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Trying Again

Part 2

by [Martha Wilson](#)

In the dingy, narrow corridor outside the medical bay, Leia shook her head in amazement. "He really doesn't trust us."

"He wants to," Luke said. "He's just...scared." It had occurred to him that someone who frequented places like Mos Eisley couldn't afford to make friends quickly. And for all Han had risked to help them destroy the Death Star, it had apparently never occurred to him that they might want to reciprocate. In a lot of ways, Han's attitude was reminding Luke of a pet chela that Biggs Darklighter had had once a long time ago. It had been half-wild to start with, and abused by a former owner, and it had taken long months of gentle treatment and coaxing before it had learned it could safely keep its claws sheathed around the Darklighter household. He didn't think Han would be the least amused by the analogy so he intended to keep it to himself.

"Then why do we think we can trust him?" Leia demanded.

"Because he keeps saving our lives?" Luke shrugged. Everything else aside, no matter how defensive, irritable, and deliberately hard to get along with Han could be, Luke knew he could trust him. "If we could get the Falcon back--"

"We can't do anything about the Falcon until we reach the rendezvous point," Leia said. "Even then it may be too late for Chewbacca..."

"But we don't know that," Luke persisted.

"No, we don't." Leia shook her head in exasperation. "We have to find out who this agent is before we come out of hyper."

"Why?" Luke asked. "I thought you said his plan was to stay with us and keep up the sabotage?"

"His original plan. He's panicked, now. He knows Han is still alive, and we could discover the agent's identity any minute." Leia shook her head. "There was a lot of confusion in that hanger bay, and there were several small ships that were unguarded, and much easier to steal than a Corellian freighter guarded by a Wookiee. The only reason to take the Falcon was to hide the attack on Han, and the only reason to hide the attack on Han was to keep their presence a secret longer, so at least one of them could accompany the evacuation. One possible reason to accompany the evacuation--"

"Is to transmit our position to the nearest Imperial patrol," Luke said, suddenly feeling a sinking sensation.

"Yes. Now I didn't want to sound too optimistic when I'm not sure--"

Optimistic? Luke thought. To him it sounded like they were in deep trouble.

--But I had all the ships do an internal scan before we left the Yavin system, and there aren't any unauthorized com devices onboard capable of enough output for hyperwave transmission. I also ordered all the com equipment to be closely guarded, but I don't think our agent is going to try to use it. There's another com setup he could use to transmit our position, and he already has his hands on it."

"The Falcon."

"Exactly. I think the Falcon is following us through hyper. If she was in the outsystem she could have picked up our signal traces and followed us without our sensors picking her up. Which means she'll arrive at the rendezvous point shortly after we do, and we'll have a real chance of retaking her."

Luke had time to notice that for all Leia had the safety of the entire Alliance fleet on her shoulders, she was still managing to devote part of her attention to getting the Falcon back.

"Of course, none of this plan requires them to keep Chewbacca alive." She bit her lip. "I'm afraid there's nothing we can do for him."

Chewbacca heard the intruders search the ship for him again. It would have been a good time to take them, if he could have moved.

While the attackers had been occupied in lifting off from the rebel base, Chewbacca had used almost the last of his strength to drag himself to this hiding place, in the smuggling compartments below the deck plates in the companionway. He had been lucky; if they had shot him while he was in the lounge area or coming up from the hold, he would not have been able to conceal himself before they returned to space what they thought was his inert body.

The blaster bolt had taken him in the right side and he could no longer use that arm. He had no weapons, and he was lucky they were human and mostly nose-dead, otherwise they would have been able to track him to his hiding place by the smell of his cauterized flesh and singed fur.

He heard footsteps overhead again, as one of the intruders walked over the compartment. Chewbacca barred his teeth unconsciously. He hurt, he hurt a lot. But it was better than being dead.

He wished he knew what had happened, or had some idea of where Han was, if his partner had been left back with the Rebels, or if he was dead or injured too somewhere. Chewbacca could tell Han wasn't a prisoner aboard the Falcon and that was the only thing he knew for certain. He didn't even know who these interlopers were; he could tell they were both humans, that was all. He had heard them having an argument earlier, over the problem they were having with one of the onboard computers, Tactical/Backup. Chewie had grinned to himself. That computer had a high degree of sentience for its model and was one of Han's particular pets; he expected it to give them a lot more trouble before it was through. He hadn't recognized their voices, but one of them had a familiar scent. Not recent familiar, and not friend familiar, but enemy familiar. He couldn't remember who that scent belonged to, but maybe that was because his thoughts were fuzzy from the pain.

A pragmatist at heart, Chewbacca didn't expect to be able to retake the ship. His injury was getting worse, not better, but he didn't mean to simply die in hiding without at least trying to take some enemies with him. He would wait until the Falcon exited hyperspace before he acted. That was if the Falcon managed to successfully exit hyper; if the fools annoyed Tactical/Backup too much it was perfectly capable of interfering with the Nav computer at the wrong moment and sending the ship spiraling off into nothingness. But if Han still lived the ship's exit from hyperspace would be the first opportunity he would have to retake her. If Han still lived.

If he didn't, Chewbacca would just have to pay the life debts for both of them.

After spending the past few hours exhausting every other possibility, Leia found herself seriously considering Han's plan. The main point in favor of it was that the only people besides herself who knew they suspected the agent was aboard the *Tantavie* were Han, Luke, Rieekan, and the two men who had been helping Luke guard the medical bay, one of whom was a younger cousin of Rieekan's and the other was Wedge Antilles. The rest of the ship's complement who knew about the saboteurs had assumed they had escaped.

Before the fleet had left the Yavin system, Leia had tried to have the individual transports and cruisers check for missing personnel, but there had evidently been a great number of people switching boarding assignments at the last minute, and there was no time before the fleet had gone to hyper to make certain everyone was where they were supposed to be. There was no intra-ship communication in hyper, so they couldn't check on it now. One of the opportunities she had explored was checking the *Tantavie* for unauthorized personnel, only to discover there was a large number of them, most with perfectly valid reasons for switching at the last moment, and a number of people who were supposed to be aboard the *Tantavie* were on other ships, probably also with valid excuses. *Imperial discipline has its uses,* Leia had reflected, taking a moment to rest her forehead against the cool metal of the terminal she was using.

General Rieekan had chosen this moment to step into the cabin where she was working, a crowded cubby just off the lower command deck. "I take it you're not sitting there with your head down on the console in triumph at solving our mystery?"

"No." Leia sat up and pushed a few stray strands of hair back. "Has Degoran gotten anywhere?" Leia hadn't shared her theories with the Colonel; she didn't honestly think he was an Imperial spy, but she didn't trust his methods or his discretion, and she didn't trust him not use this as some sort of power play against Rieekan.

"Not that he's told me." Rieekan leaned in the hatchway. He looked tired too, Leia noticed. She wondered how long it had been since he had had any sleep. *Since he heard about Alderaan, probably.* He had been on his way to Yavin when it had happened, she had found out. With him had been a few other lucky members of his staff, including Madine, the young Corellian General who had been their liaison from that world, before the Imperial crackdown had forced it out of the Alliance. Now Rieekan shook his head wearily, and said, "His pet theory was that Solo had something to do with it; now that he's had to give that up I don't think he's got much to go on. He has turned up evidence that three past 'malfunctions' of vital equipment were actually deliberate sabotage, but he doesn't have any suspects. Well, that's not quite true. He has dozens of suspects, probably including you and me, but no evidence against any of them."

