

[Back To Index](#)

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Call Back the Dream

by [Sheila Paulson](#)

Dr. Niada Karlee gave her new patient a final injection then turned to her fellow crewman with a relieved smile. "He'll live now, Dan," she said. "For awhile there, I wasn't quite sure. I wonder," she added, "Who he is"

Daneen Lathan, who was one of the ship's pilots and a good friend, said, "It doesn't matter who he is, Ni. Worrying about him won't do you any good. You know what's going to happen to him."

"Don't remind me," she said wryly. "A lot of good it does me to be a doctor when I wind up with one of these."

"Easy, love. You knew what you were getting into when you shipped on the *Kestrel*."

"Sure I did," she retorted. "As much as you did. Neither of us had any choice, did we?"

"More than he did," Daneen said. "How is he?"

"He's passed from unconsciousness into normal sleep, and he ought to be reviving any time now. But it was a bad one, Dan. I was starting to get worried."

"Cap wouldn't have been really rough on you the first time you lost one, "Dan reassured her. "He can be nasty, but he does give the crew a fair chance the first time. It wouldn't have been too bad."

"I was more concerned for my patient," she snapped, angry because it wasn't completely true. "Cap worries about profit, and when he loses money, there's hell to pay. And he doesn't really have final say."

"No, but he does stand up for the crew."

That was the truth and the only advantage Niada had found in being ship's doctor on the *Kestrel*. The line had bought her contract from Jall Strawn on Gridge where she had been practicing before. Strawn could have turned her over to the Empire when he caught her trying to help a wounded rebel, but he opted for profit instead and made a deal with Kecipor Shipping, selling her services for three years. It was better than being executed as a rebel, and when her three years were up, Niada could either renegotiate her contract with Kecipor or go her own way. All she lost was three years out of her life. But the thing that bothered Niada was that she was not a rebel--or hadn't been one before. She was a doctor first and foremost, and it was not in her to turn away someone who was suffering, no matter what side he was on. She was still young enough to have been idealistic, but that had died when she found herself on the *Kestrel*, little better than a slave, and all for helping a wounded man without stopping to ask his allegiance first.

Once on the *Kestrel*, more shocks followed, for the *Kestrel* ran slaves and ran them legally. It carried gladiators for the arena. It was said that the Emperor enjoyed such contests, and since he preferred fights to the death, volunteers were not easily come by. The *Kestrel* acquired new gladiators in much the same way as they had acquired their ship's doctor. This one, Niada knew, looking at the sleeping man, had been sold to the Kecipor Line by Jabba the Hut on Tatooine, their last stop, for failing to pay a debt. Loss of one's freedom seemed

an awfully high price to pay for such a thing, and Jabba had given the man no option.

Niada muttered a curse to herself, causing Daneen to cone over and put his arm around her shoulders. "Buck up, Niada," he said soothingly.

"I hate it, Dan. I hate it. I've saved his life so that he can lose it in the arena. Maybe it would have been better just to let him die. At least then he wouldn't have had to face being a slave."

"Nonsense. At least this way, he does have a chance to survive. Maybe not a big one, but a chance. He looks tough enough. A successful gladiator is sometimes freed. And he might even be able to escape. It's been known to happen."

"Not very often. Oh, damn it, Dani, sometimes I get so sick of this that it doesn't seem worth it."

"You've only got two more years to go, sweetheart. You could have five, like me."

"How do you stand it, Dan?"

"Well, kid, I wasn't all that respectable to begin with. I was a smuggler, and I got caught. When things get bad, I just tell myself that it could have been worse; I could be dead or doing time in an Imperial prison. Long as I'm alive, I win. And I didn't have as much to lose as you did, Ni." He gave her shoulders a squeeze. "You know, I think I've seen this fellow before. I can't remember his name, though. He's Corellian, in the same line of work as I was. Used to run with a Wookiee, maybe still does, I don't know. He's pretty sharp. Might do all right for himself. He's got luck you wouldn't believe."

"You mean he used to."

"Oh, well, everybody comes up against somebody with better luck sooner or later. It must've just been his turn. Too bad we couldn't take him on as crew. He's one of the best pilots I've ever seen."

Niada looked down at her patient, relieved to see that his general condition was rapidly improving. For a man who had been put through a somewhat primitive carbon freezing process, he was lucky to even be alive. As she watched him, his eyes opened, and he looked up at her. For a few minutes, he didn't seem to be aware of his surroundings, his eyes blank and unfocused. Niada checked her instruments in concern, then reached out to touch his shoulder gently. "Can you hear me?" she asked him.

He tried to speak, but at first the words wouldn't come. His eyes looked a bit more focused, but now they showed confusion. He moistened his lips and tried again. "Wha's goin' on?" he muttered faintly, making a feeble effort to sit up. "Is...this's a ship, ain't it? Wha' ship? Where're we goin'?"

"Lie back," Niada ordered, putting a hand on his chest to restrain him. "I'm Dr. Karlee, and you're on the *Kestrel*. You've been quite ill, but you're coming along nicely now. You'll be just fine."

He lay back but only because he didn't have the strength to resist. "*Kestrel*?" he mused weakly, then his face darkened. "Kecipor Line, right? 's a damn slave ship...you don't look much like...a slaver, doc." The sarcasm was heavy in his voice. He was starting to sound more alert, but he was still very weak.

"I'm not," she said quickly. "I'm on bond contract, as much a prisoner as you."

"Like hell," he said. "You go free...when your term is up. Me, I'm for the arena, ain't I? That's what the *Kestrel* buys slaves for, ain't it?"

"Yes," Daneen admitted, "Sorry, buddy. At least it's not the spice mines of Kessel. Don't t know if you remember ire or not--I'm Daneen Lathan. Did runs out of Slythe three or four years back. I used to see you and your Wookiee pal when you..." He fell silent abruptly at the look in the other man's eyes, a look that held a sort of desperate emptiness, as if he had discovered an unexpected void where something important had always been. "What's the matter?" Dan asked. "What's wrong?"

"You say you know me?" he said, pushing aside Niada 's restraining hands and dragging himself into a sitting position despite his obvious weakness. He grabbed Dan's arm. "Who am I then? What's my name?" Sitting up made his head swim, but he tried to ignore it.

"You don't know?" Niada asked involuntarily, realizing at once how stupid that sounded.

"I can't remember," he admitted. "Damn it, I just can't remember."

"But...your memory isn't completely gone. You knew about the *Kestrel* carrying slaves and about the arena ."

"Yeah, but I can't remember nothin' about me not even my name."

"I've been trying to think of your name," Dan said, "But it hasn't come to me yet. I think it will though, in time,"

"And you're going to remember on your own," Niada assured him. "This must be a side effect of the carbon freezing you were put through. You aren't well yet, and it'll take time for you to recover. Don't worry. There are ways to treat temporary amnesia."

"Yeah, but what if it ain't temporary? Dammit, I gotta know who I am." Reluctantly he surrendered to exhaustion and the pressure of Niada's hands and lay down again with relief.

