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Lost and Found

by [Sheila Paulson](#)

The blur of hyperspace shivered and they resolved itself into a pattern of stars against the blackness of space. Directly ahead of the *Millennium Falcon* hung a small green jewel of a planet.

"Right on target," Han Solo said over his shoulder to Princess Leia, who had come forward to watch when it was time to come out of hyperspace. Checking up on him, probably, he thought. Luke Skywalker, who was taking Chewbacca's place for this particular flight to give him some training in piloting something bigger than a fighter, nodded. He didn't seem to doubt Han's skill.

"So that's Cantis," he remarked. "Are you sure it's deserted, Han?"

"I'm sure it's usually uninhabited," Han told him, "Nobody lives there. There're a lot of ruins though, a lot like the ones on the old base back on Yavin's fourth moon. But nobody's been here, at least to settle, since the original builders, whoever they were. Cantis is on all the charts, but it's too remote to be much good to anybody."

"Why did you come here then?" the Princess asked him. "Were you hiding from someone?"

"Yeah. Imperial troops. Somebody hired me to haul engine parts and forgot to mention that they really belonged to the Empire."

"If you'd known, you wouldn't have touched them, I suppose?" Leia asked skeptically.

He gave her a dirty look. "I've done my share of smuggling, sure. But that's a little different from carrying something that the Empire is looking for. They'll overlook one smuggler more or less, long as they're not the victims. I've got enough troubles of my own without that. Not to mention the pair of you dragging me off on missions with no pay worth mentioning and a lot more risks than smuggling."

"I don't remember twisting your arm," she replied. "You're the one who thought of checking Cantis to see if it would make a good auxiliary base."

That was true. He turned the subject hastily away from his motives and said, "I spent about a week here before. The air's a little thin, but not too bad. The temperature's comfortable and the gravity's a bit less than standard. It's not bad. And we--you don't have any kind of base in this sector."

"It looks good," Luke said. "Can I take her down, Han? I'm getting used to the controls now."

Han eyed him doubtfully. "I suppose so, but be careful. The *Falcon's* the only ship I've got. I don't want you denting her."

"I won't dent her," Luke promised.

"See that you don't, kid. I..." He broke off abruptly. "Hey, I'm getting a signal."

What kind of signal?" the princess demanded.

Luke put on his earphones. "It sounds like a distress beacon," he said, his eyes widening. "I think it's a rebel signal. Somebody from the Alliance. It's one of our codes."

"I want to hear."

Han passed her an earphone and she listened for a moment. "Can we signal back?" she asked.

"We could," Han replied, "But that sounds like an automatic beacon. It could have been transmitting for a long time."

"Not that long," she disagreed. "That's one of the new codes. Somebody's in trouble down there."

"It could be a trap," Han objected.

"It could," she agreed, "Except I don't think there's been time for the Empire to have broken that code. And the place looks deserted."

"Looks deserted! If it's a trap, that's how it's supposed to look."

Leia turned to Luke. "Does the Force tell you anything?"

One of the many things that Luke Skywalker liked about the Princess was that she seemed to believe in the Force and never failed to take it into consideration. She had faith in Luke's growing abilities, and that helped his self-confidence, as well as his self-esteem.

He said now, "I haven't sensed anything unusual. I'll try." There was a pause while he tried to focus his consciousness on the Force and try to channel it. It was starting to get easier. But this time, the mental probe he sent out touched nothing. Reluctantly he shook his head. "No, I can't feel anything," he said, and waited for Han to make a crack.

But all Han said was, "I've got the signal pinpointed. It's near the ruins where I landed before. What do you think? Want to go down?"

"Try to contact them first," Leia insisted.

So they tried to signal whoever it was on the planet, but the automatic beacon went on sending its distress call uninterrupted, steady as a pulse beat. Sensors picked up no other ships in scanning range. "Okay," Han said. "It's your party. We'll go down. Go strap yourself in, Princess."

She went, reluctant to miss anything. After she had gone, Han turned to Luke. "What I can't figure out is why she came along on this mission."

Luke looked sideways at his friend. "Why not? She's probably glad of a chance to get away from the base. This mission isn't all that dangerous."

"True, but..."

"But what?"

Han shrugged. "She's probably bored at the base. She's got too much spirit to sit around and stay out of trouble."

