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UNDERSTANDING

by Liz Sharpe

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Leia cracked the hatch manually and peered through, into the dim half-light of the medical frigate's so-called executive canteen.

"Oh, my people..."

The words drifted to her out of the darkness, a measured lilt to them as though the cultured baritone voice was reciting from memory.

The princess sighed. Her hunch had been correct.

Lando Calrissian -- Baron Calrissian? -- so very recently the proud, sleek-looking administrator of Cloud City, and now merely another homeless refugee from the Empire's so-called justice, sat alone in the deserted room, in the farthest, dimmest, most inaccessible corner. A selection of bottles from the bar was neatly aligned on the table in front of him. With a great deal of concentration, Lando was frowning at his own unsteady hands as they decanted fragrant liquid amber into an oversized tankard meant for milder brew.

Leia eased the hatch open a little further and slipped silently into the room. Slowly, she began picking her way between the empty tables, her eyes troubled.

Lando must not have been as drunk as she'd thought. He glanced up sharply at her entrance, with a sudden alertness that reminded her of Han at his most guarded. She stilled the inner wail with practiced self-discipline and reminded herself that the two men "went 'way back." Lando was the elder; maybe Han had picked it up from _him_.

The wary eyes in the handsome face tracked her for a moment, then narrowed with recognition. For the first time, Leia realized that Lando was another man who could be dangerous, when he chose.

I seem to be collecting them, these days.

One could do worse.

Lando rose to his feet at her approach, swayed, and bowed unselfconsciously.

"Your Highness." He spoke with an unaffected formal courtliness that went very naturally with the bow.

Baron, indeed. The princess smiled a little. "Just 'Leia,' please."

They regarded each other across the table. The gloom obscured fine details of expression from their mutual scrutiny.

"May I sit down?" Leia asked.

"Please." Lando inclined himself with dignified grace once more. "Be my guest." He waited till she was seated before lowering himself cautiously toward his own chair.

Leia studied first the bottles on the table, then the plundered cabinet behind the bar, and raised an eyebrow.

Lando shrugged. "I helped myself. Old habits." He looked away from her, down at his hands. Flat against the tabletop, impeccably kept, they revealed nothing. "My life's had its ups and downs, Leia. I've picked up two sets of habits, keeping myself in one piece. Nice ones. Not-so-nice ones. Looks like I'll be needing the bad set again, now."

Leia heard bleak factuality in his voice. Lando had accepted the situation; it wasn't the future he was afraid to face.

The silence lengthened.

"Can I offer you a drink?" Lando spoke first, his features a cordial mask. "This is your liquor, after all."

The idea suddenly appealed to her. Han was gone -- wherever. Beyond her aid, for now. Luke was receiving expert attention in the MedCenter. Lando seemed to be looking after himself quite ably. Not even the poor Millennium Falcon required her help -- the droids and engineering teams now plying their skills under the exacting glower of a half-mad Wookiee needed no assistance from a well-meaning outsider whose limited technical knowledge was largely irrelevant to their particular specialty. No immediate political crisis demanded that she exercise her wits; the very thought of paperwork revolted her.

A drink was just what she needed.

"I'll have some of that traskeen, if there's any left," said the princess.

Lando took one of his hands from the table, and regarded the slight tremor that shook it with remote displeasure. Then he reached for the dusty black jar with the dimples. A line of clean glasses was set up parallel to the row of bottles. Seeing the princess' bemused expression, Lando shrugged again.

"I don't like mixing different liquors in one glass," he said. "I wasn't sure what kind of drunk I felt like being, so I figured I'd provide myself with a selection."

He tipped moonsilver traskeen into a tumbler and passed it to her with exaggerated care.

Leia nodded thanks, and knocked back a hearty swallow of the pale liquid fire without a quiver.

"Traskeen's strong stuff," Lando observed.

"That's why I like it." Leia took another swallow. It was criminal to gulp the fine old brew that way, but she craved the artificial heat of the liquor burning inside her.

Lando watched her drink with his gambler's stare, to which wariness had returned. At last, he stirred and lifted his tankard.

"All right," he said wearily. "I'll bite. Why'd you come looking for me? I don't need any help despising myself, right now." A trace of bitterness flawed the musical voice. "I know I'm not too popular around here in general. Word sure gets around in a hurry. But you're not just another... friend... of Han's." Lando reached out to nudge a bottle back into precise position in its row, avoiding her eyes.

Leia blinked. _The shipside chatter mill must be on overdrive._ "I hadn't realized Han was so popular," she said. "What kind of trouble have you run into?"

"Just enough to make the message plain." Lando waved ambiguously. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe it's just my guilty conscience making me magnify things out of proportion. Nobody's done anything threatening, or said anything, right up front to me." He laughed, the ghost of an urbanity that might have haunted the frivolous salons of Imperial Center, in another age. "You're a well-behaved, respectable bunch, for the vicious criminal scum the Empire says you are." The false smile vanished. "But I can feel it, just the same. The sooner I get my treacherous personage out of here, the better they'll all be pleased." He reached for the decanter nearest him, and splashed fresh golden fluid into his tankard. "Magna Mater. It's only been a couple of hours since we docked, and already anybody who knew Han around here wants to see me cooked."

