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Family Matters Part 2

by [Leela Starsky](#)

CHAPTER FIVE

Mos Eisley hadn't changed at all, Calrissian decided. It had been almost seven years since he'd set foot in the place but it could have been yesterday for all the difference it made. The same unrelenting heat seemed to suck the moisture right out of him. The same dull-eyed locals, the same pirate-infested spaceport and cantinas. The same pathetic denizens lurking in the back alleys.

He and Chewbacca had parted company with their fellow convicts over a week ago in Mos Espa, where Calrissian had stolen clothes from a drunk human in one of the back alleys. The garb was already well worn and even threadbare in places but, after a couple of days, at least it no longer smelled like its old owner. Chalmun's cantina was the first step to Jabba, and stepping down into the cool dimness of the place was almost a relief. *Almost*. The likelihood of being killed in here, simply because someone didn't like the look of you, was very high.

Chewbacca went straight through the doorway at the back of the bar to talk to Chalmun, the Wookiee who ran this den, while Calrissian calmly introduced himself into a sabacc match. He and Chewbacca had been mostly stealing to survive for the last few weeks, although he had won them a little money in Mos Espa. Nevertheless, Lando decided that winning a small pot today would help him draw less notice when he had to win larger stakes tomorrow or the next day.

Buying Solo back from Jabba would be very expensive, if possible at all. Calrissian strongly suspected that Jabba would want to make an example of Solo. And, having found out the likely results of an injudicious de-freezing of Solo from a medic in Mos Espa, Lando hoped that Jabba would want to spend a few months gloating at Solo in carbonite before unfreezing him.

Held at blaster point, the medic had been very helpful, and had furnished them with all the information and medications they required to safely thaw Han, should they have to do it out of a medcentre. But, for Solo's sake, Calrissian hoped that they would be able to get him to a medcentre and not have to resort to such primitive methods. There was still no guarantee the Corellian would come out of the carbonite undamaged; in fact the medic had been clinically surprised to hear that the unlucky Corellian had survived the initial 'freeze'.

Chewbacca returned from the back room sometime later, by which time Calrissian had bought them both a meal and a drink with his winnings.

According to Chalmun's sources, Fett had delivered Solo to Jabba a week ago, and the Hutt had hung the slab of carbonite proudly on one of the walls in his throne room. That fit in perfectly with their plan.

Unfortunately, and much to his chagrin, Chewbacca could not go to the palace himself; even he admitted he was too recognisable. And they needed passage off the planet. So they had agreed that while Calrissian infiltrated Jabba's palace and hopefully succeeded in stealing Solo, Chewbacca would try to steal a ship or at least secure them a passage to the next system.

That evening, Calrissian won enough credits in a high stakes sabacc match to get himself noticed as well as identifying one of Jabba's guards. The guard unfortunately came off second best when he upset a Wookiee and, needing a replacement, the Quarren in charge of the group agreed to take on Calrissian as the guards' replacement.

And so Lando soon found himself sailing south across the endless dunes in the middle of the Tatooine night in a sand skiff with five other guards. He was the only human among them, which helped. Under the current climate, most non-humans hated humans, so he wasn't forced to make small talk with them.

It took several hours and was fully day by the time they got there. Lando was outfitted with everything he would need to defend Jabba and put straight on duty. Jabba himself was completely unaware that he even had a new guard.

It took Calrissian a moment to locate what he was looking for, but finally he found it. Hanging in an alcove to the right of Jabba's dais, in full view of Jabba and any prospective supplicants. The grimace of pain on Solo's carbonite face a grim warning to all.

On the other side of the grimace, oblivious to the world outside, Han Solo was existing in a world of nightmares. The carbon freezing procedure had slowed the synaptic activity in his brain dramatically but, fortunately for him, it hadn't quite stopped. Although he didn't know it, Han Solo owed his life to the Cloud City medic who had flooded his system with a combination of medications just prior to his incarceration in carbonite. A combination that had reacted to the snap freezing of his cells by hyper-oxygenating them. This had allowed most of the cells in his body to expand rather than rupture as they froze, thereby slowing his metabolism to almost nothing without quite killing him. In short, a crude form of hibernation.

For most of his hibernation, Han Solo was unaware but, every so often, a spark that normally flew at a speed of one hundred metres per second would trickle from one synaptic circuit to another, triggering a thought or dream. But the excess adrenaline in his system, also supplied by the Cloud City medic to assist in his resuscitation, turned any moments of consciousness to a constant state of terror and panic. As a result, Solo's dreams were mostly nightmares.

And nearly all of them were about Leia. A result of the lingering terror of what he had left her to. Of what Vader might have done to her. In these nightmares he had watched her raped and murdered under Vader's instruction many times now and, along with the fear he experienced every time, came the all-encompassing shame and guilt. That it was *all* his fault.

But this time the random firing of his brain triggered a slow but steady release of serotonin and noradrenaline and, instead of feeling pain and an overwhelming sense of peril, Solo found himself wallowing in orgasmic passion with Leia on a grassy plain. Leia looked unspeakably happy and Solo knew he felt the same. And this time it lasted a small forever.

Landing the *Falcon* on Dagobah was an achievement in itself. Landing it without the assistance of a co-pilot put all of his skills, including his Force talent, to the test. As he completed shut down, Luke couldn't help wondering how Yoda would feel about the intrusion. At least this time he had managed to land on firm ground and wouldn't have to prove himself by trying to lift the ship out of a swamp.

Leia was asleep in the bunkroom and, Luke knew, would be livid when she found out where he had brought them. She had *insisted* they head straight for Tatooine. Would discuss nothing but rescuing Han. Had attempted to draw him in with various plans. But Luke had told her he wouldn't let her participate in any such

rescue. He was aware she had started bleeding again and, he told her, the risk to her pregnancy was too great. So now she was refusing to discuss anything with him at all.

As well as the need to protect Leia, Luke had his own need to see the Jedi Master who had been giving him such intensive training three weeks ago. He needed explanations for the lies he had been fed all his life.

He lowered the ramp and the familiar, distinctive smells of Dagobah filled the ship.

They were on Alderaan. How was beside the point, but Leia knew that was where they were. *Home*. Han was bringing her home. They were meeting her family at the Summer Palace and, while she couldn't wait to get there, she had insisted on stopping the airtaxi a good kilometre from the palace so they could walk up.

Han was a little chagrined, she could tell, but prepared to indulge her nonetheless. She could sense his eagerness to reach the palace, as happy to be home as she was. But she could also sense in him a desire to rush her straight to their bedroom, and felt a corresponding ache within herself. But first she wanted to savour the sounds and smells of *home*.

The Summer Palace looked east over the Calapora Ocean from a high cliff-face that stretched for almost thirty kilometres north and south. The spaceport and the city of Beren were almost twenty kilometres to the west, with nothing but windswept grassland between them and the palace.

Leia closed her eyes for a moment, enjoying the feel of the sun on her face, then opened them again to marvel at how incredibly blue the sky was, with not a cloud to be seen. Below them the sea shone turquoise, but at the horizon was the deepest azure. To her right she could see glimpses of the white walls of the palace, sunlight reflecting brilliantly from its many windows, and beyond it – grass as far as she could see.

Exulting in the openness of the world around her, and the wonderful sense of freedom it gave her, Leia dropped the pack she was carrying on the path and ran into the shoulder-high grass beside them. She sensed Han's bemusement as he followed her and sought to tease him by bolting away from him. She felt an overwhelming urge to make love to him right here and now and was delighted to feel an answering spike in his simmering desire as he launched after her.

She let him catch her before they reached the edge of the cliff, laughing as he pulled her down with him into the long grass. Neither bothered to undress, simply

baring the essentials before joining in a frantic moment of passion. Her desire for him was white hot and she felt herself start to climax almost immediately. She kissed him desperately as it overwhelmed her, felt herself throbbing around him as he continued to thrust into her. Suddenly breathless, she gasped, then cried his name, "Han!" as he joined her in the crescendo.

Leia opened her eyes but didn't move. She could feel her body spiralling down from orgasm and felt ashamed and excited all at once. The dream had seemed so real, but never in her life had she reached true physical climax from a dream. She closed her eyes again, enjoying the sensations coursing through her body and wishing she could go back to the dream, wishing Han was still there beside her, holding her.

Han.

Sliding her hand across her belly, clinging to the physical evidence that her time with Solo had been real, Leia took a deep breath, rolled onto her back and opened her eyes to stare at the overhead bulkhead. Like an unwelcome guest that wouldn't leave, the ever-present nausea rose its ugly head and washed away any residue good feelings left by her climax. Leia moaned resentfully and closed her eyes again, wondering if she would make it to the 'fresher in time. And even if she did, she knew she'd be faced with her daily dilemma of which end to empty first.

Taking a deep breath, Leia forced herself out of bed and ran for the 'fresher. By the time she emerged, she had realised by the lack of sound from the *Falcon's* engines that Luke must have landed the ship. Landed the ship without her!

She hurried into the main hold and the cool humidity hit her. *Definitely not Tatooine.* Anger building, Leia approached the ramp to find it down and unprotected. Well trained by Han and her own sense of self-preservation, she slapped her hand over the hatch release and felt a modicum of satisfaction as it slammed down. Furious, she stormed to the cockpit. It, too, was empty and she realised she was alone on the ship, looking out across a vista of swampland. If she had been able to pilot the Falcon alone Leia would have happily abandoned Luke on whatever planet he'd brought them to.

She stormed back to the bunkroom and hurriedly dressed. Once again she was without choice as far as clothes went and this time had to don the impractical dress she'd been wearing when they'd fled Vader's Star Destroyer. *Just the thing to go traipsing round swamps in,* she thought sarcastically, roughly weaving her hair into one plait then flinging it over her shoulder to hang limply down her back. But she added a belt to her ensemble. One of Han's belts, already loaded with

vibroblade, lamp, a small pouch of rations, powercells and a blaster recharge. She jammed his spare blaster between her body and the belt and, as an afterthought, hooked Han's mother's lightsabre on it as well. *Just for luck*, she thought to herself.

She had no idea where they were or what she'd encounter once she left the safety of the ship, nor was she prepared to take any chances. It wasn't just *her* life in the balance any more.

Finally, she donned Han's jacket. The one he'd been wearing on Bespin. Despite the obvious humidity outside, the air did not feel warm, and the jacket gave her the advantage of extra pockets to fill with things she might need. Plus it smelled of Han and she took comfort in that.

Blaster in hand, Leia opened the hatch to the ramp, stepped through and closed it behind her. She wondered if Luke knew the code that opened it, and took some satisfaction in the image of him sitting at the bottom of the ramp waiting for her to show up and open the ship.

She paused at the bottom of the ramp to take stock of her surroundings, unwilling to step off into the mud before she had to. Luke had somehow managed to land the ship on the only piece of open ground she could see. All around her the trees were draped with vines, mist and heavy with moisture. The strong scent of wet earth and organic decay filled her senses, and the noise of unseen animals was constant.

Where had Luke brought them? There was a strange familiarity about the place that left her with a deep sense of unease and she put it down to memories of the tropical jungles of Galadan or Yavin 4. But those jungles had been hot, this one was cool.

Ignoring her stomach's attempt to heave, Leia hitched up her dress and stepped off the ramp. She took a few steps towards the nearest tree, then wondered where the hell she thought she was going? She had no idea which direction Luke had gone, and the swamplands before her looked unforgiving and dangerous. As if to encourage her retreat, it suddenly started raining. Feeling particularly stupid, Leia hurried back to the shelter offered by the *Falcon*, then decided it would be more practical for her to wait in the cockpit. It occurred to her that she should take the time to find something to eat and drink, but the turmoil in her stomach did not encourage that at all, so Leia simply settled herself into Solo's chair, shifted deeper into the warmth of his jacket, and waited.

The wait turned into a lengthy one, and eventually she decided to brave the galley, returning to the cockpit with a pre-packaged meal of eggs and a large

mug of soup. She was surprised at her sudden appetite and, while not wanting to deny her body the much needed protein, had made sure the foods she picked would be easy to vomit back up. The eggs went down surprisingly easily, and the soup was so enjoyable she actually considered going back for more. But, not wishing to push her luck, Leia remained where she was and, as always, her thoughts turned to Han.

Luke was surprised to find the hatch into the *Falcon* closed and gave the small Jedi Master standing behind him a look of apology.

"She's locked us out," he told the small, green creature.

"Surprised you seem," was the gravelly reply.

Luke regarded him for a moment then nodded penitently. Leia hadn't trusted him since he'd told her who his father was. Of course she would have locked him out. The Jedi Master's response suggested he hadn't expected otherwise from her, and Luke couldn't help wondering if Yoda was speaking from what he knew about the Princess of Alderaan or what he was feeling from her through the Force.

With a mental sigh of resignation, Luke activated the comm.

"Leia?"

In the cockpit, Leia jerked awake and looked around in confusion.

"Leia?"

She pushed her hair back out of her face as she sat up properly, struggling to make sense of her situation with a sleep-befuddled brain.

"C'mon, Leia." Luke's voice sounded almost peeved through the small speaker. "Let me in."

Leia glowered at the speaker for a moment then climbed out of the pilot seat and headed for the ramp, hoping her brain would be sharp enough to give Luke a piece of her mind by the time she got there. She opened the hatch then folded her arms and regarded the approaching young man with arrogant affront. He had anticipated her first reprimand about leaving the outer hatch open because he told her matter-of-factly as he moved into the ship, "You were perfectly safe here, Leia."

Leia was opening her mouth to argue with him when the small, green creature following Luke up the ramp distracted her. He looked like a goblin straight out of an Alderaanian fairy tale.

"This is Yoda," Luke said. "The Jedi Master who has been training me."

Leia frowned. Luke had not mentioned the name before but she recalled hearing it somewhere before. From Han. Why would Han have been telling her about some obscure Jedi Master? Then she realised she was being scrutinised by the creature and her frown deepened.

"Much anger in this one," the Jedi Master opined sagely and Leia looked sourly at Luke.

"Perceptive, isn't he?" she said sarcastically

"Learn to control it you must, or follow your father's path you will," Yoda warned her.

Leia's anger flared in response and she suspected the creature had baited her deliberately.

"My father is *dead*," she told him coldly.

"Think of your child you must," the goblin-like thing said as it approached her.

Leia threw Luke a look of reprimand for telling the creature about her pregnancy, then glared at the wizened creature with affront as it tapped her belly with a small stick and said, "Strong with the Force she is."

"So everyone keeps telling me," she said, fighting the instinct to back out of reach, and resting her hand on the blaster in her belt instead. Without taking her eyes off him, she added, "Touch me again and you'll regret it."

"Leia," Luke warned crossly.

Leia switched her glare to Luke and snapped, "Why aren't we on Tatooine, Luke?"

