he glanced at her. "It is my area of expertise."

Rieekan caught Leia's eyes, in a way Han thought might have been a warning. Luke looked as confused as Han felt; at least this was all news to him, too.

Degoran looked at Han again. "Where were you last night?"

"On the base," Han said, thinking where else?

Degoran's expression said he had taken that for sarcasm, though Han was really still too out of it to make a more articulate answer. The Colonel said, "At some point last night, the transport Kisardi was sabotaged. If the captain hadn't discovered it before liftoff, it would have blown up as soon as it broke atmosphere." Degoran paused to smile. "If you could account for your whereabouts, the situation would be much clearer."

Han swore under his breath. You can't say you weren't expecting something like this. "You think I did it? What, and then bashed myself over the head to cover it up?" He wasn't even sure which ship the Kisardi was, not that that mattered.

The Princess was shaking her head. "This isn't the time--"

"You actually suspect Han? You must be out of your mind," Luke said, disgusted.

That's it, kid, get the guy on your side, Han thought. At least somebody thought he was innocent, though of course it was the person in the room with the least influence over the outcome of all this. Rieekan was watching Degoran with what could have been veiled contempt in his hooded eyes, but that might just be Han's imagination, looking for hope where there wasn't any.

Still watching Han as if he expected him to betray something significant, Degoran said, "If you just tell us where you were after you left the central area of the base...."

Okay, fine, Han thought. "I was...." He remembered where he was. Did they court-martial officers in the Alliance for that? He knew what they did to crewmembers in the Imperial service who were caught at it on base or shipboard, even if they were off-duty. Hell, for all he knew she might be married or pairmated. With his current luck, probably to Degoran. And considering where they had been.... We should've gone back to the ship. Dammit, I knew that. But Han had never considered it polite to bring company home when Chewie hadn't been able to find anybody, and from the Wookiee's disgruntled attitude, none of the human women at the party had been in the mood to broaden their experience in interspecies relations. Aware he was taking too long to answer, he finished, "I was asleep." Oh, that was lame.

Rieekan started to speak again but Degoran interrupted, "That doesn't give us much to work with, does it?"

Han let out his breath. He knew he should just keep his mouth shut, just sit here and wait for the next insult, but he had never been any good at that. In the ensuing silence, Leia frowned menacingly at Degoran. Han knew better than to be encouraged by that; she had been frowning menacingly at him earlier too. He said, "No, it doesn't. What does that mean?"

"There's also the odd behavior of your ship. Is there any explanation for that? Or did your crewman abandon you so he could keep the vessel and your reward for himself?"

Degoran was watching him carefully, but Han had expected to be hit with this and he kept his control. He gave Degoran a bored look and said, "Yeah, our relationship's been really rocky lately and I think maybe he just up and left me."

Luke looked down at the floor to hide a grin, which Han had expected. Princess Leia gave an involuntary snort of amusement and tried to cover it with a cough, which he hadn't expected.

Degoran was concealing his growing anger well, but he couldn't hide the telltale traces of red around his collar line. He said, "You appear at Yavin base, under suspicious circumstances. You have a suspiciously well-armed ship, and a suspicious reluctance to discuss your past activities." The expression on Degoran's face when he said the last word made it clear he expected those activities to be the lowest of the low. "Now you're injured under suspicious circumstances. What else are we to think?"

Luke's jaw had dropped at the beginning of this statement. Now he snorted derisively and said, "That's ridiculous."

Degoran ignored him. He said, "Well, Solo?"

Han took a deep, resigned breath. He was actually relieved. He had wanted Degoran to get it all out in the open and he had gotten what he wanted. It would be even better if he could make Degoran take a swing at him, but he didn't think he could push him that far. Not right now, anyway, with his head about to fall off. "Fine. You got me." Leia looked startled, Degoran hopeful, and Rieekan's expression became more enigmatic than ever. Han continued, "I bashed myself in the head so I could get separated from my ship and co-pilot and be gang-raped by your medical droids. I admit it. Are you happy now?"

Leia Organa rolled her eyes in annoyance and Degoran folded his lips grimly. To Han's surprise, Rieekan chuckled and said, "I think that's enough of that." He glanced back at the tech in charge of the med bay and said, "Captain Solo will be staying here for now." To Han he explained, "This area has controlled access, and the guards are people that we are absolutely sure of, so you won't be in any danger if whoever did this is on the ship."