"When was the first malfunction?" Leia asked, remembering what Luke had said about trying to backdate the sabotage.

"Three days before we left Yavin. Why?"

Not much help. Her review of the records showed there had been an influx of personnel on the Yavin base at that time, from other Alliance installations. "It means he can't suspect you or anyone who came in with you on the Freedom, since you didn't arrive until right before we left."

"I know." Rieekan smiled wryly. "I pointed that out to him. Now we have about five hundred other people to clear on the Tantavie and we'll be getting somewhere."

"I may have something in mind," Leia admitted. That was when she had seriously started to consider Han's idea.

The advantage to all this personnel confusion was that the agent probably felt relatively secure. He might even believe that if he did manage to eliminate Han, he could notify his companions on the Falcon, and they could abandon the stolen ship and rejoin the Rebels at the first opportunity, to resume their mission.

And if Leia knew Imperial discipline, and how little Imperial officers appreciated failure, resuming that mission would be very important to them.

It could work, she thought, later, heading down the corridor to the medical section. It would be dangerous, especially for Han, but it could work. Catching the agent still onboard could help them locate the Millennium Falcon, and at least they could find out what had happened to Chewbacca, if he was beyond help as she feared. Of course, she was going to have to convince Han to do it her way. Never an easy task, she was beginning to realize, when dealing with Han Solo.

Han shifted restlessly in his seat, watching Colonel Degoran listen to Princess Leia outline the plan. The Colonel's expression was becoming increasingly skeptical.

They were in an old officers' briefing area, above the second level of the Tantavie's bridge. There was still a long conference table and a curving transparisteel port, shielded now against the void of hyperspace, but the dramatic effect was ruined by the pressure barrels and heavy equipment the maintenance section was storing here. Degoran was there, with an aide who looked to be just as big a bastard as his boss. Leia hadn't brought anyone to back her up, unless you counted Han, who knew his opinion didn't amount to much. Wedge Antilles,

Luke Skywalker, and the other Alliance pilot who had guarded the sick bay while Han was there were waiting outside.

Han had woken from the last batch of anesthetics with his headache almost completely gone; of course, his earlier bout of arguing with the princess had brought it back. She had decided to let him act as decoy for the saboteur who might still be on the Tantavie, as he had wanted to in the first place, but she had added the condition that he had to be trailed by two bodyguards.

"I don't need guards," Han had objected when she had told him about it back in the sick bay. "I can take care of this myself."

Leia had let out her breath in exasperation. "You do need the guards. You were almost killed by these people once already."

Fuming, Han had given in because he didn't have any other choice, but he was sure this wasn't going to work. It did, at least, get him his blaster back. With that and a borrowed shirt to replace the one covered with bloodstains, he felt less like a reject from a downport morgue.

Degoran wasn't happy with Leia's decision, either. He said, "This is a waste of time, Princess. We should put our resources into other avenues of investigation." The Colonel threw Han an enigmatic look, and Han knew the bastard still wished he could blame all this on him.

The Princess's eyes were steely. "If you can demonstrate to me that this is a waste of time, I wish you would. I don't know of a way to prove that the saboteur is on board except to find him."

Degoran smiled. "Do you expect me to go along with this simply because of your privileged position as an Organa?"

"I'm expecting you to go along with it because it's a chance, and we need all the chances we can get." Leia smiled too, and gestured gracefully. "Unless your own political agenda dictates that you resist me at any cost, no matter how detrimental to the Alliance in the long run."

Degoran's mouth twisted. "I'm not altering the course of my investigation, princess."

"No one has asked you to."

Degoran's eyes hardened. He didn't like to lose. He got to his feet. "I'll keep you informed if I uncover anything."

As the doors cycled closed behind the Colonel and his aide, Leia muttered, "You do that."

Han stood, kicked his chair back out of the way, and paced restlessly in front of the viewport. "It's not gonna work. This ship isn't that big, and this guy would have to be an idiot not to notice."

"This ship is overcrowded and he won't be able to tell if anyone is following you or not. Besides, both Wedge Antilles and Ren Nicol have done Intelligence work before," Leia said. She got to her feet, glaring at him. Arguing with Han made her feel like she needed a club, or maybe a chair to stand on. "And it's the way we're going to do it, so get used to it."

Han stopped pacing and rubbed his temples. They had lost so much time already. _What if Chewie's time ran out while we were arguing about this? _ He said, grudgingly, "Well, Degoran hated the idea, too, which is one point in its favor."

Leia shook her head, smiling ruefully. "I didn't want to discuss this with Colonel Degoran at all, but Rieekan felt it would cause trouble if I didn't, and I suppose he was right."

Han looked at her. He kept forgetting how tiny she was; standing next to the conference table, which had been sized to comfortably accommodate large mainstream humans, she looked like a child, but she had enough force of personality for four or five people. He said, "You don't trust Degoran."

Leia let out her breath and looked tired. She had dark circles under her eyes, and Han found himself wondering how long it had been since she had gotten any sleep. _Since before Alderaan was destroyed?_ She said, "I trust him -- to an extent."

Great, Han thought. It wasn't hard to see Degoran still had it in for him. The Colonel hadn't liked being proved wrong in his suspicions. But the rebels needed Han to find their saboteur, and that was reassuring. That was temporary security, anyway. What he needed to do was keep a low profile until the plan worked. Except whenever he decided to keep a low profile something drastic usually happened.

Leia was watching him seriously. She said, "Han, however this turns out, I hope you know that you have a place here, with the Alliance. We could use your help."

Han looked away, before his expression could betray him. He knew she meant well, and he needed her help if he was ever going to have any chance of finding Chewbacca or the Falcon, but right now he would rather have chewed his own arm off than stayed with the Alliance. He said, "Yeah, thanks."

Being trailed everywhere was better than being locked up in the medical bay and going slowly crazy; at least Han was free to wander this Clone Wars reject rustbucket while going slowly crazy.

Leia had given him a tour of the ship, making sure everyone saw him without being too obvious about it, and making sure everyone knew that the man the saboteurs had tried to kill on the Yavin base was still alive. Antilles and Nicol had been pretty good at trailing them. Han had only spotted them a couple of times, and he knew where to look.

Now Han leaned on the railing overlooking the command bridge, the princess standing next to him. There were two levels of stations and consoles that he could see, a holotactical tank, some large sensor screens and a vast transparisteel viewport covering most of the curving bulkhead. It was dimmed now that there was nothing to see except hyperspace. The crew working down there were all dressed in fatigues or coveralls, with only the few officers in uniform. The people whose stations weren't active at the moment were talking amiably, as casual as if this was a merchant ship and not a military vessel.

"So what do you think of the Tantavie?" The Princess asked, in apparent innocence.

Han recognized a loaded question when he heard one. What he thought was that somebody should have wiped the computers, taken down the name plaque, and sent her on a slow spiral into a system primary, instead of giving a ship this old a refit. Or maybe the rebels were going to follow a barbaric and boneheaded old Corellian tradition and let a respected but decrepit ship die honorably in battle, taking its crew and as many enemies with it as possible. He said, "Stop trying to cheer me up."