"Because you've been touching the Dark Side of the Force," he snapped straight back. "And unless you get some training you *will* be just like our father!"

Leia all but trembled with fury, then stormed away towards the cockpit hissing, "If I could fly this ship by myself..."

She threw herself into Han's chair and glared impotently at the swampland outside. So Luke had managed to find himself a Jedi Master. Leia found that fact intriguing since it had been her understanding that they'd all been killed during the Purge. She remembered her feeling of surprise when her father had instructed her to seek out Obi Wan Kenobi on Tatooine. Surprise that the Jedi Knight had managed to evade capture for so long and consternation that he hadn't been more active in their fight against the Empire. And now here was another one. Leia couldn't help wondering cynically how many other Jedi Masters were out there *hiding*. Whatever this one's reasons, Leia was predisposed to dislike him.

In the ring corridor, Luke sighed and ran a hand through his hair, trying to quell the feeling of frustration and irritation she had provoked in him. Leia was making this as difficult as she could and Luke just wished she would stop being childish. He looked at Yoda and opened his mouth to apologise for the princess' behaviour when it occurred to him that a lot of their trauma was a direct consequence of the Jedi Master's scheming. So he closed his mouth and simply regarded his Master, wondering what the small creature's next move might be.

Yoda and Ben had both explained the reasoning behind their deception. That growing up with the knowledge of who his father was would have been too great a burden for him, plus the need to keep him hidden had been paramount. But Luke wasn't sure he agreed. He suspected they were afraid that if he *had* known, he would have walked the same dark path as his father. And he also suspected they were still not being entirely truthful with him.

They had both insisted that the attempt on his life as a child had not been orchestrated by the Jedi as Vader believed, but had in fact been another manipulation by the Emperor to further enrage his father against the Jedi. To facilitate the Emperor's Purge of the Jedi order. That made sense, but Luke had come to the conclusion that they had all been guilty of manipulating his father to their own ends. That the Jedi Order's very selective education, not to mention their unrealistic ban on relationships, had in fact triggered the internal schism that had sent Anakin on his spiral to the Dark Side.

Kenobi informed him that his first Master, Qui Gon Jinn, had claimed Anakin Skywalker to be some sort of prophetic "Chosen One". A great Jedi who would bring 'balance' to the order. Well, as with all prophecies, the realisation was not quite what the devotees had expected. Vader had brought 'balance' all right, Kenobi had admitted wryly. 'Balance' in the form of annihilation.

As for not telling him about his sister... Luke was probably angrier about that than any of the other deceptions. Remembering how he had felt about Leia on Yavin Four, it appalled him to think what might have happened had she been

more receptive to him at the time. What if they had slept together? What if they'd had the misfortune to create a child? The prospect well and truly sickened him, and he suspected that, if Han had not stayed, things might well have turned out differently.

Confronting Yoda about it had been completely unsatisfying, as he had simply taken refuge in the fact that nothing had happened. But Luke knew how he had felt at the time, and felt somehow violated because of it.

He watched Yoda follow the princess to the cockpit and decided not to follow.

Leia heard the distinctive footfalls of Luke's Jedi Master as he approached and wiped a hand across her face. Her nausea was fast reaching the point she knew would have her in the 'fresher, yet she still sought to ignore it as long as possible.

"Leia Organa," said the distinctive voice behind her.

Leia pointedly did not acknowledge him, simply continued to stare out through the cockpit canopy.

"Hide from your destiny you cannot."

Destiny? Leia thought angrily. *You arrogant little prat! How dare you try to give your petty machinations that level of respectability?*

"I'm not hiding," Leia told him calmly. "I just have different priorities." She turned and regarded him coolly, cutting him off as he started to speak. "Priorities that have little to do with Jedi agenda, I'm afraid."

"Seek to rescue your lover you do," Yoda said, closing the distance between them. "But only with Jedi training will you succeed."

Leia felt her expression darken despite her intention to draw on her political training and remain emotionally calm. "In *your* opinion," she said.

"Save him on Hoth you did," the aged creature croaked, and Leia wanted to hit Luke for sharing his opinion of the reason behind Solo's recovery on Hoth.

"So on Tatooine will you try," Yoda continued. "But learn to control those skills you must, or fail on Tatooine you will."

Now he had her full attention. Leia frowned at him, replaying what he'd just said several times in her head. Assuming that she *had* used the Force to somehow bring Han back from the brink of death after the cave-in on Hoth, Leia could

accept that she might well want to try something similar on Tatooine. The small amount of information she could find on cryogenic freezing in the *Falcon's* databanks had all pointed to Solo needing to be revived within ten minutes of 'de-freezing' before irreparable brain damage began.

That added to the urgency of her desire to get to Tatooine. If the Hutt took it into his head to release Solo from the carbonite, without full medcentre facilities, Leia doubted there would be anything they could do to save him.

Leia had tried to pinpoint exactly what she had done on Hoth but could only remember the desperate feeling of loss. *Everything I touch, everything I love dies*. And now here she was, face to face with a Jedi Master prepared to teach her the skills she needed to revive Han.

She was well aware that he had quite deliberately picked the one topic to pique her interest. And, with the mindset of a politician, Leia determined to use him to get what she wanted.

"Vader said I was using the Dark Side," she told him. Luke had doubtless told Yoda the same thing, but she knew that invoking Vader's name would carry more weight. "Can you still teach me or is it too late?"

"Dangerous to teach you it will be," Yoda admitted. "Divide your attention this child does. Hard for you to focus."

"That's just the nausea," Leia muttered dismissively. "As soon as that passes, I'll be fine."

"Change that you can, but feel the Force you must."

Leia sat up. "Are you saying you can teach me to make the nausea go away?"

Yoda nodded, and she could see the hint of a smug smile in his expression.

"Show me now!" she demanded.

Yoda walked out of the cockpit. "Come," he said.

Luke looked up as Yoda stepped into the ring corridor. He had busied himself filling a pack with food and drink from the galley and was waiting with it slung over his shoulder when the Jedi Master appeared. He suspected Yoda would want to take them some distance, and was concerned for the health of Leia's pregnancy on such a hike, but fell into step beside her as she followed the Jedi Master to the ramp.

"Do you know where we're going?" Leia asked him as she closed the hatch behind them.

"No," Luke said, keeping his eye on the quick moving Jedi as Leia moved around under the ramp and activated its closure. When it was secure she activated the ship lockdown then joined him without meeting his eyes, both of them aware that only she knew the codes that would get them back into the ship.

Then they set off after Yoda.

The first time they had to stop and wait while Leia threw up Luke felt a small level of concern but, as she'd vomited several times en route to Dagobah, he'd guessed it was part of the whole pregnancy deal. But waiting as she threw up for the fifth time inside an hour had him seriously concerned.

"She can't go on like this," he told Yoda quietly, and felt a level of irritation as the Jedi Master simply smiled and kept walking.

Frustrated, Luke waited until Leia's retching had ceased then sat on the large tree root beside his sister as she tried to catch her breath. He wanted to help her. Felt certain the techniques Vader had taught him to push away pain could be used to help lessen her nausea. But he felt like Yoda was testing him: seeing whether or not he would give in and use Vader's methods. But Yoda hadn't said anything like that, and Luke suspected it was his own misguided feeling of guilt that stopped him from using them.

"Would you let me help you?" he asked tentatively, not wanting to spark her ire. Leia looked up at him from a gaunt face and sunken eyes and Luke's concern for her increased dramatically. She was seriously dehydrated and in obvious need of a medcentre.

"Let me help you, Leia," he begged, and was delighted when she simply nodded. *Too ill to argue*, he thought grimly, then closed his eyes to concentrate. He needed to know what was going on inside her body; what was causing the nausea. And felt a real fear that his interference might compromise her pregnancy.

"Tell me what's causing it," he said, hoping she would be able to tell him more than just 'the pregnancy'.

"Hormones," Leia replied, struggling to find enough moisture in her mouth to stop her voice from croaking. "Hormones irritating the lining of my stomach." She retched briefly then added, "That's what the information the medic gave me said anyway."

Can't change the hormones, Luke told himself. Mustn't change the hormones. So let's see if we can't change what her stomach thinks... or what she thinks it's telling her...

A moment later he opened his eyes and looked at her.

"Did it work?" he asked.

Leia looked warily at him, started to retch and burped instead. Then a look of utter relief swept across her face and Luke knew he'd succeeded. He smiled and she gripped his arm.

"Luke..."

"Better?" he asked.

"It's not gone but it's..." Leia closed her eyes suddenly and covered her mouth with one hand. For a moment Luke thought her nausea had returned, then she roughly wiped away a tear that had escaped and run down her cheek. Throwing caution to the wind, he wrapped his arms around her and hugged her. And felt a moment of joy when she hugged him back.

"Thankyou," she murmured. "This is the first time I haven't felt so nauseous in weeks." Abruptly she shoved him away and declared, "I should hit you!"

"Hit me?"

"You could have stopped this weeks ago, but you let me suffer!"

Luke shook his head and started to explain, "Vader showed me how after my hand-"

Leia cut him off with a hard look and said, "I don't want to know." Then got to her feet and headed off after Yoda.

Luke watched her go for a moment, savouring the sight of her lifting her skirts to follow the small Jedi through the boggy forest, seeing a spring in her step and an energy in her body language that hadn't been there a moment before. And, most of all, sensing a healing in the rift that had come between them.

She had *hugged* him.

Smiling, Luke hurried after his sister.

CHAPTER SIX

It was late in the afternoon when they reached their destination, a simple, but very beautiful waterfall. They could clearly see the point of origin where the artesian stream had broken through the rock wall, and now cascaded splendidly down the side of the hill to gather in a series of pools before feeding off into several smaller streams, which soon became indistinguishable from the surrounding bog. It was the first truly clean, fresh water flow Luke had seen on Dagobah and he regarded it in amazement, awed that he could feel its *cleanness* through the Force. *Why hadn't Yoda brought him here before?*

He looked for the Jedi Master and found him watching the princess. Belatedly, Luke looked to see her reaction and was surprised to see a mixture of awe and fear on her face.

With a shock and a certain level of envy, Luke realised that this place was a kind of opposite to the cave under the tree Yoda had made him go into. The cave that was full of the Dark Side. This place was so full up with the Light Side it was almost blinding to a Force sensitive. To someone like Leia, who was intent on keeping the blast shield down on her Force-sense, it would be like turning on a light in a dark room.

"What is it?" she asked as he stepped up beside her.

"It's the Force, Leia," Luke told her. "Take a deep breath and let yourself feel it."

He watched as she closed her eyes and breathed deeply, felt a surge in her awareness, then she opened her eyes again and regarded the pool beside them with something akin to lust.

"I want to get in," she said in a low voice.

"In you must go," Yoda told her from his perch on a rock on the far side of the pool, and Luke watched with shock as Leia stripped to her underwear without hesitation, then walked into the pool.

Let yourself feel!

Han's words; now Luke's, were what overcome her reticence and let Leia open herself to the flow around her. It was almost tangible, like she could reach out

and touch it, and walking into the water was like plunging into the flow of the Force itself.

The water was cold, fresh from under the ground, but Leia barely noticed it. She could feel the Force so clearly it amazed her that she had never consciously felt it before. She could *feel* the life teeming all around them and soon found herself able to distinguish Luke and Yoda from the clutter.

For a long time she wallowed in the flood. Like someone just given the gift of sight, Leia took the time to 'look around', and swiftly realised that visual references were highly inadequate for what she was feeling.

She felt like a god!

But like an inexperienced swimmer, the flood soon threatened to drown her, and she felt Yoda put a blanket around her senses, dampening the flow to a mere trickle. It was an agonising relief and Leia staggered out of the pool, shivering violently. Uncaring, she hurriedly pulled her dress on over her wet underclothes, then Han's jacket, then peered intently at the water while she struggled to pull her boots on.

A little way over, she could see that Luke had started a campfire, and she moved gratefully towards the warmth. He smiled at her and she felt him touch her mind. Leia recoiled instinctively. The only other touch she felt of that kind had been Vader's. On the Death Star.

Luke reached for her, apologising profusely, but Leia held up a hand to keep him at bay.

"It's all right," she told him. "I'm all right."

She moved in and hunkered down close to the fire, hugging her knees to her chest in an effort to warm herself up.

"Here," Luke said, and passed her a mug of hot soup.

Leia accepted it gratefully, doubly pleased when she realised it was the same soup she had enjoyed so much on the *Falcon*.

"Where's Yoda?" she asked, giving the area around them a cursory look while she sipped gingerly from the warm cup in her hands.

"He'll be back," Luke assured her.

Leia found herself feeling pleasantly unconcerned about the Jedi Master's whereabouts and concentrated on the warmth from the soup spreading through her body.

"How was the water?" Luke asked, and she could hear an element of teasing in his voice.

Leia smiled at him and admitted, "*Cold*." Then she added, "You were right, Luke. I should have listened to you."

Luke shook his head. "I can understand your fear of it, Leia. Especially after your experiences with Vader." He smiled reassuringly and said, "I'm just glad you can feel it at last." He looked around at the rapidly darkening forest. "It's like being able to see for the first time."

"It was stronger in the pool," Leia said. "Overwhelming." She took another sip of her soup then asked him, "Was it like that for you the first time you came here?"

"I've never been here before," Luke said.

Leia frowned, sensing something from him but as yet unable to read what it was. She smiled and suggested, "You should try it."

He smiled and nodded, "Maybe I will." Then looked at her and added, "Though it might be a little intense for me."

"Orgasmic," she teased.

Luke threw a pointed glance at her belly and smirked. "You'd know all about that," he said.

Leia felt herself flush with embarrassment and said defensively, "You're no virgin yourself."

"I'm not teasing you, Leia," Luke told her fondly. "I'm happy for you. For both of you. Really. I just wish it hadn't ended like..."

He fell silent and they stared at the fire, both unwilling to invoke the demons from Beshpin.

"I'm going to get him back, Luke," Leia said quietly, and Luke nodded. They lapsed into something of a comfortable silence and Leia allowed her mind to drift on thoughts of Han. For the first time since Beshpin, she found she could think rationally about him, and could see her desperation to get to Tatooine for the knee-jerk reaction it was. Without the right medicines and equipment, they

would kill Solo as surely as Jabba might. Yet that didn't lessen her fears that the Hutt might still de-freeze him before they got there.

Thinking about Han at the mercy of Jabba the Hutt prompted a resurgence of the panic and urgency she had been feeling since Bespin, but Leia closed her eyes and allowed it to pass. She could only do her best, and she was doing just that by being here: by learning what she could in the quickest time possible. Then she would go back to the Rebel Fleet, get the medical supplies they'd need, and go to Tatooine *prepared*.

Leia wished Chewbacca was with her and ached to think what horrors he might be facing.