"I'll tell you what I know," Dan volunteered. "Maybe it'll help. You're a Corellian, and I think you're a smuggler like me. You fly a modified Corellian freighter; can't come up with its name either, sorry. You're one of the best pilots around. You have a Wookiee copilot. That's all that comes to me. Does it help at all?" Dan hoped it did. Somehow the plight of his fellow smuggler bothered him, and he wished he could do more to help.

"I don't know. A Wookiee..." He squeezed his eyes shut in an effort to concentrate, and for an instant, he could picture a furry face, blue eyes stricken with grief, staring at him. But the memory was somehow too painful to hold, and it melted away even though he tried vainly to call it back,

"Cap should have a record of the transaction," Dan said, helpfully, "Why don't I go and see if I can wheedle it out of him."

"I've seen it," Niada said, "It doesn't list a name, I'm sorry. Only that Jabba the Hut sold you for non payment of a debt."

"Jabba?" He tested the name thoughtfully, but although it caused an instinctive sensation of distaste, he couldn't recall why or bring anything else to mind. He felt utterly drained.

"Welt," said Niada suddenly. "I was there when Jabba turned you over to Cap. Seems like he called you something. I've only just remembered. It was..." Her brow furrowed at the effort of recalling something she had scarcely heeded at the time, then her face cleared. "Han," she said triumphantly. "He called you Han. He said, 'That'll teach you, Han my boy, that no one meddles with Jabba the Hut and wins.'"

"Hey, that's it," cried Dan. "I remember now. Solo. Han Solo. That's it. I knew it'd come back to me."

Niada smiled, "So we know that such, Han. And I'll try to help you with the rest. But at least you know your name now, You're Han Solo."

"Han Solo," he echoed, trying it out. "Yeah, it does feel right somehow." He drew a rather unsteady breath. "Doesn't help me to remember anything else, but it's better'n nothin'." He turned his hazel eyes on Niada and gave her a sudden lopsided smile of unexpected charm. "Thanks," he said.

"I wish it could have been more," she replied, smiling back, "But you'll remember on your own soon. Sleep now, Han. Maybe it'll be better when you wake up."

Han was still too weak to resist. His eyes closed, and in a minute, he was sleeping again. Niada pulled the blankets over him and raised her eyes to Dan. "Well," she said bitterly. "At least the amnesia has pushed the thought of slavery out of his head."

Dan said slowly, choosing his words with care, "I saw that look you gave him, Ni."

Her eyes widened. "Dani, you're not *jealous*?" she asked incredulously.

"Well," he confessed, half embarrassed, "They always said that Solo had quite a way with the ladies."

"I can see why," she admitted to Dan's alarm. "That smile could melt harder hearts than mine. But this lady's heart is already spoken for, remember, you idiot?"

"I love your declarations of affection," he said, relaxing and squeezing her hand. "The thing is, he got to me too. You're right, we've got a lousy job." His face hardened. "But we don't have a choice, kiddo. We're bonded. We jump ship and we've got nowhere to go."

"I know that. I'd be a fool not to. Oh, Dani, sometimes I just can't bear it."

He pulled her close and held her tightly. "Well, at least we found each other. That's something, isn't it?"

"It's the only thing that makes any of this bearable," she said, clinging to him tightly for a moment before she broke free to check her patient once more.

"He going to be okay?" Dan wanted to know.

"Oh, I think so. I'll run a few mere tests, see if I can't find out what's causing the amnesia." She frowned.

"I don't know how the carbon freezing could have done it, you know. I wonder if maybe the events leading up to his being frozen may have simply been too painful for him to face yet. You'll notice he didn't even question me when I mentioned that that was what had happened to him."

"You're right about that, but he had so much else on his mind right then that he might not even have registered what you said to him. He's no coward, Ni. I do know that much about him."

"I never said he was," she replied calmly, "Only that some things are just too much to bear sometimes. He's still very weak, not quite ready to deal with a major crisis. I think he'll remember in time, when he's a little stronger and feeling better."

"I suppose you know best, Ni. Well, I've got to get some rest or I'll fall asleep at my post tomorrow and Cap will have me for breakfast." He gave her a brief kiss and went out.

Niada smiled after him for a second, then she turned back to Han. "We've got a bit of work ahead of us, you and I," she told him though he was sleeping and couldn't hear her. "I wonder if we'll be up to it." She set up her med-scan equipment and began to run some tests.

When she had the results, she took them to Cap.

Alonzo Withess, captain of the *Kestrel*, was, by necessity, a hard man, but he was also said to be reasonable. Niada did not have very such contact with him. As long as her care of crew and slaves was adequate, he left her alone. He had not gone out of his way to make her time on the *Kestrel* easy for her, but he had not been actively hostile yet either. Niada had always heard that he treated his crew fairly, and she hoped it was true because she was a little afraid of how he would react when she made her report.

Cap never seemed to sleep. When Niada pressed the buzzer for admittance to his quarters, the door slid open at once to reveal the captain engaged in punching reports into his computer log. "Dr. Karlee," he said, "Come in and fill me in. I've been expecting you. I can see by your eyes that I'm not going to like your report though. Solo hasn't died, has he?"

"No, he's alive," she said coolly. "Physically he's making a normal recovery, though it wasn't easy. That freezing process wasn't a normal cryogenic

procedure, and it could have done a lot of damage to his system, but he's coming along just fine now."

"Physically, you said?" asked Cap, picking up on the main point at once, as she had feared he would. Cap never seemed to miss anything.

"Yes," she admitted. "He's experiencing some sort of psychological trauma that has affected his memory. I haven't been able to find a physical cause for it, and in his present condition, chemical treatment of any kind could prove dangerous--he's not up to it yet. And I absolutely refuse to try a mind probe. In his current weakened state, it would probably kill him. You don't want that,"

"Amnesia, eh?" Cap sounded furious. "When I run into Jabba the Hut again, he'd better have a damn good explanation for this unless he wants big trouble. Amnesia? I don't like it, doctor, not one damn bit."

"You'll like it even less in a minute, sir," she said. "The thing is, while he's in this condition, I can't certify him fit for the arena."

"Dammit, why, if he's physically all right..."

"Because for one thing, you've never brought anyone to the games who wasn't fully satisfactory." Niada had no pride in that record, but she knew that Cap did, "And besides, I couldn't guarantee a person in such a mental state. You could never tell how he'd react."

"What about hypnotherapy?"

"Well, it works sometimes, but I'm not a specialist, and in most cases it works because the therapist knows the background already and can use it to

advantage. In this case, I'd be going into it cold. I'll do it, but I can't guarantee anything."

"I won't order it, then. Medicine is your field, Doctor, and you've been satisfactory so far." There was a slight emphasis on the last two words. "Dammit, Doc, I put a lot of money into this man. I don't want to have to take a loss. You're supposed to be a good doctor. I'll expect results from you. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir. Daneen says he's seen him around, though, and he says Solo is one of the best pilots he's ever seen. Couldn't you use him as crew for awhile and get back your investment? I heard you were wanting to sign someone on."

"You won't certify him for the arena, but you'd turn him loose on my ship?" Cap asked skeptically.

"It's not the same thing," she explained with exaggerated patience. "If he's a good pilot, it would be a routine job, something he's used to. Doing something familiar might help him get his memory back."