Leia glanced briefly upwards in annoyance. She had been trying to give him the opportunity to get back at her for her unkind remarks about the Falcon when they had been escaping from the Death Star. Trust Han to be too contrary even to take the advantage when it was offered. She said musingly, "I wonder what the name Tantavie means, anyway?"

"It's Mithadasi for 'My Hull is about to breach,'" Han said, dead-pan.

Leia smiled wryly in acknowledgement. "So you noticed that?"

"Uh, yeah." The Falcon had a lot of problems but at least her hull was intact. _That is, I hope it still is,_ Han amended. Corellian starshipwrights always decommissioned ships with hull breaches, no matter how likely the possibilities of repair. This was mainly because they had reputations to protect and a hull that

had been ruptured was just never going to be as strong as a whole structure. It was only partly because of a very old belief that a break in the hull let a ship's soul out.

"It was approved by Engineering," Leia found herself saying. She added defensively, "They said it's not as bad as it looks."

"It couldn't be worse."

_Well, you wanted to let him needle you to cheer him up, _ Leia reminded herself. Except he didn't sound all that cheery; there was an undercurrent of bitterness in his voice that she didn't like. She said, "It gives the starboard side a seasoned look. At least that's what the firm that sold it to us said."

He actually smiled at that, if briefly. He had a nice smile, Leia decided. Especially when he wasn't trying to be irritating. Then she saw him glance at something behind her and immediately his face took on that tight, closed, wary expression again. She followed his gaze, half-expecting to see Degoran approaching, but instead it was only Rieekan. The General walked up to the railing, nodded to Leia, but spoke to Han, "A moment of your time, Solo."

Han reluctantly followed him to the back of the gallery. He found himself doing a quick mental review of everything he had said or done since being dragged aboard the *Tantavie*, wondering what they were after him for now.

Once they were out of earshot, Rieekan hesitated a moment, then said, "If this doesn't work out, I know the Princess has told you that you're welcome to stay, but I wanted to make sure you knew that no one would try to stop you from leaving, either." Rieekan looked out at the vast viewport, even though it was still dimmed to a uniform gray. "We're going to send couriers out not long after we rendezvous. Anywhere you need to go, we can probably get you there, including most of the major ports in the commercial centers."

Han just stared at him for a moment. He had been so busy formulating possible excuses and defenses that this threw him completely. He realized he needed to say something, and managed, "I'll keep it in mind."

Rieekan nodded, his expression serious, and walked on toward the command stations on the other side of the gallery.

Han moved back to where Leia was waiting at the railing. He ignored her questioning expression and said, "We need to split up; this agent knows he can get to me now, but he's not going to make a move with you around."

"Right." She nodded, thinking _I'll get it out of Rieekan, whatever it was._ As Han walked away, Leia found herself pausing to admire the view. She realized

abruptly what she was doing and blushed. _Damn, I must be more exhausted than I thought; I keep getting...distracted._ Hoping no one had noticed, she went over to where Rieekan was standing at the tactical station and asked suspiciously, "What did you say to him?"

The general looked down at her thoughtfully. "That if this plan for flushing the saboteur didn't work out, we could give him a ride to whatever port he wanted."

"Hmm."

Rieekan's mouth quirked. He added, "It's our fault this happened, after all. If our security wasn't in shambles they would never have been able to take Solo's ship out from under our noses."

Leia bit her lip, thinking. She lowered her voice carefully and said, "You've had a chance to get up to speed on our current situation; what's your opinion?"

"Dodonna was running Yavin like it was a damn tea party," Rieekan said, keeping his voice pitched for her ears alone but not bothering to disguise the irritation in it.

She nodded. General Dodonna was a scholar and a historian, but for all his dedication to the goals of the Alliance, he was no military man. He had taken on the command of the Yavin base at Bail Organa's urging, because Bail had wanted a supporter he could trust in the position. Leia thought her father had done Dodonna and the rebellion no service by insisting on it. "You see why I wanted you there." Bail Organa had thought Rieekan too independent, which Leia knew meant that Rieekan hadn't been afraid to argue with Bail when he thought the Senator was wrong. He was the most experienced military officer in the Alliance and Leia had absolute confidence in his judgement.

Rieekan shook his head, resigned to the enormity of the job he had taken on. "I'll need your help, Leia. The experienced personnel are spread too thin."

Leia looked down at the crew at their consoles on the level below. Before Alderaan, before she had even boarded Captain Antilles's ill-fated blockade runner, she had known her days as a senator were over. This was where she wanted to be, on the front line, not moving behind the scenes. "I'm not going anywhere."

The Tantavie was only a single timepart from its scheduled exit from hyper, and so far the saboteur hadn't fallen for their plan.

Han cornered Leia in the officer's quarters, where she had commandeered a space about the size of a tool locker as an office. She had been holed up there in the cramped cubby, going over the results of Degoran's investigation and her own inquiries, neither of which had turned up anything definite. "This isn't going to work," he told her. "There's always too many people around. You've got to let me do it alone."

Leia shook her head, her expression adamant. "That's too dangerous."

Han swore under his breath. Who asked you to care, lady? It was none of her business if he got himself killed. "We're running out of time."

"I'm well aware of that, thank you," Leia snapped.

"So let me do it my way."

"And when you're dead and we have no hope of finding this person at all--"

"You'll be no worse off than you are now!"

The princess rubbed her temples and went through a variety of facial contortions, by which Han understood that she had a headache and he was making it worse. Finally she said, "All right. I'll tell Wedge and Nicol to back off. But keep Luke with you."

Han opened his mouth to object, then realized that while the two other rebel pilots would do whatever Leia told them to, up to and including diving naked out of an airlock, that Luke had yet to be brainwashed into abject obedience and that it was likely he could talk him into anything that sounded even vaguely like it would work. He said, "Okay."

Leia looked startled at his sudden acquiescence, then suspicious, but Han bolted out of the compartment before she could change her mind.

The Tantavie's hangar bay was huge, crammed with racks of fighters, several different types of shuttles, and even a couple of Gell-class couriers. There were bays and work areas built into the bulkheads and suspended overhead on the gantries and catwalks. It was crowded, labyrinthine, and not well lit in spots. It was the perfect place for a shipboard murder; it was certainly the place Han would have chosen, if he had wanted to get rid of somebody.

Luke had found a maintenance bay with some free floor space, its ceiling open to the upper level of the main bay overhead, and borrowed a sensor remote to practice his light sabre techniques. Han was sitting on a pressurized barrel

watching. Anyone who had been paying attention would know they were down here, and in the offshift the hangar was almost deserted. They both had comlinks they could call for help on, and Antilles and Nicol were only one deck up, waiting for the signal.

Luke blocked a quick burst from the remote, and watched it as it circled him. The astromech droid Artoo-Detoo was controlling the remote, and showing both a sense of humor and a lack of mercy that Han wouldn't have expected from a mechanical, or at least not one with that low a designation. They had been at this a while and Luke was getting winded; the droid was a lot rougher with the remote than old Ben Kenobi had been. Han privately thought the droid probably had more concern for Luke's future safety than Kenobi had had, but that was just his opinion. He could tell Luke was already starting to improve his performance from when he had practiced on the Falcon. Luke blocked another flurry of bursts, then at the next lull said, "Take a break, Artoo." The remote dropped to hover a few inches above the deck, and Luke leaned against a stanchion wearily. "I thought it was against your programming to try to kill me."