Luke offered to refill her cup and she smiled and held it out to him.

"So," he said, "what changed? Between you and Han, I mean."

"I missed my transport off Hoth," Leia told him. "So Han got me out." She sighed heavily. "Then the hyperdrive failed. We would have been caught over Hoth but Han came up with the brilliant idea of hiding in the asteroid field."

Luke regarded her with shock and said, "Tell me you're joking?"

Leia shook her head and said seriously, "Oh no. It was terrifying."

Luke stared into his cup and muttered, "Maybe he *is* insane..."

"No," Leia said. "More like dangerously brilliant. He then hitched a hyperspace mini-hop on the back of one of the Star Destroyers and drifted off with the rest of the garbage when they dumped it just before going hyper." Luke shook his head, awed, and Leia smiled. "Then we spent the next four weeks limping to Bespin at sublight."

Luke grinned broadly and Leia felt herself blushing again. "I learned Shri Wook on the way," she said in a vain attempt to distract him from thinking about the other things that she had obviously learned on the way to Bespin.

"Good for you," he said, and Leia could tell he was genuinely pleased for her. "I was hoping you two would sort things out on that trip to Ord Mantell. But when you came back and things were *worse*..." Luke shook his head then chuckled. "You have no idea how many bets were lost on that trip!"

Leia sniffed with affront and said unsympathetically, "Serves you all right!"

"Be no denying it this time, though," he said, looking at her seriously.

"I have no intention of denying it," Leia agreed.

"Are you happy about it?" Luke asked, and Leia sensed he was seizing on the chance to find out her feelings about the pregnancy. "Happy about being pregnant?" he clarified.

"It wasn't planned," she admitted. "And Han was supposedly *sterile*..." She found herself staring into her soup, once again wondering how Han would feel about the child they'd somehow created, and muttered, "I don't know how it happened." "The Force," the Jedi Master croaked ominously out of the darkness.

Luke and Leia looked in the direction the voice had come from, surprised, and a moment later he stepped into the firelight.

"Forges all our destinies it does," he continued.

"Actually, I think this had more to do with contraception failure myself," Leia muttered under her breath, and saw Luke hide a smirk behind his hand.

Yoda seemed to study her gravely, his eyes glimmering, reflecting the firelight. "Believe in the Force you do, Leia Organa," he told her gently. "Yet believe in it *in* yourself you do not."

He's right, Leia thought, and felt compelled to nod. She did believe in the Force, and not just because she had been brought up to believe in it. She had seen Luke use it far too often to think that it was just a myth. But her fear of finding such a power within herself was a real one. It would be so easy to deal with problems by simply *forcing* sentients to do things the way *she* wanted. The way she knew was right. *Forcing* them to be sensible and good. Not to mention meting out justice on those she thought deserved it.

It was an aspect of Force use that Leia instinctively knew to be Dark but, knowing her own nature, was afraid she would find an irresistible temptation. Especially in light of the revelation that Vader was her biological father. Yet her desire to save Han was beginning to make the risk one worth taking. That and the knowledge that, despite her mother's attempts to block her abilities, she was beginning to use the Force anyway.

*Using it to **coerce** your lover*, her conscience reminded her bitterly.

"Tell me about Force Bonding," she asked Yoda suddenly.

The small Jedi Master seemed to consider her request for a long moment before responding, "Felt this you have."

Leia nodded, then added, "Vader told me it was a punishable offence by Jedi law."

"Powerful coercion it is," Yoda agreed. "In the hands of the unscrupulous."

"But I didn't even know I was doing it," Leia protested calmly, meeting the small Jedi Master's gaze.

"Saw into your lover's heart you did. And he into yours. Addictive this is. Especially for non-Jedi."

"It didn't-" ...*happen every time*. Leia paused, unwilling to go into detail, but the Jedi Master seemed to understand.

"Mmm," he agreed, sounding unsurprised, and told her matter-of-factly, "Mutual orgasm."

Leia, aware that Luke was sitting beside her taking everything in, blushed profusely and picked at the dirt under her fingernails.

"Difficult to achieve this is," Yoda continued. "Especially for humans." He leaned towards her and surmised, "Worried that you coerced your lover you are."

Leia chewed the inside of her lip as she met his gaze once more, then nodded. "Force Bond first time did you?" Yoda asked and Leia shook her head. "Then coerce him you did not."

"Is that..." Leia thought for a moment, trying to find the right words, then asked, "Could that be what created the child?"

Yoda shook his head without hesitation. "No," he said. "More likely the child it was who prompted the Force Bonding."

Leia was astounded. "*Really?*"

"Strong with the Force she is," Yoda reminded her.

"But..." ...*she would have only **just** been conceived*, Leia thought.

"Very strong," he insisted.

Leia frowned, finding it difficult to entertain the thought that she could be carrying such a powerful child. *Or maybe the Force Bonding was simply something I did*, she thought. *Or even Han*. His mother had been a Jedi after all.

"Sleep now," Yoda said. "Work hard in the morning you must."

He moved out of the firelight and disappeared into the darkness, leaving them alone once more, yet Leia got the distinct impression he would not be far away. Beside her, Luke sighed heavily then got to his feet and pulled a large ground-mat from the pack he had brought. Looking at him, Leia sensed he was irritated about something and asked, "What's wrong?"

Luke finished arranging the ground-mat then finally looked at her and said, "Force Bonding?" The exasperation in his voice was unmistakable. "I was here for nearly *four* weeks and nobody told *me* about Force Bonding!"

"Well..." *It was hardly something the Jedi Master thought you would need in the immediate future*, Leia thought, but she said, "Four weeks isn't a very long time, Luke." She could hear the conciliatory tone in her voice and, not wanting to sound condescending, tried to sound neutral as she added, "As I understand, it took Jedi years to train."

Luke sighed heavily. "I know," he admitted. "It's just... I feel like I learned more in my two weeks with Vader than I did here."

"I wouldn't trust his methods," Leia opined darkly.

"He taught me healing techniques!" Luke said defensively. "Healing techniques that cured *your* nausea! He also taught me how to conceal myself to avoid the need for fighting. All Yoda and Ben taught me was how to fight and defend myself." He paused then clarified, "How to fight Darth Vader and win." He flopped down onto the ground-mat and added sourly, "And I lost."

Leia allowed Luke his petulant outburst then told him pointedly, "Vader only told me about Force Bonding so he could *gloat*, Luke." Luke frowned at her, not understanding, and Leia felt compelled to explain.

"Not only did Vader have his men record every minute Han and I spent together on Bespin, he *felt* us. Then gloated about it to me while he was torturing Han."

"*Felt* you?" Leia watched as understanding swept over Luke and he grimaced, hanging his head in his hands. "Leia, I have no idea how to apologise for something like that." Leia opened her mouth to tell him it was not something he needed to apologise for, but he cut her off. "And don't tell me it wasn't *my* fault, 'cause it was! Vader wanted *me* and he knew he could use you and Han to get to me!" He wiped his hands over his face and added, "I'm *so* sorry."

"Me too," Leia agreed softly. "Maybe we should get some sleep?" she suggested, trying to change the subject. "Are there predators we need to keep watch for?"

Luke shook his head. "Nothing I won't sense," he told her.

Lying beside Leia, both of them wrapped in a blanket, Luke couldn't help feeling somewhat surprised at how quickly she had fallen asleep. From the many times they had been forced to share sleeping facilities, Luke had known the Princess of Alderaan to be the sort to stew for at least an hour before falling asleep. Solo had complained about it often because she would usually disturb their attempts to sleep with either her restlessness or random thought processes that she inevitably deemed necessary to share. To see her fall asleep within moments of putting her head down was both a comfort and a concern. Comfort because, with the amount going through her head at present, Luke would have expected her not to sleep at all, and concern because it was so unlike her.

He surmised the long walk from the *Falcon* must have exhausted her and wished it'd had the same effect on him. Instead he found himself stewing in the same way she normally would; worries and 'could have beens' whirling around mercilessly in his head. *Mind-fucking*, as Solo so eloquently called it. Sighing deeply, Luke gave in and used the Force to quiet his mind. It was something he had become very adept at doing while training with Yoda. Yoda, who would only ever answer questions when he deemed Luke *ready* for the answers. Which, of course, was nowhere near as often as Luke would have liked.

As he drifted off to sleep, Luke found himself comparing his father's teaching style with that of Yoda, and decided sleepily that he preferred his father's. At least he answered questions...

Leia woke, from what had been a surprisingly restful sleep, just as the sky was lightening. Luke had not slept well, and even now looked worried, and Leia suspected it was his restlessness that had disturbed her.

Bad dreams.

After all that had happened to them recently, it was to be expected.

She took an experimental deep breath, fully expecting the oh-so-familiar wave of nausea. And while she could sense it vaguely, it was nothing like it had been. Relieved, and feeling *almost* normal, Leia gazed dreamily up at the mist-shrouded tree limbs overhead.

Close to her head, a clean-limbed spider had spun a large web, and every strand of the intricate design was bejewelled with beads of moisture. The artist was

sitting in the middle of its spectacular creation; all shiny black with some lighter spots on its back. Spiders were not something Leia was terribly fond of, and she was intrigued at her own lack of alarm at the nearness of the creature as well as the fact that it seemed to be watching her.

Testing her theory, expecting it to be proven an arrogant assumption, Leia lifted one hand towards the spider while still keeping a safe distance. The spider shifted fractionally and raised one leg towards her. Not quite threatening her; just threatening to threaten her.

Leia smiled.

She lowered her hand and experimentally reached out with the Force to the creature; was mightily surprised when she realised she could discern the spider's distinct presence. She attempted to delve deeper and got the distinct impression that the spider was concerned about her proximity.

Fascinated, Leia considered testing her fledgling Force-sense even further but, now that she was fully awake, the need to empty her bladder had become an urgent demand. She carefully slipped out from under the blanket without disturbing Luke. After she'd finished, Leia replaced the pad she had made out of Solo's old sheets in her underwear and went to wash the soiled one in the waterfall. Her bleeding seemed to have lessened during the night, which was encouraging.

The water was cold but, as she watched it rushing over her hands, Leia was gripped by the same desire that had gripped her the day before. The desire to fling her whole body into the water. She could feel the thrumming power within the pool beckoning to her, and looked back at Luke. He was still sound asleep. And she couldn't see Yoda anywhere. Making up her mind, Leia unbound her hair, stripped naked, then spent a moment on the edge of the pool staring into the water. Its pull was inexorable. Like tantalising a blind man with sight.

Leia moved forward a fraction, flinching a little as the icy water washed over her toes. *I'm insane*, she thought, but walked further into the water nevertheless. She could feel awareness of the Force flooding through her and closed her eyes, savouring the sensation for a moment before sliding into the water and swimming towards the deepest section of the pool. Now out of her depth, Leia hung in the water briefly then fully submerged. Under the water the thunder of the waterfall itself was somewhat softer, and the effervescence it churned into the water swirled and eddied around her, caressing her skin, capturing her hair. Leia expelled all the air from her lungs to keep herself under water, thoroughly enjoying the sensation. It was like submerging herself in the force of life itself. She could feel it all around her and within her. So healing, so much *life!*

She broke the surface to fulfil her body's need for oxygen, then submerged once more. There was a burning brightness to the Force flowing through her that the chill water seemed to soothe. It left her with a feeling that, outside the pool, she could very well ignite.

Remembering the overwhelming nature of her experience the day before, Leia decided it would be wise to temper her time in the pool a little and surfaced once more. She swam towards an offshoot of the waterfall proper, a sloping rock-face with a small torrent of water rushing across its surface, and climbed carefully onto the large smooth stones at its base. Then she lay with her back against the rock-face while the water cascaded around her, pummeling her skin in a delicious massage.

Closing her eyes, Leia let the Force take her where it would; expecting it to carry her along with the flow of the water, and follow it out across the planet. And was vaguely disappointed when it seemed to turn in on her, giving her an awareness of her body like she'd never had before. She could feel the blood coursing through her veins, rushing with every pump of her heart to every part of her body. That was when she became aware of the other heartbeat.



Leia's eyes flew open, but she stared unseeing at the clouded sky, while her hands moved to press against her belly, seeking physical evidence of the small presence she could sense growing there. But there was only a Force enhanced awareness of her swollen uterus and the independent heartbeat within it.

She sought out that heartbeat and found it accompanied by a strong desire to live. A sentience running on instinct. But so *clean*, so *innocent*...

My daughter.

Leia felt an overwhelming love for her child bloom in her breast, swiftly followed by an aching need to protect her.

Then came the softest touch through the Force, like tiny mental fingers wrapping around one of her own, and Leia burst into tears.

She sat up, hugging herself and wept helplessly as the full consequence of motherhood was revealed to her. The knowledge that she would place the health and safety of her child above all else, and the *unimaginable* devastation that would follow her loss.

What have I done?

Leia needed time alone to absorb and rearrange her new feelings. To try and come to terms with the enormity of the task she'd given herself. Not only did she have to give birth to this child but, Leia realised, she would spend the rest of her life *worrying* about her.

She plunged back into the main pool with the intention of getting out, her mind in turmoil. But the nature of the pool gripped her, plunging her deep into the swell of the Force. Leia tried to fight it but it overwhelmed her, pulling her helplessly into its currents and expanding her consciousness to unbearable levels.

After what seemed an age, she felt another presence closing on her, blinding in its brightness in the Force, and was dimly aware of being dragged from the pool. Then came the blessed relief as the maelstrom in her head quietened to a manageable level. Suddenly cold, Leia clutched at the blanket that was wrapped around her and looked up to find Luke's very worried looking face peering down at her. Very worried and very *wet*. In fact, he was dripping on her.

Leia opened her mouth to thank him, but her teeth were chattering so she shut it again.

"What were you thinking?" Luke chided her.

She let him guide her back to the ground-mat they had slept on the night before then sat, shivering, while he hurriedly set about making a new fire. He was shivering too and had obviously jumped into the pool fully clothed.

"Sorry," Leia murmured contritely.

Luke paused and looked at her, his irritation evident on his face. "What were you thinking?" he asked again, then turned back to getting the fire started.

Leia pulled the blanket tighter and told him softly, "I felt her, Luke."

Again Luke paused to look at her, but this time his expression softened. Leia sensed he was reaching out to see if he could feel her daughter through the Force as well. Guessed by the smile that suddenly broke across his face that he had succeeded.

"Isn't she beautiful?" Leia breathed.

"She's..." Luke seemed to have trouble finding the right words and finally settled for, "she's amazing."

"I can't feel her here," Leia added, looking back at the waterfall. "Just in the water..."

"Don't you even *think* about jumping back in there!" Luke warned. He succeeded in getting the fire going then got to his feet. "Get dressed. I'll be back in a minute." He headed off into the mist-shrouded forest and disappeared behind a tree.

