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Committed

by [Cindy Olsen](#)

Fingers quivered over the butt of his blaster, stretching, anticipating the moment of draw. His concentration focused on the target remote that hovered across the other side of the hold from him. His breath was slow and shallow as he went through the sequence of the drill in his mind, imagining the movement of muscles and tendons required to raise the weapon from the holster, level, aim, the gentle twitch of finger to squeeze the trigger...

Han Solo had performed this practice sequence a million times before. Here in the forward compartment of the Millennium Falcon, and in countless different holo-ranges. In real life, he had outdrawn more beings than he cared to think about. Only one opponent had ever beaten him, and even then it had taken a professional gunslinger to achieve this; Han still bore scars from that close call he'd had with Gallandro. Despite this record, a nagging doubt had crept into the faith he held in his own abilities.

You can do this you can do this you can do this-

Without warning, the target remote shot diagonally towards him on a burst of repulsor power. Solo ducked and rolled to the side, the blaster instinctively in his hand before he hit the deck, just the way it should be. Levelling the weapon at his hip, he aimed at the malevolent globe and squeezed the trigger.

He yelled as the remote's tracer beam caught him on the lower leg. His own shot sailed across the top of the globe, impacting harmlessly on the bulkhead safety cushions. Before the remote could fire again, he slapped the droid caller on his belt and deactivated the device. The orb powered down and dropped to the deck with a satisfying clang.

Recovering his breath, Han rested his shoulders against the cold deck plates, using the chill as punishment for failure. Failure not once, but ten times in as many minutes. An overwhelming self-disgust quickly subsumed his initial rush of adrenaline. He closed his eyes, wiped the sweat from his brow with the edge of his hand.

Nothing had been right since returning to the Alliance fleet after his rescue from Tatooine. No, he amended. Not since Bespin. It's all been screwed up since Bespin. As much as he didn't want to consider it, he suspected the cause of his failure with his speed draw. Carbonite. This was yet another result of having been frozen in carbonite for over one Standard year. One more damn thing... Han raised his head slightly, let it fall unchecked to the deck - one more damn thing... - raised it again, allowed it to fall - one more damn thing... - unconsciously beating his head against the hard surface. As if the nightmares, insomnia and 'other' side effects weren't enough.

With a concerted effort, he rolled over and pushed himself off the deck, cursing the numbing, tingling after-effects of the remote's tracer beam. He winced at the throbbing ache in his hip, recalled the bruising impact of when he had tried to dodge the remote, cringing even further when he thought of Leia's reaction to this injury. She had been coddling him since he'd been discharged from the medical centre. Ensuring he gradually weaned himself back onto solid food, kept himself hydrated, and worrying over his inability to sleep soundly for longer than an hour at a time. When she saw the inevitable bruise on his hip, she would probably become even more unbearable.

That's not fair, he thought with an annoyed shake of his head, distantly wondering why the back of his skull felt tender. If anyone's unbearable, it's been me. He knew he had become increasingly snappy and short-tempered over the last few days. He had initially pegged his mood as being a result of enforced sedation for two ship days. The hibernation sickness had plagued him throughout the journey back to the Rebel fleet, his body racked by spasms as it purged itself of the carbonite, while he wallowed in and out of delirium. Once onboard the Calamari cruiser, Home One, it had been obvious to anyone, especially the examining doctor, that he needed to rest and recuperate in order to fully recover. In typical Solo fashion, the only way the doctor had been able to convince him was to sedate him before he had a chance to argue.

After two days sedation, it had taken him more than half a day to eventually wake up. It seemed that things had steadily gone down hill from there. The washed-out feeling he'd had upon awakening had persisted ever since, deciding to take up permanent residence in his chest and bones.

His first taste of solid food had made him nauseous, however not nauseous enough not to attempt making love with Leia. Solo blanched now at that memory. An 'attempt' was all it was. Despite their mutual desire and eagerness, they had

not met with success. The one part of his anatomy crucial to this manoeuvre had remained 'under sedation'. There had been four nights since then, and numerous attempts, and still he and Leia were yet to pick up their relationship from the point they had left it on Bespin. He could tell it was starting to frustrate her. Hell, he was already well beyond the 'frustrated' stage, and was rushing head long towards 'panicked'. And how did a man who loathed medical treatment seek help for his impotence? Especially in the middle of a war.

Han was automatically returning his blaster to its holster when he realized his hand was trembling. He drew his weapon closer and watched the tendons twitch in the back of his hand. Raising his arm out as though aiming, he sighted down the barrel of the blaster. From this perspective, the slight quake became a noticeable shake; it was no wonder his aim was off.

The heavy blaster pistol flew from his hand as he hurled it against the bulkhead, the white-fury blinding him from logic and reason. The violent contact triggered an ineffectual burst of tracer fire, before the weapon smashed to the deck, firing twice more as it clattered against the plates. Spinning on his heel, he kicked the target remote out of his way and stormed down the ring corridor towards the crew quarters. He was almost breathless by the time he had stripped himself naked and was standing in the refresher stall, his head tilted upwards, mouth open as the cold stream of water gushed over him. Yet still the rage consumed him, boiled and churned inside far worse than any bout of illness.

It started out as a growl; a primal expression of the anger and frustration he harboured in his soul. The roar quickly gathered strength and momentum, reverberating in the confines of the refresher until it was a full-throated howl. He stood there and screamed, addicted to the sheer insanity of it, devoid of all concept of time and rationale.

He had no idea how long he had been in there for, screaming out his lungs, when Chewbacca unexpectedly reached into the stall and pulled him out of the shower. Solo lashed out instinctively, struggling from the Wookiee's grasp, his eyes wide and feral. Realizing it would take more than a few shakes to bring his friend to his senses, Chewbacca swiped a paw against the side of the Corellian's head, his strong grip on Solo's arm restraining him from crashing into the bulkhead. The blow seemed to work; the scream died abruptly in Solo's throat and sanity returned to his eyes.

Solo shook his head in an attempt to clear it and to give himself some time to come up with an explanation for what had happened, not quite prepared to meet his friend's gaze. Still holding onto Solo's biceps, Chewbacca reached behind him into the refresher stall, turned off the flow of water and activated the drying cycle. He roughly pushed the Corellian back into the stall. [Dry off,] Chewbacca brusquely ordered. [Get dressed. Then we'll talk.]

His eyes still averted, Han nodded awkwardly as he stood in the buffeting currents of warm air, only raising his head after he heard the Wookiee close the stall door on him and stomp from the room.

Chewbacca rubbed at the crick in his neck as he circled the perimeter of the Falcon's forward compartment, trying to convince himself he shouldn't be worried. He knew Han's recent behaviour wasn't normal by human standards, but then he had never counted Han as a normal human being; if the Corellian had been normal, the young Imperial pilot, Lieutenant Solo, would not have freed him from slavery.

Chewbacca understood how Solo had been shaped by the traumatic events of his childhood; the murder of his free-trading father had forced him in and out of countless foster homes, and even onto the streets on occasions when the violence some foster parents inflicted upon the young boy had become unbearable. This early life had moulded Solo into a loner who hid his emotions behind a harsh, uncaring exterior. His court martial from the Imperial Navy had warped his attitude towards authority figures, and distorted his ability to trust or rely on anyone but himself and his Wookiee first mate. And finally the life of a smuggler had seen him waiver from an obsession with self-preservation, to an at times suicidal disregard for his own mortality.

