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WELCOME
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Home - the Falcon at last! Han ran his hands lovingly over the controls he knew so well. Damn! Everything was still so blurred.

"Sorry Lando, guess you're gonna have to take her up. I still can't see too good. Wouldn't want to hit the wrong button or something - besides, I'm kind of tired."

"Sure Han." Lando replied as they exchanged places. He eyed the tall Corellian with a mixture of concern and regret. "Hey Han, I ... I'm ..."

"Forget it, Lando. It's over now. You helped save my neck back there. Forget it, okay?" Han slumped, exhausted, into the navigator's chair. Leia reached across from the adjacent flight seat behind Chewbacca and took his hand. Her eyes met his slightly unfocused gaze revealing a hint of anxiety and a deep, shining love. He smiled back at her, squeezed her hand and winked reassuringly.

Overcome by an intense weariness, he lay his head back against the head rest and closed his eyes. Still holding Leia's hand tightly, he reveled in the familiar feeling of the thrust of power beneath him as the Falcon lifted off. Somehow his escape had not seemed real until this moment. Free at last! He fervently hoped he would never set foot on Tatooine again. A few minutes later and Lando had skillfully completed the procedure for the jump to hyperspace. Han smiled slightly as he squinted at the streaks of receding light, Calrissian seemed to be handling the Falcon much more expertly than he recalled him doing over ten years ago. Chewie must have been a good teacher - then again, the Falcon

was a different ship now, much more maneuverable than the hulking freighter he had won from the gambler.

Leia continued to watch Han's pale, strained face carefully. His eyes were again closed and he appeared to be drifting off to sleep. Well, he couldn't sleep comfortably here. "Han," she said softly, "Come on, you've got to go back to your bunk. You can sleep properly there."

Han opened his eyes, nodding weary agreement as he smiled back at her concern. He stretched luxuriously - he didn't think he'd ever get tired of being able to do that - then winced as the pain returned. Leia noticed his grimace and slight groan at the flexing of his muscles with alarm. He staggered groggily as he got to his feet. Chewbacca had turned in his seat at the sound of Leia's gentle suggestion and was also watching his unsteady friend with worried eyes. Both he and Leia simultaneously reached out supporting arms.

"Hey, you two, stop fussing!" Han laughed, "I'm okay -just need some sleep." He lurched wearily from the cockpit, Leia a close step behind him. As soon as they had left the confinement of the cockpit, she hugged him tightly as if afraid to let him go. Han hugged her back, his cheek resting on the fragrant softness of her hair. He couldn't help wincing slightly as her grip tightened about his tender muscles. Leia noticed immediately and released her hold, pulling away from him and studying him closely.

"Han," she asked in a tone that indicated she would tolerate no attempts to treat her question lightly, "how do you feel - really?"

Han smiled down at her, admiring her delicate beauty, drinking it in as his vision improved with each passing minute. He noted with amusement that she had hastily thrown one of Lando's old cloaks over the skimpy slave girl costume - somehow he didn't mind - he didn't really want to see her in that outfit, even though it would undoubtedly reveal more of her slender graceful figure. He did not desire to be reminded of how humiliated she must have felt dressed like that, forced to suffer Jabba's oily, lecherous paws - you got what you deserved, Jabba, your askrist lump of slime!

Leia took his long silence for a reluctance to answer. What was he afraid to tell her? "Well?" she prompted with a threatening, yet fearful note of entreaty.

Han heard the genuine anxiety in her tone and answered truthfully, "Leia, I'll be all right, honestly. I'm just more tired than I've ever been before and..." he hesitated, "a little sore."

"Sore?" Leia probed.

Han laughed at her persistence. "I ache all over, Leia. My muscles feel as though they've been through the garbage masher. Guess it'll take a while for the ... the cold to wear off completely. That's all, okay?" he kissed her forehead reassuringly, "Nothin' serious. Now how's about lettin' me get to my cabin before I drop in my tracks!"

Leia laughed in relief. "Come on then, flyboy!" she responded with gruff affection, as she wrapped an arm about his waist and helped him across the main compartment and down the corridor to his quarters.

As they reached his door, Han stopped and ran his hand caressingly over the door control panel. "Home." He whispered.

Leia swallowed against the lump she felt growing in her throat and fought to hold back her tears. She waited while he collected his feelings and finally stabbed at the panel. The obediently hissed open. Han was pleased to find everything looked exactly as he had left it. Even the manual he had been studying as they approached Bespin still lay on the table beside his bunk.

Noticing his pleased look, Leia commented softly, "No one's been in here since ..." she shut her mind swiftly from that memory. "Sit down while I make up the bed."

"Yes, nurse!" Han chuckled, but collapsed gratefully into his familiar welcoming reading chair. Again he couldn't resist running his hands over the velvet softness of the arm rests, wondering how long it would be before the sensation of touching, of various textures against his skin, smells, sounds, and now, sights; would all cease to be so delightfully new and refreshing.

By the time Leia had finished placing fresh coverings on the bunk, Han was almost fully asleep in his chair, his head lolling on his chest and his arms dangling loosely by his sides. She had been going to suggest that he might enjoy a hot meal, but now she realised he was far too exhausted to do anything other than fall into bed. She crouched down in front of him and began tugging off his boots.