Leia dressed hurriedly, savouring the warmth and comforting scent of Han's jacket as she pulled it on over her clothes. Pausing to enjoy the comfort it gave her, Leia wondered if there would be some way for Han to sense their daughter the way she had.

She looked up as Luke returned and asked him whether he thought it might be possible.

Luke shook his head and said regretfully, "I don't think so. It's a Force thing..." He pulled the flask of soup from his pack, "Have you thought about a name for her yet?"

Leia shook her head. "She just wasn't real to me," she murmured. "'Til now..."

Luke smiled then looked sideways suddenly. Yoda was sitting on a nearby tree root, watching them.

"Morning, Master," Luke said, and handed Leia a cup of soup. "Soup?" he offered the Jedi Master.

Yoda grunted acquiescence and joined them by the fire.

They breakfasted pleasantly together then Yoda led them on another trek, which took most of the day, all the while instructing, not just Leia but Luke as well. Each time they paused to rest, Leia bombarded the Jedi Master with questions and Luke watched her frustration grow as his answers became steadily less satisfying. Nevertheless, Luke felt deeply comforted by her presence; felt a *rightness* in the Force that she was here. This is the way it should have been: brother and sister training together.

Once again he found himself haunted by what might have happened had he taken Solo's advice just after the battle of Yavin and slept with the Alderaanian Princess. He couldn't help feeling ashamed of his desires at the time despite their innocence, and had to squash an accusatory spear of anger that lanced out towards the Jedi Master. Despite the attempt to hide his anger, Luke suspected that Yoda had sensed it anyway.

Leia was spending any breaks they had trying to sense her baby, which Yoda encouraged as an exercise to help her open herself to the Force without the aide of the waterfall. But even that she had been unable to achieve. Yoda had told her that, until she allowed the outside forces *in*, she could not affect them.

In Luke's opinion, the shields Leia had built around her emotions were of Super Star Destroyer quality, but the controls were as dodgy as anything on the *Millennium Falcon*. Amused at his own analogy, Luke wondered if that was how Han had known how to break through them?

It was raining steadily by the time they stopped for the evening, and they sought as much shelter as they could in the giant buttress-like roots of a tree. As they settled down to sleep, Luke put his arm around his sister and, as she relaxed, showed her what she had been trying to feel all day. The tiny life within her. Leia hugged him gratefully and fell asleep entwined with the gentle presence of her daughter through the Force.

Luke took a moment to study her, comparing her profile to the memories he now had of their mother.

So alike...

He kissed her softly on the forehead and let himself drift off to sleep.

He found himself in a large elegant hallway and, aware that he was dreaming, decided he was in a palace of some sort. Looking around, Luke noticed a young man approaching and was abruptly aware that he himself was much older than his current years. Was he dreaming about the future?

The young man approaching was on the small side for an adult human, but lean and hard in an athletic sort of way. His hair was dark, unkempt and too long, forcing him to push it out of his eyes at regular intervals. But the blue eyes that peered through the jagged, self-cut fringe, were brightly intelligent and the face vaguely familiar.

But what shone most brightly, and riveted Luke Skywalker's attention on him, was his Force-sense. The young man all but *glowed* with a level of power Luke had not felt since Darth Vader or the Emperor.

Skywalker held out his hand and the young man gripped his forearm in greeting. "Master Skywalker."

Luke estimated the young man's age at about 18 and for an instant wondered if this was how he had looked to Ben Kenobi at the same age. All brash and eager, and glowing with the Force. And felt a moment of understanding at the thrill it must have given the old Jedi. The sense of *future*. Of purpose.

But Ben had always known about Luke; this young man had seemingly come out of nowhere. No, Luke decided; what he was feeling was probably closer to what Vader had felt.

"Durc Organa," the young man said, introducing himself. "I think you knew my mother?"

Luke regarded the young man with shocked surprise. "Organa? You're Leia's son?"

The young man nodded and there was an almost sinister glimmer in his eyes as he added, "And yours, *uncle*."

The familiarity of the young man's features made sudden and horrible sense as the truth of his words slammed into Luke. He and *Leia* –

Luke jerked into wakefulness feeling panicked and ill. Had he just seen his son? The son he might have had from a path where he'd unknowingly slept with his sister? He wiped a hand across his face, struggling to banish the non-existent phantoms of his dream, and felt Leia stir beside him.

"Luke?" she murmured.

"It's all right," he told her hastily. "Go back to sleep."

He felt her unconscious attempt to touch his mind, to seek the truth directly, and blocked her.

"It was a bad dream," he admitted carefully. "Go back to sleep."

Bad dreams were something Leia knew intimately. She accepted his explanation without question and settled back into sleep.

Luke, on the other hand, was afraid to sleep lest his subconscious take him back to a place he did *not* want to go to. So he gazed out at the darkness, his mind in turmoil. But the sound of the rain and the breathing of the princess were soothing, and he soon found himself dreaming again.

But this time he could see *nothing*. Nor could he breathe. Gripped by a terror like he'd never felt, Luke wanted to scream but he couldn't move. His body in agony, yet unable to do anything about it, Luke thought he would go mad, and wondered why he wasn't dead from his inability to breathe. Instinctively he sought out the one presence he truly cared about, but couldn't feel the Force at all. He tried to calm himself, tried to focus, but a mindless panic took over.

Leia! he screamed helplessly in his head. *Leia!*

"Luke?"

Luke gasped for air as he woke and heard himself shriek, "Leia!" Still trying to get a grip on reality, he dimly became aware that Leia was shaking him.

"Luke, wake up. It's just a dream."

The need to flee still gripped him and he lurched out into the rain, breathing with panic-stricken gasps. Again he heard the echo of a cry in his head, "Leia!" and this time he recognised the voice.

Han.

Horrified understanding almost paralysed Luke. Han was *aware*. Frozen in carbonite, but still somehow aware.

Afraid that Leia would sense what he had just felt through the Force, Luke slammed his mental shields into place and sought to calm his breathing, which had degenerated into traumatised sobs. He turned his face into the rain, concealing his tears and seeking to wash the sudden and unwelcome knowledge from his mind. But, of course, it remained.

This was what Vader had planned to do to him. To lock him in a living hell.

"Luke?"

Luke looked back at his sister, could feel her concern, and managed a weak smile, hoping it looked reassuring. This was something Leia must never know.

He walked back to her and sat on the lowest edge of the tree root they'd been sheltering against, uncaring of the rain.

"Bad dream?" she asked, hunkering deeper into the small dry space they'd been sharing a moment ago.

Luke nodded. He leaned his elbows on his knees and stared unseeing at the hands that hung loosely between his legs, only dimly aware of the water trickling off his hair and nose.

It was like the vision he'd had before. Han in pain. A vision that had every instinct within his body urging him to rush to his friend's rescue. *Just like before...* He had ignored the advice of the Jedi Master teaching him to go and rescue his friend. A choice that had resulted in dire consequences for all of them. Did he dare repeat that mistake? Did he dare *not*? How could he leave Han in that hell? He turned his right hand palm up, watched the water gather in it and run off, clenched it into a fist then opened it again. The hand was surprisingly sensitive, despite being artificial. A legacy of his father.

He looked at Leia and found her watching him carefully. There were no demands for explanations from her, yet Luke knew that if she'd had any inkling of what he'd just felt, she would be doing an immediate bolt for the *Falcon*.

Which should he follow? Instinct or reason? Reason told him Leia needed Yoda's instruction, but could Han survive the sort of torment he'd glimpsed?

"I'm wet now," he told Leia. "I'll stay out here."

The princess nodded and closed her eyes, settling back to sleep.

Luke stared out at the rain.



Leia glared at the pebble sitting on the ground only a metre away, willing it to move. Although able to feel the power that was part of her genetic heritage, she was still unable to consciously manipulate it. Used to seeing results almost as soon as she put her mind to a task, Leia's frustration with her lack of progress in this area manifest as a short temper and an acid tongue.

They had been on Dagobah almost four days now and her need to rescue Han was becoming an unrelenting throb at the back of her brain. Much to her relief, they had returned to the *Falcon* after their hike to the waterfall, and were now using the open area around it as a training ground. But, apart from a few minor successes such as being able to sense the child steadily growing inside her, Leia felt like she was going nowhere.

She had only moved the pebble once so far, when she had walked over and kicked it in a fit of pique. The Jedi Master had sighed and Luke had seemed vaguely amused. Well Leia wasn't amused. Not at all.

"You're trying too hard," Luke told her as she growled and hung her head in her hands, giving up once more. "Relax and let it flow."

"Relax?" Leia repeated through gritted teeth. *That's about as achievable as me moving this rock*, she thought sarcastically.

"Which is why you can't move the rock," Luke replied wryly.

"I don't *want* to move the rock," Leia snapped tersely. "I want to go find Han! This is a waste of time-"

"You can do this, Leia."

"*Obviously!*" she said, waving accusingly at the rock.

"You just have to feel-"

"I *can* feel the Force!" she protested. "I can feel you, I can feel Yoda, I can feel my baby, I can even feel the rock. I just can't *move* the rock!"

Luke sighed heavily and Leia echoed him.

"You can reach out and touch the rock but you're keeping it all at arm's length," Luke tried to explain. "It has to be internalised, Leia. You have to *feel* it." He shrugged and finished simply, "You're blocking."

"It's what I was programmed to do," Leia replied quietly, taking refuge behind the block they'd concluded her mother had placed on her abilities as an infant. "So turn the program off," Luke told her gently.

Let yourself feel. The same thing Han had told her. Let her guard down; leave herself emotionally vulnerable. She had been getting used to lowering the shields she had built around her psyche to feel her daughter; could it really hurt that much to lower them a little further?

What had Vader told her to do to stop the Emperor from sensing her? To feel nothing? Then surely doing the opposite would have the desired effect?

Leia took a deep breath and, with her exhalation, tried to let go. Focussed briefly on her daughter and felt an answering touch. She tried to open herself further and, to some extent, felt her consciousness expand. Closing her eyes, Leia pictured the rock in her mind, felt its shape, weight and texture. Felt the waves of energy focus through her mind to lift the rock.

She knew she was succeeding by the surge of excitement that washed over her from both Yoda and Luke, and opened her eyes.

The rock was teetering, just off the ground.

I can do better, Leia thought, and attempted to find the woman she had been just before Bespin. Open, happy... Memories of Han washed over her and Leia smiled and let them flow. Knew without looking that the rock was rising steadily. Then it hit her. A wave of such desperation, such *agony*.

Leia!

"*Han!*" She responded, vocally and mentally, and the Jedi Master ducked as the rock shot over his head and slammed into the tree several metres behind him.

The psychic scream vanished as quickly as it had come. Bereft and deeply traumatised, Leia surged to her feet.

"I felt Han!" she exclaimed.

Luke, who was trying to recover from the psychic backwash, staggered to his feet to calm her, but Leia was inconsolable.

"I felt Han!" she said, wringing her hands in panic-stricken anguish. "I felt Han! I felt Han!" Her eyes met Luke's with a cataclysm of understanding and, without another word she fled towards the *Falcon*.

Luke closed his eyes briefly as Leia raced up the ramp then turned and looked at Yoda. The Jedi Master's lips were pursed in unexpressed disapproval. Luke had heard all the admonishments before, but he knew nothing would stop Leia from leaving now. A fact solidified by the sounds of the Falcon's engines warming. "We'll be back, Master," Luke said apologetically. "I promise." It was the exact same promise he had made before leaving Dagobah last time, and Luke hoped the decision would not end as disastrously this time. He wished Yoda would say something and, resigned, picked up the jacket he'd left lying nearby. But what the Jedi Master said when he finally did speak was the last thing Luke had expected. "With you I will come," Yoda said, hobbling towards the *Falcon's* ramp.

"Master?"

"Time I came out of hiding it is."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Wedge Antilles had been in Cloud City for several days now, sifting through the turmoil of the recently occupied city. Knowing that it would be too risky to fly his X-wing in, he had bought a passage to Bespin on a commercial transport from Duro. The journey had taken almost a week, but Antilles knew that the time was worth it for the security it ensured for the Rebellion. His subtle investigations in Cloud City had finally brought him to a man called Lobot, who had apparently been an aide to the administrator in charge of the city before its sudden and swift takeover by the Empire. Lobot had agreed to meet him in a nondescript tavern on one of the lower levels of the city as the new and unwelcome Imperial presence was almost non-existent there.

Antilles had been impressed by the city, but its inner levels were like industrial or lower socio-economic areas anywhere; darker, dirtier, and its inhabitants reflected this. The reason for the city's recent Imperial occupation was a mystery too. One that none of the inhabitants he'd spoken to so far could enlighten him on. Cloud City had remained beneath the Empire's notice for *years*, it seemed, and he couldn't help wondering if Solo and the princess had somehow been the catalyst. He hoped not, but suspected their arrival here to be too much of a coincidence to be otherwise. Why they'd come here, and where they'd gone, Antilles hoped Lobot would be able to tell him.

He wasn't sure what he'd expected Lobot to look like, but he hadn't expected the hooded man he found sitting in the part of the tavern they'd agreed upon. Then he glimpsed the cyborg attachments on the man's head and understood the need for the cloak. Lobot had clearly been an Imperial slave at one time.

Antilles placed the drinks he had bought on the table and sat opposite. Lobot accepted the drink without a word, and Antilles caught a glimpse of intense blue eyes.

"What can you tell me?" he asked in a low voice.

The hooded man slid a datachip across the table towards him and Antilles smoothly pocketed it.

"It's all on there," Lobot said, then met Antilles gaze with a piercing glance and added, "*All* of it."

"Imperial surveillance," Wedge said, and got a small nod. So now he had the unedited version of what Chambers had bought on Negavan. "Why did they come here?" he asked.

"Vader set a trap," he answered.

"*Vader?*" Antilles hissed, then wondered why he was surprised. Trouble followed Solo and the princess like a faithful pilgrim and, after the run-in they'd had recently with the bounty hunter on Ord Mantell, Wedge realised he'd assumed this to be something similar despite the obvious Imperial connections. More of Solo's past catching up with him. He sighed at his own arrogant prejudice. "Vader himself orchestrated everything," the man offered tightly. "Wanted the one called Skywalker."

Luke?! Wedge held his breath momentarily, then he said darkly, "Skywalker was *here?*" What the hell had he been up to? Why hadn't he rejoined the fleet?

Lobot nodded. "He was the reason Vader set the trap." He took a long draught from his glass and muttered, "It's all on the chip. The smuggler came looking for help because his ship had no hyperdrive."

Antilles hid his astonishment by taking a swig of the contents of his glass. The *Falcon* had limped all the way to Bespin from Hoth? No, that couldn't be right... At sublight speeds that would have taken them *years*. The hyperdrive must have blown somewhere en route. No wonder they'd been missing so long!