Despite all of these factors and throughout the time that they had been friends, not once had Chewbacca seen his Honour Brother look so lost and dispossessed as he had been over the last few days. The Wookiee could smell the depression emanating from Solo. Had seen the glimmer of madness in his hazel eyes. And now had witnessed the manifestation of these symptoms into a worrying display of psychosis. He knew Han's behaviour was due to the carbonite. There could be no other explanation.

With a frustrated sigh, Chewbacca gave up massaging the muscles in his neck and shoulders. He could never properly reach those muscles, always relying on Han to ease his discomfort and fix the popped vertebrae in his neck. Then he noticed the Corellian's heavy blaster pistol lying on the deck, and across the hold the dented shape of the target remote. It was suddenly apparent what had happened here, the spark that had ignited Han's fuse.

Chewbacca collected the blaster from the deck, thumbing on the safety as he checked it for signs of damage. Perhaps an extra scratch here, a nick there, but it was a solid, reliable weapon - like its owner - and Chewbacca doubted there was anything wrong with it. He only wished the same could be said for Han.

Muttering to himself, Chewbacca placed the blaster on the holo-game table, and then disposed of the target remote in a toolbox. There were other more pressing

matters that he should be attending to. The Wookiee had offered his services, free of charge, to the Rebellion's maintenance squadrons. The Home One, along with half of the Rebel fleet, had arrived on the edge of Sullustan space early this 'morning' ship's time. The Alliance forces were convening here before pressing on to Endor, focused on delivering one final blow to the Empire before it could bring the planet-crushing second Death Star on-line. There were fighters that needed to be repaired, shuttles to be prepped and the cruiser's own cannons required re-calibration.

This battle would be decisive; there was no doubt about that. The outcome would decide the fate of the galaxy. And yet, despite his offer of assistance, Chewbacca felt his friend and Honour Brother deserved his time and support, even if in a few days time, neither of them would be around to worry about a future...

Hoping that a drink may help ease the inevitable tension, Chewbacca grabbed a bottle of something strong and potent, along with two glassine tumblers, and sat and waited at the holo-game table for Han.

After some considerable time had passed, the Wookiee was contemplating going in search of Solo when the Corellian walked quietly into the hold, favouring one hip slightly. He wore a dark blue shirt that Chewbacca could not recall seeing before, his old dark blue trousers with the red Bloodstripe, and a jacket the princess had given him to replace the one lost on Bespin. The gun-rig hung on his hips, the empty holster almost yearning for its lost weapon. Strangely enough, his hair was neatly brushed, almost parted straight, and it shone under the light from the glow panels. His eyes were the only indicator that something was not quiet right. There was a wildness in his gaze as he focused on the arrangement of Wookiee, alcohol and blaster, then slid across to the chair at the tech station as he considered the option of keeping some distance between himself and his friend. Then their eyes met, and Han accepted the unspoken challenge.

He moved towards the game table, stopped at the edge and reached for his blaster. Chewbacca's hand clamped down over Solo's as the pilot picked up the weapon. For a moment he allowed the Wookiee's touch to restrain him, then he pulled his hand and blaster free.

[Sit,] Chewbacca softly urged.

Han remained standing while he replaced the practice charge with the combat charge from the case on his belt. Chewbacca filled the two tumblers, pushed one towards the Corellian, then sat back in the lounge. He waited until Solo holstered the blaster and gingerly seated himself before speaking again.

[What was that all about?]

"What was 'what' all about?"

The Wookiee pulled a face and gently whacked a hand across the back of Han's head. [Wrong answer.] Solo's face became ugly as his eyes rounded on Chewbacca, his body stiffening with irrational rage. But when he saw the compassion and concern in the Wookiee's blue eyes, the anger suddenly leached from him. He turned back to the table, propped an elbow on it and pressed his face into his palm. "I don't know what's goin' on any more," Han mumbled down at the table, his voice hoarse from screaming. His head and hip throbbed from the combination of blows they had recently received. "Nothin' makes sense. Especially not me."

[You're still recovering,] Chewbacca observed. He watched the Corellian's fingers shake noticeably as Solo reached for the tumbler. [Still tired. When was the last time you got some decent sleep?] Han gulped at the gold coloured liquid, then muttered bitterly, "Bespin." [Feeling sorry for yourself, little brother?]

Solo's initial reaction was resentment, followed by a modicum of judgment that forced him to question himself. Am I just feeling sorry for myself...? Is that what this is all about? The concept was alien to him. In a life others may have found harsh and solitary, he had never known self-pity; even the sympathy of others had been enough to send him running. He normally dealt with emotions and situations he didn't like by simply ignoring them. This...this was different.

Whatever he was feeling now was overwhelming.

Immediately following his rescue from Tatooine, although uncharacteristically grateful that he had been rescued, he had been unable to express his gratitude to the small group of people he now considered to be his friends. During the first night he had spent alone with Leia once they had returned to the Rebel fleet, he had given her a pledge: "If I get to spend the rest of my life waking up with you in my arms, I'll be a happy man." At the time, it was possibly the most heartfelt promise he had ever made in his life, and had truly reflected what he felt for the princess who loved him so dearly.

But he didn't feel happy now, and perhaps hadn't since that first botched attempt at lovemaking. With each passing hour, an inexplicable despair seemed to blanket across him more and more heavily, until it felt as if he was drowning. And when he lashed back, tried to fight his way clear of the fog, he invariably exploded in a fit of white-hot rage. Self-pity he could deal with. This...this was totally different.

Han turned and looked at his friend, his expression sober. "Am I going crazy, Chewie? Am I already there?"

Chewbacca reached out, fondly ruffled Han's hair and joked, [You've always been a little insane, my friend.] He repressed a sigh when Han pulled away from the affectionate gesture and returned to his drink. [Han. Han, listen to me.] The

Corellian scowled but glanced up at the Wookiee. [I don't think you're crazy. But I do think you need help.]

"Help?" The sarcasm was thick in his voice. He winced at the headache that was threatening to develop. "No shrink's poking around in my mind."

[I don't mean a counsellor,] Chewbacca explained calmly, thinking I doubt you could sit still long enough for one.

"I don't do drugs," Solo growled emphatically, "you know that!" During his time on the streets and as a smuggler, he had seen enough lives destroyed, enough brains turned to mush, that he had an almost paranoid distrust of any narcotic. It seemed almost incongruous then, that the main source of his smuggling income had been running spice, perhaps one of the most potent stimulants in the galaxy.

Chewbacca raised a placating palm; he had been going to suggest that his friend attempt to locate some andris, a spice known for its anti-depressant qualities that was frequently used in psychopharmacology. However, seeing Han's violent reaction to even a hint of this suggestion, he wisely changed tack.

[Find something to do with yourself, Han.] Keep your mind occupied, was what he had wanted to add. Solo stared into his glass as he swirled the remains of the drink. "I've got something to do. I gotta ship to maintain, unlike someone else around here."

Chewbacca ignored the blatant attack at his own absence from the Falcon. Part of the reason why he could offer his services to the Rebellion was because the YT-1300 freighter did not require any further repairs.

[The Falcon is fully operational. You know that. Anything else you're doing here is just tinkering around the edges.]

Solo looked at the Wookiee sourly. "I gotta know she won't give out on me like she did last time." An awkward silence settled over them as they both considered private memories of 'last time'. The hyperdrive had refused to function, not once but twice, allowing Boba Fett and eventually the Empire to track them to Bespin. At Bespin, the nightmare had really begun for Han. First torture on the scan grid at the hands of Vader, and then the torture of the carbonite.