"Hey, Leia," Han protested sleepily, "I can do that!"

"If you tried you'd probably fall flat on your face," Leia grinned, "Now shut up and take it easy."

"Yes, Your Highnessness!" Han replied mirthfully. Leia felt a warmth flooding through her and again forced down her tears. She did not think she could ever have enjoyed hearing one of his many teasing names for her again so much. How she had missed his sarcastic taunts!

She finished pulling off the last boot. Standing, she began unfastening his shirt. Han looked embarrassed but pleased as she hauled it over his head. Leia smiled shyly at him, "The rest you'll have to manage for yourself." She giggled as he shook his head and made a disappointed snap of his fingers. "I left some clean things in the sani-cube." She informed him laughingly as she helped him to his feet.

Han winked at her as the cubicle door closed behind him. Leia sat in his chair, sighing softly at the pleasure of knowing he was back safe and sound; and apparently not changed in the slightest, judging by the return of his typically teasing manner. She enjoyed studying the surroundings of his cluttered, yet orderly, cabin again. Memories of that one, wonderful shared night of love before they had reached Beshin filling her mind. She listened as the sound of running water came from the cubicle, he had found the energy to shower after all - the temptation would have been hard to resist. Idly, she picked up the manual and began flipping through it, fascinated in spite of all the technical jargon, as she now looked upon it as another insight into the man she loved.

Han emerged from the cubicle, wrapped in his robe, looking radiantly happy as he gazed down at her with an expression of deep love. He held out his arms to her and she hurried into his embrace, revelling in the security of his enfolding strength. He kissed her tenderly. Leia smiled up at him noting that he was blinking hard trying to keep his eyes open. She chuckled as he yawned, "Nothing but sleep for you right now, hotshot." She scolded lightly as she pushed him gently down on to the bunk.

Han swung his aching legs up on to the bunk and lay back, shutting his eyes and groaning in relief as he felt his sore back at last contact the softness of the sleeping surface. Feeling the gentle touch of blankets being drawn up around his shoulders, he forced open heavy eyelids to find Leia gazing down at him, tears glistening in her tender, dark eyes. He took her hand and kissed it softly, "Leia, it's all right. I'm back now. Everything's going to be fine now." He reassured gently.

Leia bent down and kissed his forehead lightly, "I'm the one that should be saying that to you," she smiled. "Now go on, get some sleep, for the Maker's sake!" She turned to leave.

"Leia, you'll wake me when we ..."

"Of course, Han. Now go to sleep," she ordered firmly.

"Wait Leia," Han called as she was about to activate the door lock. She looked back at him to find an expression of acute embarrassment playing across his handsome features. She lifted her eyebrows questioningly. "Uh ... leave it open, okay?"

Realising how much he would hate to be shut in after what he had been through, Leia cursed herself for her thoughtlessness that had caused him to voice his fear. She frowned and crossed back to his side, "Oh Han, I'm sorry," she said contritely, "I never thought ... You will be all right?"

"Yeah, sure I will," Han mumbled, "just might take a while to get used to being in small places."

"You're certain?"

"Go on, get outa here, will ya?" Han laughed, "Let a man get some sleep."

"Sleep well, Han," Leia kissed him again before turning to leave.

His hand clasped hers, she looked at him enquiringly.

"Leia," he whispered, only half awake, "Leia, I love you." His eyes closed completely and his head lolled to one side as he at last relaxed into a deep sleep.

Leia held his hand to her cheek, looking down at him contentedly, before smiling mischievously and saying quietly, "I know." She placed his hand back gently by his side, tucked the blankets more securely about him, then hit the dimmer switch, plunging the cabin into darkness as she left, remembering to leave the door open.

* * *

Chewbacca was waiting patiently for her in the main compartment. She felt a surge of affection for the Wookiee as she appreciated his respect for their need to be alone together. What she had just done would normally have been his task. He too, must be anxious for his friend. She walked briskly across the room to sit opposite him.

At his interrogative growl, she looked to Threepio.

The droid obligingly translated, "He asks is Captain Solo all right?"

Leia looked back to the Wookiee. "He should be fine, Chewie. He's just exhausted and he says his muscles ache from the after effect of the freezing. I think ..." Suddenly she was unable to push down her immense relief any longer. The reaction to the strain of the past months of not knowing, of only having Luke's assurances that Han was alive, finally took its toll. She hid her head in her hands and began to sob.

The Wookiee's furry arm rested lightly about her shoulders as he held her and rumbled comforting sounds. "Hey Leia, what's wrong?" Lando asked anxiously as he entered and hurried to her side to also embrace her gently. He looked apprehensively towards Han's cabin. "Leia, it's not Han is it? He's all right, isn't he?"

Leia forgot her own emotional upheaval at the sound of the fear in Calrissian's voice. She stifled her sobs, wiped her eyes and quickly regained her composure so as not to alarm him any further. "He's fine," she repeated her assurance, "he's asleep. I'm sorry for carrying on like this, Lando. It's just that it's such a relief to have him back safe and well." She smiled at the dark man affectionately, remembering the part he had played in Han's rescue. She shuddered at the memory of the events of Jabba's palace. Calrissian had worked in that horrid place for weeks, carefully watching over Han's frozen form. She regarded him with an expression of sincere gratitude. "Thanks for all you did for him back there. It can't have been easy living in that hell hole all that time."