The droid chirped happily, apparently of the opinion it was doing its job pretty damn well.

Luke looked at Han. "What do you think?"

As far as Han could tell, the old weapon had all the disadvantages of a vibroblade, without being as easy to conceal. He said, "You got to be careful holding it like you've been."

"What do you mean?"

"Practicing with the remote is one thing, but it's different when you're fighting organics. If you hold it too far away from your body, somebody could reach under your arm and knock it out of your hand, or worse, turn it back on you." Han shook his head. "That's the problem with a shortrange weapon like that. It'll only keep people at a distance if they're afraid of it, and if you get in a fight with some crazy son of a bitch, he's probably not going to be as afraid of it as you think."

"Yeah, that's true." Having learned everything he knew about unarmed combat by rolling around on the primary school's recess room floor trying to beat Deak's head in, Luke knew he needed more serious lessons, and he was willing to bet Han knew dirty fighting tricks that nobody in Anchorhead had ever heard of before. He said, "Hey, will you help me learn more about hand-to-hand fighting? If I'm ever going to be any good with the sabre I've got to get better at that."

"Why not?" Han leaned back against the bulkhead and stretched to ease the tension in his shoulders, and give himself something to do besides sit there and look bleak. Luke's question had brought home the fact that he didn't have much

else to do with his time if this didn't work. What the hell did it matter what he did, if he had lost his partner and his ship? "It's not like I have a lot of previous engagements."

Luke watched him unhappily. Han was good at concealing his feelings, but Luke was beginning to know him well enough to read the subtle signs. "How long have you known Chewie?" he asked.

__At least the kid isn't talking about him in the past tense,__ Han thought. He said, "Years. I don't know, I haven't been keeping track."

"Leia thinks there's a real chance of getting the Falcon back."

Han looked away. Sure she did. While they needed his help to catch their saboteurs, he was sure everybody would be terribly enthusiastic about the chances of getting the Falcon back. After the saboteur was caught however, he was also sure those plans would tend to fall by the wayside. It didn't change anything right now. His only line on what had happened to Chewie was the agent Leia believed was still on the Tantavie; he had to stay until whoever-it-was was caught. Dead or not, Han had to find his partner.

There were a lot of reasons why shipjackers might have kept Chewbacca alive. Wookiees were valuable as slave labor, and since on most of the inner worlds they weren't considered fully sentient, there was quite a market in their pelts, too. Imperials agents out for career advancement rather than profit probably wouldn't have bothered, but Han had to either find proof Chewie was dead or find out where he had been taken.

And if Chewie was dead, there were a whole host of Wookiee deities and ancestors all expecting Han to avenge him. For once, he meant to do what was expected. He shook it off; sitting here thinking about it didn't do him any good. He asked Luke, "So are you in this until it's over?"

"In the Alliance?" Luke asked. He had signalled Artoo to start the remote again, and was trying to deflect the blasts while keeping the sabre closer to his body. He ducked the remote's feint at his head and watched it come around for another try. "Yeah. Yeah, I think I am."

Reluctantly, he added, "Besides, it's not like I have anything to go home to. A blasted-out farm that I never wanted in the first place."

Imagining himself on Tatooine, trying to work that ruined homestead, with no credits to hire help or buy droids, alone with his thoughts and his dead, was a nightmare he really didn't want to contemplate. Even with Owen and Beru there, he had always hated the loneliness of the place. He blocked two blasts, then signalled Artoo to stop the remote and straightened up, wiping the sweat off his

forehead. "I don't know. I keep wondering about my uncle, what he'd think about me just leaving like that. He put so many years into that land, and now it's all for nothing."

Han knew what he would think, if he was that dead farmer. "Maybe he'd be glad you were alive, and hope you'd get some of the bastards who got him."

Luke smiled, a little. Owen had never liked giving in, to the Sandpeople, to boundary disputes with neighbors, to the Imperial tax collectors, to Tatooine's brutal climate. "Maybe. It doesn't matter, I can't go back now. Maybe I just feel guilty because this way is easier on me. If I was there, I'd just think about them all the time. Since we got here, I've barely had a chance to think about anything. And I would never have known what happened to Biggs, never know that he wasn't coming back."

Han let his gaze wander over the upper level of the hangar, the walkways and racks, the equipment suspended overhead. This conversation was reminding him of things he didn't usually let himself think about. He said, "It gets easier."

Luke hesitated, watching Han's expression, wanting to ask, not wanting to ruin the very fragile bonds of friendship that were growing between them. _No, better not,_ he thought. He said instead, "Yeah, at least I could go back if I wanted to. Not like Alderaan."

Han suppressed a wince. Nothing was like Alderaan. Then on one of the catwalks overlooking the maintenance bay, he suddenly caught a flicker of movement. Someone had been up there watching them, someone male, human, too far away for Han to get a good look, but by body language and height he could tell it was neither Antilles nor the other guard checking up on them.

Luke had captured the remote and was disarming it. "Do you want to try going back to the upper decks for a while, or should we stay down here? It might look suspicious if we hang around in one place too long but--"

"Why don't you go on ahead," Han said.

Luke looked up, his expression suddenly arrested. He half- turned to look up at the catwalk where Han had spotted the watcher, then caught himself. He said, "Yeah, okay."

Han watched as Luke, trying to look casual and mostly succeeding, wandered away with the chirping droid trailing him, apparently heading back toward the hangar entrance, hidden past rows of equipment and specialized docking apparatus. But not too far away, Han was willing to bet; Luke had known that Han had seen something, simply from the tone of his voice. Whether it was

hypersensitive intuition or the kid really did have the Force, like Kenobi had said, Han wasn't willing to guess.

Han hopped down off the barrel and headed toward the main hangar floor and the rows of shuttles, not bothering to look casual. There had been some techs in here earlier, working in one of the other bays, but he couldn't hear their voices anymore. The hangar was a good place for this. There were hundreds of places to hide, and it would be easy to fake an accident. If the agent planned to bother with concealing his actions, and wasn't simply going to kill Han and escape.

Han wove his way between two shuttles, glancing back to make sure he wasn't visible from the walkways above the loading area, then ducked down and rolled under an empty docking clamp.

In a few seconds he heard footsteps. From the concealment of the shadows under the massive clamp, Han watched the man approach. He was young, mainstream human, nondescript. *_No, I've never seen him before,* Han thought, frustrated. That mystery would have to stay unsolved a little longer. His face had that open, guileless expression that in Han's experience so often meant trouble; he was sure he would have remembered him if he had seen him before. *_Especially if he was wearing an Imperial uniform._* Right now he was wearing the same brown fatigues as half the crew on the *Tantavie*. The name plate on the jacket read *_Gantre._*

He walked past Han's position without noticing the more solid shadow under the clamp, craning his neck to try to see past the equipment blocking the view ahead. Han let him get a few steps away, then rolled back out from under the clamp and to his feet. He said, "Looking for something?"