As the wounds were still fresh for Han, Chewbacca was prepared to leave his questioning at that, until it occurred to him that Han was going to fly the Falcon in the upcoming battle against the Death Star. He studied his friend earnestly, taking in the red-rimmed eyes, the pallor of his skin, and the hand that continued to shake.

[You're going to fly her, aren't you?] Chewbacca stated, more than asked.
[Against the Death Star.]

The Corellian's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Why not? I flew her against the other one. Can't see the difference."

[You!] the Wookiee bellowed. [You're the difference! Look at you! You can barely hold that glass steady let alone a control yoke.]

The glass cracked as Solo slammed it against the surface of the table, the dregs of the alcohol spilling over the lip. "You don't have to fly with me if you don't wanna," he snarled. "I'll get someone else. Lando, even." Not that he knew what Lando had been up to lately; he hadn't seen much of the gambler since their return to the fleet. But someone would readily take over the co-pilot's position if Chewie refused; he just knew they would.

Chewbacca wisely re-vectored his reasoning. [What about the princess?]

Solo glared at the Wookiee, resenting the attempt to influence his actions by invoking his relationship with Leia. "What about the princess?"

[She won't want you flying. She's probably expecting you to stay with her here on the command ship.]

The headache speared Solo's temples. "She'll understand. I thought you would too."

Chewbacca finally took a sip at his drink as he regarded Solo critically, his instincts rebelling against what his brain was preparing to say. Releasing a sigh, he set down his glass. [I'll fly with you, Han. I have a Life Debt-]

"No!" Han's voice cracked as he rose from the seat. "Don't drag that up again! You fly with me cos you want to. Not because you have to." He backed out away from the game table. "Screw your Life Debt."

Chewbacca's lip curled back in an unvoiced snarl, keeping his emotions under tight control. He watched Solo clutch a hand to his temple. Obviously stricken by a headache, the Corellian stalked over to the tech station and slumped into the seat. He flicked on a diagnostic scanner and brought up the operational parameters for the hyperdrive motivator, ignoring the fact this was the fifth time that day he had checked it. He found it more difficult to ignore the lethargy that sucked and pulled at his own energy levels. He knew he didn't have the strength to continue this argument.

The headache was arching its way towards migraine status, dulling the ache in his bruised hip by comparison, so he kept his back resolutely towards

Chewbacca and continued with the systems checks. For long minutes, the Wookiee stared at the back of Solo's head, struggling for words that would soothe his friend, make him see reason, perhaps even ease whatever plagued him. But Han wasn't in the mood for talking; that much was painfully obvious. And being the stubborn, nerf-headed human that he was, Chewbacca knew the best thing for the moment would be to leave Han alone.

Chewbacca glanced at the remains of his drink, downed it in one mouthful and quietly rose from his seat. The Corellian's attention was absorbed in his work, but the line of his shoulders suggested he was steeling himself against another verbal assault. Realising he needed a different line of attack if he was going to help Solo, Chewbacca left the hold without another word and clumped down the boarding ramp.

Solo released the breath he had been holding as the Wookiee's footsteps faded away. For the first time he could recall in a while, he was seriously considering seeking out the medkit to find relief for his head. Perhaps if he rested his eyes for a while, took a quick nap, that might also put paid to the ache and his dark mood...

He dragged his fingers through his hair, massaging the tightness in his scalp, before his gaze returned to the diagnostic screen. There was too much to do. Too many checks to run. He had to be organised. Had to be prepared. He'd already lost once before. He wasn't about to lose again.

The shrill beep of the comlink woke him. His brain found consciousness before his eyes opened, and for one terrifying moment he couldn't remember where he was. His mind screamed at the thought that he was still trapped inside the carbonite. His limbs jerked in panic, striking the control panel in front of him, and his eyes snapped open. A cry of pure terror strangled in his dry throat, but the sound was enough to bring him to his senses. He was sitting in the cockpit of the Falcon, in the pilot's seat. Safe.

The comlink trilled again. Han swiped a hand towards his belt and drew the comlink to his mouth, his heart thumping in his chest.

"So-Solo."

"Hi, it's me." The soothing tones of Leia's voice calmed his nerves and he relaxed back in his seat, his eyes closing again as he tried to compose himself. "Are you all right?" His shook his head in annoyance. She'd heard the stammer and the pitch of his voice and immediately knew something was up.

"I'm fine," he lied, opening his eyes again. "Just sorting out a few things. How 'bout you?" Leia paused before responding. "I'm nearly finished for the day." She was silent again, expecting him to suggest what they should do next, but when he failed to respond, she added, "Would you...would you like to-"

"I'll come up and see you," he quickly offered, knowing he had missed the opportunity to propose the idea unaided. Must be losing my touch...along with everything else. "Are you still in the Command Centre?"

"That's right. Level 23."

"I know, I remember," he grouched, irritated that she felt the need to remind him. When there was no response from Leia, he swore at himself for snapping at her like that. "Sorry."

Leia waited a beat before replying. "That's all right."

It's not all right, he told himself. She's put up with enough from me without wearing abuse as well.

"I'll be there shortly."

He sat there for a while after he had signed off, staring absently at the cockpit's transparisteel viewport, wondering what in hell was wrong with him. At least the headache had gone, and his bruised hip only hurt when he prodded it. He vaguely wondered how long he'd slept for. Probably four or five hours. The pilot's chair was comfortable and he'd slept upright in it many times in the past. He certainly hadn't meant to fall asleep, not with all the work he had been intending to do. At least his sleep had been sound; he could not recall any nightmares or feelings of suffocation.

His focus switched and he took in the swarm of activity outside in the hangar bay. Maintenance crews, technicians and droids scurried around all manner of star fighters, prepping and servicing them in a carefully choreographed sequence. To the untrained eye, it may have appeared haphazard, but Solo knew the Rebels were skilled in maintaining their craft under the pressures of war. Nearly as skilled as Chewbacca and himself...

Something inside Han cracked as he recalled the words he had recently aimed at Chewbacca: Screw your Life Debt. He'd never said anything as spiteful as that before to his friend, but then he'd been saying a lot of things lately that he regretted. Add another one to the list. It was almost as if his brain and his mouth were somehow disconnected, or he suffered a bout of temporary insanity.

'Temporary', he thought contritely, his throat still sore from the screaming session in the 'fresher. Let's hope that's all it is.

It appeared that Leia was the only stable element in his life. Her love for him seemed to be the sole thing that hadn't been affected by the carbonite; if anything, her love had deepened and strengthened. He was grateful she was there for him, as solid and indomitable as always. Grateful that she loved him so very much, in spite of himself. He didn't know if he would have been able to cope with the effects of the carbonite if he'd had to face them on his own without her.

Cope? he sneered inwardly. Call this 'coping'?

He pushed himself out of the seat with an angry finality, rebuking himself for having such pathetic and fatalistic thoughts. I'm going to see Leia. That beautiful princess who loves me. Leia with the tantalising touch and the magic lips.

He stopped as he felt a stirring in his groin. Knowing he'd felt that once before and it had only led to frustration and a lack of fulfilment, he tried not to get his hopes up, and instead concentrated on getting a rise out of something else. He conjured a vibrant image of making love to Leia, the exquisite sensation of sliding into her, of being enveloped by her warmth. Looking down at her as she gazed up at him, her eyes mirroring his own desire...