Lando stared miserably at the floor. "He would never have been in there in the first place except for me."

Chewbacca growled firmly. Threepio translated. "He says that is not entirely correct. That one of Jabba's bounty hunters would probably have caught up with Captain Solo sooner or later."

Lando only nodded quietly. He could not shake the horror, the dread that had filled him when he had witnessed Han's release from his carbonite tomb and believed him to have been permanently blinded by his ordeal. He had almost lost his grip on the spear which Han held out to him over the Sarlaac pit from eager joyful relief when he had realised that the man's eyesight was returning. It would take a long time for him to rid himself of the guilt that still plagued him over the suffering he had partly caused to his friend. He often heard the man's screams as he was tortured, echoing relentlessly in his dreams.

He shook his head and got to his feet. "Well, I think we could all use something to eat. I'll go and see what I can find."

Chewbacca ambled off towards Han's cabin, unable to resist checking on him for himself; and also wanting simply to reassure himself that he really was back. Leia smiled as she watched the shaggy being disappear into the corridor. She laughed to herself, remembering her first reaction to the Wookiee - a walking carpet, she had called him! Han could not possibly have found a more faithful, loving friend anywhere in the galaxy. She also stood and went to help Lando in the galley.

Leia looked up from her meal as the Wookiee returned and managed to squeeze his massive frame into the chair across the table from her. "Is he sleeping all right?" she asked.

The Wookiee nodded, but something in his posture revealed tension as he growled back to her. Again she listened to Threepio's translation.

"He is puzzled at why Captain Solo's door was open. He says he always sleeps with it closed."

"I know, Chewie." Leia replied softly, noticing Lando also listening to the reply, "I was a little worried about that too. He asked me to leave it open. He says it going to take him a while to get used to confining places again."

Calrissian moaned, put down his mug and stared at it guiltily.

"I'm sure it will wear off soon," Leia reassured. Lando nodded. "Come on, let's eat up before it gets cold." She advised cheerfully.

* * *

The darkness closed in on him. White clad arms reached for him. He struggled to back away, but they followed him inexorably, finally clutching at him, pinning him down. No, he thought desperately, please no, no more. Every nerve in his body caught fire as thousands of red hot needles dug deeply into them. He tried to scream, writhed to break free, but now cold, suffocating cold stifled any movement. He was being slowly crushed. The icy weight bore down, forcing his ribs on to his lungs. Can't breathe! The pressure built up, became unbearable. Agony tore through every muscle, threatened to grind every bone. Help please, somebody please help me! No one answered, no one would come. He was alone, alone ... He screamed.

"Gods! What was that!" Lando exclaimed, as Han's agonised screams resounded around the dining compartment. Leia dropped her spoon, her face turning a ghastly shade of grey. Chewbacca sprang to his feet. The sound suddenly stopped. The Wookiee glanced at Leia. They both turned stricken

expressions towards Han's cabin. The screams began again, even more strident.

Chewbacca raced down the corridor, Leia a few paces behind. Calrissian remained seated in shock, the horror of Beshin returning to him. "No, oh no," he groaned, before wearily getting to his feet and following. He entered Han's quarters just as a third wave of screams sent icy chills down his spine, Vader and Fett's impersonal, cruel masks again loomed into his thoughts.

The Wookiee had hold of Han, trying to restrain him as he writhed within his grasp without hurting him. He tried desperately to shake him awake, but the man was caught deeply in the horror of his visions. Tears streamed down Leia's lovely face as she looked on, calling, imploring him to wake up. Lando pushed past the Wookiee, raised his hand open-palmed, and glanced hesitantly to him for permission. Chewbacca nodded grimly. Lando slapped Han hard across the cheek. The man's screams halted, but he did not awaken. Within moments, he began to writhe again.

"Sorry," Lando said softly and hit him harder, once to each side of the face. Abruptly, Han's eyes opened, he blinked, stifled a hard-voiced cry of pain and stared blankly ahead; totally confused, not knowing where he was or what had happened. Chewbacca shook him gently, rumbling soothingly. Han's head turned and slowly his eyes focused on his friend. "Chewie?" he whispered. The Wookiee growled softly.

Han began to understand what had happened. "Another nightmare, huh?"

"Oh Han," Leia cried, taking his hand.

Han only now became aware of her and Lando's presence, "Uh, look I'm sorry," he mumbled, embarrassed.

"No you don't, Han!" Leia ground out fiercely between her tears, "Don't you dare apologise to us!" She began to sob softly, gulping huge breaths and trying to stop herself.

Han had never seen her so shaken. He embraced her gently, cursing himself inwardly for frightening her so badly. "Hey, Leia. Come on. It was just a dream. I'll get over it." He reassured, mustering as much confidence as he could.

"Oh damn!" Leia cursed. "Why is it you always end up comforting me!" she said, exasperated with herself and disgusted with her inability to hide her tears. Han grinned and pulled her closer to him. She lay her

head on his chest, pleased to see the return of his smile, seeing that in his concern for her, he had quickly forgotten his terror.

Lando decided he was no longer needed and that Han would only be embarrassed by his presence and discreetly left. Han smoothed down Leia's hair and looked up at his Wookiee friend as Chewbacca growled something to him. "Yeah, I guess it was worse than the last time," he admitted grudgingly.