"Were they followed?" he asked, then dismissed the question with a shake of his head. "Of course they were," he muttered apologetically. "Stupid question."

That earned him a bit of a smile from under the hood and he flashed one back.

"Vader was here several weeks before the smuggler," Lobot said flatly. "Skywalker arrived the day after."

Antilles frowned and shook his head, still unable to piece together what had happened. Had Luke stayed with the *Falcon* the whole way to Bespin? In which case, why hadn't he arrived *with* them instead of the next day? And, if he hadn't stayed with them, then what had prompted him to come to Bespin? And what game was Vader playing? Why the hell would he want *Luke*?

"Vader..." he murmured, then asked the question that worried him the most, "Are they prisoners?"

Lobot shook his head. "The ones who survived escaped in the smuggler's ship." Antilles winced, afraid to ask who hadn't survived. "The *Falcon*?"

Lobot nodded, then added, "The smuggler was given to the bounty hunter who led the Imperials here."

Antilles heart sank. So bounty hunters *had* been involved. And Solo had been packed off with one. Then who hadn't survived?

"The princess?" he asked.

"The princess and the Wookiee escaped. Skywalker was killed."

Wedge didn't bother to hide his shock and dismay, and numbly forced the last of his drink down his throat. Unable to come to terms with the fact that Luke had been killed, he ejected it to deal with at a later date.

Realising that he'd probably stayed too long and was unnecessarily increasing their risk of discovery, he stood up to leave, but was stilled by a sudden flickering of lights from within the hood. Then he remembered the man's cybernetic enhancement and dismissed it, but was stopped from leaving by a firm hand on his arm. He looked back at the man and found the blue eyes regarding him intently.

"A Corellian YT-1300 just docked in the southwest sector," Lobot said, and Antilles sat down again. He didn't want to let himself hope, told himself there were plenty of YT-1300s still freighting and that it probably wasn't the *Millennium Falcon*, but couldn't stop himself from feeling excited.

"I asked to be notified every time one landed," Lobot explained. "In case it might be Calrissian."

"Let's go check it out then," Antilles said.

The *Millennium Falcon* arrived at Cloud City on Bespin under the false registration of *Sunfighter Franchise*. It was a name Solo had used on various smuggling runs for the Rebellion, one Leia knew that worked. She just hoped it wouldn't attract attention.

Leia had planned to return to the Rebel Alliance for the equipment and medications needed to safely revive Solo but, with her newfound knowledge of what Solo was suffering, no longer felt she could afford the time it would take to contact an agent and find the Alliance. Plus there would be all the extra complications of trying to explain exactly what had happened to Solo, not to mention the horror her rushing off to rescue him would be met with. So Leia had come to the decision to go back to the source of the problem.

Bespin.

Having Yoda come along had been an unexpected complication as far as Leia was concerned. But, so far, the Jedi Master had seemed happy not to interfere, and had in fact insisted on remaining aboard the *Falcon* when they landed, which suited Leia perfectly.

They landed without incident and, looking like any other freighter crew, entered the city unchallenged by the stormtroopers overseeing their arrival. The Imperial presence was no great surprise, nor was the dramatically reduced population. But none of that concerned Leia. She was only interested in getting the information and medication they required and getting out.

She sensed Luke's unease at returning to a place that had such life-changing and unpleasant memories attached to it. Felt somewhat that way herself. But the practicalities of what she was trying to achieve made it easy for her to dismiss.

What was harder to dismiss was how tired and ill she was feeling. The nausea had returned with a vengeance, and nothing she or Luke did seemed to help. Luke had come to the conclusion that it was because her nausea was now being caused by stress rather than just hormones, and Leia suspected he was probably right. But that didn't make it any easier to live with. Luke had suggested she get a medical check-up while they were here, but Leia had argued that spending a minute longer than they had to in the city was just too risky.

They wound their way through the various levels of the city until they found the medcentre that serviced all of the city's administrative personnel. Leia knew this would include the medics who serviced the prison section and set about looking for his face among the many listed on the electronic information board by the door.

Leia identified the one she was looking for just as a protocol droid approached them and asked in a softly modulated voice if it could assist them.

"Yes," she told it matter of factly. "We're looking for this medic," she said pointing at the small photo ID on the list. "I saw him a couple of weeks ago and he wanted me back for a check up. Said I should see him personally as he knows my case." "And your name?" the droid asked pleasantly.

"Frozen Corellian," Leia said stiffly.

The droid seemed to pause for a moment, reconsider, then headed down the corridor containing the consulting rooms. Leia couldn't help wondering if the medic would have them arrested, and felt herself tense as the droid returned a moment later and directed them to one of the consulting rooms.

She could feel the fear from the medic who was waiting in the room for them, instinctively started to block the emotions she was receiving through the Force

then reconsidered and consciously opened herself to it, seeing the value and truth-telling advantages to such empathy.

"It *is* you," the man said softly.

Leia got straight to the point. "I need to know what you gave him and how to decarbonise him safely," she said.

"I can tell you exactly what I gave him, but decarbonising?" the medic shook his head and told her honestly, "I have no idea. As far as I know, no human has ever been carbon-frozen before."

"Then you'll just have to give me your best guess," Leia said icily.

Looking at the battered freighter sitting on the docking arm, Antilles knew without question that it was the *Millennium Falcon*. According to Lobot it had been registered in the landing records as the *Sunfighter Franchise*, but Antilles simply shook his head and said quietly, "That's the *Falcon*."

Unwilling to compromise his position any further, and feeling sure that Calrissian would contact him if he had returned, Lobot left Antilles to wait for the crew's return by himself.

The Rogue Squadron pilot settled down among the empty crates near the entrance into the city, and about an hour later two figures approached the ship. Wedge recognised Luke and the princess immediately and felt an overwhelming relief at finding his friend alive.

"Luke!" he exclaimed, and stepped out from among the crates.

Luke and the princess both looked alarmed and wary, but Luke smiled as he recognised his friend.

"Wedge," he said, acknowledging Antilles as he approached, then asked, "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you!" Antilles told him. He glanced awkwardly at the princess and wondered if he could tell her about the incriminating datachip of her and Solo that had allowed him to track them to Bespin.

She smiled thinly at him and said, "Lieutenant."

Wedge ran a hand through his hair and uncomfortably corrected her, "Actually it's Commander." He looked apologetically at Luke and explained, "I got promoted when you didn't show."

Luke smiled wryly but was sincere as he said, "Congratulations."

"Where the hell have you been?" Antilles wanted to know. "We thought you'd been killed!"

"It's a long story," Luke replied evasively.

"I've been looking for you for weeks!" he complained without thinking, then made a conscious effort not to flinch as the princess focussed all her attention on him. "What made you look on Bespin?" she asked suspiciously.

"That's..." Antilles threw a grin at Skywalker and replied glibly, "another long story." He indicated the *Falcon* with his head and said, "I could use a lift back."

Leia opened her mouth to say something, changed her mind and closed it again. Her eyes told Antilles that she knew he wasn't telling her something, but that she was too mentally exhausted to fight him for it.

Luke nodded and indicated that they should board the ship.

"Rieekan has been very worried about you," Antilles told the princess as she entered the codes to lower the ramp. "He'll be very glad to have you back safe and sound."

Leia simply nodded and they boarded.

Antilles couldn't identify the species of the small creature that was waiting for them in the ring corridor and felt vaguely alarmed when Luke offhandedly introduced it as 'Yoda the Jedi Master'.

"Get her warmed, Wedge, and I'll be with you in a minute," Luke said as they reached the arm that led to the cockpit, then he followed the princess into the main hold.

Sensing they needed a moment alone, and trying not to feel intimidated by the small green creature that followed him, Antilles carried on to the cockpit and set the engines warming.

Luke followed Leia to the bunkroom and watched as she secured the bag the Cloud City medic had given her in one of the drawers under the medbunk. The

bag was full of drugs and instructions for decarbonising Solo. Despite the fact that she had spent time in the bunkroom during their twenty-one hour journey from Dagobah to Bespin, Luke felt sure Leia hadn't slept. He was aware that she had spent a large part of the journey in the 'fresher, vomiting. Recognised it as a reaction to what she had felt from Solo; the revelation had left Luke wanting to throw up too. But, in her current condition, Leia was far more susceptible. She looked exhausted.

"Why don't you try to get some sleep?" he suggested gently. "Wedge and I can fly the ship."

"To Tatooine?" Leia asked, standing up straight and facing him.

Luke considered for a moment then said, "I think we should go back to the fleet first," then added hurriedly as she opened her mouth to disagree, "So they can see you're okay."

Leia's expression darkened. "We've been through this, Luke."

"We agreed it would take too long to find the Alliance, yes," he said, "but Wedge found *us*."

"I'd still like to know how," Leia snapped.

Luke chose to ignore that topic for the moment and insisted, "You need to see a medic, Leia. If we go back to the Alliance you could see Gizela-"

"If we go back to the Alliance they won't let me leave to look for Han!"

"But you've been so sick," he insisted.

Luke was genuinely worried, not just for Leia's health but that of her child as well. And there was her safety to consider too. Who knew what sort of lengths the Emperor would go to in his attempts to capture Leia's child?

Although he knew she would be outraged, Luke couldn't help suggesting, "Maybe you should stay with the Alliance."

"I *knew* it would come to this," Leia growled. "I'm pregnant, Luke, not an invalid. And I'm going to rescue Han whether you come with me or not."

Luke felt certain that if Leia took that path she would fail. Solo's rescue was something that needed serious planning.

"Leia, I've never seen you this sick," Luke told her, his voice thick with concern.

"You've lost weight, you're not eating, you haven't stopped vomiting since we first left Bespin!"

"It's morning sickness, Luke. Vader's medic said it should stop at ten weeks..."

"And what are you?"

"Seven."

"Fine. A couple of weeks with the Alliance will give us time to plan and prepare properly, and give you time to get well."

Leia shook her head emphatically. "I'm not waiting two weeks! You felt Han too; you *know* the sort of hell he's in! How could you even *suggest* waiting two weeks?!"

"It could mean the difference between success and failure."

"He could be dead by then."

At any other time, the glare Leia gave him would have had Luke backing down, bowing to her greater knowledge and sophistication. But this time he stood his ground, secure in the belief that he was right.

He touched her face and said, "If something happened to you or your baby, Han would never forgive me. We're going back to the Alliance."

Leia jerked her face back out of his reach and snapped, "I outrank you, Commander. I could order you-"

Luke smiled and told her, "Sorry, Princess, I'm AWOL."

He turned and left the bunkroom and headed for the cockpit.

When he got there, Wedge Antilles was getting clearance from the port authority for their departure. He was sitting in Chewie's seat and Yoda was perched on the communication operator's seat behind him. For a moment Luke wondered what the Jedi Master might have said to Wedge, then dismissed his concerns and slid into Solo's seat. Luke felt Antilles glance at him and guessed he had heard the raised voices from the bunkroom, but busied himself with the procedures of raising ship. Questions and answers could be dealt with once they were safely in hyperspace.

In the bunkroom, Leia sat on the edge of the bunk and hung her head in her hands. In her head she knew Luke was right, but her heart just couldn't agree. Rescuing Han was something constructive she could focus on. Going back to the Alliance terrified her. Going back to the Alliance would require explanations from her, *confessions*, which she just wasn't prepared to give. Having to explain her pregnancy would be hard enough, but the whole Vader thing... Just contemplating that increased her nausea exponentially.

She felt and heard the ship rumble in preparation for lift off and quickly decided that the distractions of the cockpit would be better than the current turmoil in her head, and hurried in that direction.

As she stepped into the cockpit, Luke told her curtly, "Strap in." Antilles managed to throw her a quick smile over his shoulder, but Luke didn't look at her. Watching them raise ship, Leia couldn't help thinking how *wrong* they looked in Han and Chewie's seats. It just didn't seem *right* having someone else fly the *Falcon*.

It was early afternoon Cloud City time, and Leia found the bright daylight a welcome contrast to her other views of it at dawn or sunset. Fewer memories. Luke guided the *Falcon* through the clouds and away from the planet and minutes later took them safely into hyperspace. Luke, Yoda and Antilles immediately relaxed, unbuckling their harnesses, but Leia didn't bother. She felt too tense and wound up to relax.

Antilles turned to face them and said, "Okay, *please* tell me Solo's alive."

Leia felt Luke look at her, knew he was deferring to her, and she said stiffly, "He's alive. We think the bounty hunter took him to Tatooine."

"And Chewie?" Antilles wanted to know.

This time Leia deliberately deferred to Luke. She had heard Chewbacca taken out of his cell during her time in the detention centre on Vader's Star Destroyer, but she had no idea where he'd been taken.

"Chewie and Lando were shipped out together," Luke answered quietly. "For Kessel."

"Crap," was Antilles succinct appraisal, and Leia couldn't help thinking, *This is all my fault. Even Chewie thought so...* She wanted to ask Wedge how he had known to look for them on Bespin, but was afraid to ask.

"Alright, start at the beginning," Antilles told Luke, then smiled and added seriously, "Consider it a practice for your de-briefing. Where did you go after Hoth?"

Luke threw a pointed glance at Yoda and said, "I found a Jedi Master."

Antilles looked warily at Yoda, started to say something then changed his mind and said simply, "How?"

"The Force," Luke muttered dismissively.

"How far away is the Fleet?" Leia asked, wanting to change the subject. "Did most of the Hoth cell get away?"

"Most of the transports got away. We lost a lot of ground troops." Antilles regarded her carefully. "There were reports of the *Falcon* flying into the asteroid belt."

Leia nodded. "We got away from Hoth and then the hyperdrive blew. We limped to Bespin and Vader was waiting for us."

"How did he know you were there?"

"I don't know. Maybe we were followed?" Leia wiped a hand across her face. "There were so many... problems... with the *Falcon*."

Antilles looked at Luke. "Why did you go to Bespin?"

"Vader wants me," Luke replied.

Leia could hear the reluctance in his voice and suspected Antilles would too. "He captured Han and Leia and tortured them because he knew I would feel it through the Force," Luke continued. "Would rush to help them..."

There was a long pause and Antilles finally encouraged, "And?"

Leia looked at Luke, wondering how much he intended to tell his Rogue Squadron friend, and sensed he wasn't about to continue. For all his talk of accepting their parentage, it seemed Luke was not prepared to share the 'good news' just yet.

"We were all captured," she told Antilles flatly.

"And?" he said again when nothing more seemed to be forthcoming.

"We escaped," Luke said matter-of-factly, then climbed out of his seat and left the cockpit. A moment later, Yoda followed him.

Leia watched Antilles expression turn into one of consternation as he watched them leave, then he looked at her and asked, "How?"