He almost gaped in amazement as he felt himself twitch and harden. He added Leia's moans to the fantasy, the touch of her fingers through his hair, and an increased flow of blood rushed to his groin. He hadn't felt this aroused since Bespin.

"Yes!" He punched the air and crowed with glee, almost running from the cockpit. This was it! This would be it! All he had needed was time and rest. Now he could show Leia how much he loved her. He would make it all up to her. Now they could be reunited physically, spiritually, and emotionally.

He came to a sliding halt at the top of the boarding ramp as a thought suddenly occurred to him. Perhaps he should try things out before he went to Leia like this. Bring it out for a test flight first? he considered. Chewing on his bottom lip, he glanced down the corridor in the direction of his cabin. He was not adverse to the idea. Before he and Leia had finally given in and admitted their feelings for each other, he had spent many a night in his cabin, alone with just lurid fantasies of her and a tube of lubricant. But somehow, now, the thought of jerking off before making love to Leia seemed as if he would be 'cheating' on her and himself.

Han adjusted himself and loosened his belt by a notch, hoping to make things more comfortable and to hide the extent of his arousal. There was almost a spring in his step as he made his way to the Command Centre. Although making love to Leia would not solve all his problems, it was a good place to start. Might even make him feel more like his old self again.

By the time Solo made it up to the Command Centre, he realised the shift had changed a good three hours ago, and yet Leia was still there working as she had been since she had left him in her bed that morning, at least 15 hours previously. Apart from the fact that she worked long hours, he wasn't sure exactly what position she now held with the Alliance. It appeared to be mainly administrative and organisational, not the high profile command and diplomatic position she had held previously. He suspected she had been demoted, and that the demotion had been his fault. Well, he suspected it was due to her decision to take a leave of absence from the Alliance in order to rescue him from Jabba the Hutt. No doubt her judgement and leadership had been called into question.

Leia being Leia, she had not complained about her duties, or explained to him why she was now an administrator instead of a leader. For the princess, this was just the way things were; if she wanted to contribute to the Alliance, this was the job that the High Command now expected her to do. Solo couldn't help but feel responsible for the position he had effectively placed her in. She had sacrificed her standing within an organisation that she lived and breathed for, simply because she loved a worn out Corellian smuggler. And he loved her all the more for it.

As with most operational areas of a Calamari cruiser, the Centre was large by human standards, and well appointed with holo-tanks and screens, rows of diagnostic and tactical workstations, communications suites and an expansive array of scenario simulators. The Centre was humming with activity when he entered, and he had to wind his way through a crowd of curious tacticians, analysts and other ops staff.

He found Leia soon enough, sitting at a workstation, her attention focussed on the monitor in front of her. She had arranged her hair into plaits and had pulled them up against the back of her head away from her neck. The result was a tantalising glimpse of soft white skin between the top of her collar and the beginning of her hairline, a glimpse that grew as she stretched her neck forward and briefly massaged the vertebrae. The invitation was irresistible. He placed his hands on her shoulders, feeling her tense slightly at the unexpected contact, then relax as she quickly recognised his touch.

She remained facing the screen and murmured, "Hi."

He leaned down and pressed a kiss against the bare skin of her neck, felt her tremble against his lips and felt his own body respond to her reaction.

Leia tried to repress the shiver. As much as she relished the incredible sensations his mouth set off inside her, she knew they should wait for a more private place to continue. Not only wasn't it fair to flaunt their relationship in front of others, it wasn't professional.

She moved to face him but her cheek came in contact with his lips and he kissed her again.

"Missed you," he told her huskily, his breath whispering in her ear. "Did you miss me?"

Leia's eyes closed and she reached for the hand on her shoulder. "Desperately."

"Good."

She chuckled and turned her seat towards him. Han squatted down next to her, bringing his eyes level with hers. She saw the glimmer in the depths of hazel, a mischievous spark she hadn't seen for a while. An excited, half-grin lit his face, and she recalled private memories of moments on board the Falcon when he'd approached her with a similar look, followed quickly by erotic suggestions. She couldn't refrain a smile, wondering what had lifted his spirits, and obviously something else as well.

"What is it?" she asked softly.

He raised his eyebrows, pressed his lips together and took her hand.
"Mmm...nothing."

The adorable half-grin returned, and she couldn't resist brushing the backs of her fingers against his cheek.

Willing to encourage his playful mood, she gently insisted, "Tell me."

His other hand slipped onto her knee. "Why don't I show you."

Leia's stomach dipped and a tingle rushed through her system. She matched his grin, and they held each other's gaze, feeding on the heady expectation that shimmered between them.

"Excuse me, Princess."

General Rieekan's voice brought them back to the reality of the Command Centre, dampening their intimacy. From his position in the hatchway to his office, Rieekan considered the curious couple that was the princess and the smuggler. This was the third time he'd seen them together since Solo's rescue, and each time the personal distance between them suggested they were more than friends and far from the antagonists they had been on Hoth.

>From this angle, Rieekan could clearly see Solo's face, and had watched the princess lovingly caress his cheek. Their relationship did not overly concern the Alderaani general. Although he felt protective towards the daughter of his friend

and viceroy, Bail Organa, Rieekan genuinely liked Han Solo, even if he was a smuggler. He'd always suspected the spark between the princess and the Corellian had its foundations in a basic sexual attraction, rather than the antagonism that they espoused. The frostiness that had characterised their relationship following their mission to Ord Mantell had helped firm this belief.

There was also the fact that Leia had taken a leave of absence specifically to rescue Solo. Skywalker, he could understand - but the princess...? Questions had been raised about her commitment to the Alliance and her better judgement. At the time, the High Command had believed she had left because she was following Skywalker, that she was enamoured with the young commander and was allowing her emotional attachment to him to dictate her actions. Consequently, upon her return, she had been relegated to a lesser role.

And then there were the rumours. The gossip that was quickly spreading throughout the Rebellion, almost matching the animated discussions about the upcoming battle. These rumours were effectively solid fact. When she was not on duty, the princess was constantly seen in Solo's company, usually holding his hand. And it was widely known that Solo had effectively taken up residence in the princess' cabin. Rieekan didn't want to imagine what role the High Command would have placed the princess in if they'd known that she and the smuggler were lovers.

Now, as Rieekan had disturbed them, he had noticed the guilty looks they had traded as they hastily masked their emotions, hid their annoyance at being interrupted, and rose to face the general. Within moments, Leia was composed and professional. "Yes, General?"

Rieekan tamed the smile that curved his mouth. "May I have a word with you?" The princess glanced at Solo, and the general added, "Both of you, if you wouldn't mind."

Rieekan caught the instinctive fire that flared in the Corellian's eyes, a reaction to what Solo anticipated would be a reprimand, counselling or warning to curb his relationship with the princess. Rieekan noticed the quick squeeze Leia gave to Solo's hand, and the staying influence it had over him; the defiance cooled in Solo's gaze.

The couple allowed themselves to be ushered into the general's undecorated office and took a seat in the simple chairs, curiously noting that he did not close the hatch. Rieekan took a moment to settle himself behind the cluttered desk, then allowed that moment to drag on into a heavy silence that soon had Solo shifting in his seat. The princess, on the other hand, handled the situation with her usual diplomatic aplomb.

"How may we help you, General?"

Rieekan noted her willingness to be viewed as one half of a couple. Not quite prepared to ease up on them, the general began, "There's something I need to discuss with you."