Guards? Han felt his tension increase exponentially, and the pounding in his head grew measurably worse. He said, "Until when?"

"Until we find out who attacked you."

"The brig would be even more secure," Degoran pointed out.

Already turning to leave, Rieekan didn't answer. Leia raised her eyebrow and said, "This isn't the Imperial navy, Colonel."

Somehow Han wasn't reassured by that.

"I'll talk to them," Luke promised, before he followed the others out.

Leia Organa walked into the tiny office that had been allotted General Rieekan. _'Climb in' might be a better term,_ she thought. It was the size of a small storage compartment, with every bit of floor space taken up by the terminal and two chairs. Leia was not terribly happy with what she had seen so far of the Tantavie IV. The frigate was a recommissioned Clone Wars vessel, and she was beginning to think the refit had gone to the contractor with the lowest bid. The crew quarters, even the officers' areas, were small and uncomfortable, and there were signs of wear and past damage everywhere. The engines and support systems checked out, but there were signs one of the bulkheads on the starboard side had buckled at one point from stress, and even if the repair work was top quality it was still unnerving. _But we take what we can get,_ she told herself. Rieekan was occupying one chair in the tiny cabin. Leia squeezed around the edge of the terminal and fell into the other.

"Well?" he asked, eyeing her challengingly. "Do you think it was Solo?"

"Of course not. I hope you don't," Leia said, annoyed. She had already set some inquiries in motion, based on what little Han had been able to tell them.

"No, I agree with you," Rieekan shook his head, smiling. "I had my disagreements with Kenobi's methods and judgement, but I don't think he was fool enough to walk into a port dive in Mos Eisley of all places and pick an Imperial undercover agent to fly him to Alderaan. And there's the little matter of Solo helping Skywalker blow up the Death Star. I've seen agents kill their own people to prove their loyalty before, but that's a bit excessive, even for a dedicated Imperial."

Leia rubbed her temples. "And there's me. Am I such a complete fool that I would bring an Imperial agent to base?"

"No."

"Then tell Degoran."

"I have, but we know how much he loves my opinions and he has too much support in the Council for me to just order him off this." Rieekan thought a moment. "Solo didn't know about his ship leaving so suddenly either?"

"No, when Luke told him he looked...." _Ill_, Leia thought. Worse than when they had found him in the empty command center in a spreading pool of his own blood. _Hysteria would have been easier to handle._ She had wanted to say something comforting but had known there was nothing she could say. "He didn't know." Degoran's suggestion that Chewbacca had taken the opportunity to steal the ship wasn't even worth considering. Han, who was practically clinically paranoid from what she could tell, hadn't thought it worth considering and she trusted his opinion of the Wookiee's loyalty far more than Degoran's. Besides, even on brief acquaintance, Chewbacca just hadn't struck her as that kind of person.

There was a bleep from the door and Rieekan reached up to tap the entry panel.

The door slid up, revealing Luke Skywalker, who hooked his thumbs in his belt and looked at Leia reproachfully.

Leia sighed, correctly interpreting that expression. "I can't do anything about Degoran, Luke; I'm not all-powerful."

"Come in, son, and have a seat," Rieekan said easily.

Luke stepped in and sat down on the opposite end of the console the terminal was mounted on. "General, you have to know this is all crazy. Han didn't have anything to do with the damage to the Kisardi."

"The truth is, Luke, you and Solo are the only ones among the newly arrived personnel that I am sure of," Rieekan said. "Kenobi was bringing you to Alderaan so you could contact the Alliance -- that's clear from your astromech droid's records. And Solo is here purely by accident."

"Then why is Colonel Degoran pushing this so hard?" Luke demanded.

Leia shook her head. "Internal Alliance politics. Degoran is a supporter of the faction in the Alliance High Command that opposed my father. You and Han came to the base with me, and he would love to discredit either one of you, to erode support for the Organa faction in the High Command." She hesitated a moment and added, "He's right about the sabotage being his area of expertise."

He was an investigator for the customs office of the Forsalis Port Authority before he joined the Alliance."