"We could use another good pilot, sure," Cap mused. "Lathan's good, but Sellis isn't worth much. The problem is, once we started using Solo as crew, there's no way I could let him go to the arena. It'd create bad feelings all through the ship, and that could lead to trouble."

Niada held her breath waiting. This was what she had hoped for. Cap looked at her angrily, as if it were her fault, then he slapped his palms in exasperation. "I can't sign him on till he's fit," he said, "Talk to me about it then. If he still can't remember, I might consider it. But I want your word, Doctor, that you will work on helping him get his memory back. I'll find out if you don't. Your job is to make people well. Do it. What happens to them afterwards is no longer your responsibility."

"That's nice in theory, Cap, but when it comes to people it isn't quite as easy." She managed a reluctant smile. "It's something like your not selling a crewman into the arena, I think."

Cap frowned at her. "Could be. But that doesn't change a thing. Get him well, if you can, if not, get him fit and I'll sign him on. That's the best I can offer, doc."

"If that's the best, I'll grab it."

"Do that." He gave her a sour look. "For a good doctor, you aren't always a bargain, lady."

"Would you rather have an inferior doctor who was a yes-man?"

"I might be better off," he replied without enthusiasm. "Go away now and do your damn job. Leave me to figure how I'm going to get back my investment. The company never loses; it's always the ship. It'll come out of your pocket, Karlee, if we lose on him, and that's a promise."

"This ship is way ahead in profits, and you know it," she retorted.

"Maybe. Get back to work and do what you can for him. If he's as good as Dan says he is, he could be a help to us. I've got enough on him for a five year contract."

Five years, Niada reflected, was better than being dead, and if Han Solo didn't think so, he had to be made to feel that way. Even bonded, he would qualify for a share of the *Kestrel's* profits--the Kecipor Line was successful enough to be generous--and bonded crews were cheaper than hiring for pay. Some beings worked well under bonding, but many humans seemed to dislike it, and Niada

suspected that Han Solo, who had shown evidence of hating the idea of slavery, was going to hate this too.

It was morning, ship's time, when Han Solo awoke again, and for a instant, he lay assessing his surroundings. The *Kestrel's* Med Center was fairly large for a class L freighter, but then a slave ship would need more than the average amount of medical area. Sitting up and looking around, he made two discoveries; first that he was the only patient in the room, and second, that yesterday's weakness was almost gone. He still didn't feel very energetic, but at least it didn't take all his strength just to remain sitting up.

He didn't want to think about not remembering it made him too uncomfortable. So far, he'd managed to keep it on the edges of his awareness, but it wouldn't stay there; it kept flashing into his consciousness like a laser blast, too sharp and painful to be ignored. He didn't know who he was, couldn't remember anything about himself at all. That girl--doctor, he corrected himself, though she didn't look old enough to be a doctor--and Daneen Lathan had told him that his name was Han Solo, and he was certain only of that much. Lathan said he was a freighter pilot, maybe a smuggler. Well, probably. He'd known he was on a ship; the feel of a ship in space seemed natural to him. The Wookiee, yeah, that sounded right too, and there had been that flash of memory, if that's what it was. Not a very happy memory, though. It wasn't easy to face, but he had to know who he was. He had to. So he closed his eyes and tried to think about the Wookiee.

It was about as easy as resisting the thrust of a ship launching and just as successful. Even yesterday's bit of memory seemed vague to him when he tried to recall it. Unsuccessful, he abandoned the attempt, muttering curses to himself in several different languages. If he tried hard, he could identify the languages. He could even name the planets where the languages were spoken and describe those planets. But when it came to remembering being there or recalling specific people who lived there, nothing came through. It was as if every personal thing had been erased from his mind.

The doctor arrived then, smiling at him when she saw that he was awake. "Good morning, Han. You look a lot better today."

"Yeah, I feel better."

"I'm glad," she said. "You'll keep gaining strength now, and I think that'll help you to remember."

"It better," he said. "I gotta know who I am. Why don't you tell me how I got here. Maybe that'll help."

"All right. " As she spoke she was running a med scan, pleased at this morning's results. "We got you from Jabba the Hut. He seems like a pretty unscrupulous character. Cap says he's bought contracts from him before."

"Contracts," Han said roughly. "Say what you mean, damn it. Slaves! Jabba sells slaves. Your captain buys slaves. At least I never ran slaves."

"You remember that?"

He looked startled. "I...I'd have to, wouldn't I? But I couldn't prove it; it just feels right. Hell, it'll have to wait. Go on. You said something yesterday about me being frozen?" He sounded like he was wondering if he had heard her right.

"Yes," she admitted. "I know this much. You owed Jabba some money, and when he didn't pay him as soon as he wanted you to, he put out a contract on you. When a bounty hunter brought you in, you had been put through some sort of carbon freezing process. From the trouble I had reviving you, I don't think that it was intended to be used on humans."

"Meaning somebody tried to kill me and Jabba and the bounty hunter got lucky?" he asked bitterly.

"We don't know that, Han." But she wondered if that might not be the truth and a part of the reason for his amnesia.

"It sounds that way to me."

"Han, you're alive," she said comfortingly. "You survived it. Try to think of that instead."

"Sure, alive as a slave. That's some option."

"Han, I want to help you. Please believe that. Will you trust me?"

"No." His answer came so quickly that it sounded almost automatic.

"But Han, why not?" she asked softly. "I want to help you. I know that you've got no reason to trust anyone on this ship, and I can't really blame you for that, but there may be a way to keep you out of the arena. I'm working on it, and I've talked to the captain about it. It wouldn't be the same as going free, but it would be better than the arena. Why won't you give me a chance to try to make it work?"

"Because when you trust people, you're only setting yourself up for trouble, lady, and if I was that big a fool, I'd deserve what I got, wouldn't I?"

Niada didn't reply immediately. Somebody must have let Han down and let him down badly, but he couldn't remember that right now any more than he could anything else, not yet. Under the circumstances, she didn't really blame Han for not trusting her; she probably would feel the same were she in his position. Since winding up on the *Kestrel*, she wasn't quite as ready to trust people either. "Okay, Han," she said at last. "I'll do my best not to betray you, and I realize that I'll have to prove myself to you first."

"I ain't gonna trust anybody on this damn ship, so you can quit playing games, lady. I can see that maybe you don't much like slavery, but you're stuck here, so you're gonna try to quiet down your conscience by being nice to me. If that makes you feel good, hooray for you, but it doesn't do one damn thing for me. So why don't you just say you did your good deed for the day and leave me alone, 'cause there ain't nothing you can do that's gonna change anything."

Niada drew back as if he had struck her, his words hurting more than blows would because she knew that they were true. She had been trying to assuage her guilt, as if by being humane to the *Kestrel*'s slaves, she could justify healing them for the arena. That made her a real hypocrite, and Han had seen through her easily. "You're right," she admitted in a small voice that caused him to turn and look at her doubtfully. There was still no yielding in his eyes, though, so she continued, driven to it.