When Solo noticeably bristled and cleared his throat as if to speak, Rieekan thought it time to cease his teasing.

"Calrissian has offered his support to the Alliance, and has formally requested a commission into Rebellion forces."

"Lando?" Leia asked at the same time Han gaped, "What?"

"That surprises you?"

Solo made a sour face, then frowned when Leia replied, "Well, when I think about it, I suppose not." Without thinking, Solo rounded on her. "You don't even know Lando!"

The princess slowly turned her attention towards Solo, carefully composing her response and facial expression so as not to attack or belittle him, but to ensure he understood her opinion. He quickly recognised his mistake and averted his eyes when Leia told him, "Yes, I do."

Rieekan felt obliged to help set Solo straight on exactly what had happened during the time that the Corellian had been absent.

"I have a reasonable familiarity with Calrissian myself," Rieekan explained. "Not to the extent that you may have, Solo, but I like to believe I'm a reasonable judge of character. Calrissian may be a smooth operator. A polished, professional con-artist," - Leia smirked at this assessment - "but beneath all that glitz and glamour, the white, bright smile, he's got a good heart." Han snorted derisively, but did not contradict the general's conviction.

"You believe otherwise?"

The Corellian grimaced in concession. "So you've known the man for a year. Lando's still gotta lot of history behind him you may not like."

Rieekan raised an inquiring eyebrow. "The same could be said for you, Solo. I don't hear anyone questioning your support to the Alliance."

"Well, I haven't been around much lately, have I?" Solo's face hardened and his voice dropped to a dangerous monotone. "I'm sure the slander will start again soon enough."

The princess lay a hand against her lover's arm, and spoke his name soothingly, "Han..."

The Alderaani general leaned forward across his desk. "No one should be judged solely on their past. It's what they do now, their deeds and actions, that matter most." He glanced at the princess. "Otherwise I'd be seriously questioning your intentions towards Leia."

The couple exchanged suspicious glances, wondering if they should be grateful Rieekan trusted Han, or irked that he felt he had a 'claim' over the welfare of Bail Organa's daughter.

The general seemed not to notice, or chose to ignore, their reaction. "I believe Calrissian is reliable and trustworthy enough to be offered a commission. Force knows we need the help." He sat back in his chair, folded his hands against his chest. "I'm interested in your opinion on what position and rank would best reflect his skills and experience."

"Why my opinion?" Solo asked warily.

Rieekan's response was open. "I respect your capabilities and acknowledge your substantial spacer experience. I recognise the military training you've had. And, strangely enough, I like you." He added with a grin, "Most of the time."

The Corellian gave a small shrug. "If it was my decision, I'd make Lando a private first class and give him sentry duty in front of the heads."

Leia called his name again, this time in reprove. "Han."

Rieekan smiled appreciatively. The princess was in for an interesting future if she thought she had a chance of seriously altering the smuggler's behaviour. "He seems to be a reasonable pilot." "Reasonable's about right," Solo agreed.

"But what I'd like to understand is his tactical ability and his capacity for thinking on his feet." Solo's gaze flickered up to the bulkhead behind Rieekan as he chewed on the inside of his mouth. He could feel the princess watching him intently and he met her inquiring eyes. The look she gave him was encouraging and hopeful. He sighed deeply, lifted his chin and turned back to Rieekan. "You've heard about Taanab?"

Rieekan frowned, his interest piqued. "The Norulackian pirate raid?"

"Yeah."

"The Battle of Taanab?" It held almost legendary status amongst spacer circles.

Solo's mouth twisted into a wry grin. "There's been another one while I was gone?"

Rieekan nodded at him to continue. "Go on. You've got me intrigued."

"Me too," Leia added.

The incident at Taanab had occurred not long after Leia had been elected to her office in the Imperial senate. Taanab was an agrarian world whose populace had remained relatively under-developed technology-wise in order to maintain their idyllic farming lifestyle. The peace and tranquillity was seasonally shattered by bands of Norulackian pirates. As the populace comprised farmers, fisher-folk, biologists and botanists, they lacked the necessary skill and ability to ward off these attacks. Unfortunately for Taanab, the rest of the galaxy had seemed unconcerned with what happened to a reasonably insignificant mid-Rim world. The legendary Battle of Taanab had brought the raids to a halt-until the Empire assumed control and imposed martial law, channelling Taanab's abundant natural resources towards feeding and clothing its soldiers.

Solo's voice took on a serious tone. "Pirates had been raiding Taanab for centuries, and it seems some of the locals had grown tired of visits by these uninvited guests. They managed to acquire the remains of a squadron of Headhunters, but being dirt-lovers, didn't have a brain-cell between them when it came to spacer skills." He shook his head slowly in disgust, a grimace turning his mouth. "The Z's remained undercover in a hangar somewhere, butted up next to the manure and the birdseed. And the raids continued unabated.

"Fortunately for Taanab, Lando was refuelling on-planet when one of the raids took place. The Nor'lacks shot up his ship real bad, and seeing as it was straight off the production line, Lando was mighty pissed about it too. If you ask Lando, he'll tell you he took on the pirates because of the damage they did to his ship." His eyes widened in disbelief. "I reckon it was because he had a soft spot for those defenceless morons. Plus, I also heard someone bet him he didn't have a hope in hell of winning against the Nor'lacks.

"So they pulled out the Z's, brushed out the bird nests and fuelled them up. Lando was quick to realise that what the locals lacked in ability and direction, they made up for in determination and sheer bloody-mindedness. Seems like all they needed was someone who knew what he was doing. They needed direction, and a leader to follow."

"I understand it was a bit more than that," Rieekan suggested. "Superior tactics and amazing manoeuvres also played a part."

Solo raised a shoulder in compromise. "That, and a lot of luck. The Nor'lacks may be as thick as rocks, but they know how to fly." He pressed his lips together. "Lando did all right."

General Rieekan raised temple fingers to his mouth, his gaze momentarily lost in thought as he weighed up Calrissian's capabilities and experience, Solo's begrudging opinion and his own personal knowledge of Lando. Solo's advice had certainly helped make his decision easier.

Rieekan returned his consideration to the Corellian. "Thank you for your candour and insight, Han. It helps place things in context."

Solo nodded once in acknowledgment. "No problem."

At his side, Leia spoke up, compelled to express her own beliefs in order to present Lando in the best light. "May I add that Lando has already proven himself to be a friend and ally of the Alliance. And a good friend to me as well." Her eyes met Han's, held them so that he understood how she felt. "I can personally vouch for his reliability and loyalty." Her smile was small but assuring. Solo nodded again, this time in agreement with her appraisal.

"One more thing," Rieekan added, and Solo's attention returned to the general. "How do you think Calrissian would fair leading the attack against the Death Star?"

A chill prickled the hair on the back of Solo's neck, his palms moistened, and for the first time he realised that he had been waiting for the Alliance to offer that position to himself. That was why he had been prepping the Falcon so thoroughly; if he was going to lead the Rebel forces, both himself and his ship had to be ready. And although the Falcon was, he wasn't too sure about himself. Now though when he thought about it, why the Rebels would ever offer such a crucial position to Han Solo - a non-aligned smuggler - was beyond him. Totally beyond him. It was probably just as well that he wasn't up to it, physically or mentally.

Solo was aware that Leia was looking at him with slight concern. He wondered if she sensed he had wanted the lead position for himself. Knowing that she knew the way his mind worked better than he did, he could not meet her eyes. Instead, he kept his gaze resolutely fixed on Rieekan and told him, "If he has the right ship, he'll do all right."