There was no particular self-pity in his voice. He just sounded resigned, as though he half-believed himself that he deserved the treatment he was getting.

"I didn't realize so many people would care," Leia said.

"They care," Lando replied. "Most people who know Han care about him -- one way, or the other. Believe it or not,

I care too. But why should you listen to me?" He shrugged fatalistically. "You must hate my guts."

"No. No, I don't." It seemed important that he should understand she no longer resented him for what he'd done.

Leia wrapped her fingers around her drink. The traskeen was hitting her hard, warming her vitals with its familiar glow, what with her unstrung nerves, her fatigue, and the fact that she hadn't eaten since... since...

Calrissian was watching her uneasily. Somehow, he managed to look hunted and puzzled, simultaneously.

I know where I've seen someone look that way before...

Leia finished what was left in her glass and silently held it out for more. _I haven't been this tired since..._ When was the last time she'd truly rested? _Not on Hoth. Not since that day on Bespin._ And in between... That brief interlude in transit hadn't been exactly restful, for all its attractions.

Not for the first time, she wondered whether Han possessed some sort of instinctive foresight. He'd seemed so hungry, so desperate to have all of her, but not with the same greedy, brutish lust she'd seen transform other men's faces, when they craved to pleasure themselves with her body. No, it had been as though Han was afraid of losing precious moments, as though he automatically distrusted the generosity of the fate that had finally brought him to the right pair of arms.

Leia smiled into the gloom. _Cloud City._

Coppershot brown hair glowing between her fingers in the clear, pure sunshine from the skylights; hot lips wandering over her skin; warm skilled hands exploring her responses with a remarkable delicacy of touch...

"You should hate me." Lando addressed his tankard heavily. "You've got every right."

Leia shook off her reverie. "Have another drink," she suggested. "And quit trying to tell me I should go on

holding a grudge against you for something that wasn't your fault."

Lando took her advice in a big way. "Not my fault," he repeated. "I wish I could convince myself of that. But I should have known. I should've known the minute I saw that ugly black mask of Vader's step out of that shuttle."

"It was probably too late, even before the shuttle landed," Leia said gently. "The Empire -- Darth Vader, in particular -- has a habit of not leaving people with any right choices to make."

"No right choices," Lando echoed moodily. "Yeah. That's about it. Save your friend -- or save your other friends. And don't be all day about it. Make up your mind, quick." He drew a ragged breath. "People are not numbers. You can't just weigh them against each other like some kind of, of _commodity_." His fist thumped the table top once for emphasis.

"No, they're not. But... I don't know exactly what Cloud City meant to you," Leia said slowly. "And I don't know what was between you and Han. But -- he was just one man, one wandering s-scoundrel." Her voice betrayed her, but she went on. "One drifter's life... can hardly balance against an entire city." She finished in a whisper.

"Scoundrel'?" Lando's smile was small but genuine this time. "You ever call him that to his face?"

"Oh, yes." Leia stared into her traskeen.

"Bet he laughed." Lando's voice was distant, but kind; she'd touched on some private joke of theirs.

"Not... exactly." She closed her eyes.

"No right choices," Lando repeated again, remotely.

Leia looked up. "If I'd been in your place, I don't know what decision I would have made, myself."

"That's noble of you."

Leia ignored the edge his words had acquired. "No, it's not," she said. "I've been forced to make a dreadful choice like that, a choice affecting countless innocent -- and not so innocent -- lives, myself. All those people... People whose welfare I held myself responsible for. People I loved. The consequences will haunt me forever. You and I have more in common than you might think."

She traced the rim of her glass with a fingertip.

"Oh, yes. I was angry with you at first. Angry enough to stand there and watch Chewbacca throttle you, with pleasure. But I've had time to use my head since then." Her voice had gone very quiet. "It's hard to keep on hating something that you understand too well."

Her tone was soft, undemanding; the brittle defensiveness melted away from Lando as quickly as it had come.

The princess remained silent, lost in a faraway memory. Lando returned to his own meditations, his face unreadable, only the eyes melancholy.

"Oh, my people
like this day lost,
we ended bravely,
yet for no cause
other than that
darkness came,"

he said. The lilting quality was back in his voice; the words rolled with a cadenced music which told both of training, and of love of the craft of speech itself.

It brought back her own long lessons, the patient teachers, the painstaking rehearsals, the public recitals.

"For oh, my people,
all my people,
all
who have gone down
untimely
into the dark

long before
I..."

"What's that?" Leia asked.

Lando focused on her slowly. "It's nothing. An old poem I learned once. Learned it from my tutor, at my father's hall. On Velder Cor, when I was just a kid." Lando chuckled faintly. "Only two things Gusty ever taught me, poetry and drinking. Father threw him out, eventually. A very long time ago, that was. Been a lot of parsecs under these tired feet, since then." He lapsed into silence.

"It sounds very moving," Leia said. "Is there a story behind it?"