"The last time?" Leia asked, puzzled as she looked into his eyes and sat back from him slightly to study his expression. She noticed that his face was dripping with sweat. "This has happened before? When? How?"

Han shrugged weakly. "I fell asleep while I was in the cell with Chewie," he frowned and stared down at the covers. "It wasn't so bad that time because the big lug had never let go of me from the moment I was thrown in there, and I told him I couldn't see. He woke me the instant it started."

"Oh Han." Leia comforted, stroking the damp hair from his eyes, 'You're going to have to tell us about it or it's just going to keep coming back."

"Yeah, I guess," Han mumbled.

Leia observed that he looked alarmingly pale and ill. "You need some good, hot kalin ... and some food!" she said firmly.

"Sounds good," Han smiled as she stood. Chewbacca placed a furry paw on her arm, indicating that he would get it, just as Lando entered carrying a tray with a flask and some mugs as well as a plate of the stew they had been eating. "Thought you could use some hot kalin in here," he suggested quietly, not raising his eyes to look at any of them, he put down the tray and turned to go.

"Hey Lando. Wait up!" Han called. Calrissian turned back but still could not meet his friend's gaze. "Lando," Han said firmly, "Dammit! Look at me will ya! I'm not talking to your fancy jacket you know!"

Lando could not help but smile as he lifted his eyes to look back at his friend, noting with relief that the man seemed to have recovered his irrepressible sense of humour, and now seemed to have calmed somewhat after the effects of the nightmare.

"That's better," Han grinned. "Look, it wasn't your fault. You couldn't have stopped Vader. I was angry back on Bespin because Luke was

walking into a trap because of me. You get that into your thick skull, or I'll ... I'll pound it into your head myself!"

Lando chuckled, "I think I'll pass on that, Han. I still remember that last punch."

Han laughed. "Good," he said, "Now take it easy on yourself, okay? I know what you did for me back on Tatooine and you don't owe me anything. You got that?"

"Sure, Han." Lando laughed, then added sincerely, "Thanks."

"Oh go on, get out of here!" Han grinned, "Who's mindin' the ship?"

Lando laughed once more, "Yeah, I guess I'd better go check. You rest up, okay?"

"Sure, sure."

Leia returned to Han's side with the cloth she had moistened and began to wipe the sweat from his face. "Hey, you two really missed your calling, you know," Han mocked, "You'd make a great pair of wetnurses."

Leia smiled as she handed Han the kalin, "Get some of this into you. You can't go back to sleep until you tell us about that dream."

Han winced and stared into the mug, "Leia, I'm ... I'm not sure I can talk about it."

"You have to, Han," she pleaded, gently touching her hand to his cheek, "please try."

Chewbacca rumbled something. Han laughed. "Okay, Chewie, okay!" Leia looked to him for a translation, wondering at what had been said that could so easily have lightened Han's mood. "He says I'd better get it out of my system because he doesn't plan on having his digestion or sleep ruined by me yelling all the time."

Leia laughed too and cuffed the Wookiee's fur with grateful affection. "Right. That settles it, now come on - out with it."

"Aw hell, Leia, it's just that ... well, I don't know, maybe its the darkness. It reminds me .. I ... every time I close my eyes I ..." he took a deep breath then plunged n quickly, wanting to get it over with, "I can feel those bastards strapping me onto that scan grid, then I remember it all over again." He smiled weakly back up at her, "I'll forget it soon."

Leia eyed him suspiciously - his torture had been agonising, but she knew he had been through similar experiences in the past, she had seen the scars. She was sure he had coped with it, been able to accept and control his feelings about it back on Bespin in the short time they had had together in the detention bay. There was something more, something he was not telling her. "Han, that's not it," she stated confidently, "At least, I know it was bad, but that's not all of it, is it?"

"Sure that's all! That's enough!" Han claimed angrily. "I can't remember anything else!" Seeing the hurt look on her face, Han swore at himself. He bent forward and kissed her forehead tenderly. "Gods Leia. I'm sorry. I don't know what got into me. I never meant to yell like that."

"Oh Han," Leia responded as she took his face in her hands, forcing him to look directly at her, "you had every right to yell. That must have sounded so callous. It's just that I was sure you were over that and I thought maybe ... are you sure that's all you remember?"

Han grinned and winked to Chewbacca, "Do you remember that Imperial we picked up over Vencath, Chewie? Couldn't shake him ... persistent, wasn't he?"

Chewbacca chuckled as Leia punched Han gently on the shoulder, "Please Han. Be serious. You can't go through life reliving your pain every time you fall asleep. Think back to the dream. Was there anything else?"

Han's pallid face creased into a frown as he concentrated. Fear suddenly clutched tightly at his throat, he couldn't breathe. He felt inexplicably cold. He shivered and took a gulping breath. There was something else, something that had happened to him after the carbon freeze. The fear became almost overwhelming, he stiffened, began fighting for breath, gasping. Leia reached out to him urgently. He barely noticed. He felt as if he had just dived into a icy pool, the shock of the cold forcing the breath from his lungs, his heart ... NO! He screamed, mentally fighting back the images threatening at the edge of consciousness. NO! There's nothing else. Nothing! He had simply gone to sleep and then woken in Leia's arms. That was all. He had been unconscious. He had!