"Neither one of us can tell Degoran to back down, Luke," Rieekan said, watching him carefully. "It would just look as if we were covering for our mistake in allowing Solo on the base."

"Oh," Luke said. _Wedge was right,_ he thought. But somehow Degoran's former occupation sounded more of a potential threat when the princess described it. He wondered what it would mean to Han and suspected nothing good. "What about Chewbacca and the Falcon?"

Leia and Rieekan exchanged a look. "If the saboteurs used it to escape...." she began.

"Then Chewie's probably dead and no one will ever see the ship again," Luke finished. _Dammit_. He didn't want to think about what that would do to Han.

Reluctantly, Rieekan said, "It's a strong possibility."

The door beeped again, and Rieekan tapped the entry panel. It slid up, revealing a young woman with lieutenant's tabs on her jacket. Ria Vanrin, that was her name, Leia remembered. She said, "Hello, Ria. Am I wanted in control?"

"No, princess, I...." She smiled nervously and stepped in, then saw Luke and Rieekan and smiled even more nervously. "I have to talk to you."

"Yes?" Leia said encouragingly. Vanrin worked in the tactical area and was an expert with longrange sensors. She was tall and lovely, with dark hair almost as long as Leia's, now arranged into tight braids and wrapped in a coronet around her head. _I'll have to try that style,_ Leia thought. _Looks easier to manage without help_. She didn't want to have to cut her hair. An upper-class Alderaanian woman kept her hair as long as possible, and Leia didn't want to give that up, as if she was trying to forget her world had ever existed. But she didn't want to have to wander up and down a corridor every morning looking for somebody to help put the pins in the back where she couldn't reach, as she had before the medal ceremony on the base. So many little things had changed. It was the little things that caught you by surprise, that attenuated the pain of loss like so many needles in your flesh. She shook herself. Vanrin was still standing there, saying nothing. "Is something wrong?" Leia asked.

"I just heard...they were saying that Colonel Degoran thinks it was Captain Solo who was responsible for the sabotage on the Kisardi, that he did it last night after the celebration, before we evacuated. But he couldn't have. He was with me most of the time."

Leia brightened. She didn't notice Rieekan's sudden expression of amused enlightenment. She had known Han was no saboteur, but it was going to be much easier to prove it with a witness. "That's good news, Lieutenant," she said. "What were you doing?"

"Um," the young woman hesitated again. She looked at Rieekan, at Luke, then back to Leia. Her cheeks, under her olive brown complexion, were darkening with a blush. She said, "We were...uh. I was showing him the backup control room."

Leia noticed Luke's sudden expression of enlightenment, but she was certainly mystified. Perhaps this wasn't the ideal witness she had hoped for. Even going over all the systems in the control room wouldn't have taken long enough to account for Han's whereabouts for the entire window of opportunity. She frowned. "How long were you there together?"

"Pretty much the rest of the night, until I had to leave so I could pack my things before going to my duty station for the evacuation. About four hours, I think."

"But...." Leia didn't understand. "What were you doing all that time?"

The lieutenant bit her lip. "Well, we were just, you know, um...."

"Talking," Luke supplied helpfully. "About the battle, and the princess's escape, and everything, right?"

She looked grateful. "Yes, that's right."

"For four hours?" Leia asked skeptically. "And why didn't Captain Solo tell us--" Rieekan gently kicked her under the console and she frowned at him. Seeing his face, suffused with suppressed laughter, she finally got it. "Oh. Oh, I'm sorry, Lieutenant. Talking." _Leia, you idiot._ "I know you'll have to tell this to Colonel Degoran, but I'll be there and...we'll keep the detail to a minimum." She was blushing now, too, but so was the lieutenant, which somehow made it less embarrassing. "But after this," she added, "Please don't use the backup control areas for, uh, talking, no matter what the occasion."

"Yes, your highness. I won't, your highness. Thank you, your highness." Vanrin made her escape gratefully.

Luke got up to follow her. "I'll go tell Han his alibi came through." He was red too, but from suppressed laughter, as Rieekan was.

"Yes," Leia muttered as the door slid closed behind him. "Make sure he gets his story straight this time."