"Excuse me, General."

A lieutenant had appeared at the open hatchway, and Rieekan gestured towards her, indicating that she should continue.

"Sir, we're ready to conduct the briefing."

"Thank you, Chyra." The Alderaani general turned back to the couple in front of his desk.

"Princess, Solo, if you'll excuse me."

The three of them rose together and moved out of the office. Rieekan headed towards the briefing room with Lieutenant Chyra in tow, and Solo heard him tell her, "Contact Calrissian and invite him to the brief."

Leia's voice captured Han's attention. "I just need to collect my things." Her sideways glance suggested she was still worried about him. "You haven't eaten, have you?"

He followed her back to her workstation, trying to focus his mind on the sensual way she walked to help resurrect the desire that had previously surged through his system. "No."

"I got us some meals to take back to my room." She indicated the insulated packs that sat on her desk, wondering what was going on behind those expressive hazel eyes of his. "Are you happy to go back to my room? Or did you want to eat at the mess?"

He smiled when she took his hand. "Your room's fine."

Wanting to reignite the excited spark that had warmed his face, she interlaced her fingers with his. "So what did you want to show me?"

"Oh, that?"

The half-grin slowly returned as he collected the meal packs under his arm. He tugged her closer, pressed his leg against hers so she could feel the onset of his arousal. Her eyebrows rose in comprehension and her mouth curved into a seductive smile. The hardness nestled just above her hip promised that the final stage of their reunion would soon occur. It was tempting to run her hand across the front of his trousers, but this was definitely not the place. Then her mind filled with the urge to push him to the floor and make love to him right there in the Command Centre, regardless of the scene they would cause.

Mischief and hunger gleamed in his eyes. "What do you think about me showing you some of those 'intentions' the general should've questioned me about?"

Entranced by his gaze and her own desires, Leia could only nod and agree, "Okay."

Within moments of the hatch to the princess' cabin closing, there was an almost frenzied, breathless assault on fasteners, clasps, belt buckles and anything else that stood in the way of undressing each other. Solo pulled the shirt over his head and Leia immediately ran her hands through the hair on his chest and down across his abdomen. There was a rent of fabric as he pushed the shirt from her shoulders. Mouths feasted on skin as it was stripped bare, moist nips that were more bite than kiss.

She lifted her arms so he could remove her crop top bra, and it was still halfway over her head when she felt him cup her breast and suckle on it. Feeding on his intensity, Leia untangled her arms and buried her fingers in his hair, encouraging him and relishing the exquisite sensations coursing through her body. She pulled his head up slightly, found his ear with her lips and nibbled on the fleshy lobe. Momentarily overwhelmed, he moaned against her breast. Keeping up the desperate momentum, Leia helped him push the trousers from his hips and caressed him mercilessly through the fabric of his shorts.

There was barely enough opportunity to appreciate the sight of the other naked before they shepherded each other to the bunk. Leia pulled the covers aside and fell backward onto the sheets, pulling Solo by the hand so that he toppled over the top of her. His lips captured hers, and his tongue explored the recesses of her mouth as he settled himself against her, taking most of his weight on his hands and knees. She widened her legs to accommodate his body, groaning with desire as she felt the hardness of his erection slip up her inner thigh. He lifted himself up to enter her and she leaned forward to bite softly at his raised nipple. He gasped, a strangled moan in the back of his throat, and a grimace contorted his features as his body briefly spasmed. Leia felt a warm moistness spurt against the top of her leg, but didn't comprehend what had happened until she heard him cry out in self-disgust.

Shoulders heaving, Solo pushed himself up and away from her, kneeling between her legs and looking down at the mess he had made and his rapidly deflating erection. His head shook slowly in disbelief until a growl of pure rage tore from his throat. He pushed a hand through his hair and threw his head back towards the upper bulkhead, the roar of frustration and despair grinding past his clenched jaw.

"Han. Han, stop it. You're scaring me."

Leia's calm voice penetrated the darkness that engulfed him. He swallowed the feral snarl and looked down at her, panting with exertion and repressed emotions. Propped up on her elbows, Leia was staring at him with a mixture of worry and apprehension - fear not of him, but for him. He immediately regretted

that his reaction had frightened her, more so than his regret at not being able to perform.

Averting his eyes and looking anywhere but at her and the evidence of his failure, he muttered, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," apologising for everything that had happened.

"It's all right," she soothed.

"This hasn't happened to me since I was an over-sexed kid," he blurted out, then winced at how pathetic that had sounded.

"It's okay. I understand."

She tried to take his hand but he pulled away from her and rose from the bed. "Better clean this up." He headed towards the refresher, then stopped and asked without facing her again, "Can I get you a cloth?"

Wishing there were something she could do to erase his distress, Leia's heart ached. It was as if she was watching the man that she loved slowly fall apart in front of her eyes. Their abysmal record in bed was just the start of it. She knew he was plagued by insomnia and an insipid depression lurked constantly at the back of his mind. His wild reaction to his inadequacy was also deeply disturbing. The doctor who had conducted the initial examination of Han following his release from the carbonite had warned that he could have been severely traumatised by the experience. With each day, it seemed as though this was more and more the case. If the Rebellion hadn't been so close to such a definitive battle against the Empire, she might insist he seek psychological treatment.

"I'm fine," she told him. "I'll have a 'fresher when you've finished."

She watched his shoulders heave as he sighed and nodded. "Fine."

For the rest of the night, the atmosphere between them was strained. They ate in relative quiet, Han poking and prodding at his food as he evaded her attempts to start a conversation. When she asked him about the bruise on his hip, he shrugged and told her he had slipped while working on the Falcon. The quickness of his reply made her suspect it was rehearsed and that there was more to the injury than a simple fall, but she left it at that.

After they had eaten, Leia snuggled up next to him on the bed. He placed a hesitant arm around her shoulders as she moulded herself down the length of his body. He tensed as her fingers teased through his chest hairs and he looked at her warily.

"Did you want to try again?" she asked.

If he didn't love her so much, didn't feel so guilty for failing her, he would have said 'no'. "Okay."

Taking his assent as a personal challenge, Leia slipped her leg across his waist and sat up so she was straddling him. He opened his mouth to say something, but she placed a finger across his lips. "Shhh," she told him. "Just lie back and relax."

She started at his shoulders, running her hands across his body in a sensuous caress, paying particular attention to his erogenous points: his nipples; the shallow indentation where hip met buttock; his upper thigh; and the stretch of skin at the bottom of his stomach. When her touch failed to excite him to his previous level, she replaced her hands with her mouth, licking, biting and sucking her way around his body.

Eventually, he pulled her head up. "It's okay," he explained. His expression was apologetic,

anguished. "It's nothing you're doing." He removed her hand from his groin. "It's me."

There was not much more she could do, so she suggested they try to get some sleep. After she turned off the light, there was a moment of palpable tension as they lay under the covers, trying not to touch one another. Then Leia reached for his hand, and he did not pull away, instead rolling on his side toward her. He rested his head against her shoulder, and Leia pressed a kiss to his forehead, cradling his body with her own.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

She simply replied, "I love you."

A soft, rhythmic thumping woke Leia from a light sleep. She took a moment to orient herself, then discovered the source of the noise. Han was sitting up in bed, his upper torso bare as he sat with his back pressed up against the bulkhead. In the faint light she could tell his eyes were closed, yet she sensed he was awake. And with each breath he took, his head beat back against the bulkhead. Leia touched his side, felt him flinch when she accidentally brushed against his bruised hip, but the sickening thud of skull against metal continued. He only stopped when she called his name.