He became aware that Leia was shaking him fearfully and Chewbacca was growling his concern. "Please Han, relax!" They were both urging. Han fought to control his breathing. Slowly, the fear lessened its grip on him and he lay back against the pillows, exhausted. Chewbacca growled an enquiry.

"No, Chewie, No!" he insisted. "There couldn't be anything after that. There couldn't be. It was just the torture. That's all."

"Han?" Leia asked, wondering what the Wookiee had said.

"Chewie just wanted to know if maybe it was ... the carbon freeze I was remembering in the dream. But it couldn't be that, Leia. I mean, there was some pretty bad pain when the cold first hit me, but then I must have passed out. I mean ... I couldn't have been conscious after that, could I?"

Leia felt a frightening dread arising within her. The way Han had asked that question - it was almost as if he were begging her to help him deny it. As it ... as if he had been conscious after he was frozen. Oh God, no, please! Leia cowered away from the horror of that image. Please no, don't let him have suffered like that! He had almost gone into deep shock a few moments ago when she has asked him to try to remember. If it were so hard for her to even face the possibility of such torment, it must be completely beyond Han's ability to even recognise.

If, if that was how it had been, she didn't have the necessary skill to help him. She couldn't risk having him remember here, now. He had almost stopped breathing when he had tried. Oh Maker! If he had been in agony, suffering conscious asphyxiation or even worse for every hour of these long weeks! The shock of the memory could drive him into insanity or even death. No wonder his mind had erected the defence of amnesia. His memories surfaced only as his subconscious mind took control during sleep. But should he ever be locked up somewhere, alone in the dark ... He would have to have trained help immediately.

"Leia?" Han asked, worried at her long silence.

"I'm sorry, Han. I was just thinking," she kissed him gently. Noticing that he was still shivering, she pulled the blankets back up around him. "Han, if it is something worse even than the torture," she said, carefully avoiding a direct answer to his question, "It's ... it's not something we should try to make you remember. Not this soon. I think we should wait until we get back to the medical frigate. After the way you reacted just now, you ... well you could go into shock. We'd best have a psych-med put you into trance first."

"Now wait a minute, Leia!" Han protested, sitting up again. "I'm not lettin' any of those mind-messers fool around with me!"

Leia insisted gently but firmly, "You'd rather keep having those nightmares?"

Han looked back to the covers, "No ... but ..."

"There's no buts about it, Han." Leia interrupted, "You know it's the only way. We can give you a sedative so you can sleep undisturbed for a few hours, all right?"

"Yeah, I guess. Okay." Han agreed reluctantly.

"Good." Leia smiled and handed him the plate, "But you're going to eat something first. You look as weak as a vintlet."

"Well, thanks a lot!" Han said with feigned insult. Taking the offered he suddenly realised he did feel ravenously hungry.

* * *

Leia had insisted that Han report immediately to the psych-med as soon as he had been given the all clear to dock with the medical frigate. Now she stared down anxiously at his sleeping face as Dr Arbin ushered her into his clinic. The man had been talking with Han for over two hours while she and Chewbacca had tried to keep from pacing up and down the corridor outside. Arbin had obviously not yet allowed Han to awaken from his partially drugged trance. She wondered fearfully why he had chosen to call herself and the Wookiee before reviving him.

"Your Highness, Chewbacca," he explained as she took a seat beside the bunk on which Han lay. She took up his limp hand, "I wanted you both here to reassure him if need be when he awakens. I'm not certain how he will react once he remembers consciously what he just told me while in trance."

Chewbacca growled anxiously. Leia voiced their question, "How bad?" she whispered fearfully.

"It is severe traumatic shock." Arbin frowned. "He is fortunate that he has such a strong will, such powerful defences, a sure sense of self. I do not think many men could have survived the experience sane."

Chewbacca placed a comforting arm about Leia's shoulders as she made a little sob and paled, visibly shaken by this statement.

Hastily Arbin reassured them. "That is why I am reasonably confident that he will eventually make a full recovery. If he has made it this far, he has already overcome the worst of it entirely without professional

help. You said he was blind when you first released him?" Leia nodded. "And then later he took an active part in the escape?"

Leia smiled down at the sleeping Corellian, remembering his quick thinking and determination which had saved Lando's life. "Yes," she replied softly.

Arbin shook his head wonderingly. "He must have incredible courage." Chewbacca laid his other massive paw affectionately down on Han's shoulder and woofed a single word. The doctor glanced at his translator and chuckled, "Yes, I guess that too." Leia glanced at him enquiringly, "Stubbornness." Arbin informed her laughingly, then added sincerely, "And some very good friends." Both Leia and Chewbacca's gaze shifted down to the floor in embarrassment at the depth of feeling in the man's compliment.

Sighing, the psych-med gathered himself to tell them the rest. "Your Highness, Chewbacca; I'm not sure how to tell you this. It is going to be a shock for you as well." Again he hesitated before continuing, "He was conscious and in pain for the full duration of his imprisonment in that carbonite."

Chewbacca threw back his head and howled his sorrow. Leia clutched tightly at Han's hand, drew in a deep breath, swayed and covered her face with her left hand. "Oh God. Oh God, no," she said in a barely audible whisper, "I thought that that might have been it, but I hoped, I prayed ... oh, God."