"But I did talk to Cap, and I told him I wouldn't certify you for the arena while you can't remember who you are. If you still don't have your memory back by the time we get there, Cap says he will take you into the crew to collect, on his investment. Once you're in the crew, he'd never let you go to the arena. And, damn it, I wasn't supposed to tell you that, so don't say I haven't tried to help you." Tears filled her eyes and she turned away to keep him from seeing them.

He didn't answer right away, then he said in a softer voice, "Okay, so whatever your reason, you did put in a good word for me. Thanks for that. But you could have saved yourself the effort, 'cause I ain't gonna crew on a slave ship, and nothing's gonna make me."

"Even if it means going to the arena if you don't?" she asked him disbelievingly.

"Yeah, even then. And that's the difference between us, isn't it?"

She hesitated, then nodded reluctantly. "I said I'd try to help you, though, and if I can't do it this way, I'll have to find some other way to do it."

"I ain't gonna hold my breath waiting."

"I know," she said, "And I don't blame you. But maybe I can work something out. I'll try, and that's a promise. For now, let's talk about your memory. Has anything come back to you yet?"

"No."

"You said that awfully fast."

"So what if I did?"

"Han, I am a doctor, and I'm a good one. In spite of the *Kestrel* and the arena, my first interest is healing the sick. If you don't believe anything else about me at all, believe that because it is the truth."

He looked at her consideringly for a minute, pretty sure that she wasn't lying to him this time. "Well," he admitted reluctantly, "Yeah, I suppose so. Okay. What do you want to know?" If nothing else, she was the only one who was likely to help him remember, and his need to know was strong enough to force him to make use of her skill.

"Have you remembered something?" she asked, her voice becoming a bit "tore professional.

"Yeah. I had a..nightmare, or something," he confessed, half embarrassed at the admission.

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

"I don't even want to think about it," he said wryly. "It didn't even make much sense till you told me about the carbon freezing. It's the same damn stuff over and over, three different voices. 'You're being put in carbon freeze.' 'What if he doesn't survive?' 'Put him in!' That's all, just those things over and over, getting louder and louder. And it's sorta dark, and there are masked faces."

"Masked faces?" she said blankly. "Stormtroopers, maybe?"

He frowned. "Yeah, some of them," he realized. "I think."

"Then it sounds official. Han, do you think you might be a rebel?"

"Not me," he said automatically.

"Really, or can't remember?"

"If I was a rebel, I wouldn't say so to you or anybody on this ship." He added, "I can't remember anyway, but I don't think I feel like a rebel."

"It would be hard for you to tell. Han, do you know why I was bonded? Because I got caught trying to help a wounded rebel."

"Bully for you."

"I only meant that I wouldn't turn you in for it--and that there are times when I do stand up for what I believe in."

"Nice you can turn it on and off."

"What do you want of me, Han?" she asked helplessly. "To jump ship with you when we get to Demetra and help you make contact with the Rebel Alliance?"

"That'll do for starters," he replied sarcastically.

"I'm sorry."

"Why not? Being sorry is easy and it doesn't cost you nothing."

She pushed the thought of his bitterness away, hurting inside for him and his inability to trust. "Han, this isn't helping you to get your memory back."

"Why should I try to remember? I'll only go to the arena if I do."

"What about your friends, your co-pilot? They'll be looking for you, won't they? Cap'd let them ransom you, I think, as long as he didn't lose by it."

"I don't remember anybody--and anyway, they don't know where I am."

"You don't remember the Wookiee? I thought you did last night."

"No." But he felt like he should. Trying to remember didn't help though he felt that there was something pulling at him, struggling to surface. He stared down at his hands, trying to think, but it only made his head ache and brought back the voices. "You're being put into carton freeze." "What if he doesn't survive?" "Put him in!" He shook his head wearily, wishing that it would stop aching so fiercely. "I can't remember," he yelled. "I can't remember. Leave me alone, dammit."

Her med-scan equipment was setting off all sorts of alarms as he got overexcited. "Han, please," she said soothingly. "Please, try to relax. I'm going to give you an injection to help you to sleep. I want you to rest now, and I'll come back in a few hours."

He was too drained to resist the injection, though he tried feebly to push her away. But he was relieved when lethargy crept over him, easing his headache. Niada said soothingly. I don't think you'll dream now, but if you do, write it down when you wake up. It might help us. There's writing equipment in that drawer. I'll come back later. And I promise you that I'll try to help you."

"Sure you will," he muttered and went to sleep.

"Dani, what's Demetra like? I've never been there." First watch was over and Daneen had come by Med Center to see Niada as was his custom. Her question, asked before he could even greet her, was unexpected, to say the least.

"Why?" he asked, looking at her in concern. "Niada, you look as if you've been crying. What's wrong? Are you ill--or in trouble?"

"Not yet. Just tell me about Demetra."

He sat down on the edge of her desk. "Well, it's our next stop. We'll be there tomorrow. We'd have been there by now if Cap hadn't made that hyperdrive test today. Anyway, Demetra itself is pretty dull and law abiding—the locals are pretty staid and set in their ways. But the port's not like that, it's more like Mos Eisley. It's a wide open place like most big ports, full of the scum of the galaxy. I don't want you going ashore there, Ni. It's dangerous."

"I was hoping it'd be like that. Dani, do you know much about the Rebel Alliance?"

"Me? Hell, no. I'm a star pilot, not a patriot. I stay out of that kind of trouble." He frowned at her. "You're up to something, Ni, and I don't think I like it."

"Could you get in touch with the rebels on Demetra if you had to, Dani?" she persisted.

"Maybe," he admitted cautiously, "But I'll deny I ever said that if I have to. What game are you playing, sweetheart?"

"I'm not playing games, Dani. I'm through with games. I'm done being a hypocrite."

"You're not a hypocrite."

"I am. I hate slavery, but here I am on the *Kestrel*."

"You had no choice."

"I did, you know. There's always a choice. That rebel, the one I got caught helping—he was only a boy, Dan, not even twenty. He told me that the rebels can always use doctors, and I'm sure they could use pilots, too. You said last night that we stayed here because we had noplacel else to go. Well, if you can find it for us, we do have a place to go. The Rebel Alliance."

"Are you crazy!" He grabbed her wrists roughly. "Keep your voice down, damn it. This room could be monitored."

"It's not. I checked."

"That's something, at least. But I ought to beat you, you little fool. Where'd you get all this nonsense anyway? >From Han?"

"No, not really. He only made me see what a hypocrite I am. Dan, think. You hate this as much as I do, you've just got a harder shell. At least, with the rebels, you'd be more your own man again. You know you'd be happier away from here."

"Yeah, so what? You're talking nonsense, Ni. The two of us wouldn't have a chance."

"The three of us," she said gently.

"The what!"

"I won't leave Han for them."

"He doesn't even know who he is."

"No, but you do. Dan. he doesn't remember anything beyond a tiny flash or two, but one memory that might be real is that there were stormtroopers present when he was frozen. That sounds like the Empire had a hand in it, which could mean that he's a rebel."

"It could mean they caught him for smuggling. It might not even be a real memory. Come on, sweetheart, be reasonable."

"I've been reasonable too long, and it hasn't done one thing for me. Dani, I love you, but if you won't help me, I'll have to try to do it alone."