"Luke used the Force," she told him honestly. "That's as much as I know, Wedge."

After an hour alone in the cockpit, and aware that Luke, Leia and the Jedi Master were sleeping, Wedge Antilles decided to break the monotony of their twelve-hour hyperspace journey skimming through the data that Lobot had given him.

Unlike the very selective data on Chambers' datachip, this one showed him everything. The *Falcon's* arrival, the Wookiee working on the *Falcon* with the Cloud City crew while Solo and the princess 'played' in the apartment's massive bed. Their dinner together, every word crystal clear...

If he'd ever had any doubts about the seriousness of Han and Leia's relationship, or Solo's feelings towards the Princess of Alderaan, Antilles had none now. There was no question that Solo loved her. Which made their betrayal and capture the morning following their intimate dinner even more tragic.

The data was multi-level, showing him each of the subjects under scrutiny on separate information threads and, when they were together, showing them from a variety of angles. That was, until Solo and Chewbacca were being tortured. At that point the princess' surveillance suddenly stopped, and didn't resume until she was thrown back into the cell with Solo and the Wookiee. Antilles couldn't help wondering what the Imperials had done to her while the smugglers were being tortured, and why it hadn't been recorded.

He watched with utter disbelief as Vader tested the carbonite freezing on Solo. How could anyone survive something like that? No wonder the princess was so traumatised! Then he watched with total shock as Luke willingly stepped up to battle Darth Vader! With lightsabres no less! It was hardly surprising that Lobot thought Skywalker had been killed...

That was where the recording finished. There was no footage of Vader successfully carbon-freezing Luke. No footage of their escape from Bespin. Nevertheless, Antilles knew that Rieekan would be grateful for the data. Particularly as he sincerely doubted that Luke or Leia would be very informative about what had happened. In fact the data would probably speed up the debriefing process for them. But how anyone would tell the princess about the existence of the data, Wedge couldn't imagine. On top of everything else, it was a blow she might well crumble under.

He tried to equate the tired and fragile looking woman he'd found on Bespin with the one he'd seen on the pornographic datachip and couldn't. But then he couldn't equate the girl who'd been rolling around with Solo in that datachip with

the coolly efficient princess he knew either. And the woman currently sleeping in the *Falcon's* bunkroom was neither.

Luke and Leia were at odds too, that much was obvious. Leia understandably wanted to rush off to rescue Solo while Luke was being the voice of reason. Fall back, regroup, and prepare a successful attack. Fighter pilot strategy.

Yet Antilles could understand the princess' reticence to return to the Alliance. Once she was back in the 'fold,' the hierarchy would not want to let her go. Especially not to rescue a *smuggler*.

Antilles realised that the princess wasn't the only one who had changed. Luke's familiar exuberance had gone. Whatever had happened to him during their capture had left deep scars and, if what the princess had said was true, Luke's small time with his 'Jedi Master' had made him powerful.

The Jedi Master himself was an enigma, and Wedge wasn't sure how the Alliance would feel about him. Could they trust a Jedi who had inexplicably escaped the Jedi purge?

Grieving for his friends, Wedge sighed.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The *Millennium Falcon's* arrival back with the Alliance was met with much fuss. A crowd had gathered around the ship before the ramp was properly down, and generals Rieekan and Madine were waiting for them at the bottom of the ramp. Leia watched their consternation grow as they realised that Solo and the Wookiee were not on board.

Luke had made her promise to see Gizela before they were de-briefed, but Leia didn't think she would have a choice. She and Luke were too much of a security risk.

Leia forced herself to smile for Rieekan; he looked so relieved to see her. Madine looked suspicious as usual, particularly when Yoda had appeared on the ramp. "Where's Solo?" the blonde general snapped.

"Han and Chewbacca were captured," Luke replied, and Leia suspected he'd deliberately left off the 'sir'.

Leia let Rieekan embrace her and wondered whether she and Luke would have joint or separate de-briefings. But, before she had time to think, let alone contact a medic, Leia found herself redirected into the Supreme Commander's office as Luke and the generals continued on to the de-briefing room.

Feeling perturbed, Leia settled in for what she surmised would be a mini-debriefing. Either that or the Supreme Commander wanted to inundate her with information about the current state of the Rebellion. Information the princess just wasn't in the right frame of mind to process. Nevertheless, Leia decided that she could use the opportunity to request official leave to rescue Solo. She didn't think her chances of being granted the leave were very high, but felt compelled to try and do things the 'right' way to start with.

Looking at the head of the Alliance, Leia couldn't help wondering what the woman considered so urgent that it demanded her attention *now*.

"You wanted to see me, Supreme Commander?"

"Yes. Leia, there's something you need to be made aware of before we go in to the de-briefing," the woman told her without meeting her eyes, then indicated the chair opposite. "Please sit."

Leia sat as Mon Mothma inserted a datachip into her computer, and found herself wondering about the significance of the Supreme Commander calling her by just her first name. She couldn't remember the last time the Chandrilese

former senator had called her simply 'Leia'. It was always 'Princess' or 'Princess Leia'.

Mon Mothma turned the screen so that Leia could see it as well. "This was bought on Negavan by one of the Rouge Squadron pilots," the woman told her.

Leia frowned at Mon Mothma, then at the screen as she waited for the image to appear. She suspected the Supreme Commander was attempting to get her interested in the Rebellion's next military action by showing her some outrage or injustice perpetrated by the Empire. Was already rehearsing what she would say to the woman as an explanation for her non-participation when the screen came to life.

Leia leaned forward a little to see better and her eyes widened with shock as she immediately recognised the room on the screen. Not to mention the couple enthusiastically copulating on the bed in the middle of it.

Nausea slammed into Leia full force and she put a hand over her mouth to muffle her gasp of shock.

"It was brought to our attention several weeks ago – out of concern for your safety. The pilot in question thought it might help us to find you and it was, in fact, how you were traced to Bespin.

"As far as I know, this is the only copy on the base," Mon Mothma continued conversationally, "but I could be wrong." She might have been discussing the catering for the next official function.

Leia could not have felt more devastated. As if discovering the Imperials had been watching her most intimate moments with Han on Cloud City hadn't been bad enough, now it seemed the bastards had sold their surveillance data galaxy wide.

She looked at the Supreme Commander, her expression one of horror and mortification, and found herself being coldly scrutinised. There was no pity or understanding in the woman's eyes, just disappointment and condemnation.

Leia looked back at the screen to see that the image had shifted to a close up of Han's passion filled face as he enthusiastically mouthed her breast. Leia winced as she heard her own encouraging whispers. She closed her eyes momentarily, struggling to suppress her body's urge to vomit, and attempted to disassociate herself from the couple on the screen. Tried to regain control of her emotions by pretending it was someone else.

Then she heard Mon Mothma say, "I felt it was necessary to make you aware of the data's existence as it will be a major component of the de-briefing."

Leia tried to ignore the animalistic grunts from herself and Han on the screen as she forced herself to meet the Supreme Commander's eyes. Not content with simply taking Han from her, Vader had taken her most private moments with Han and turned them into something cheap, tawdry and disgusting. And while she knew Vader probably wasn't responsible for the data's distribution into the general populace, he obviously hadn't done anything to stop it either. And now Mon Mothma was capitalising on it.

"This was an Imperial Surveillance recording," Leia told her flatly.

"I am aware of that," the woman replied. "A lot of time was spent studying it to find out where it had been recorded and the sort of security risk it might represent to the Alliance."

With dismay Leia realised that the data had been analysed to the finest degree by goddess knew how many people... She looked back at the screen and felt her gorge rise; had to swallow several times before it settled back into her stomach and sat there like a huge lump. For a moment she wondered how many people had seen the data but dismissed it as something she had no control over. The fact that the Supreme Commander was now attempting to *shame* her with it infuriated her.

One thing was certain; whether or not the Alliance defeated the Empire eventually, there was no chance of her having a career in politics after this. There was certainly no way she would be taken seriously among Rebel Alliance hierarchy any longer. Leia swallowed bitterly. So Vader had killed her life with the Rebellion too. Steadily taken everything from her until all she was left with was herself.

It was almost liberating.

For a moment Leia wondered whether she should really ruin the Supreme Commander's day and tell her about the pregnancy, but swiftly decided it was none of Mon Mothma's business.

Leia heard herself shriek delightedly on the small screen between them, and couldn't help watching as Solo rolled them so that she was on top. Leia-on-screen then proceeded to rock her hips enthusiastically in his lap, ardently and eagerly fucking her lover.

"This is an Imperial Surveillance recording," Leia repeated irritably. "Han scanned for surveillance devices as soon as we arrived-"

"Of course he did," the Supreme Commander agreed without looking at her and the sarcastic edge to her comment was unmistakable.

Leia stiffened angrily. "I am *not* going to apologise to you or anyone else for something Han and I thought we were doing in *private*," she snapped. "The fact that it has since become an object of *pornography* is nothing less than a complete violation of our rights! And to confront me with it the way you have..." Leia could feel Dark Force tingling at the edge of her awareness, beckoning her to use it, and felt even angrier that Mon Mothma could draw such a response from her. She glared at the woman. "Making it seem like we were committing some sort of *crime*," she finished. "How *dare* you."

"I understand, Leia," the Supreme Commander said, suddenly placating, while she switched off the screen and removed the data chip. "Sometimes I forget how young you are. This was an error in judgement"

The comment about her age infuriated Leia even more. "The only error in judgement I consider we committed was in trusting Han's scanner!" she told the woman hotly. "I *refuse* to let you make me feel ashamed of what we did! Han and I were having sex. So what? Billions of humans do it everyday! Even if it had just been casual sex between us, you have *no right* to treat me as though we were doing something-" Leia hunted for the right word then finished, "*depraved!*"

"No, I wouldn't call your behaviour 'depraved'," Mon Mothma agreed stiffly, "but I'm *sure* your father would not have approved."

For a moment Leia was rendered speechless. She felt so angry that she was almost tempted to tell the woman who her *real* father was. That it was her *real* father who had ordered the surveillance, which had produced the data that had so horrified and scandalised the Supreme Commander.

But, instead, she felt a cold acceptance settle over her and got to her feet. "I herewith officially resign from the Alliance," she said flatly.

"Now, Leia-

"After that recording," she told the Supreme Commander matter-of-factly, and indicated the now silent screen with her hand, "*no one* is going to take me seriously. There is no place for me here."

"Leia, you're being unreasonable."

'I'm being unreasonable?' Leia thought, then smiled to herself. *I'm only just getting started!*

"I resign all rank and privileges," she continued, "and will leave Alliance sanctuary immediately following the debriefing."

Ignoring Mon Mothma's request to return to the desk, Leia headed for the door, but the door opened before she reached it to reveal Yoda standing on the other side. He fixed her with a gaze that told the princess in no uncertain terms that he had felt her brush with the Dark Side, then turned his attention on the Supreme Commander.

Mon Mothma's reaction was memorable to say the least. She got to her feet and regarded the Jedi Master with shock as she managed to stammer, "Master Yoda?"

So she knows him, Leia thought with profound curiosity. *How interesting.*

"Await you at the de-briefing we do," Yoda said in his distinctive manner, and Leia had no doubts that he meant both her and the Supreme Commander. "I guess we'd better get a move on then?" Leia replied sarcastically, and was once again the recipient of Yoda's displeased gaze. She caught Mon Mothma glancing at her and could have sworn the woman looked guilty. *He makes her uncomfortable*, Leia realised. *This is going to be **very** interesting.*

Stifling an arrogant smirk, Leia led the way out of Mon Mothma's office and into the room a little way down the corridor that was commonly used for higher level meetings and de-briefings

"Here they are," Rieekan announced cheerfully as they entered, and smiled warmly at Leia.

The other generals, Dodonna and Madine, barely glanced at her as she entered the room and Leia found herself looking to Luke for reassurance, but he wouldn't meet her eyes. That was when she realised they'd already been watching the data from Bespin. The data Mon Mothma had just shown her.

Turn around, Leia told herself. *Turn around and walk out. You don't have to take this.*

Rieekan and Antilles were the only ones there who seemed prepared to look her in the eye; Antilles even started to smile at her. But the expression that flitted across Mon Mothma's face as she took her place at the head of the table was one that Leia could only describe as victorious.

The woman smiled coolly at everyone in the room and her smug confidence rekindled Leia's anger. Which ironically gave her own confidence a much-needed boost, and she forced herself to sit in the vacant seat beside Luke. Yoda had taken up position at the opposite end of the table from Mon Mothma, in a chair that had been adjusted for his size.

Madine jumped straight to the point. "Princess, the Supreme Commander has made you aware of the data we have in our possession?" Leia did not reply, her answer implicit in her silence. She made a point of activating the small screen in front of her so that she could see what they were referring to, and was faced with the frozen image of herself, Solo and Chewbacca in the cell on Cloud City. An image that triggered a physical response so painful that Leia almost couldn't breathe. Han was lying on the hard pallet, just returned from his session on the scan grid, and she was comforting him.

Madine carried on. "Commander Antilles has brought back an unedited version," he said. "One that shows your Imperial incarceration on Cloud City."

Leia was having trouble taking in his words. This was exactly how Solo had looked the last time she'd seen him. Haggard, traumatised... She jammed her hands between her knees so that the others wouldn't see how much they were shaking and wondered how Madine and his cronies had managed to watch so much of the new data already. It didn't occur to her, in her current state, that Antilles had been through the data already and had brought selective points to their attention.

"There is a discrepancy in the data we have of your time on Bespin," Madine continued. "A period of time while Solo and the Wookiee are being tortured when you are not under surveillance. We need to know exactly what happened to you in that time."

Leia swallowed and tried to recall her time with Vader dispassionately. "Vader took me to the surveillance room," she said. "Made me watch while they tortured Han." She looked across at the blonde general and found herself being coldly scrutinised. Just like Mon Mothma had done. Leia felt a deep-seated defiance flare up within her and there was a challenging note in her voice as she added, "Told me some stuff. The usual, you know."

"*Told you some stuff*," Madine quoted, then smiled sarcastically and asked, "What *stuff*?"

Leia felt a sudden and irrational desire to tell him, but recognised it as a purely selfish desire to shock. Shock them all with the truth. But she curbed her desire and replied flatly, "He gloated about the surveillance; about watching Han and I." No one said anything, but she heard some of them shift uncomfortably in their chairs. Her eyes dared Madine to question what she meant and he averted his gaze.

Looking at the blonde general, Leia realised that the man's appearance had changed since she'd last seen him. She hadn't seen him for over two months and used the puzzle of trying to figure out exactly what had changed to distance herself from the trauma of the memories they were forcing her to dig up.

"Of course," she added sarcastically, "he didn't mention he was going to sell the surveillance galaxy *wide*."