Gantre spun, half reaching into his open uniform jacket before he could stop himself. So he was armed, and now Han knew where it was. It was also all the confirmation he needed. A crewman wouldn't reach for a weapon on his own ship, not just because somebody called out to him. *_Even I'm not that paranoid,* Han thought.

"What are you doing here?" Gantre asked. His eyes went from Han to the passage behind him, to the catwalks overhead and the looming shuttles screening them from view.

"Aren't you looking for me?" Han countered. Taking him out wasn't enough; there were too many questions Han needed answers to and he was only going to get them if this man admitted what he was. He took a step forward, not too fast.

"I don't know what you mean," Gantre said, shaking his head and smiling, sounding so casual and normal Han might have doubted his instinct, except for

that spasmodic reach for a concealed weapon the man had made. And the fact that if he was really innocent, he would be walking away by now.

"That's funny," Han said, "'Cause I could've sworn you were looking for me. Or maybe it was one of your buddies."

Gantre's face tensed. All the man had to do to get out of this was to look baffled and walk, considering the only evidence Han had was that Gantre had followed him down here. But if he was the agent then he had to be under pressure to complete his mission and get out of here, and it would be hard to pass up this chance. It would also unnerve him, thinking Han knew for certain who he was. A very good agent might take the chance, walk away and hope for a clearer shot at his target later.

Instead of walking, Gantre said, "What buddies?"

Han took a step closer. If he went for his blaster, Gantre would just stop talking and they would be right back where they started. He wanted to give the guy a real chance at him. "The ones back at Yavin base." He saw Gantre's eyes narrow in speculation. Han continued, "My partner wouldn't have been too suspicious of the rebs -- they'd just given him a damn medal, after all -- but he's real fast, so I think there must have been two of them, to get the drop on him. One to distract him, say there was a message from me or liftoff instructions from the deck officer, one to shoot him." Han took another casual step forward.

Gantre said, "Stop right there."

Han stopped. Over Gantre's head, on the top deck of a lifter platform designed to service the tall shuttles, Han saw a flicker of movement, just the edge of a gray Alliance uniform jacket. If he was lucky, it was Luke or Antilles or somebody who could be a reliable witness; if not, he was screwed. _But you're screwed anyway, so what the hell_, Han told himself. He asked, "So am I right?"

"No games, Solo," Gantre said suddenly. His face had hardened, and he didn't look so guileless any more. "What's your angle? Why didn't you tell the rebels?"

Tell the rebels what? Han wondered. He had never seen Gantre before in his life. He said, "Maybe I wanted to check out the situation first." _Or whatever. Dammit, give me something to work with here._

Gantre nodded, as if he had expected that answer. "He thought you'd play it that way."

Han took another step forward. If he could just get Gantre to say who that "he" was. "Why'd you take the ship? It wasn't for the money onboard...or didn't he mention that to you?"

Gantre's face changed, and Han knew he had made a mistake. The agent took a step back, saying, "You're bluffing. You don't know anything." Gantre went for his weapon and Han dove forward. The man hadn't told him anything yet, he couldn't risk taking a shot at him. A blaster bolt skimmed past his shoulder and he swung at Gantre, his fist connecting with the man's jaw. They were on the deck then, struggling for the pistol.

Han lost his hold but managed to knock the small gun out of Gantre's hand. The agent grabbed for Han's blaster, half wrenching it out of the holster despite the retaining strap. Han hit him in the wrist, too off center to break any bones but jarring the man's grip on the pistol and sending it spinning across the deck after the other.

Gantre threw him off with a knee in Han's stomach that left him gasping and staggering. Instead of coming for him again, the man glanced up and saw Luke and Antilles, running toward them down the aisle of shuttles. His face changed, showing fear for the first time, and he fumbled at the strap of the chrono on his wrist. Han was already gathering himself to dodge, thinking it was another weapon, when he realized what it must be and tackled Gantre again. They rolled and Han came up on top. He smashed the man's hand against the deck, twice, until his fist unclenched and he dropped the minuscule tablet of poison he had taken from the inside of his chrono. Gantre swore at him, breathing hard, and Han said, "Tough luck. You should've been faster." Then the rebels were around them, Luke and Antilles dragging them apart and shoving Gantre up against the side of the nearest shuttle.

Han straightened, then went over to recover his blaster. There was what looked like a whole squad of security running toward them over one of the catwalks; Luke must have alerted half the ship.

Luke stepped back from Gantre as the others moved in to take over. He came back towards Han, saying, "Did you know what he was talking about?"

Han shook his head, truly baffled. "I'm beginning to think these guys have me confused with somebody else."

Han thought the waiting was harder than anything else had been so far, including getting bashed in the head.

They were in a little compartment off the admin deck, Han pacing with the intensity of a trapped gundark and Leia sitting silently and drumming her fingers on the pitted metal surface of the table. Antilles was standing with arms folded, staring resignedly at the open hatch into the corridor, and Luke had been unable to hold still at all, and gone off to reconnoiter.

Han felt like he was going to go crazy. "What's taking so damn long?" he finally said, unable to contain himself any longer. He stopped and glared down at the princess, though he knew it wasn't up to her. "You should have let me just beat it out of him."

Leia lifted an eyebrow, glaring back up at him. She almost said, *_how about if you hold him down while I beat it out of him_* but managed to regain her control between one breath and the next. Alderanni nobility didn't betray itself that way, didn't let true feelings show, especially in a situation like this. Bail Organa had made sure she learned that lesson above all others. So, her voice sounding too caustic even to her own ears, she said, "That's not the way we do things, Captain."

Before Han could answer and start a major shouting match, Luke Skywalker swung in through the open hatch, saying, "They're finished, they're coming out!"

Han folded his arms and turned away, his jaw muscles tight. If Degoran walked in here and said the agent had told him Chewbacca was dead and the Falcon was on her way to Gyndine or Corsalis or some other Imperial military stronghold, he didn't know what he would do. *_Live through it,_* he told himself bleakly. *_You lived through everything else_*.

"How did they look?" Wedge asked Luke, sounding anxious.

"I couldn't tell," Luke said, gesturing in annoyance. He was frowning from worry. "General Rieekan wasn't with them."

Leia held her breath. It seemed to take a long time for Colonel Degoran to walk down the corridor from the area they were using as brig and interrogation room, and Leia wondered if he would ignore her direct order and not report to her here first. But her nerves had made the moment stretch, and in another instant Degoran was stepping through the hatch.

He nodded cordially to her. "Princess." He hadn't entirely believed Han's story that he didn't know Gantre or have the least clue as to who any of his buddies were, but he couldn't refuse to believe that Gantre was an Imperial spy; the poison caplet which the man had tried to kill himself with rather than be captured had been proof enough of that.

"Did you learn anything, Colonel?" she asked coolly.

"He still refuses to tell us anything, at least for the moment," Degoran said, and Han bit back a curse. "But he did have this on him." The Colonel placed a small device on the table.

Han grabbed for it before anybody else could move. _Yeah, it's what I think it is_. He opened the cover to look at the frequency, but it didn't tell him anything.

"What is it?" Luke demanded.

"It's a preset beacon, used to signal a specific ship. This is how he was going to call for a pickup." Han was aware he was spoiling Degoran's big denouement but he didn't give a damn.

"So if we set that off the others might show up with the Falcon?" Luke looked hopefully at Leia.