He looked into her stubborn face and believed her. "I could tell Cap what you're planning," he suggested, knowing that he would never do such a thing. "Damn it, you're too trusting."

"That's why I need your help."

He glared at her for a long time, then he started to curse. Niada listened, amazed at his fluency, then, to his surprise and annoyance, she began to giggle.

"What the hell is so damn funny?"

She came around the desk, wound her arms around his neck, and kissed him.
"You are. Oh, Dani, don't you see? You want to do it as much as I do."

"That's what worries me," Daneen admitted. "You know I'm with you, Ni. Only how do you propose to get Han off the ship? They'll hardly let you stroll down the ramp with him."

"Cap's going to give the crew shore leave on Demetra, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"Then, when he goes ashore to buy slaves and most of the crew is gone, I'll pump knockout gas through the air ducts. As soon as everybody's sleeping peacefully, we'll just walk out and lose ourselves in the crowd."

"Just walk out? As easy as that? Girl, you're crazy."

"You only say that because it's my plan, not yours. I'd expect you to take care of the emergencies. It'll work, Dan."

"Unless Cap orders Han to the pen with the other slaves before then."

"He won't. I'll see to that somehow."

The pen was the slave deck of the *Kestrel*, not quite as bad as the name implied, but unpleasant all the same for what it signified. Once a being went into the

Kestrel's pen, he didn't come out until the arena. Niada wasn't going to allow that to happen to Han Solo.

"You'd better be right, kiddo," Daneen told her. "Because Cap's the only one who can open the pen."

"I can handle my job," she said.

"Can you handle Han?"

"I don't know," she admitted honestly. "I think so. If he doesn't want to go to the arena, he'll have to go along with us, won't he?"

"Well, you know best." Daneen was skeptical. I let you talk me into this I'll never know." He pulled her hard against him and kissed her. "But we could end up in the arena ourselves," he said when he released her, "So we'd better not make any mistakes."

Han Solo had the dream again that night, and though it grew more detailed, it didn't seem to help very much. One of the masked figures was clad in black from head to toe, and it was this ominous being who gave the order, "Put him in!"

"No!" Han came awake suddenly to darkness and silence. He was shaking with cold and the memory of the dream, drenched in sweat. For a moment, he sat there shivering, then he pulled the blanket tighter around his shoulders before reaching for the light.

"Han?" The voice was female but he wasn't up to recognizing it right then. Niada, dozing in her office, had come in response to his shout, and now, seeing the condition Han was in, she came and gathered him into her arms as she might have done a child, pulling his head down against her shoulder and stroking his hair. "Ssh, it's all right," she whispered soothingly. "It's all right, only a dream."

Leia?" he muttered vaguely, and Niada hesitated, torn between questioning him instantly on what might prove to be a new memory and comforting him. But he had his arms around her and was holding on tight, so she opted for comfort, continuing to speak softly and stroke his hair until she felt his tension easing away and his grip loosening. At last he raised haunted eyes and stared at her in surprise, as if he had expected someone else.

"All right now?" Niada asked quietly.

"Yeah," he said, but he didn't sound all right. "For a minute I thought..." He shook his head. "No, it's gone now."

"You called me Leia," she said, watching his face for his reaction.

But he only looked puzzled. "Yeah, I know," he said. "Musta been instinct or something."

"You don't remember anything about someone called Leia?"

He shook his head stubbornly, sadness in his eyes. "For a minute there was something, but it's gone now. I don't know who she is. I can't remember."

"You care for her," Niada said gently. "I could hear it in your voice."

He shrugged, and she sensed that he was starting to fight the memory, as if he couldn't lower his guard enough to take a chance of facing it. "Leave it for now," she said. "When you're ready, you'll remember."

It was a mistake. "What's that supposed to mean?" he demanded.

"Only that you'll remember when you're stronger."

"You're trying to say that there's nothing wrong with me, that I can't remember because I don't want to?" He dulled away from her altogether. "Don't try to pull that on me. I want to remember. I don't want to hear all this garbage."

"It isn't that simple, Han."

"Na, not such. You're only trying to say I'm crazy or something. Damn you, you're just making excuses because you don't know what to do to help me get my memory back. I want to remember. I've gotta know who I am."

"Han, will you listen to me? No, don't turn away. Listen. You've been through a bad experience, something that must have been very traumatic for you. The mind protects itself sometimes from things that are too much to bear. It's a perfectly normal reaction, coming on top of the carbon freezing and partly because of it. It left you drained of energy. As you get your strength I think you'll start to get your memory back too."

"Maybe. But you can't remember, at least you say you can't. There is no physical cause for it other than exhaustion and weakness. Part of your problem, I think, is that you're not used to being run down like this. You've always been pretty healthy. It's harder to face being ill when you're not used to it. I do think you'll

remember, Han, When you're strong enough to face it. Until then, I'll do my best for you."

"Here we go, more promises. Doc, I don't buy any of it. Don't you ever give up?"

"You'll believe it tomorrow."

His eyes narrowed. "Tomorrow? What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you got to me, blast it, Han. And tomorrow, when we land on Demetra, we're getting away, you and me and Dan."

He stared at her in disbelief, but there was something convincing about her this time, and he wanted desperately to believe it, needed to believe it. "If you're lying to me," he said ominously, "you'll be sorry."

"I'm telling you the truth. Dan has some contacts on Demetra. You might even have a few there yourself."

"Won't do me any good if I do, Doc, not if I can't remember 'em ." He looked at her. "What's your name anyway?"

"Niada. Han, I'm on your side. I always was." She reached out and took his hands in hers, and he let her.

"And Dan's on your side, too. Dan can be pretty tough, though he never was with me, but you're his own kind, and besides, he hates crewing for somebody else when he's had his own ship."

"Can't blame him for that."

"Then you're with us?"

"I'd hafta be a fool to hang around here, wouldn't I?" He gave her a sudden grin.
"I got to you, huh?"

"Egotist. It's nothing personal."

The grin broadened. "Don't panic, Niada. I know you're tied up with Dan--not that it might not be worth the effort to try to change your mind." His eyes danced.
Niada suspected that she might be getting a glimpse of what Han had been like before he lost his memory.

She smiled back. "You're too late, but thanks for the compliment. It beats having you threaten me."

"You're probably safe." He winked at her. "In more ways than one."

"If Dan heard you, he'd be furious."

"Then it's a good thing he's not here." He didn't sound particularly concerned.
"You'd really jump ship?" he asked, still sounding a little skeptical. "Because of me?"

"Because you made me see the truth. I found out I didn't like myself very much, so I'm getting out."

"Dragging me and Dan along with you? When you set your mind to something, sweetheart, I'd hate to be in your way." He grinned at her and squeezed her hands. "Okay, Niada. Can't say I quite trust you, But I'm gonna have to take a chance on you anyway."

"I hope you won't have cause to regret it," she said seriously.

"I don't think I will," he answered. "Y'know, we just might make it."