Rieekan shook his head, chuckling. "I just realized I'm old. I can't think what the attraction was in the backup control-- Wait a minute. The holotactical system has that big, flat imaging plate. Oh, I am old...."

Leia glared. "Well, he is Corellian."

"Now, that's hardly fair, Leia. It was a party, after all. If they were the only ones who spent the night that way, I'll kiss Degoran's big toe. And considering what everyone on the base has been through...."

"I know. That was terrible of me, I'm sorry." She rubbed her eyes. She had spent the night lying on a bunk in her quarters, staring at the rocky ceiling overhead, awash in a tidal wave of pain. Alderaan. The pain threatened to engulf her again, every time she closed her eyes. Rieekan felt that pain too, she knew. She could recognize it in the set of his mouth, the new lines of strain around his eyes. At least Rieekan still had his sense of humor. She was in great danger of losing hers, perhaps permanently. "Why didn't Han tell us? I didn't expect chivalry from him...."

Rieekan shrugged. "Not chivalry, exactly. He's only been involved with the Alliance a few days, and most of that he spent on the Death Star, in the firefight over Yavin, at the celebration, or unconscious. Not normal conditions, and not long enough to find out how we operate. What do you think an Imperial commander would do to a junior officer who spent half the night with a Corellian smuggler in a duty area?"

"You're right." Leia got to her feet. "I'd better go talk to him again. Are you coming?"

Rieekan shook his head. "I think you'll have better luck alone. He doesn't like officers."

"He doesn't like anybody." Moving to the door, she added, "Now that we've gotten rid of this smokescreen, maybe I can get enough information out of him to figure out who's really behind this."

"A smokescreen, Leia?" Rieekan said, eyeing her thoughtfully. "It was Colonel Degoran's suggestion."

"I know," she said, and stepped out of the cabin.

Now that Han was conscious the medtechs had more tests they wanted to run on him, scans of brain activity and nervous system function, to make sure his injury hadn't caused other damage. He put up with it, mainly because there was

nothing else to do and it was hard enough trying to battle despair without having to fight off a roomful of techs and droids along with it. Then the Two-One-Bee unit had tried to give him a painkiller that would have either knocked him unconscious or left him floating somewhere up around the ceiling. He had refused it. The Two-One-Bee had then recited several very good reasons why Han should take it. He had refused it again, and the droid had retreated across the medical bay in search of reinforcements.

Han sighed and rubbed his aching temples. He should make them give him the rest of his clothes back, try to think of a way out of this. Try to think how he had gotten into this. Somebody had been determined to get rid of him -- there had to be a reason for it. He would have sworn it had to be an old enemy, someone who was with the Rebels for his own reasons, but had recognized Han and Chewbacca when they had been paraded in front of the entire base at that damn ceremony, and had decided it was payback time. He would have said it had to be that, except for the damage to the transport. That suggested an Imperial agent, and an Imperial agent wouldn't jeopardize his mission just to get back at a Corellian ex-pirate and smuggler or his Wookiee partner.

He watched the male medtech approach, carrying the hypo. He was young, a stiff wet-behind-the-ears type. The man began, "Captain Solo--"

"No."

"But you--"

"No."

Han watched the man's eyes shift. The thought was as easy to read as if his skull was transparent. Han said, evenly, "Try it, and you'll need a painkiller more than I will."

The medtech took a hasty step back.

After that they left him alone.

He lay on the padded table, trying to figure a good time to slip out. There were always at least two organic techs on duty, besides the Two-One-bee and some other more specialized meddroids, and he was willing to bet there were at least two guards outside the door. The diagnostic comp that actually ran the bay probably had a high degree of sentience as well, and he didn't know enough about medical systems to put it into control mode without giving it time to set off alarms all over the ship. Medical bays could be harder to escape from than detention centers.

And then what? remained the big question. The Tantavie was in hyper. He was stuck here until it came out, whether he was locked up here or hiding somewhere else, he was still a prisoner.

And this was all assuming there was anybody or anything left to escape to....

Stop that, he told himself. Either Chewie needed help, or Chewie was following the fleet, waiting until they exited hyper for a chance to help Han. If he hadn't been able to follow the fleet through hyper, he would wait until the Imps got tired of searching the evacuated base on Yavin IV, then return there and wait for Han to find him. If Chewie was dead, killed by whoever had tried to kill him, Han would never see him or the ship again and there was no point in speculating on that.