Dr Arbin hurried to her side holding out a glass of lagmeld. Leia sipped it, grateful for its warming strength and for Chewbacca's continued supporting arm. Finally, she managed to push back the horror of Arbin's words enough to be able to ask the next question. "What do we do now?"

"He is a very determined, brave man," Arbin answered calmly, "I have implanted a subconscious command for him to accept, if not remember, the truth of what happened to him after the freezing. He will not as yet actually remember what it felt like," both Leia and Chewbacca grimaced at the idea, "only that it did happen. It will be as if it happened to someone else. I am hoping that gradually, I will be able to help him remember it all, clearly, while he is fully conscious. He has got to come to terms with the fear of remembering, or ... it will slowly destroy him."

Chewbacca rumbled anxiously. Leia nodded grimly, "He will now as soon as you awaken him?"

"Yes. I'll do it now if you are both ready?" Both Leia and the Wookiee nodded. Leia tightened her hold on Han's hand. Chewbacca still clasped both friends' shoulders.

Han heard a familiar voice ordering him to awaken, and was instantly aware of Leia's anxious face staring down at him. Suddenly, something else flooded into his mind. Immediately he recognised it as the memory of which he had been so afraid. He began to try to block it out but then realised he was safe, that he was remembering it only in a detached way, remote from feeling. He recalled it now, he had been aware, awake ... oh Ashtar! No wonder he was having nightmares!

"Han, how do you feel?" Leia asked fearfully as Arbin and Chewbacca studied his expression carefully for signs of shock.

"I'm okay, Leia." Han replied shaking as Chewbacca helped him to sit up, "I remember, I mean I don't exactly remember but I do know what happened to me."

"Drink some of this, Captain Solo," Arbin instructed, "It will help settle you and overcome any lingering effects of the drug I gave you."

"Oh Han, I'm so sorry," Leia said tenderly as she watched Han swallow the offered liquid, "If only we had known. We would have moved systems to get you out sooner."

Han's familiar cheeky grin reappeared, much to his friends' delight and Arbin's surprise. "Just as well you didn't know then, or you would all have gone rushing off without thinking properly and probably gotten yourselves killed."

Leia recognised the truth in his statement. Even with Luke's further training and newly acquired skills, it had been a hazardous rescue. If they had tried to reach him sooner it could very easily have had tragic consequences. Thank the Maker she was spared the agony of knowing how he was suffering through all those long, lonely days of waiting for news from Lando and Chewbacca.

"Well, are you just going to lie around all day," she teased, "or are you going to help with the work. There's a lot to be done to prepare for the attack on the new Death Star, you know."

"Some things never change!" Han groaned in mock disgust, as he got to his feet. He would never admit it, but he was looking forward to seeing all the friends he had made during his two years with the Alliance and

somehow he very much wanted to be a part of their coming battle. After what Vader had done to him, to Luke, to Leia ... but even so he knew his new sense of commitment was far more than a result of the desire for revenge. Somehow, and he grinned ruefully at the thought, he belonged. This was home. He cared for these people very much. He would do everything he could to ensure they weren't hurt.

Han looked gratefully toward Arbin. The man had helped him remember at least the truth. He wasn't fully cured, he suspected the nightmares would still be with him, but perhaps now they would be a little less painful. It was a beginning. He clasped the man's hand, "Thank you," he said sincerely.

Arbin nodded. "I'll be needing to see you regularly, Captain. You still have a long way to go. You are going to have to remember everything fully before you'll be able to sleep soundly again. In the meantime, I can give you something to help you sleep ..."

Han shook his head stubbornly, "No. Thanks, but no. I'm not takin' any drugs. Chewie can wake me if things get too bad. I'll be okay."

Arbin was doubtful but recognised the fierce independence of the man. He was used to fighting his battles alone except for the support of his non-human friend. It must have been hard for the man to ask for help. He wouldn't push his advice now, or the pilot might not come back at all. "All right, Captain, but take it easy. It's going to take some time. We'll have to go slow. If you should remember it all too soon ... well ..." he left the grim conclusion unspoken.

"Yeah," I know." Han nodded. Come on Chewie, Leia. Stars know what Lando's done to the Falcon. Anyway, we can't trust those Rebs near her, I saw the gleam in their eyes." He took Leia's arm as she laughed and they left the room.

* * *

Luke was pleased to be reunited with his friends and especially happy to see Han looking well and strong. He was not particularly surprised by the news of Han's newly acquired rank. He had sensed the change in the man back on Tatooine.

He hugged all three of his friends affectionately again as they adjourned to the privacy of the Falcon to discuss the upcoming mission to Endor, only two standard days away. As Luke sat down quietly, his Force heightened senses detected a certain tenseness running between his three companions which had nothing to do with the pending battle. He opened

himself to the Force more fully and concentrated on his sister's aura. He sensed a deep concern, some shock and pain, but not for herself, for Han.

Quickly, Luke scanned the tall Corellian - surely the man seemed well enough, back to his old self, playfully laughing and joking with Chewbacca as they left to check some instrumentation which Lando had installed. Luke turned back to his sister who was pouring some kalin into a mug for him.