She held out her hand and reluctantly, Han gave her the beacon.

"It's a remote chance," Degoran said, frowning. "I'm not sure it's worth the risk."

Leia examined the little device herself, biting her lip thoughtfully. "No," she said suddenly, and Han had time for the thought _yeah, you're on your own again, Solo,_ before she continued, "It's not a remote chance at all. These beacons have to be set to the ship's ID sequence from the communications console. The Falcon is the only missing ship that this man had access to. The beacon could very well be set to her ID." She handed the device back to Han, and gazed coldly at Degoran. "There are two more Imperial agents out there, Colonel. Are you suggesting we simply let them go?"

It was all settled, even the details. The Tantavie was about to drop out of hyper, and Han, Luke Skywalker and Wedge Antilles would take a shuttle and land on one of the drifting planetoids in the system's asteroid belt, and activate the beacon. The fleet would move outsystem and be ready for hyper again, in case the beacon summoned something other than the Falcon.

Han had ducked out into the corridor as the meeting was breaking up, wanting a chance to talk to the Princess alone, but for someone with short legs she moved awfully fast and she was already halfway up the corridor to the operations dome, talking to a couple of command staff. Han turned back to catch up with Luke, who was already heading for the bay, just as enthusiastic as if it was his ship and Chewie was his partner. Han wasn't sure what he would have said to Leia, anyway. _Probably something stupid._ Restraining the impulse to fling himself at her feet had been difficult enough.

"There she is."

Han knew he was wound pretty tight, but the surge of emotion in his chest caught him by surprise. His hand hurt and it took him a moment to realize it was from gripping the back of the acceleration chair.

Luke glanced up at him, grinning. "She looks okay." He and Wedge were in the pilot and copilot seats of the Tantavie's shuttle. They had set the beacon off over a timepart ago, then landed on the flat bottom of a crater on the small planetoid.

Han managed to tear his eyes off the shape in the viewport long enough to look down at the sensors. No stray energy traces coming off the hull, nothing funny in the drive signature. "Yeah, she's okay." Han swallowed in a suddenly dry throat. Now if only Chewie was in as good a shape.

They tried to bash your head in, what makes you think they would've left him alive?

Because he's a survivor. If there was a way to stay alive, Chewie had found it.

Han couldn't think about it now. He would know soon enough. He stepped back through the cockpit hatch, moving carefully in the low gravity, pulling a breath mask and goggles off the rack as he went past. He hung both around his neck, glancing back at the port. _That's right, come to me, baby._ The Falcon was coming in low over them, close enough to pick out detail now, the familiar pockmarks and pits, the old blast scars. The approach was clumsy; whoever was flying her wasn't used to the extra boost in the thrusters and was having trouble balancing them with the anti-gravs.

Too bad he won't have time to learn. The Rebels had Gantre, and that was only fair, considering the way they had helped Han. But whoever was in that ship now was his.

Wedge was locking down the instrument boards, getting ready. Han checked the charge indicator on his blaster for about the third time. Luke got out of the straps and lurched across the shuttle and fetched up against the hatch next to the Corellian, managing to be graceful and awkward at the same time. Han said, "Remember, don't open it until I call you, no matter what." _Because it would be a real pain in the ass to get my ship back and then find out I accidentally shot you._

"I got it," Luke said impatiently.

The sound, carried on the thin atmosphere outside, was audible now, making the skin of the shuttle shiver. A shadow fell over the port as the Falcon hovered overhead, then the whine of the antigravs grew as she slid sideways and drifted gently to the ground -- with an audible crunch. Han winced. Somebody was going to pay for that. But she was blind now, all across her top hull. Han caught the

bottom rung of the ladder for the top hatch and swung up one-handed, easy in the low gravity.

Wedge came out of the cockpit, carrying an extra blast rifle. "Solo, are you sure you don't want to take one of these?"

It was a two-handed gun. "No, it'd just slow me down." And whoever was in the Falcon wouldn't be wearing blast armor. He hoped.

There was another hum, different in pitch. Then a thump, as the extender tube from the Falcon's hatch locked on to the shuttle.

Han pulled the mask over his face and opened the interior hatch, boosting himself up through it. He thought he heard Luke and Wedge calling after him to be careful and good luck, and so on, but he was already concentrating on what he had to do. He got the goggles on just as the lock cycled open and then slipped outside.

Han waited for the shuttle's lock to close, getting his bearings. Even with the filters in the protective lenses the light was bright and the shadows of the rocks and the edges of the crater were sharply drawn. The Falcon was looming over the smaller shuttle, and Han would have to stand to reach the top hull. He glanced forward, making sure he wasn't visible from the small port on that side, but the angle was wrong. The lock sealed firmly and he went to the edge of the shuttle's hull, to where he could see the Falcon's extender tube locked onto the shuttle's hatch.

Moments passed, just long enough for him to worry, but then the tube shuddered and he heard the familiar whine of the Falcon's hatch sliding open. Han stood, grabbed the upper edge of the Falcon's hull and swung up onto it.

He waited until he was certain someone had moved into the tube, and then quickly crawled across to the top hatch. He was pretty sure they wouldn't have changed the codes. Pretty sure. He tapped the sequence into the key pad, including the disarm code that would keep the cockpit alarms from going off, and held his breath. If they had messed with his security this would set off alarms all over the ship, and if the Falcon lifted.... Luke and Antilles, still in the shuttle and pretending they couldn't get the hatch to open, would probably come through all right, but Han figured he would be blown right back into the Falcon's main thruster.

The hatch beeped quietly, as if it knew Han's life depended on it, then started to cycle. Han slipped inside as soon as the opening was big enough and hit the emergency close. The lock began to dilate shut, the platform under his feet lowering him into the ship. This was the other bad part: hoping the agent was still distracted by the shuttle's apparently recalcitrant hatch, that he hadn't come back

in for a tool, that his partner was still in the cockpit. That he wasn't waiting with a blaster at the bottom of the well. Then the platform bumped to a halt and the interior hatch slid smoothly open. Han stepped out into the engineering station and no one shot at him. The lounge area just beyond was empty as well.

Han crossed it as quietly as he could, wishing for Chewie's big, flat, silent feet, and paused at the entrance to the companionway. He could hear a muffled voice from the port side: the agent at the end of the extender tube, trying to shout instructions through the hatch.

He went down the companionway to the cockpit, staying close to the bulkhead. He reached the hatchway and hesitated.

The figure sitting in the pilot's seat was human, young, dark-haired. He was leaning over the board, changing the settings on one of the sensor inputs.

Han stepped forward into the cockpit, not bothering to be quiet.

The agent said, "Is he aboard?"

Han caught the back of the man's head and slammed it into the control board. A muffled yelp was all that escaped him. Han pulled his head back up and saw eyelids flicker. *_Huh, only stunned_*. A second slam did the trick. He shoved the man back in the chair, and peeled back an eyelid to make sure he was really unconscious. That was when he recognized him.

Oh, so that's it, Han thought. *_That explains a lot._*

Han spared a moment to key in a codelock to the nav computer, to make sure the Falcon wasn't going anywhere else without him, then stepped out of the cockpit again. Leia hadn't been entirely right in her theories, but then there were factors she couldn't have known about. They had all been postulating disinterested Imperial agents, just trying to accomplish a mission; none of them had considered somebody who just might be crazy enough to do all this for revenge.