Leia could *feel* the discomfort in the room and wondered whether it was being amplified by the Force or if she was just more sensitive to the underlying tension.

Dodonna cleared his throat and switched off the data flowing to their screens. The image of Solo vanished as he asked, "And on Vader's ship?"

"I was locked up the entire time," Leia replied flatly. "I saw nothing and nobody until we got to Coruscant." She glanced sideways at her brother and added, "Not even Luke.

"I was brought before the Emperor briefly," she continued. "He seemed to find me very amusing until I almost succeeded in killing him with Vader's lightsabre." That declaration animated them somewhat, but Leia ignored their murmurs of disbelief and added, "Then he used Force lighting on me."

The revelation that the Emperor was a Force-user and, more particularly, a *Dark* Force user was not lost on those present. They were definitely excited now, and started arguing about the ramifications. Yoda launched into a portentous dialogue about the Sith, but Leia found it difficult to keep her attention focussed on the discussion. The images Mon Mothma had forced on her kept repeating in her head. Over and over and *over*... Han holding her, caressing her, *loving* her. The desperate ache she had been carrying in her heart since Solo had been put in carbonite suddenly became unbearable and she felt tears spring in her eyes. She wiped a hand across her face in an attempt to conceal the tears with a not entirely false display of tiredness, and felt the gentle touch of a hand on her leg.

Luke's hand. A subtle squeeze that told her he was there for her. A sign of affection and caring that made her desire to cry even stronger. Leia put her own hand over his and repeated the gesture. Solidarity between friends. Friends who had so recently discovered they were siblings as well as offspring of the second most evil being in the galaxy.

The pain around her heart intensified and Leia closed her eyes; felt a soothing balm through the Force from Luke and drew it to herself gratefully.

The questioning had shifted to their escape from Vader's Super Star Destroyer and now they were interrogating Luke about his Jedi training as well as about the Jedi Master he had brought back with him.

Looking at the small, green Jedi at the end of the table, Leia couldn't help wondering what their reactions to Yoda had been. She got the distinct impression that Mon Mothma was the only one who fully understood the ramifications of Yoda's re-emergence onto the political stage. But that could have been because

the Supreme Commander was the only one among them who remembered the Jedi Master from the days before the Empire. The Jedi Master's agenda was anyone's guess, and Leia was looking forward to hearing his answers when the questioning turned to him.

They questioned Leia about her time on Dagobah and Leia expressed little but her irritation at being there when she should have been rescuing Solo. Luke had deliberately omitted any reference to her having Jedi abilities and Leia did not contradict him. Nor did Yoda, much to Leia's relief. She was more than happy for them to think she had ended up on Dagobah simply because Luke had insisted on going straight back to Yoda after escaping from Vader. And they seemed reassured that Luke had returned to his Jedi Master for guidance after spending time with Vader.

Thinking about Vader turned Leia's thoughts to the child in her womb and the difficult path ahead of her. The threat from the Emperor disturbed her deeply, and Leia sought the comfort and reassuring presence of her daughter, felt an answering caress. *I love you*, she told her daughter silently. *No matter what happens, I will always love you.*

Leia had come to the conclusion that Palpatine intended to make a Dark Jedi of the child she was carrying. A new Sith Lord. Not only was she Vader's genetic stock, the fact that Solo's mother had been a Jedi would doubtless add weight to the Jedi gene-pool coded into every cell of the child's body. It would increase her desirability to an irresistible level as far as the Emperor was concerned, and Yoda's portentous warnings that the child was already very strong with the Force simply confirmed that conclusion in Leia's mind.

For the first time, Leia seriously considered the course she would need to take to keep her child safe, and wondered what Han's suggested solution would be? Flee to the other side of the galaxy? An echo of the wish he had shared with her just before they'd reached Bespin came back to her: *The full fantasy; run away together.*

Leia raised her eyes to look at Yoda and then at Mon Mothma. Perhaps that was the answer?

Leia wondered if she could avoid telling the Alliance about her pregnancy. She had vowed to leave, so it was not something they needed to know. The thought of leaving the Alliance, of giving up what had essentially been her reason for living since Alderaan, was almost crippling. Yet, what else could she do? After the data that Mon Mothma had shown her...

Leia closed her eyes as the images flooded her brain once more and mingled with the treasured memories there. Seeing Han make love to her was bringing all her desperate feelings of loss to the fore. Her need to hold him, and be held by

him, was all encompassing. And thinking about the torment she had felt from him on Dagobah...

Helplessness was not a feeling Leia Organa handled well, and the tears trickled out from under her lids despite her efforts to contain them, burning trails of scalding embarrassment down her cheeks. So she took refuge in controlling her emotions the most effective way she knew how: by summoning her anger. Anger she couldn't help but focus on the leaders of the Alliance, particularly Mon Mothma. To feel so belittled by someone she had looked up to and respected all her life left her seething.

I hate you, Leia thought vehemently, and opened her eyes to glare hotly at the object of her ire. Mon Mothma was completely focussed on the Jedi Master at the other end of the table, arguing about security.

I hate you.

Something slapped her hard enough that she saw stars and, bizarrely, Leia finally recognised what it was about Madine's appearance that had changed. The general had somehow sprouted a thick head of hair! For a man who had always kept his thinning hair clipped short, to find him with a sudden and obviously unnatural, thick head of hair was seriously amusing. *Han is going to have a field day with this one*, she thought, then she slipped into unconsciousness.

Leia woke to find herself in the medcentre with no recollection of getting there. She was in a private room, under dim, sleep-shift lighting, and sitting at the end of her bed, *on her bed*, was the Jedi Master.

Leia shifted, attempting to work moisture back into her tongue, while trying to remember how she had got here. Moving made her aware that she had something strapped to her left arm, and she paused to look at it. Raised her arm to confirm it was nothing more insidious than an infuser, then let her arm flop back onto the bedcovers.

She remembered the debriefing, or part of it. She thought she remembered getting angry...

Leia looked at the small, green Jedi on the end of her bed and decided that he was the reason she was in the medcentre.

"What'd you do to me?" she croaked dryly, and started to sit up.

Nausea crashed over her like a wave and she hastily covered her mouth, scrambled out of the bed and into the ensuite 'fresher. The down side of being hydrated was that it meant there was something in her stomach to throw up.

Some minutes later, she emerged from the 'fresher looking haggard and wrung out, and fell back onto the narrow bed, laying as she fell, too exhausted to be bothered rearranging herself into a comfortable position.

Was it really worth all this suffering? Did she want the child *that* much?

Leia took a deep breath and dismissed the question as the irrational rambling of a woman at the end of her endurance. She twisted her head slightly and regarded the Jedi Master with one eye.

"Are you here to protect me, or to protect everyone else *from* me?"

One ear twitched, but Yoda remained silent.

A medic entered the room, doubtless brought by her brief absence from the bed, and fussed checking her infuser and the bio-readings on the small screen behind the bed.

"How are you feeling, Princess?" the medic asked automatically.

"Terrible," Leia replied with feeling.

"Were you vomiting?" he asked and Leia nodded, realising he probably knew why.

"Can you give me something for the nausea?"

"You'll have to discuss that with Doctor Shalleron in the morning," he said. "Can I get you anything? A drink? Something to eat?"

The thought of putting food in her mouth almost made her retch again, yet Leia knew she was hungry.

"Soup?" she murmured hopefully.

"I'll see what I can do," the medic said, and left the room, closing the door behind him.

Leia looked back at the Jedi and, sighing at the inevitability of the lecture she knew she was about to get, forced herself to sit up. Her stomach rolled, threatening to send her back to the 'fresher, and she hung her head in her hands and moaned to the universe in general, "Oh, goddess..."

She felt his approach down the bed and opened her eyes to find herself looking at two scaly, clawed feet. She stared at the feet for a moment then, summoning her courage and resolve, raised her eyes to meet his. And saw in them a very deep concern.

"Much anger in you, Leia Organa," he said portentously. "Like your father."

The first words he'd said to her. On Dagobah. Leia felt her mood darken in direct response and growled, "Did you just come here to insult me, or are you here to tell me something constructive?"

"Return with me you must," he told her matter-of-factly.

"What?" He wanted her to go back to the swamp?

"Return with me now or walk your father's path you will."

Leia felt a genuine stab of fear. She could *feel* the truth in his words. And in them found an answer to the dilemma of keeping her child safe. She would run away to Dagobah and stay there for as long as it took. Until her daughter was grown if necessary.

But first she had to rescue Han.

"I have to find Han," she said. "But I promise-" Her words trailed off as Yoda lowered his gaze sadly. "Master Yoda," she said, using his title for the first time, "I *promise* I'll come."

His eyes met hers once more. "Paid for his arrogance with his hand, your brother did; what will the cost for you be? If you walk the Dark path, Leia Organa, take your child with you, you will. Will your lover thank you then?"

Leia buried her head against her knees and fisted her hands in her hair, her face screwed into an expression of torment as she relived Han's agony.

"You're asking me to *choose* between Han and my daughter?" she said through clenched teeth.

"Others there are who can save your lover," he said.

"No!" she said reflexively, then felt a calm certainty settle over her and looked at him as she repeated, "No." She found herself searching his gaze as she said with conviction, "If I don't go he'll die." She looked away for a moment, stunned at her own surety, then looked back to see evasive regret in the Jedi Master's eyes. "And you know that. Don't you?"

Yoda dropped his gaze to her belly and admitted, "Concerned you will do the Emperor's work for him I am."

"Do you think I would do anything to endanger my daughter?"

"To save your lover? Yes."

Leia opened her mouth to protest, but he cut her off.

"Like your mother," he said gravely. "Saved your father, but nearly lost you in the process."

Leia sat back aghast. So Yoda had *known* her mother was pregnant, had *known* she was not Bail's child. All these years...

Sudden revelation swept over her and she said, "*You* put the blocks in my head. To stop me from using the Force. To protect me from Vader."

"With your mother's help and consent," Yoda admitted.

Leia looked away, into her past, as so much of it unexpectedly made sense. When she looked at him again her eyes were full of reluctant gratitude. "You saved my life on the Death Star," she said softly, and Yoda inclined his head briefly, a humble acceptance of her appreciation.

The door hissed open and the medic entered carrying a food pack. He eyed the small Jedi suspiciously then smiled at Leia as he handed her the package.

"It's a green soup," he told her apologetically, "but it was the best I could do." Leia gave him a reassuring smile and said as she unsealed the package, "I'm sure it'll be fine." But the moment she looked at the yellowy-green liquid, Leia knew it wouldn't be.

The air triggered a thermal reaction to a chemical in the soup, heating it in her hand and, a moment later the soup's distinctive aroma reached her. Leia thrust it back at the medic and fled to the 'fresher.

The medic smiled apologetically at the Jedi Master. "I think it's the colour," he said. "Human women do it every time. Pregnant ones anyway." He looked awkwardly at the pack in his hand then at the 'fresher door. "I'll go see if I can find something else," he muttered.

Leia emerged warily from the 'fresher a moment later and winced as she realised she could still smell the soup. She found herself longing for the soup that was on the *Falcon* and wondered if they'd let her out of the medcentre to go get some.

The medic returned as she was climbing into the bed and she eyed him doubtfully.

"Dry biscuits," he assured her, handing her another package and a large cup. "And sweet, carbonated lemon." Leia pulled a face and he assured her, "I've been told many times it's the best cure for nausea." He shrugged. "Maybe it's the sugar? It seems to work though."

Leia took a tentative sip of the sweet, fizzy drink, then another. And another. Then she burped. She looked at the medic and realised that she did feel marginally better.

He smiled. "Call me if you need anything," he said, and left the room.

Leia took a decent swig of the fizzy lemon and decided to give the biscuits a try. Tentatively nibbling on one, she turned her attention back to Yoda.

"What now?" she asked.

"When well enough to travel you are, return to my world we will," he said.

"After we rescue Han," she corrected.

Yoda sighed heavily. "Come see you later I will," he said, and climbed off the bed.

Leia watched him leave and felt profound relief as the door closed behind him. She felt as though even her thoughts were under scrutiny whenever he was around.

Yoda hadn't answered her question of whether he had caused her abrupt departure from the debriefing, and she deliberately hadn't asked him again. But, if the chrono beside her bed was to be believed, she had been 'asleep' for at least eight hours. Something that had to have been Force or chemical induced. Leia wanted to talk to Gizela, and she wanted to talk to Luke. She took another drink of lemon and wondered how cross her brother would be if she woke him. Perhaps he would bring her some soup from the *Falcon*?

She turned and looked at the bio-display beside the bed and wondered if she'd been scanned. Wondered if her baby had been scanned. Wondered if she could access Solo's file and find out when he'd had his last contraceptive shot.

Although Leia had accepted her pregnancy, she still wanted to know *how* it had happened. Yoda's appraisal that it was Force inspired just wasn't good enough; Leia *had* to have a scientific explanation. Despite the fact that she and Gizela

Shalleron had been friends for several years now, Leia fully expected to be reprimanded by the woman for being irresponsible enough to get pregnant. She remembered her own outrage when Gizela had offered her a contraceptive shot before she and Solo had gone on their ill-fated mission to Ord Mantell. Like the rest of the base, it seemed Gizela had assumed that she and Solo would finally 'do it' enroute. They hadn't of course, but the irony was that if she *had* taken the offered contraceptive at the time, she wouldn't be pregnant now.

Leia suspected that Gizela would offer to terminate her pregnancy and wondered how she would justify her own unwillingness to comply. Terminating it would solve so many problems, starting with the Emperor and whatever he had planned for the child. But, having *felt* her daughter, touched her soul so to speak, Leia knew she would fight to the death for her.

She finished the last biscuit, washing it down with the last of the carbonated drink, and contemplated her room for a moment. Still feeling hungry, she decided to go in search of more, and hoped the night medic would leave her alone. Opening the door, Leia peered out into the main medcentre area. There were several patients on the critical beds in the main area, and all of them appeared to be asleep. The medic station was unattended, and she guessed he was with another patient.

As she oriented herself to the familiar surroundings, Leia couldn't believe her luck. She was in the room beside Gizela's office. Which *had* to have been Gizela's doing. Making sure there was no sign of the night medic, Leia closed the door to her room, ducked into Gizela Shalleron's office and closed the door behind her. If the medic noticed the alert on his screen that she was out of her bed, with any luck he would simply assume she was in her 'fresher throwing up the biscuits and fizzy lemon.

With the practiced ease of someone who was used to accessing information illegally, Leia matter-of-factly sat in her friend's chair and activated her terminal. Normally she would have been able to access the data using her own high-ranking codes. This time, however, she had to assume that, until she was cleared as a risk to Alliance security, using her own codes would register as a security breach, lock her out completely, and have security down here investigating the attempted breach. And there was also the chance that Mon Mothma had taken her resignation seriously, in which case her personal codes would definitely be locked out.