Daneen came by Med Center before going on watch in the morning, bringing along some clothes for Han. He'd suggested to Cap that visiting the bridge of a ship in space might help Han remember, and offered to furnish clothes for him, since they were much of a size. Cap, who wanted nothing so much as to collect on his investment, was all for the idea, so the morning found Han dressed in some of Dan's civilian clothes, brown pants and shirt and black boots. The boots were just a bit too wide and the shirtsleeves were a fraction too short, but Han, eyeing himself in a mirror, could find no fault with his appearance. It was far better than the Med Center robe he'd been wearing. He felt a lot better this morning, too. But there was something missing, something not quite right about, his costume. "Any way you could get me a blaster?" he asked Dan. "Don't feel right without one."

"Sorry, but Cap would never buy it." Daneen grinned at the idea of Cap permitting one of his slaves to go around armed. "C'mon, we're going to the bridge. Cap thinks it might jog your memory, and Ni says you need to see more of the ship."

"She's the boss," Han said dryly and went with him, leaving Niada to fume over the tone of his words.

The *Kestrel* was a large freighter, a class L ship, maybe a fourth as big as an Imperial Star Destroyer, carrying a crew of 25. The Kecipor Line was well known, though the *Kestrel*, one of its most profitable ships, was not widely publicized. More respectable cargo was carried in cost ships of the line, and others carried passengers. That Han had identified the *Kestrel* as a slaver proved that he came from a shipping background. The average Imperial subject would not have know that. Han knew his way around the ship; though he couldn't remember it, he had crewed on one like it once. At first Dan was surprised when Han knew the way to the bridge, then he grinned.

"You've been on ships like this before," he said. "That ought to help."

"Why're you in this?" Han wanted to know. "I can see the *Kestrel* ain't such in your line, but you're a survivor. You'd get by. You don't look like you'd be one to take the risks, not when you don't have all that much to gain."

"Try serving on one of these tubs sometime," Daneen replied. "Nothing beats being your own boss and having your own ship." He grinned. "Hell, Who am I kidding. There's Niada. She'll curl up and die if she has to stay here much longer. 'Sides, I never was one to pass up a challenge. It'll be fun."

Solo grinned back. "Yeah," he said. "I think I know what you mean. What the hell, we'll give it a go. I don't have a thing to lose."

Cap was waiting for then. "So you're Solo," he said. "Jabba the Hut guaranteed you as a good fighter. I must say I wasn't sure before, but you look more like it now. Have you remembered anything yet?"

Han shook his head, disliking Cap's tone from the first. "Not a thing," he retorted. "Better not hold your breath waiting."

"Don't worry, Solo, I won't lose any money on you." He added ominously, "One way or another."

"You slavers are all alike," Han said, moving forward to study the navigation panel without bothering to ask anyone's permission.

Cap, who considered himself well above the general class of slavers, held his temper in check with an effort. "Know where we are?" he asked.

"Sure, the Bana system," Han replied, raising his eyes from the instruments. "You testing me?"

"Maybe," Cap said. "Lathan says you're a good pilot."

Han nodded. "One of the best." He wasn't bragging, just stating what he felt to be true. He couldn't prove it yet, but he knew it all the same. "I could handle this ship," he added.

"Don't get cocky with me," Cap snapped at him. "I don't think I like you, Solo. But I could live with that. I don't expect my crew to like me."

"I ain't one of your damn crew."

"No, you're one of my slaves," said Cap with relish. "I own you, Solo. You remember that while you're on my ship."

It took all of Han's self control to keep from attacking the man on the spot. Niada had told him about the pen, and that's where he would go if he attacked the one who owned him, unless the captain decided to have him killed for it, which would be within his rights. With a chance to get away, Han could manage to endure slavery for another half a day, but it wasn't going to be easy. He said sullenly, "I can't very well forget it, can I? So? You had me brought up here. What do you want?"

"To remind you what you are. I know the doc. She babies all her patients till they start thinking they've got the good life. I need her certification of your health, so I'll let you stay in Med Center a little longer, but just remember, you don't get off easy, not on my ship, mister."

"Yeah, I figured that, Han said with an insolent smile. "So what?"

"So I catch you trying anything or playing on the Doc's sympathies, it's the pen for you. It's not like Med Center, boy. And there are ways to punish slaves that do no permanent damage." His eyes were hard, then his tone eased. "Enough of that for now. Take a look around the bridge. Don't try anything, just look the place over. I want to know if you could fly this ship."

"Ain't no ship I can't fly," Han said, and meant it."

"So you remember some things? Very convenient, your amnesia, Solo."

"Yeah, ain't it? I don't give a damn if you believe me or not."

"I could give you truth drugs to find out if your amnesia is genuine, you know."

"So use 'em. No way I could stop you. I ain't lying to you. I don't waste my time lying to slavers.

Cap stared at him, and Han not and held his gaze. Cap was the one to look away first. Han allowed himself a smile, but he knew that he hadn't won anything and that alienating the captain was stupid. It was just that he hated being told he was a slave, and his first instinct was to fight back. Instead, he turned and began to stroll around the bridge, checking it out.

Daneen, who'd tried to avoid taking part in the conversation and who would have preferred to go unnoticed altogether, watched him, suspecting that Han knew more about this particular ship than he did.

Cap watched him too, realizing that Solo could be an asset to the ship, and that it would be a real waste to send a skilled pilot to the arena when the *Kestrel* was always shorthanded. But first, he had to put the boy in his place. His crew didn't talk back to him like Solo did, and Cap wasn't going to have that getting any ideas. So he motioned for Meldor, his security chief, to join him.

"Take Solo to your office and interrogate him," he instructed. "I want to know if his amnesia is real or faked, but I don't want him damaged. Use whatever works best as long as he's on his feet when you're through with him."

Han had jerked around to listen the moment the captain began to speak. This didn't sound good, though he had asked for it, in a way. With luck, Niada would find out what was going on and put a stop to it, but he couldn't count on that. In the meantime, he'd have to get through it as best he could, so he put a bored look on his face and waited, reluctant to show fear in front of the captain. He refused to give the man that much of a victory. But inside, he felt suddenly cold. This was going to be bad.

"Hey," Daneen objected. "Cap, he's just been put through carbon freeze. If Meldor gets too rough with him, it could kill him."

"Don't worry about your pal," Meldor said pleasantly. "Cap wants him on his feet, so he'll be on his feet. I know my craft. I don't make mistakes." He drew his blaster and leveled it at Han. "All right, hot shot," he said with good cheer, "Let's go."

Han had no choice. He went.

Meldor was a huge man, broad and muscular but light on his feet. Han had the feeling that he wouldn't need the blaster to subdue him, that his superior strength and apparent skill would be quite enough. Besides, on this ship, there was no place to run. He was sure that the purpose of the exercise was to punish him for his insolence, and that Cap only wanted an example, not to damage his merchandise. It would be painful as hell, but if he could hang on and keep his mouth shut about the escape plan, it wouldn't be too bad. That made sense, but still, he had to resist the wild impulse to try to break free and run, anyplace at all as long as it was far from what was going to come. Only the sheer futility of such an action stopped him.

Meldor took him to the "office", a small, grim room dominated by a metal chair with a series of controls attached. Han was motioned into the chair and he sat down reluctantly. For a moment he had a strange blurred sensation of having gone through this before, and recently. He felt like he was about to remember something, something horrible. There had been torture before...He shook his head both to clear it and to deny the memory. "What's this supposed to be?" he asked, trying to sound casual and not quite succeeding.