Han made it back to the lounge and leaned against the concussion padding just inside the arch. He hadn't seen any trace of Chewie, and the thought of what they had probably done to him made a cold anger burn. At least now he knew who he was dealing with. Han heard the muffled noise from the direction of the connecting tube cease abruptly and swore under his breath. The man would be moving through the companionway toward the cockpit. Han stepped away from the arch, backing toward the technical station. He heard a soft sound from the engineering station across the lounge and even as he turned, ducking and firing simultaneously, he knew he had made a fatal miscalculation.

The blaster bolt caught him above the knee and he hit the deck hard, losing his grip on his own weapon. He rolled, ignoring the pain ripping through him, stretching to reach the fallen blaster.

Just as his hand closed on the grip a warning shot splashed against the deck near enough for him to feel the heat and smell the ozone, leaving a blackened scar on the metal. Han froze, then slowly looked up.

The man looking down at him was heavy-set, with graying hair and harsh features. He was smiling. "Put the blaster down, Solo, slowly, and move away from it."

Han couldn't see that he had much choice. He put the blaster down on the deck, and slowly sat up, pushing himself back until he could lean against the base of the acceleration couch. The burn wound in his leg was deep and nasty-looking; Han resolved to ignore it, since he couldn't currently do anything about it. He focused on the man pointing the gun at him and said, "So you working for the Empire now or was this just a contract job?" Veric Devril had worked for the Empire off and on, tracing deserters in the fringe and rim ports that the Imperial agents couldn't move through as freely. And the man he had knocked unconscious in the cockpit was Lias Niam, an Imperial hunter who had worked with Devril before.

Devril eased forward and picked up Han's blaster, all without taking his hard eyes off him. "The Empire is where the money is," Devril said, beginning to smile. Han had run into him in the Tion Hegemony, where the hunter had been hired by the Imps to track pirates. Devril had been successful for a while, insinuating himself in as a trader willing to sell information about merchant convoys. The pirates knew some ships were going missing, but no one realized they had been destroyed by Imp patrols or captured and the crews sold to Kessel. The disappearances hadn't been tied back to Devril until he sold the coordinates a Gisellan freighter was exiting hyper at to the pirate Flight Han was currently attached to. Since the Falcon had proved to be the hottest ship in the Flight, it had been Han's job to lead their attacks, and Han had a natural distrust of everybody, but especially of traders who sold out other traders. He had decided to take the Falcon alone and watch from a safe distance to see if the Gisellan freighter appeared as promised. Devril had become careless, and contemptuous of his quarry.

He no longer bothered to give up a hapless freighter or two to make sure his prey was hooked. So what Han saw come out of hyperspace was an Imperial patrol.

Devril had managed to escape fatal retaliation, but he had had to abandon his damaged ship and some of the Imperial agents he had brought with him had been killed. After Han had left the pirates, Devril had made it his business to find out all he could about him, and had gone after him a couple of times, but that

was a few years ago. After their last encounter, Devril must have thought Han was dead, killed in the explosion of an atmospheric craft on Riella, until he had seen him on the Yavin base. Then he must have made damn sure the Corellian hadn't seen him. Devril said, "I wondered what a scum like you was doing with the Alliance, until one of the officers let slip the facts about the payoff they gave you. It was too good a chance to let go by."

Han nodded to himself. So it had been the money aboard the Falcon. The blaster wound was getting harder to ignore, sending a lance of pain through him with every beat of his heart, but he said, "You didn't bother to tell your two friends about it."

"They're good little Imps, they don't care about credits, just about killing rebels. But I had to go along with the rest of the mission, come back and pick up Gantre. It doesn't do to doublecross the Empire. You should know that, Solo, a deserter like you." Han hadn't been a deserter, mainly because it technically wasn't desertion when you escaped after they court-martialled you and scheduled you for slow termination, but as a bounty hunter Devril had never worried too much about legal technicalities. "Besides," Devril continued, "I convinced them that you knew I was on the Yavin base, that you were blackmailing me, and that they had to get rid of you. I had to stay around for that, didn't I?"

Han had been lucky, so lucky. Devril could have been halfway to the Cron Drift by now, but he was such a crazy son of a bitch that getting revenge meant more to him than money and freedom from the Imps. _Too stupid to live, Devril. And you always did know too much about me._ "You didn't do such a great job of it. Were you the one who screwed up trying to kill me?"

"Oh no, that was Gantre. I would've made sure you were dead before I left. I always did like killing Corellians. But since you've been with the Alliance, I can probably get more from the Empire for you alive." The expression on his face turned wary. "What were you doing with the Alliance, anyway, Solo? What was your game?"

Han heard a distinctive soft thunk of metal on metal, and immediately said, "They hired me to do a job, and I did it, that was all," hoping Devril hadn't noticed. It had been a very familiar sound, the noise the lid of one of the secret compartments in the companionway made when it popped up. His heart was pounding with hope. Devril wouldn't have anybody hiding in the smuggler's compartments, even if he had been able to discover their existence, there was no reason for it. Only one person on the Falcon would have the motive to hide.... "I was leaving anyway, as soon as the fleet hit hyper. Your Imp pals wasted their time."

Devril sneered. He was red in the face and didn't look healthy to begin with. Maybe the pressure of working for the Empire had been getting to him. He said, "It wasn't a waste for me--"

There was more, but Han didn't hear it. It was taking all his concentration not to react to the fact that Chewbacca was now easing silently through the open hatch behind Devril. The Wookiee's fur was disarranged and he looked wild-eyed, but he was moving with the soundless step of a forest hunter. Han managed to focus on what Devril was saying again, and heard, "You know what happened to your pet Wookiee, Solo? He crawled out of the ship after I shot him. Did the rebs find him or did they leave him there for the Imps? Or did he just bleed to death in the hangar?"

Chewie paused to roll his eyes in resigned disgust at this low opinion of his competence. Han figured his partner was close enough. Most humans didn't realize how long a Wookiee's reach was, but Han was adept at gauging it. He said, "No, Devril, you dumb bastard. You just thought he crawled off the ship."

Devril barely had time to draw breath before a furry hand closed around his throat. His shot went wild and Han threw himself forward with all his remaining strength, falling against Devril and wrenching the blaster away from him. Chewie yanked Devril towards himself in what should have been a killing grip, but Devril struck backward and the Wookiee yowled and let him go. Devril spun away from him, but he was only giving Han a clear shot.

The blast took him full in the chest, at close range, smashing him back against the bulkhead. Devril slid down it, an inert mass of charred flesh.

Han let out his breath in relief, then grabbed for the back of the chair at the tech station to keep standing. The sudden weight on his wounded leg hadn't helped it any. He leaned over the chair and hit the comlink on the console, saying "Luke, Antilles, it's all clear, get in here."

Chewbacca was snarling at him, waving one arm irately. Han listened in disbelief, then demanded, "What do you mean 'Where the hell have I been?' You were the one who was lost, you dumb, fluff-headed--"

Chewbacca roared an insulted response, then sat down heavily on the deck. Han spotted the burned fur and limped toward him, managing to kneel down without falling on his face. "Let me see that."