The doors to the bay cycled open and Luke Skywalker stepped in. Han sat up, then cursed at what the abrupt change in orientation did to his headache. The male medtech with the attitude stopped Luke and spoke to him for a moment.

"What did he tell you?" Han asked as Luke walked up, not even trying to keep the suspicion out of his tone.

"He told me you were violent and unpredictable," Luke explained, grinning. "I told him I already knew that." He boosted himself up to sit on the opposite diagnostic bed.

"Thanks."

"What did I do?" Luke protested.

"You can walk in and out of here anytime you want."

"It's for your own safety, Han. You know that."

"No, I don't know that."

"What, you think somebody on the base ordered this, for some reason?"

"That's exactly what he thinks." Leia Organa walked into the bay and stood near the quiescent Two-One-Bee. "After Colonel Degoran's display I can't say I blame you. But you don't have to worry about him any more. Lieutenant Vanrin came forward and explained where you were."

Han looked blank. "Who?"

Leia closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose, apparently in the grip of strong irritation and trying not to show it. "Ria. Her family name is Vanrin."

"Oh." Han wasn't sure how to react to that. He made such a convenient scapegoat for them, he hadn't seriously considered the possibility that anybody would bother investigating the truth.

Leia continued, "We can't find anyone on the Tantavie who saw the Falcon leave, or noticed if anyone boarded or tried to board her before she lifted off. That's not surprising; we're mostly command staff and crew here. The bay personnel who would've seen what happened are all on the transports--"

Han swore. "Look, Princess, that ship is all I've got. My chances of ever raising the cash to get another one are less than zero. If I lose her, I'm garbage. Do you understand that?"

"Of course I understand that. I have no intention of letting that happen. You'll just have to trust us -- Oh, don't look at me like that." She paced in front of the diagnostic comp, thoughtfully tapping her chin. "I suspect we're dealing with at least two saboteurs. One took the Falcon while the other tried to kill you. It's possible the plan was to make us think the Falcon had simply left with both you and Chewbacca aboard."

"That's right," Luke said. He was practically radiating enthusiasm. "The tech who found you only went back to the Command Center because she thought she'd left some tools behind. If she hadn't--"

"Yeah, I'd be dead now, I got that part." Han was getting a much clearer picture of what had happened. The darkened Command Center, the empty corridors. _That's why they had to take the Falcon, to get Chewie out of the way, make it look like we left on our own._ They had never meant for the rebels to find his body. They hadn't known he was about to disappear voluntarily, leaving them with a free field to do whatever they were with the Alliance to do. Han realized he had a white-knuckled grip on the life-support table and made his fingers relax. It didn't bode well for Chewbacca's present health; they had no reason to keep the Wookiee alive. And he couldn't do a damn thing about it. "Why do you think there are two of them?"

Leia was still pacing. "At least two. There might be more. If they thought you could expose them, the smartest thing to do would have been to steal a ship and run. In the confusion of the evacuation, this wouldn't have been difficult. Instead they took a risk trying to kill you and make it look as though you and Chewbacca had left of your own accord."

"They don't want to abandon their mission," Luke said.

"Exactly. One of them must have left with the Falcon, but I'm willing to bet that at least one of them is on this ship now." She stopped and turned to face the Corellian. "You must know who it is, Han."

Han rolled onto his back and covered his eyes with his arm. His head hurt too badly to go through this again. "I don't know who hit me. I didn't touch the motherless transport. If I knew anything, I'd tell you." _I should've known she was just here to interrogate me again_....

"Han, listen to me." He heard her steps come closer, sensed her nearness when she leaned on the padded table. "These saboteurs only hit the one transport. The goal couldn't have been to slow or stop the evacuation, or they would have done far more damage than that. They must have meant to engage in a long-term, subtle series of sabotages, then flee with all the information they had gathered. So why attack you? No one knew that we had uncovered the tampering on the Kisardi except Rieekan, myself, and the transport's Captain, so the agents couldn't know yet that their presence had been discovered. The only reason to attack you is if they thought you were a danger to them. They think you know who at least one of them is, even if you think you don't."