Lando regarded her as though from a great depth. "Yeah, sure. It's supposed to be the dying words of the Master of the local Jedi school. Dates back to the time of the Pogrom. Local tradition had it that when the Sith shocktroopers razed the school, they didn't kill the old man cleanly. He got away. Made it to the top of this hill, west of the town. He died up there at sundown, with the school still burning below. 'Two nights fall as one,' the poem says. Really means three, excusing poetic license, counting the fall of the Jedi as another kind of darkness coming on..." Lando shifted restlessly. "The piece is no classic, but it kind of caught my fancy. I was young, then."

"Young and foolish?" Leia suggested gently.

"That's right. And now I'm old and foolish, I suppose." Lando made an elegant, meaningless gesture of dismissal. "Hopeless romantic, that's me. Never did know when to quit." He rambled a little, between memory and the drink. "There was this plaque on a stone, up on the hill, where the old man gave it up. The place was all grown over. The murder of the Jedi -- it's not the sort of thing the present government is interested in having commemorated. Some damnfool kid might find it glamorous."

He snorted faint derision.

"I used to go up there, and look out through the weeds across the sea at sundown, and imagine him, dying. I

thought it was terribly sad, and oh, so noble... What an idiot." Lando set his jaw and drew himself up. "Hell, I've got no business getting maudlin over some old dead wizard, then or now. But whether or not those were really his words, it's a pretty piece of language. And it suits. 'We ended for no cause...' _No cause_" Lando's hands clenched into tight fists on the wet-ringed surface of the table. "At least San D'Rohobar was _with_ his people, when their doom fell."

Silence descended once more.

"Lando, I'm sorry about Cloud City," Leia said quietly.

"What are you, a mind-reader?" Lando glowered at her.

The princess shook her head. "Alderaan."

It finally registered. Lando had the grace to look stricken. "You -- Mother of us all. I'm sorry --"

"Do you know what really happened?" Leia asked.

"I've heard the propaganda. From both sides," Lando said, carefully neutral.

"The Empire gave me a choice, too." Leia spoke with the detachment that came to her readily now. "I'd been captured. Grand Moff Tarkin stood there on the bridge of the _Death Star_. And he, he said..." She raised her chin. "He told me that I could reveal the location of the Rebellion's headquarters. Or, I could hold my tongue, and watch Alderaan die. We were in orbit then, you know. Direct visual contact. My whole world shining right there in front of us through the viewport." It was her turn to seek counsel in the contents of her glass.

Lando shifted uncertainly, as though to touch her, then shook his head. "What...?"

"I told them," Leia said. "Of course I told them. But Tarkin -- he -- they went ahead and b-blew it up anyway. It was all a lie. They never intended to keep their side of the 'bargain'."

"No right choices," Lando repeated once more. "The Imperial touch. It's unmistakable."

"Sometimes I think that's what real evil is all about. Backing you into that kind of corner." Leia smiled faintly. "Fortunately for the Rebellion, though, I didn't play by the book, either. The information I gave Tarkin was safely out of date."

"Good for you." Lando raised his glass in tribute. "But still, my sincere apologies. I regret that I've reminded you."

"It's been a long time, Lando. I only dream about it once in a while, these days." The princess shrugged. _Who has time for sleep?_

"Sleep," muttered Lando gloomily, putting a hand to his temple with a tentative gesture.

The princess sat straighter with an effort. The room was spinning disagreeably, but she'd been drunker and survived. "Lando, I know a little how you must feel," she said. "If anybody's in a position to understand, it's me. I know what it's like to be forced into making a bad decision by the Empire -- and to find out, too late, that even when you've made the terrible choice, the lesser of two wrongs is still...not right. The responsibility, the guilt. You can't hide from yourself. Not ever. But that doesn't mean you bury yourself alive in remorse, either."

Lando made a wry face. "I wasn't really going to try very hard," he said, deliberately lightening his tone. "Guilt isn't one of my talents, anyway. You can ask Han, when me and Chewbacca get him back. If there's anything left of me, after he wakes up and figures out what happened, that is."

Whether the casual, positive words were the product of gifted dissembling, or sincere confidence in the future, Leia appreciated their optimism -- and the speaker's kindness.

"You can hide behind me," she offered. "Han may holler at me like a dockhand, but I don't think he'd try to hit me."

"He wouldn't dare!"

"Not if he knows what's good for him," Leia said staunchly. "I fight dirty."

Lando snorted.

"Well. Sorry. I didn't mean to sermonize at you." The princess finished her drink with a decisive swallow. "How does your poem end?"

Lando grinned a little crookedly. "It gets kind of sad and happy at the same time, if you know what I mean. The old guy knew he was a goner, but he was a stubborn man, and he believed in tomorrows.

"I go with the light;
I go with the Light.
Let there be then
no morning for me,
for faith holds
though I fail
the sun will rise
again
beyond this land."

The words rang out through the dimness.

Leia set her glass on the table with a crisp gesture.

"Exactly," she said. "Or what the hell are we here for?"

"Let's hear it for stubborn old men."

"For stubborn people. For right choices. And for tomorrows."

Lando raised his tankard to her in salute, and drained it to the lees.

END

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