"It's a device that creates the illusion of pain," the security man said matter-of-factly. "It stimulates the nerve endings without doing any actual damage. But it will hurt you, I guarantee it." As he spoke, he was fastening bands around Han's arms and wrists and strapping down his ankles. Solo tested them surreptitiously to no avail, then forced himself to relax. "You enjoy this sort of thing, don't you?" he asked trying to stall a little.

Meldor shrugged. "I do my job, that's all. It'll be easier for you if you cooperate."

"Cooperate," Han retorted with an attempt at bravado. "What the hell does he expect? I can't remember anything, and torture ain't gonna help."

"Maybe not, but I have my orders." Meldor finished fastening the bonds to his satisfaction then stepped back to the control panel. "A light dose at first," he said, twisting a knob.

Han stiffened, his body going rigid in the chair as pain stabbed through his body. It wasn't quite as bad as he had feared, but suddenly, the room faded before his eyes and he was remembering another time and place. It wasn't the place of his nightmare, but some of the people from the dream were there, the stormtroopers and the one dressed in black who stood by silently watching... He closed his eyes in a futile attempt to shut it all out, but it was too vivid, too real.

Meldor called him back to the here and now. "And it increases so." The knob was turned a bit further, and this time, Han couldn't suppress a cry of pain. "Tell me your name," Meldor asked.

"Han Solo," he gasped, bracing himself against the pain and even harder against the memory.

"How do you know?"

"The doctor told me." He writhed and twisted against his bands, but there was nothing he could do to ease the pain. He didn't know if he were feeling Meldor's torture or the earlier one. He only knew that he hurt and that there was no escape.

The questions kept coming, but he could hardly speak, it hurt so much. Screaming didn't help, but he couldn't stop himself. Between screams, he could only answer, "I don't know," and "I can't remember."

He seemed to drift between memory and reality, neither one bearable. Some of the time he was trying to answer Meldor 's questions, and some of the time there was the other torture and no questions. It was hard to keep the two clear, harder to even try to.

Han never lost consciousness. That was something else Meldor watched. "The human body can take far more pain than you d expect," he said pleasantly. Not once did he raise his voice or grow angry, neither did he sound as if he were enjoying himself. This was just a job to him, something he had been ordered to do, so he was doing it. "Pain in itself can kill, but only when administered by an amateur. And I'm not an amateur."

"No, you re not, damn you," Han gasped, then went rigid in his chair as a new wave of pain washed over him. His muscles were beginning to cramp with the effort of resisting past and present. Meldor continued to regulate the dial until everything blurred before Han's eyes. The growing darkness almost felt good.

"Turn it off at once!!"

Han was only vaguely aware of Niada 's furious shout. "How dare you," she continued. "Do you want to kill him?"

"He 's in no danger," Meldor said in the same reasonable voice he d used throughout the entire procedure, but he switched off the machine all the same. The sudden cessation of pain was almost as much of a shock to Han as the pain itself, and he slumped in the chair gasping for breath. He didn't quite lose consciousness, bet the room blurred before his eyes, the memory beginning to ebb.

"This man's been put through a severe strain associated with the carbon freezing he was subjected to," Niada stormed at Meldor. "He almost died, damn you. I barely pulled him through. And now, you're trying your little games on him. Well, I won't have it, do you hear me?"

"He'll walk out of here, I guarantee it. Maybe he took it a little hard, but I know enough not to damage somebody the captain wants intact. Besides, I was only following orders."

"Look at him. A little hard? You underestimate your...skill, you bastard. I'm taking him back to Med Center. Go and make your report to Cap, damn you. Leave Han to me."

"Cheer up, Doc," Meldor said, unruffled by her fury. "My report will tally with yours. Memory loss is genuine."

"Get out of here!"

The security man strolled out, looking pleased with himself.

"Han, can you hear me?" Niada asked, worried, her voice shaking.

"Yeah." He forced his eyes open. "It's starting to ease up a little. It wasn't as bad as before." He was sorry as soon as he spoke.

"Before?" Niada echoed, but he shook his head, avoiding her eyes.

"I don't remember," he said stubbornly, and he found that it was true. Already the memory was blurred and unreal, and he was glad of it.

Niada looked at him closely and decided it would be better not to question him about it. That kind of memory wasn't going to help him; more likely it would make remembering that much more difficult.

She decided to leave it for the moment. By this time, she had the bonds off, tears in her eyes as she worked on them. "Han, I'm so sorry. If I'd guessed what Cap had in mind for you, I would have come up with medical restrictions so fast that he wouldn't have dared to try anything like this.

"How'd you find out?" he asked, still avoiding her eyes.

"Dani came and told me straight away."

"But it's been hours..."

"It's only been ten minutes," she said gently. "Han, can you get up, do you think? I want to get you back to Med Center."

"Yeah, I think so." He climbed to his feet, then he clutched the back of the chair to keep his balance. "Damn him, he said it wasn't real."

"It's not, but your muscles didn't know that, and they've been fighting it. You'll be stiff and sore for a day or two, but as far as I can tell, you're all right other than that." She slid her arm around his waist for support and comfort. "I'll help you back to Med Center now. I'll be happier when I've checked you out and made you more comfortable." Then in a barely audible whisper, she said, "Did he ask you anything about our plans for getting out of here?"

He shook his head wearily. "No, only about who I was and things like that, tryin' to see what I could remember. But I can't remember nothin', and he didn't help one damn bit."

"I know," she soothed. "It didn't help that you'd been badly treated before. That just made this so much worse for you." She tried to keep her voice matter-of-fact, but he stiffened away from the words anyway.

"Never mind about that," he said shortly.

"I won't. I shouldn't have said anything at all, I know. But at least I want you to know that whenever you're ready to talk about anything, I'm ready to listen. I'll do what I can for you, Han. I should have realized that you and Cap wouldn't get along and what that would lead to, but I've gotten pretty good at avoiding the more unpleasant aspects of this blasted job. I'm sorry. I'll try not to let you down again. If you want to talk, we'll talk. If not, fine. Enough of that. You're practically out on your feet right now, and talking isn't exactly the best thing for you." She began to steer him toward Med Center. "Come on, Han. I want you in bed right away."

He managed a crooked grin, glad that she wasn't going to pursue her questions. "Women always say that to me," he retorted, trying hard to act natural, though it wasn't easy.

"Some woman will put you in your place someday," she told him, playing along with his mood.

"I thought that's what you were going to do when we got to Med Center."

"You never give up, do you, Solo." But she was worried about him. He was too pale, and he had to lean on her a little to stay on his feet, his balance none too steady. Meldor 's torture would have done somebody in peak physical condition no good, but it was worse for Han because he'd been weak to begin with. He was on his feet now, she suspected, out of sheer stubbornness.

Med Center was more than welcome. In a few minutes, Niada had Han in bed and had run a new physical, giving him several injections to strengthen him and ease his stiffened muscles. He simply lay there and let her, watching her silently. He had a bruised look around his eyes as though this latest indignity had made things completely unbearable.