"Leia, what is it? Is something wrong with Han?" he asked softly, "he seems all right, but you're worried about him. Something's not right, is it?"

"Luke," Leia explained, "He's been having the most horrific nightmares, waking up screaming sometimes. The psych-med is trying to help him but I don't think it's working too well. The nightmares just keep recurring." Leia's gaze shifted from her brother's concerned, gentle eyes to stare down at the small hands she clasped tightly in her lap. Her next words were barely a whisper. "Oh Luke, the thought of how he must have suffered is so bad ... I ... I"

Leia hung her head and turned away, but not before Luke noticed the unshed tears glistening in her dark eyes. He moved swiftly round the table to her side and embraced her gently. "Leia, it's all right. It's over now." He comforted, "You know Han. He'll get over it eventually. He just needs time."

"Luke, oh Luke; I wish it were that simple." Leia took a deep breath before looking again into those strangely wise eyes. Maybe here in the Jedi that shone so brightly from those depths, lay the answer. She wondered how she could tell him gently. He would after all, blame himself for Han's fate. The carbon freeze had been meant for Luke, Han had been simply she closed her eyes tightly against the image ... an experiment.

"Leia?" Luke's anxious tone brought Leia's hand to touch his before she continued.

Quietly, calmly she told him. "Luke, Han was ... conscious and in pain the whole time."

Luke stiffened as the shock of the words filled him. Horrified, he stared back at his sister. "Oh Force, no, Leia. God, I should have known. I thought I sensed his presence sometimes, in my sleep. I ... I had terrible nightmares about him. But I thought - no I wanted - to believe that's all they were. I didn't want to accept the truth, I

blocked his pain. Oh Leia, all because of me. He would never have suffered like that but for me." Luke's hand clenched firmly about Leia's. "And I should have gotten him back sooner. If only I had ..."

"Luke, stop it!" Leia ordered sharply, "That's enough! I don't want to hear any more of that kind of talk. We can't change the past. We've got to try to help him now." Seeing the remorse still deeply entrenched in the young man's expression, Leia added firmly, "Even Chewie says the bounty hunters would have caught up to him sooner or later. If Vader hadn't frozen him like that ... well ... Jabba might have ... have killed him before we could get to him."

Leia was relieved to see a slight smile brighten the grave face before her. "You're right, Leia. I'm sorry." Luke shook his head and grinned ruefully, "I was supposed to be going to help you."

Leia chuckled, "Believe me, Luke; I know the feeling!"

The answering laugh was only short, Luke's voice was again solemn as he continued. "Leia ... I ... I even tried to reach out to Han through the Force once. In case, he could, somehow, hear me. I wanted him to know we hadn't forgotten him, that we were coming for him. I don't know whether or not I succeeded because all I felt was ... well ... such intense pain that I blacked out." The young Jedi snorted in self-disgust. "After that, I guess I just refused to believe that Han could be hurting like that. I wouldn't admit it to myself."

Noting that the guilty expression had returned, Leia pleaded, "Luke, listen to me. There was no way we could have helped him immediately," she assured, "Don't you think you did the right thing? If you had allowed yourself to feel what he was going through, if you had ever told me and Chewie - and we would have seen it in your eyes - how do you think we could ever have stayed level-headed enough to be of any use to Han?"

Luke nodded, then looked up, a determined light shining in his eyes. "Well, I can help him now Leia," he said resolutely. "He's not going to keep reliving it in his sleep. That's one thing Yoda taught me that I'm going to put to good use right now."

"What, Luke?" Leia asked hopefully.

"He taught me how to reach into another person's mind and unravel any tension or pain there. I'm sure I can help Han if I can convince him to let me use the Force in his mind."

Leia smiled ruefully, "I hope you can, Luke. This is going to be interesting."

"What's going to be interesting?" Han called cheerfully as he returned to the main compartment, overhearing Leia's remark.

Only now did Luke notice the dark circles under Han's eyes, the thinness of the man's face, and the carefully screened weariness of his movements. He was going to need at least one night's sound sleep before he could tackle Endor, or he would wind up making a fatal error.

"Han," Luke explained gently, "Leia told me about your nightmares, about what happened to you after ..." about to offer some expression of sympathy, Luke paused, remembering how much Han hated such show of pity, "Han, my Jedi Master gave me some special training in healing skills. If you let me, I'm sure I can help you get rid of those nightmares once and for all."

Han felt dubious but hopeful. He remembered the incredible feats Luke had performed back on Tatooine. He was a Jedi Knight now. He knew he couldn't tolerate the lack of restful sleep much longer and he couldn't be taking sedatives on the mission. "Okay, Luke. I'm game," he grinned, "let's give it a try."

Surprised by Han's easy acceptance of his offer, Luke realised it was only a reflection of just how desperately Han must need respite. Again he grimaced inwardly at the memory of his own visions of Han's agony. Force! How could anyone have withstood torment like that for weeks without help.

"Right Han," Luke smiled at his friend, "It would be best if you lie down first."

After Han had settled himself comfortably on his bunk, Luke began explaining the procedure. "Han, I'm going to reach into your mind with the Force. You'll feel a slight shock at first, something like a bright flash of light. Then I'll start probing for your memories of what you felt in that carbonite ..."

Han drew in a deep breath and tensed himself at the thought of again having to relive that agony.