"Han."

His eyes remained closed but she saw the wince of alarm cross his face.

"Han."

"Go back to sleep, Leia."

His thigh muscles tightened beneath her touch. "Tell me what's wrong."

"Nothing's wrong. Go back to sleep."

Leia sat up and activated the lights, causing them both to cringe under the sudden brightness. She dimmed the luminance to a tolerable level and faced him squarely.

"Don't tell me nothing's wrong."

His eyes were wide and overly alert, and if she hadn't known him better, she'd have thought he was on some kind of amphetamine high.

"I'm fine," he lied. "Just can't sleep. Sorry if I woke you."

"And why can't you sleep?" she wanted to know, suddenly prepared to have this out with him. He shook his head uncaringly. "I don't know. Maybe cos I had a nap today and I don't need any more."

She regarded him suspiciously, knowing full well how bad his insomnia had been; the nightmares he had when he did manage to sleep; how upset he had been over their failure to make love; and suspecting he was disappointed that the Alliance hadn't offered him the lead position in the upcoming battle.

"How long did you sleep for?"

"Four, maybe five hours."

Perhaps he was right; if he was telling the truth, four or five hours would have been the most stretch of sleep he'd had since he'd been discharged from the medical centre. Still, it didn't account for his moodiness or the way he had been bashing his head against the bulkhead.

She took his hand and looked at him earnestly. "Han, I want to suggest something to you and I don't want you to over-react." He rolled his eyes and opened his mouth in protest but she stopped him mid-flight. "Please. Hear me out." She touched his cheek and tempered her voice. "I'm worried about you."

"You don't have to be," he told her dismissively.

"Yes, I have to be because I love you." His hand twitched and quivered involuntarily in hers; she had seen the slight shake before, but this was the first

time she had seriously felt it and wondered how it would affect his ability to fly in battle. "You've got a few problems that obviously aren't going away and may not for some time. I've heard that andris can sometimes help-

"No!" He dropped her hand as if scalded. "I'm a smuggler, Leia. I run spice. I don't do it."

She sat back from him, shocked at the way he had so quickly discarded her suggestion. That, and the fact he still considered himself a smuggler, after everything they had been through.

"Answer me this, then. Are you planning on flying the Falcon in the battle?"

His eyes dropped to his hands. This wasn't the way he had wanted to tell her. "I was thinkin' about it." He heard Leia repress a sigh, then glanced up at her again. "Why?"

"Could I be selfish for once and ask you to stay with me?"

His eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Chewie thinks I'm not up to it. Do you think that as well?" How could she tell him what she really thought? After all that had happened tonight.

"I'm sure you're more than capable of flying anything against the Death Star," she replied. "Han Solo operating at only 50% is still worth two normal pilots."

"I feel 100%," he insisted, knowing it was a blatant lie. "Almost as good as new."

She held his gaze, her eyes telling him that although she knew the truth, she did not want to contradict his assertion "Han, I haven't had you with me for over a year. We both know what could happen in the next battle. I'd like to be selfish and have you here with me."

It was now his turn to clasp her hand. He didn't like the idea of facing the Death Star in any ship he didn't have control of. He also didn't like the thought of leaving behind the only stable factor in his life - Leia. "Come with me on the Falcon."

She shook her head slowly. "You know I can't."

"You mean they won't let you."

Leia dismissed his accusation with a shake of her head. They both knew the truth. She had been unable to convince the High Command that rescuing a smuggler was a worthwhile cause. Accompanying that same smuggler, her lover, into battle - risking the life of the sole remaining heir to the Royal House of Alderaan - would be seen as unacceptable folly.

"I'll do more good here," she insisted. "They need me to liaise between the Command and the military."

The troubled look on his face nearly broke her heart. Leia leaned towards him, pressed her forehead against his. "Please stay."

Aah, Leia. His head tilted downwards. Don't make me choose. "You know I love you," he whispered. "Han." She placed kisses down the length of his nose, across his cheeks and up to his eyes, his lids closing under the caress of her lips. "Stay. Please."

A sigh cracked from deep within his chest. Eventually he nodded, and Leia wrapped her arms around his neck.

"I'll stay," he promised.

As he walked up the ramp of the Millennium Falcon, Calrissian's tread was careful and considered. He didn't quite know what to expect. Since returning to the Rebel fleet, he had seen Han infrequently and each time he suspected the Corellian had become more unstable. He swallowed at that thought. Despite his best efforts, and reassurances from the princess, Lando couldn't ignore the guilt that continued to torment him; guilt that he was responsible for Han's current state. He knew Han didn't hold him personally responsible...correction, he knew that Leia had told him Han didn't hold him personally responsible. But then again, Leia was an incredible woman who had been quick to absolve him of any liability for what had occurred on Bespin. Han...well, he wasn't quite sure what Han thought. Then again, who ever knew what Han Solo was really thinking.

Calrissian suspected Leia had something to do with Rieekan not only offering him a commission, but also granting him the rank of general and placing him in command of the fighter attack. A general. He still couldn't get over the fact they had commissioned him as a general. Him - Lando Calrissian - without any previous military training. General Calrissian. As far as he knew, they hadn't even offered that level of rank to Solo, and Han had once been one of the brightest to come out of the Imperial Academy. Granted, with his extensive criminal past, Solo probably wasn't the type of general the Alliance wanted. But then again, the Alliance was hardly in a position to be choosy, a factor that no doubt, he acknowledged with an uncharacteristic touch of humility, had helped ensure his own commissioning.

He briefly wondered if the uniform of an Alliance general would come with a cape.

Upon reaching the top of the ramp, Calrissian stopped and patted the freighter's hull in a fond gesture. The Millennium Falcon, his old ship. He held many cherished memories of his time at the helm of the YT-1300. Perhaps Solo and Chewbacca had improved her slightly with their 'special modifications', but she had always been a fast ship, despite her bulky appearance.

That was why he was here now. He was an Alliance general, in charge of the fighter attack against the Death Star. He needed a fast ship. A ship he could rely on and that befitted his new status. One he was familiar with, knew its strengths and idiosyncrasies. A ship he could trust his one-and-only precious hide with. And, unfortunately, the one ship that met these criteria now belonged to Han Solo.

Calrissian wasn't quite sure how he would ask Solo if he could 'borrow' the Falcon for the attack. Rieekan had offered him one of the latest B-Wings, but Calrissian had assured the Alderaani general that he had his eye on another ship. A fast ship. All he needed was the owner's permission to fly her. Rieekan had huffed in wry amusement, "Good luck." Lando was very much aware that he would need to draw on all his legendary charisma in order to talk Solo into giving up the Falcon for the duration of the battle.

Despite the fact this had once been his ship, Calrissian didn't feel comfortable entering the Falcon uninvited. She was Han's 'girl' now, had been for years. Walking on the balls of his feet, he delicately entered the ship, reverentially, as if intruding into a cathedral or sanctuary. He moved down the corridor into the forward compartment and came to an abrupt, yet silent, halt.

Solo stood on the opposite side of the hold, his back toward Calrissian as he stared at the bulkhead. Calrissian watched for a moment before realising that Solo must have been concentrating intensely for him not to notice that he had a visitor; as quiet as Calrissian had been, Solo was renowned for being attuned to every noise, squeak and beep on the Falcon.