Unwilling to take the risk, Leia spent the extra time and hacked into the system the underhanded way. She knew Gizela would not be pleased, but that was something she could ignore.

A moment later she accessed her own file and scrolled quickly through the data until she reached the most recent entry. Gizela had given her a full, comprehensive scan. Not taking any chances, it seemed.

The first shock came when she realised that Gizela had given her daughter a file name of 'Organa-Solo', and her immediate reaction was to wonder how her friend had known Solo was the father. She felt an automatic affront at the medic's assumption, then realised that the data from Bespin was a pretty good clue.

Leia wasn't sure how she felt about giving her child that label; Organa-Solo sounded so... *married*. She couldn't help wondering what Han would think about it. Would he be affronted that his name had been used? Or pleased?

The second shock came with seeing the scanned image of the child growing inside her. Leia was aghast at how much like a *baby* she looked. The body was small in proportion to the head, but Leia could see the child's arms and legs quite clearly; could even make out fingers and toes. She wondered what she had expected to see? Some sort of blob perhaps?

The child on the screen was moving constantly; rolling and kicking, and Leia stared at her in awe. Here was the presence she had been feeling since Dagobah. Seeing her like this made the child more *real* somehow, more *alive*. Leia pressed her hand against her belly and wondered if her daughter was moving like that right now. And, if so, why she couldn't feel the acrobatics.

As an afterthought, she studied the written data beside the picture. It gave her all her daughter's current statistics as well as the results from the various tests Gizela had run. She didn't understand all of them but, from what she could tell, her daughter seemed perfect. She had ten fingers and ten toes, two eyes, two ears, a mouth, a nose...

Leia frowned and increased the magnification on the child's face, then gazed in wonderment at her daughter's features and found herself suddenly overcome with emotion. Astounded that she and Han had created something so complex. So perfect.

Without trying.

She reduced the image back to its original magnification and noticed an estimated delivery date at the bottom of the screen. A date that was only five months away, which was a frightening prospect. No, Leia corrected herself, not frightening: *terrifying*. From the little she knew about childbirth, it was anything but pleasant and potentially dangerous for mother and baby.

This was something to take into consideration if she was seriously planning to run away to Dagobah. The prospect of giving birth in a swamp was anything but

appealing. What if there were complications? And if she left the Alliance, what medcentre could she go to? Where would she be safe?

Leia rested her elbows on the desk and hung her head in her hands. Her life had always been complex, but these new complications made her old life look positively simple.

So much to worry about. And to make ninety percent of it go away, all she had to do was terminate the pregnancy.

And that was out of the question.

She was lost in thought, staring at the image on the screen, when the door opened. Leia looked up guiltily, then felt a slight lessening of her guilt when she realised it was Gizela standing in the doorway. She started to offer an apologetic smile, but quickly smothered it as her friend's expression turned even stormier. Leia hastily got to her feet as she said, "I was just-"

"I don't want to hear it," Gizela snapped. She moved in behind her desk as Leia stepped away, and checked to see what files the princess had been looking at. Gizela Shalleron was only a little taller than Leia, with fiery red hair and a Corellian temperament.

"Interfering in medical records is worthy of a court martial, Princess," the medic said darkly, and Leia frowned at her friend. It was unlike Gizela to react with such hostility.

"I didn't-"

"You *did*!" Gizela hissed angrily. "If anyone but me had walked in that door, Leia, you'd be under arrest right now." She sat, indicating for Leia to do the same. "And I am *livid* that you would put *my staff* in the position of having to report you!" Leia remained standing. "I looked at my own file. Nothing else," she said. "It didn't occur to you to call me?"

"The night medic said I could talk to you in the morning...I didn't want to wake you."

"As it so happens, I wasn't in bed, but I would much rather have had the chance to tell you to piss off and be patient than be called in by one of my staff who didn't want the responsibility of reporting you. I have a medcentre full of patients, Leia; I really *do* have better things to do."

"I'm sorry," Leia said contritely, and started for the door. "I'll go." Her friend's reaction was totally unexpected and she intended to return to her room so she

could put as much space between them as possible. Until Gizela had calmed down at least.

But the medic got to her feet. "You'll *sit*," she said firmly, pointing at the chair on the other side of the desk. When Leia didn't leap to obey, the redhead stabbed her finger at the chair and repeated, "Sit!"

Leia sat and Gizela settled once more, checking the file Leia had left open. "You've had a look, I see." Leia nodded and Gizela continued, "The pregnancy itself seems perfectly healthy. There's no damage or scarring from the genetic testing. The placenta is in an excellent position and is functioning perfectly."

"Why can't I feel her?" Leia asked.

"You'll start to feel her from about 14 weeks," Gizela said. "Maybe earlier, but with a first it's usually 14 weeks. She's six centimetres long – perfect for seven weeks gestation." Abruptly she looked up from the data-screen at Leia, her expression serious. "You do have options you know."

Leia knew exactly what the medic was suggesting and told her flatly, "I'm not going to terminate, Giz."

"I'm not just talking termination, Leia. You also have the option of putting the pregnancy on hold so to speak. Remove the foetus and place it in cryogenic suspension. That way you can replant it in your uterus when you feel the time is right or, if you so choose, find a surrogate womb."

Leia found herself unable to breathe as a hot wave washed over her, followed by a surge in the ever-present nausea. *Freeze her baby?* The similarity to what had happened to Han made it unthinkable. She put a hand over her mouth as her stomach heaved and was unable to make eye contact with her friend. "Nausea bad, hmm?" she heard Gizela ask, and nodded.

"Can you give me something?" Leia asked from behind her hand.

Gizela sighed and said apologetically, "If this was an Imperial medcentre, yes. But, as you know, we only have the bare essentials. And hormonal nausea treatment is just not something you stock for in a triage situation."

Leia nodded. So she would suffer the nausea.

"I've heard it's the worst part of the whole pregnancy deal if that's any encouragement," Gizela said.

Leia closed her eyes for a moment, willing the nausea down, and tried to distract herself by thinking about something else.

"How did you know?" she asked, then clarified, "About the tests."

"Luke told me when they brought you in here. To tell you the truth, I'm surprised you're still pregnant. That particular test invariably results in the loss of the embryo."

"Then why am I still pregnant?"

Gizela considered for a moment, then admitted, "I honestly don't know. Luck? The two weeks of enforced bed-rest that you had on the *Executor* would have helped."

There was a lengthy silence between them, then the doctor asked, "Have you thought of a name for her yet?"

Leia shook her head. "Han told me he was sterile," she said quietly, knowing she needed to ask the question that had been plaguing her since she'd discovered she was pregnant.

Gizela frowned. "He should have been," she agreed and busied herself at the terminal. "He's been having the con-shot for years..."

"Ten years, he told me. I thought maybe he'd missed his last shot?"

Gizela had obviously called up Solo's file because she spent a moment reading then shook her head. "Nope. He had it just after we got to Hoth."

"Then *how* am I pregnant?"

Gizela appeared genuinely flummoxed. "I have no idea." She read further down his file then said, "Wait a minute..."

Here we go, Leia thought cynically. *The great medical fuck-up that caused it all.* "He had an exceptionally long bacta emersion after that cave-in you were both caught in."

Leia nodded. "He nearly died."

"It doesn't make sense though..." Gizela muttered.

"What?"

"Well, the bacta washed the contraceptive out of his system."

"It did?" Leia was alarmed. That was a side effect she would need to keep in mind for the future.

"The problem is," Gizela continued, "Han's been on this so long he's effectively sterile."

"Obviously," Leia muttered churlishly.

"Even with it being washed out of his system it should have taken him at *least* four months to reach full potency." Gizela frowned across the desk at Leia. "If he'd been *trying* to get you pregnant, it probably would have taken at least a year."

"So... what are you telling me?"

"I'm telling you he didn't lie," Gizela said firmly, and met her eyes to add emphasis to her words.

"Then *how*?"

"The only thing I can think of is that it had something to do with whatever it was that brought him back from the brink of death. That was nothing short of a miracle. And for him to achieve such high potency in such a short time..."

Leia blanched as she abruptly remembered her unwitting use of the Force that had brought Solo back from the dead. The way it had healed him completely; even cured his frostbite... and Gizela's astonishment that he had seemed healthier than before.

The medic sensed her unease immediately. "What?" she asked. "What have you thought of?"

The pregnancy was her own doing Leia realised suddenly, albeit unknowing. The bacta had removed the contraceptive from Solo's system, but *she* had returned him to full potency. Luke's little Jedi Master had insisted the conception was Force inspired and it seemed he was right.

"It was me," Leia confessed. She sighed and wiped a hand across her face, and muttered, "Goddess, I did it to myself!"

"You're not making sense yet."

"I have the Force, Gizzy," Leia admitted.

"The *Force*?"

"Luke said it was me at the time and it turns out he was right. I *healed* Han somehow and-"

"Are you *serious*?" Gizela's disbelief was palpable and she almost laughed.

It was the sort of reaction Leia herself would have been guilty of not so long ago. It was the sort of reaction she had given Luke when he'd first voiced his suspicions about Solo's miraculous recovery. Leia's expression told her friend that she thought it was anything but funny and Gizela hastily stilled the humour in her voice.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly, "it's just so-"

Leia shook her head tiredly. "It's all right, Giz. The whole thing is insane." A thought occurred to her and she asked, "What happened in the debriefing? How did I end up here?"

"You fainted."

Leia regarded her sceptically and wondered whether her friend believed that or if she thought she was protecting her. Leia knew she hadn't fainted. Something had hit her.

"Is that why the Jedi is here?" Gizela asked. "Because of you?"

Leia nodded reluctantly. *He doesn't trust me*, she thought. *He thinks I'm going to go bad...*

"And the baby," Leia said. "He wants to protect her."

"From?"

"The Emperor."

"The Emperor?! What does he want her for?"

"He wants to make another Darth Vader out of her."

"He thinks she's Force sensitive, too?"

"He doesn't *think* it, Giz." Leia sighed and admitted sadly, "Yoda, Luke, Vader. Even Palpatine. They could all sense her."

Gizela sounded deeply disturbed as she opined, "That is seriously creepy." She considered for a moment, then asked, "And you have it too? Why wasn't this picked up when you were a child? Weren't you tested?"

"Yoda put a block on me as a child. Made sure I didn't...manifest."

Gizela immediately leapt to the conclusion, "Because of the purges!"

Leia wanted to tell her friend the truth; longed to share the burden, but this involved Luke too and telling someone else, bringing it into this part of her life, would make it far too real. Instead she took refuge in her friend's assumption and simply nodded.

"How's Luke?" she asked, deliberately changing the subject.

Gizela smiled as she replied, "Considering what he's been through, he's doing remarkably well."

"Is his hand-"

"They did an amazing job with his hand," Gizela said. "We'd have been hard pressed to do anything near that standard. He's very lucky."

Lucky? Leia couldn't even comprehend the term in reference to what they'd been through, but before she could say something to that effect Gizela admitted, "I was just watching the Bepin data that Antilles brought back. Seeing Luke go up against Vader like that... It's a wonder he's alive at all."

Leia felt her face burn with embarrassment and picked at imaginary imperfections in the weave of her pants so she wouldn't have to meet Gizela's eyes. Nevertheless, she growled darkly, "Mon Mothma was very selective in the part she showed me."

Gizela winced and sighed heavily. "I'm sorry," she said.

"I've resigned, you know."

Whatever Gizela had been expecting her to say, it wasn't that. Leia could hear the surprise and confusion in her voice as she said, "You what?"

"From the Alliance."

The medic considered her response for a moment before replying carefully, "Leia, the Alliance is your *life*."

Leia still couldn't meet her friend's eyes.

"You resigned because of that data?" Gizela clarified, then assured her gently, "It was an Imperial Surveillance recording, Leia. There was nothing you could have done about it."

"I know, I know. I just wish...Mon Mothma saw it that way."

"So, your resignation was a reaction to her showing you this?"

"Among other things."

"Like being pregnant," Gizela surmised.

Leia wished that her pregnancy was the only reason, and said, "Like having to find Han."

Gizela wiped a hand across her face and muttered, "I can't believe he's alive either."

The pain and terror she had felt from Solo washed over Leia afresh and she told the doctor in a voice that brooked no argument, "He is." Nevertheless, from the expression that flitted across the doctor's face, Leia got the distinct impression that her friend was allowing her the fantasy of believing she could rescue Han. Anything to help her cope with the loss.

Well, if Leia had her way, she and Luke would be on their way to Tatooine by tomorrow morning, and the Alliance could make of it whatever they wanted.

CHAPTER NINE.

Luke had just finished the final pre-flight check when he saw her approaching across the flight deck. For a moment he considered using the Force to obscure her from anyone else who happened to be on the flight deck but, at this hour of the night, there really wasn't anyone else around. Besides, using the Force would alert Yoda, and Luke didn't want the Jedi Master joining them.

He met her in the ring corridor as she boarded the *Falcon* and asked, "How are you feeling?"

Leia smiled tightly and replied, "Same as ever." Then added emphatically, "Relieved to be doing something at last."

Smiling, Luke touched her face. "I love you," he told her, his voice thick with emotion. "Always have, always will."

She took a step back, putting a little distance between them, and Luke sensed a resurgence in her concern that he might love her in a way that would damage their relationship. Luke drew her into an unconditional embrace, and reassured her, "You're my *sister*, Leia, and I am so glad I found you!"

He felt her relax and return the embrace wholeheartedly.

"I love you too, Luke," she whispered, and Luke had trouble reconciling this princess with the one he had been arguing with in the medcentre a few hours ago. The one who could accept that Yoda had done something to her in the debriefing, but flatly refused to believe her brother's explanation of *why* the Jedi Master had intervened.

That she had started to Force-choke Mon Mothma.

Luke had felt it, Yoda had felt it and, fortunately, Mon Mothma had only just started to feel it when Yoda had rendered the princess unconscious. Leia was treading a fine line, Luke knew and, holding her now, felt sure that she, as much as the child she was carrying, was the reason Yoda had come with them.

But rescuing Han was something that had to be done, and there was no way Leia would let Luke do that without her.

So they headed for the cockpit together and Luke asked, "How did you get away?"

"I came to get soup," she said smugly, throwing him a grin over her shoulder. "Told them it was the only thing I could keep down. Which is true," she added as an afterthought. She settled into Chewbacca's seat and asked, "What about you?"

"Gizela knows I'm going," Luke said as he brought the ship's engines online. "Gave me a kit of stuff for Han." He paused then added, "Made me promise to bring you back safe."

Leia gave him a wary glance, then busied herself with the pre-flight protocols. When that was finished she turned and smiled at him.

"Let's go then."

To be continued...

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