"No, Han," Luke quickly reassured as he felt the man's fear, "It'll be different this time. I'll be with you. I'll help you. I'll draw the pain away from you, so you can remember it without hurting, then I'll slowly let you take over again so that you can handle the memories

consciously without shock. You will be able to hear my voice inside your mind, just do exactly as I say, all right?"

Han winked at him, "Sure kid. I trust ya."

Luke grinned, feeling warmed by his friend's faith in him. He prayed that it would work well - after all it had only been theory before - Han was his first patient. "Okay. Then let's get started. First you have to relax completely. Try not to think of anything at all, just make your mind a blank."

Han shut his eyes and began breathing deeply. Satisfied as he saw the man's muscles become limp as he drifted towards sleep, Luke lay his hand gently on his forehead and felt for his aura. Han stiffened momentarily then recognised his friend's psychic touch and relaxed again. Instantly, a bright comforting light filled his mind, already he could feel it bathing away his anxiety. Luke's voice commanded softly in his head for him to remember - 'Go back to the carbon freeze platform on Bospin.'

Suddenly Han found himself again looking into Leia's grief stricken eyes, he felt sick with worry for her. A thrill of fear ran through him as the platform began lowering. Before that memory could become real, he felt Luke's presence come between him and it in such a way that he now appeared to be watching the scene remote from his body. His emotions returned to a relatively relaxed state.

Luke watched as his friend's breathing steadied again. Gently, he commanded through the Force for Han to remember what came next. Pain slammed into Han's mind and body, overwhelming agony began to course through every nerve. He opened his mouth to scream. Abruptly the pain became separate from him, something he was somehow aware of but could not actually feel. Luke staggered as the full weight of Han's agony flooded into his mind. He struggled to hold onto the comforting light of the Force, direct the pain outwards away from himself. Succeeding, at least partially, Luke probed deeper into Han's mind, searching now for the man's terror at being trapped, unable to seek help, move or even breathe, lost in darkness.

Now Han felt fear tighten every muscle to snapping point. Gods! He couldn't breathe! I have to breathe! Try! Darkness, I'm blind! Pressure - please no, don't let me be crushed!

Beyond him, Luke was stunned by the enormity of the man's suffering. He was losing him! No! With a sudden surge of power, Luke fought his way back to his friend's side.

Han sighed in relief, realising he had been holding his breath in sympathy with the horror of his vision. Luke's presence had pushed between him and the memory, shielding him, protecting him, comforting. The light was all around him now, the darkness was gone at last. He felt loved, cared for, no longer alone. He had never felt so relaxed, everything would be all right while ever the light was there and Luke's voice assured it would never leave, it would always be there for him. Always a place in which he could seek refuge when needed.

Feeling that Han had found and accepted the comforting embrace of the light of the Force, Luke began gently directing him, instructing him in how to channel the fear and pain away from himself. Luke opened his own aura to Han to demonstrate how it was done. As Han's aura touched his, Luke was momentarily stunned by its power. Han was a beacon for the Force, his radiant soul amplifying it incredibly. Luke instantly understood from whence had come the man's great love of life. The light that always shone brightly in those hazel eyes had been reflecting the power of the Force within him. Yet he had denied its existence! Even under the threatening weight of Han's pain and fear, Luke could not help but smile inwardly.

Han sensed his friend's gentle amusement, shared it and also smiled. Recognising that Luke was straining to hold back the flood tide of agony from Han's mind, he began cautiously easing some of it back to himself, allowing it to be absorbed into and disintegrated by the warm glow of the light as Luke had shown him. Gradually, the entire weight of the horror of the experience was returned to him. He could look upon the memory without recoiling. It was unable to harm him. The light was still there and somehow Han knew Luke was right - it always had been and always would be with him. No amount of pain or fear, and he realised with a shock of recognition - loneliness, or isolation - could ever hurt him so deeply again.

Han smiled and sighed softly. Suddenly he felt immensely drowsy. Luke was urging him to sleep, explaining that having used the Force so intensely on his first try would have exhausted him. He must sleep. He would be able to do so peacefully now. Han nodded mentally and was instantly lost to a deep, dreamless sleep.

Luke straightened and opened his eyes. He looked down at his sleeping friend as he covered him with a blanket. He smiled gently, "The Force will be with you always, Han." He left the cabin, himself now also feeling totally drained, in desperate need of sleep. But first he must speak to Leia and Chewbacca, ease their concern, tell them that they need not worry any further. Han would suffer no more. He was no longer alone. The Force was with him.

* * *

The forest of Endor seemed ominously still, expectantly hushed, as the four Rebels gazed anxiously upon the encampment below.

"Me an' Chewie'll take care of this. You stay here," General Solo directed.

"Quietly," Luke advised as he saw an all too familiar eager gleam in his impulsive friend's hazel eyes, "There might be more of them down there."

Han's expression was all injured innocence, then the rounded eyes narrowed into a look of devilish mischief. Solo's large, capable hands directed his hesitant friends' attention to the obviously indestructible man before them. "Hey it's me!" he admonished with a grin.

Luke and Leia exchanged exasperated sighs, rolled their eyes beseechingly, then grinned, inwardly glowing with the same warming, shared thought:- "That's Han Solo all right! ... He's really back."

THE END

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