Solo's arm suddenly exploded into action, the blaster appeared in his hand as he withdrew it from the holster, aimed it at the bulkhead, returned it to the holster. His fingers flexed over the butt of the blaster, then the drill began again.

Fascinated with the scene that confronted him, Calrissian remained silent and continued watching. He knew Solo had a deserved reputation for his speed draw, but this was the first time he had seen him practice. Initially impressed with what he saw, Calrissian began to notice the errors as the drill proceeded. Solo's hand occasionally fumbled on the butt of the blaster, or the muzzle caught on the holster when he tried to level it too early. The explosive movement of his arm and shoulder soon grew tired and jerky.

The guilt solidified in Calrissian's stomach. This wasn't the same Han Solo who had intuitively and flawlessly drawn and fired at Darth Vader. He couldn't help feeling responsible for what the carbonite appeared to have done to the Corellian. And now he was surreptitiously watching Solo; spying on him... It just didn't feel right. Calrissian cleared his throat.

In that heartbeat, the blaster leapt into Solo's hand as he spun on the toe of his boot. Calrissian's palms sprang up in an instinctive, defensive posture as the weapon's muzzle was aimed at him from the end of Han's outstretched arm.

"Whoa there!" Lando called.

Solo's eyes were wide, glassy and seemingly uncomprehending. The blaster was aimed resolutely at Calrissian, and Lando watched with some alarm as Solo's finger tightened on the trigger. "Hey, take it easy," Calrissian warned. "Stop joking around."

Solo's face was impassive, but his eyes blazed with a level of rage Lando had infrequently seen before. Strange...he thought they had resolved the bad blood that had been between them. Lando wondered what he'd done to incite this viciousness in the smuggler; surely he couldn't be angry because Calrissian had snuck up on him.

"Okay! Okay!" Calrissian's voice raised a few octaves. "Now you're scaring me."

In spite of the noticeable tremor in Solo's outstretched arm, Lando didn't trust that the blaster's aim would be that far off if Solo pulled the trigger. Besides, he didn't want to push his gambler's luck by chancing it; after all, a blaster bolt could cause serious damage, no matter where it hit. There was no recognition in the Corellian's wild gaze, and the whites of his eyes glowed brightly against the grey pallor of his face. It suddenly occurred to Lando that, for some reason, Solo did not know who he was.

"Han? Han, it's me! Lando!" His throat went tight and dry. This would not look very impressive on his brand new service record: killed before making it in to battle. "Han!"

Solo's face twitched, his lids blinked slowly, and something warmed in the hazel eyes. His head pulled back as if suddenly seeing the situation for the first time. Calrissian watched as Solo swallowed deeply, his larynx bobbing with the effort. The weapon dropped to his side.

The Corellian's eyes colour-shifted to a frosty green. "What do you want?" he gruffly asked. Trying to compose himself, maintain some sense of dignity and keep his own anger in check, Calrissian lowered his hands and moved into the hold. He automatically raised his hands again when Solo raised the blaster to

holster it, arresting both of their actions. The Corellian sneered and settled his DL-44 back in its holster while Lando straightened up again.

Solo repeated, "What do you want?"

Maintaining vigilance, Calrissian slipped back into his smooth composure. "I was passing by. Thought I'd drop in to see how you are."

The response was reflexive. "You've seen me. I'm fine. What else do you want?"

Yeah. I can see how 'fine' you are, Lando thought despondently. Solo may have been there with him in the hold now, but he hadn't been present only seconds ago, at least not mentally. He wondered if Leia or Chewie were aware how far Solo's condition had deteriorated. Perhaps it was just as well that he wasn't officially part of the Rebellion.

The Corellian swung around, hunted in a toolbox for a moment. "Look, I'm busy." He retrieved a hydrospanner and moved towards Lando. The gesture was not menacing, yet Calrissian couldn't repress a flinch. "Got things to do."

Lando took a few steps backward. "I won't hold you up." Best to stay out of arm's reach. "I just wanted to let you know that I've joined the Rebel forces, in case you heard it through the rumour net."

Solo watched him knowingly. "Didn't realise you had an allegiance to anyone apart from yourself." Calrissian's eyes glared. "That's a bit low."

Han only raised an eyebrow, and Lando had to admit the judgement was not that far from the truth, or at least, it had been once.

"Okay," he conceded, "perhaps you could've labelled me with that in the past. But not now. Not since..." His words petered out as he realised what he had been going to say, and not certain whether he had the right to say it, or how Han would react to the claim.

Solo finished the sentence, the cynicism filling his voice. "Bespin?" His knuckles whitened as they tightened around the hydrospanner, struggling to keep the tremor from his hand. "I don't want your damn sympathy, Lando."

The silence between the two men was cold. Calrissian had hoped Han's hostility was temporary, like the foul mood that seemed to have engulfed him for the last few days. He thought they had settled their differences on the flight back to the fleet. But this - this was different. This wasn't just Solo harbouring a grudge. This was worrying. Lando quickly shelved any ideas he had about asking Solo to give up the Falcon.

"What rank have they given you?" Solo suddenly asked, hefting the tool in his hand as if weighing it.

Lando didn't respond immediately. The pride he had in his newfound military status rapidly deflated. How could he be so conceited when his friend was so totally messed up, and especially when the 'mess' was partly due to his own inaction? And then he was also concerned about how Han would react to the news that Lando was a general.

"Rieekan hasn't told me yet," he said evasively.

"I imagine you'll find out soon enough," Solo suggested. "Leia tells me the final briefing sessions start tomorrow."

Lando frowned. Leia told him...? Why wasn't Han directly aware of when the briefs began? "Aren't you flying in the battle?"

"No." Solo's eyes flashed a warning, daring Calrissian to make a comment.

Lando held his tongue as his mind turned over with all the possible reasons why Han wasn't flying. The Rebellion hadn't asked him, wouldn't pay him, wasn't worth a second thought? Or perhaps the doctors had grounded him? Or Leia? Or even himself? Whatever the explanation, Lando wisely chose not to ask for it. He didn't feel like arguing with the business end of a blaster again.

Lando glanced over his shoulder, half-turned as if to leave. He now felt slightly foolish for even coming up with the idea of asking for the Falcon. It was more than obvious that Han didn't want him there. "Look, ah... I've got to go."

"Gotta pick up that new uniform, huh?"

Lando froze. That was exactly where he was heading. "I'll let you get back to your-"

"Yeah, sure."

Solo's abrupt response checked his departure, and Lando realised this could be the last time he saw the Corellian until after the battle. Or perhaps, the last time he saw him ever.

"If I don't get the chance," Lando began, aware of the way Han's eyes narrowed as he spoke, "to catch up with you again before it all starts. I just want you to know-"

"May the Force be with you."

Lando stared at his friend, stunned at the solemn words that had come from the mouth of the usually cynical smuggler. The gaze that met his own was most definitely sane, serious, yet contained a touch of humour, an echo of his former self.

"You too, Han." He discarded the idea of extending his hand towards Solo, and instead offered him some advice. "Take care of Leia. And look after yourself too."

Solo seemed to accept the gesture in the spirit it was given. "I'll see you on the other side." Calrissian nodded once and considered saying something more, when an uncomfortable grimace crossed Solo's face and he brushed past Lando and headed towards the cockpit. Calrissian watched Solo disappear down the corridor, then he turned and moved back to the boarding ramp, almost praying to himself, I certainly hope so, Han. I certainly hope so.

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