She was tempted to bolster his spirits by talking about the escape plans, but it might be wiser to say nothing in case it didn't work out. So she stayed professional, working hard until the treatment was over, then she sat down abruptly beside him on the edge of the bed. To her surprise, she was shaking.

Han noticed, and reached out to capture her hand. "Hey, you all right?"

"Oh, Han, I should be asking you that," she said shakily.

"I think I'd just as soon you didn't. Come on, Niada. What is it?"

"I don 't know whether I 'm furious or sick or both," she said, her teeth chattering. It must be reaction. Han pulled himself into a sitting position, putting his arms around her, and for a long time they sat like that, drawing comfort from each other. It helped. Niada got control of herself again, and some of the suffering eased out of Han's eyes. When Daneen came in half an hour later to announce their impending landing on Demetra, Niada was looking like herself again, and Han was sleeping.

"How is he?" Dan asked.

"I think he'll do fine, but that bastard Meldor really put him through a bad one, Dani."

"Is he up to..."

"He will be. What'd Cap say?"

"That Han had better stay here in Med Center for today. Cap caught on from Meldor's report that you thought he'd overdone the torture. He's got a lot of credits invested in Solo, so he wasn't too happy with Meldor. Meldor didn't much care, of course, but things were a little tense on the bridge for awhile." He shrugged. "You're right, Ni. I want out." He took her hands. "Hang on. It won't be long now." He kissed her and went back on duty.

An hour later, the *Kestrel* landed on Demetra. Leave was authorized shortly for eligible personnel, then a bit later, Cap came to Med Center to have a look at Solo. Niada had expected him to, and as a result, she had left Han sleeping. He would need all the rest he could get for what was to come, and besides, in that condition, he looked vulnerable, tired and ill, incapable of trying anything. He was still far too pale, and it was apparent, even to Cap, that he'd been put through more than he had been ready for.

"Next time you decide to punish one of my patients, I wish you'd check with me first," Niada said. "He wasn't up to one of Meldor's treatments. Or do you enjoy cruelty?"

"Okay, so I was wrong this time," Cap snarled. "He's worth a lot to me. Will he pull through?"

"Oh yes, in time."

"In time for the arena?"

"Easily," she said, angry at the mention of the arena. "In a few days even. But did it occur to you that you've probably made it harder for him to regain his memory? My medical skills won't do you any good if I'm not even consulted."

"I might be better off with that yes-man doctor we talked about," Cap said. He looked down at Solo a minute longer. "I'm going buying now. Be ready in case I bring back merchandise that's needing treatment."

"How long do I have to work on Han in the meantime?"

He shrugged. "As long as it takes. And though I respect your medical judgment, Doctor, I won't have you going behind my back with my crew. Next time, send for me, and I'll deal with Meldor. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good." His point made, Cap became more expansive. "I've got a line on a couple of good buys. I may have to send for you to check them out if it becomes necessary."

Niada's heart sank. "I really shouldn't leave Solo yet. The torture put a severe strain on his heart," she lied. "I know you don't want to lose him, and I ought to watch him until I'm sure there aren't going to be any dangerous side effects."

"How long before it'll be safe for you to leave him?"

"Maybe three hours."

"Then you've got three hours, damn you." He stormed out.

Niada breathed a sigh of relief, hoping that would be long enough.

As soon as Cap left the ship, she set about reviving Han. The sleep had done him good, and he looked much better when he woke up. Niada dialed a meal for him and left him to eat it while she made her preparations, relieved to see that his appetite seemed normal.

"You look a lot better," she commented when he had finished eating. "How do you feel?"

"Sore.

"That's natural. Let's see you on your feet." She removed the tray. "I want to make sure there's no dizziness."

Han stood up and obediently walked around Med Center. "Hope, no dizziness. I'm a little stiff, that's all."

"Good, That'll wear off as you move around. You'll get tired easily for a few more days, but once we've hidden someplace, you can rest."

"Dan got any ideas?"

"A few. And we could run into people who know you too."

He looked at her sharply.

"Han, tell me this," she asked him. "Do you want to remember?"

"Yeah, sure I do. What kind of stupid question is that?"

"It's just that every time something starts to come back, you draw back and effectively shut it off. I know there were some bad things that you'd rather forget, and I can see why you might be a little afraid of that, but..."

"I ain't scared of nothing," he interrupted. "Of course not. I can see that."

"Don't patronize me, Doc."

"I don't mean to. I know you're no coward. Being afraid doesn't make one a coward anyway. I know I'm absolutely terrified about what's ahead of us."

"But not facing things might make somebody a coward," he said. "Okay, doc. I guess I get the message." He gave her a wry smile.

"No, Han. Memory will come, and I'll help you over the rough spots. Until then, just try not to block it out, that's all."

He nodded. "Yeah. Well, I'll try."

"Good. That's all I ask. Here." She handed him a small portable respirator. "Put it on."

"What's that for?"

"I'm going to gas the ship. Go on, put it on."

"What about Dan?"

"He knows the time we've set. He'll be here in a minute. He had to give an excuse for turning down leave, so he said he wanted to stay with me, and the crew's been teasing him about it as if he were a lovesick kid. I think he's ready to wring my neck."

Daneen arrived then. "Made it. Dammit, Ni, everybody's laughing at me."

"They won't be laughing long," she consoled him.

Han couldn't help grinning at the look on the other man's face--it was probably the same way he would feel in Dan's circumstances. "You'll survive," he told him cheerfully.

"Thanks a lot, pal."

Niada gave Dan his mask. "This stuff will act instantly," she explained, "And will produce unconsciousness that will last for several hours. We'll have to wear these until we're off the ship."

"Seems almost too easy," Han commented. "There could be trouble. I want a blaster. Can you get me one?"

Niada opened a closet and produced a blaster and gunbelt. "Here you are. I got this for you. I'd forgotten."

Han strapped it on, settling the blaster low on his hip, then drawing it to check the charge and setting. Reholstering it, he said more cheerfully, "Now I feel better."

"Then let's go." She checked to be sure their masks were all in place, then she flipped the switch. They turned and left Med Center behind them. So far so good.

They met no one on their way through the ship, encountering only several unconscious crewmen sprawled in the corridors. It would be in leaving the ship that they would be the most vulnerable. A guard would probably be posted in the docking bay.

"I'll go and check it out," Dan volunteered. He pushed the button to release the inner hatch, and when it slid back, he strode down the ramp. Han and Niada could hear him talking cheerfully to someone at the foot of the ramp, followed immediately by the sound of a blaster set on stun.

Han took that as a signal to move. Drawing his blaster, he went down the ramp fast, Niada trailing him, to find Lathan, weapon at ready, standing over the bodies of two unconscious crewmen.

"Put them in the ship," said Niada. "The gas will keep them unconscious longer."

Han and Daneen dragged the two men inside, and Dan sealed the hatch again. "Okay," he said. "Let's go." They crossed the docking bay under the heat of Demetra's twin suns and blended into the jostling crowd of the port. No one paid them any attention, and no one tried to stop them.

[Continue To Part 2](#)

[Back To Index](#)