Surprised, Han thought, _she's right._ He moved his arm so he could see her. He said, "But I didn't recognize anybody."

"But he recognized you," Leia persisted. "Have you come into contact with any Imperials recently? Customs agents, port personnel?"

This could be just another more subtle form of interrogation, but somehow Han didn't think so. He sat up on his elbows and said grudgingly, "Yes, but...even if I saw him when he was in uniform, I'd still recognize him in civilian gear, even if he kept in the background. I keep an eye out for people like that."

Leia didn't look convinced, but Luke said, "The problem is, even if you could recognize one of them, that's the one who probably took the Falcon."

Han's head hurt too much for this. "Kid, this would be a little easier if you weren't enjoying yourself so much."

"Sorry." Luke didn't sound sorry. "Maybe we could come at this from another angle. Try to find out if there were any other incidents, and pinpoint when they started."

"The clamps on the simulator," Han said suddenly, thinking of Wedge saying _I'd like to kill whoever did this._ "There was no good reason for that."

"They were melted. That's right." Luke frowned. "But that must have been done recently. It only makes sense as sabotage if whoever it was knew we were going to evacuate."

Han swore under his breath. They weren't going to get anywhere like this. "Look, if you really think one of them is still onboard, you've got to get him to make a move."

Leia nodded. "Go on."

"So take the guards off those doors. Give him a clear shot at me."

"Use you as bait?" Leia shook her head impatiently. "That's absurd."

"Why?"

"What if he kills you? You're certainly in no shape to defend yourself at the moment."

Han slumped back on the table and rubbed his pounding temples. _What the hell is wrong with her?_ Han couldn't see anything against the plan. If Chewbacca and the ship were gone, he didn't have anything else better to do except help them catch their hypothetical saboteur. What did it matter if he died in the process?

The Princess stepped back up to the table, watching him worriedly. "You look terrible. Didn't they give you anything for the pain?"

"No."

She started to turn away, to call the medtech, and he caught her arm. "They didn't give me anything because I wouldn't let them. Just leave it alone, all right?"

"Why didn't--"

"Leia, I don't want to be unconscious." He didn't want to be here at all. It was getting really hard not to just let go. To fall in with the illusion that he trusted them, that they gave a damn about what happened to him, and that everything was going to be all right. It was one thing to be swept up in that kind of temporary camaraderie when they were in danger and they needed him and his ship to help get them out of it, but he knew how things changed once danger was past.

"Han...." The princess looked genuinely puzzled, then impatient. "If you would just relax and let us take care of you--"

Even now, when the back of Han's head felt like it was going to explode, all part of his mind could think about was how much he liked it when she said his name. This annoyed him so much he actually blurted out what he was thinking. "Why should you do that? You don't even need me anymore."

Leia's expression was incredulous. "You and Luke and Chewbacca rescued me from the Death Star. If you hadn't come back and blown up those TIE Fighters, every person on this fleet would be--"

"That was two days ago. What have I done for you lately?"

"Three days ago, Yavin Standard," Leia said. It came out sounding cold, which was usually how she sounded when she didn't know what to say. _He's serious,_ she thought. She took his hand. "You can't help yourself or us until you recover. That would happen more quickly if you let the techs give you the proper medication."

"Why bother to act like I've got a choice? If you want me to have it just give the order. I know if I fight them I'll get put into restraints," Han said. It wasn't really being unconscious that he was afraid of; he had had the old training to resist interrogation drugs and mindprobes, but that was years ago, and painkillers tended to make him loopy. He didn't want to wake up and find out he had told someone his whole life story just before passing out.

Leia didn't answer. Han looked and sounded furious, but she knew it was mostly fear. She just didn't know what to do about it.

Luke was watching him worriedly. He said, "Han, if you don't want the medication, nobody's going to give it to you, I can promise you that. But if Leia thinks you ought to take it--"

Han looked away. Somehow Luke saying that was even harder to handle, because at some gut-instinct level, Han believed him, and instinctive trust just didn't fit into his life anywhere. But if Chewbacca was dead and the Falcon was history, he didn't have a life, so it hardly mattered anyway. "Fine, I'll take it, just leave me the hell alone."

end part 1

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