The Wookiee made grumpy protesting noises but let him look at the blaster wound. Carefully brushing aside the singed fur, Han winced in sympathy. The energy bolt had struck Chewbacca in the side, above the hip, leaving an ugly cauterized wound, with ridges of red and blackened flesh. That was how Devril had gotten out of the Wookiee's grasp; he had known to strike where Chewbacca was wounded.

Han grimaced, thinking of what his partner had gone through, hiding so long with an injury this bad and no treatment for it. The only reason Chewie was probably

still alive was that Wookiees didn't go into shock as humans did; being traumatically injured only seemed to make them angry. "Yeah, you're all tore up," he muttered. "If you can't be more careful I'm gonna have to replace you."

Chewbacca growled a suggestion of something Han could do with himself that was anatomically impossible for any bipedal species, and pointed out that Han had gotten shot too. Continuing to grumble as Han tried to determine the extent of the injury, the Wookiee sniffed and poked at the back of the Corellian's head.

"Ow, yes, it hurts, so don't touch it." At Chewie's inquiry he explained, "Before they went after you, they bashed my head in and left me for dead at the base."

Chewbacca snarled angrily, then declared his intention of tearing off the heads and hands of their enemies, so they could be displayed somewhere on the Falcon for the Forest Spirit to acknowledge their victory. Han said, "Maybe later."

He heard Luke and Antilles in the companionway. "Damn," Antilles said, seeing what was left of Devril. "I guess he won't be giving us much trouble."

"There's another one in the cockpit, still breathing," Han told him.

Antilles went off to secure the prisoner and Luke came into the lounge, holstering his blaster and asking worriedly, "Hey, Chewie, you okay?"

"No, the big dumb monkey got shot. We need to get him to the sick bay on the frigate." Chewbacca growled a protest at this description but didn't argue with the sick bay part.

"You don't look any better," Luke pointed out, coming over to help Han stand.

"It's just a scratch." Han decided they needed to get the Wookiee to his cabin where he could lay down while the Falcon made the short hop to the Tantavie. That was about all they could do until they got him to a meddroid. This was way beyond the Falcon's poor stock of medical supplies.

"Who was he?" Luke asked, looking at what was left of Devril. "Were we right, did you recognize him?"

"Nope," Han said. "I don't know who the hell he was." He reached down for the Wookiee's good arm. "Give us a hand, huh?"

Once the fleet had regrouped and was safely moving again, with the Millennium Falcon tucked into a hastily cleared berth in the big hangar, Leia went down to the sick bay to look for Han.

It was the offshift and the large chamber was quiet, the lights dimmed, and only one organic tech and one droid in attendance. None of the humanoid diagnostic beds were large enough for a being Chewbacca's size, so they had converted a float pallet using some emergency padding and portable med equipment. She found Han sitting on one corner of it, leaning against the metal rail, holding the unconscious Wookiee's head in his lap.

"How is he?" she asked quietly, sitting down on the deck and resting her folded arms on her knees. A portable bacta-healer unit covered the blaster wound in Chewbacca's side, and various sensors and leads from the diagnostic equipment were buried in the fur on his chest. His breathing sounded rough and distressed to Leia, but she could see the monitors were all reading normal. Han had had his own injury taken care of, and with a change of clothes from his ship, looked much better himself.

"He's okay," Han said. "He's a little crazy from all the medication. I didn't want him to wake up groggy and tear somebody's arm off before he realized where he was."

"Oh." Leia pursed her lips to hide a smile. Considering what she had heard about Wookiee tempers, it was probably all too true, but she still thought it funny that Han apparently felt he had to supply a pragmatic excuse for sitting with his injured partner. "I'll tell the medical staff. I'm sure they'll appreciate it," she said dryly.

"Do that. If they thought I was a lousy patient, they haven't seen anything yet."

"I see." Chewbacca made a low growling noise in his throat and twitched a little. Worried, she asked, "Should I move back?"

"No, it's all right as long as he can smell me. I think he's just dreaming." Han rubbed his co-pilot behind the ear, and the twitching calmed. Chewbacca woke suddenly and blinked, then turned his head, his glazed blue eyes finding Leia and after a moment managing to focus on her. He whimpered something, sounding remarkably pitiful, and reached out one big hairy hand to her.

Han rolled his eyes, and explained, "He wants you to hold his hand for a minute."

Leia reached out and took Chewbacca's hand. His skin seemed to have a dozen different textures, soft as velvet on the palm, tough and almost abrasive on the fingerpads, leathery at the base of the blunt claws and at the edge of the long coarse fur. Bemused, she asked, "Why?"

"He wants to touch a woman one last time before he dies." Han told the Wookiee, "You're not dying, you big idiot."

Chewbacca snarled weakly at Han and released Leia's hand. Still growling a little, he faded back off to sleep again.

After a moment, Han looked up at her. "Thanks."

Leia was exhausted, and the quiet and half-dark of the sick bay was making her want to drift off. She found herself trying to decide what color Han's eyes were. Brown, she had thought, but right now she would swear they were green. It took her a moment to realize what he had said. "For what?"

"For him, for the Falcon. You had Gantre, you didn't need to set a trap for the other two."

"It's a good thing I didn't, considering one of them had to be scraped off the Falcon's bulkhead," Leia said, but she knew he was serious. She added, "You're wrong, I did need to do it. What kind of a person would I be if I had the chance to help, and didn't take it?"

Han didn't reply, only looked back down at the Wookiee, still running his fingers reassuringly through the thick fur.

Leia sat there for a time, enjoying the quiet and the fact that no one was demanding she handle four hundred different crises at once. Enjoying, if the truth were told, just looking at Han. *_Don't enjoy that too much,_* she reminded herself. No time for sorrow, and no time for resting one's eyes on exotically handsome Corellians, either. But she thought there was something in Han that had changed. Something about him, in his voice, in his eyes, seemed less...damaged. Leia couldn't pin it down, but she was glad to see it, anyway.

Being able to help him find Chewbacca and the Falcon had done something for her, too. Taking things that were wrong and helping them get put right again, that helped a little. Perhaps eventually there would be enough things put right, enough to in some small part make up for that one gigantic wrong, that murder of an entire world, that would never be put right. Her head jerked suddenly and she realized she had almost dropped off to sleep. Better leave before she curled up on the deck and snored. Regretfully, she got to her feet. "Call me if you need anything."

Han watched her go. Leia Organa evidently meant to run every part of the Alliance personally. She was going to kill herself, either from overwork or the hard way. But if anybody could make this crazy attempt at a rebellion work, it would probably be her. Degoran was still suspicious, but the others seemed satisfied with Han's story that Devril had been after the credits on the Falcon all along, and had made up the details about Han knowing who he was so he could get his Imperial comrades to go along with his plans. He wasn't sure Leia had entirely bought this, but she seemed to trust him, anyway.

Chewbacca stirred a little, groaned, and grumbled a complaint about being hooked up to machines, and he didn't need all this, and how could they possibly pay for it anyway? "Tough," Han told him. "Next time duck faster. And it's free."

Chewie's answering snarl was weak and half-hearted. He drifted off again for a time, then came to once more and asked groggily if all this meant they were working for the rebels, for now.

"For now," Han said, not sure about it himself until he said it aloud, but after that he was sure. "For a while. Then we'll see what happens."

end

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