Luke nodded, wondering what Han had really meant to say. But all he said was, "Do I still get to take the *Falcon* down?"

"What're you waiting for, kid?"

The landing was smoother than Han had expected it to be and he was relieved not to have to take over the controls at the last minute. Luke might be hot stuff with planet-based craft and he'd proven he could fly over the Death Star, but that

was a lot different from Han entrusting him with his precious ship. "Not bad, kid," he praised Luke. "A few more tries and I might be able to get you a job with a decent freight line."

"I've got a job, thanks," Luke replied with a grin. Then, looking out at the new planet, he pointed. Ahead of them sat an X-wing fighter that appeared rather the worse for wear. "There's the ship," he said unnecessarily, "But I don't see the pilot."

"He's probably hiding out," Han suggested. "Waiting to see if we're friendly. He'd be crazy to come rushing out. For all he knows, we could be imperials or bounty hunters or pirates. We'll have to be careful when we go looking for him. He probably has a blaster aimed at us right now."

The princess arrived and promptly noticed the fighter. "It wasn't a trap after all," she pointed out to Solo.

"Now, your royalness, we don't know that yet. I don't know about you, but I'm going out there with my blaster ready."

"Must you always go in shooting, Han?"

"I'm still alive, aren't I? I wouldn't have been a couple of times, if I hadn't been ready. I didn't always have people to back me up if things fell apart."

"Han's right," Luke said, reluctant to disagree with the princess, a wary look on his face. "We have to be careful. I can feel trouble, sort of."

"Now he tells us," Han complained. "What kind of trouble, kid?"

"I don't know. It might not be anything. Just a kind of vague uneasiness. I wish Ben were here. He'd be able to interpret it."

"Well, he ain't here, kid." Han said, not unkindly. "So we'd better get out there and see what's going on. That pilot could be in trouble. Maybe that's what you're picking up on."

"It could be," Luke agreed. He got to his feet, and the three of them went out to have a look around.

Cantis was a beautiful world. The *Millennium Falcon* had landed in a large clearing between two ancient pyramids. Thick greenery had all but covered the buildings, and tall trees and shrubs grew all around closing in on what had once been a vast cleared space encompassing the entire complex. Beneath their feet lay great moss-encrusted paving stones. Grass grew high between the stones, and the moss felt soft and springy beneath their feet as they walked. Except for

the songs of birds and the hum of insects, all was silent. There was not even a breeze to stir the leaves. High overhead, the sky stretched out, a remote and pale blue. It was midday.

Unactivated lightsaber in his hand, Luke approached the X-wing fighter, followed closely by Han and Leia. The Corellian had his blaster ready, but the Princess was unarmed. Luke climbed up to peer into the open cockpit. "Nobody here," he reported. After a hasty examination of the equipment and controls, he added, "It won't fly, not like this, but we can fix it."

"What happened to it?" Han asked.

"It looks like it was disabled deliberately. The controls are a mess, but they've been disconnected rather than smashed."

"The pilot might have done that to protect himself," Leia suggested.

"What I don't get," Han said, "is what the ship was doing here in the first place. It's not a long range ship. How did it get here? This is a long way from any inhabited world. I don't like it."

"You might be right," Leia admitted with obvious reluctance. "But it is here, and so are we, so we'd better have a look around. Let's check inside the pyramids. They're the only logical place to shelter."

Luke scrambled down to join them. "We'd better not split up." His premonition of trouble was growing by leaps and bounds. Although the day was warm, he felt a sudden chill. There was something dark and dangerous here, something that he should have understood and recognized but hadn't. If only Ben were here, he might have explained it. But Ben was not here, and the voice that sometimes came to him in moments of stress was silent.

They crossed to the nearest pyramid first. The great stone doors stood ajar as they had stood for centuries, perhaps for millennia. Ordinarily, the darkness inside would not have frightened them, but Luke's mood affected all of them. There was danger on Cantis. As yet, they did not know what the danger might be, but it was real and it threatened them all.

Luke activated his lightsaber; if nothing else, it gave off light. But a little light in a huge dark place is often worse than none at all. As soon as he switched it on, great lurking shadows swooped down, shadows that could have concealed a regiment of storm troopers.

But the place felt empty, so empty that Leia raised her voice and called out, "Is anybody here?" The echoes rolled back from the ceiling, fading fast. "...here...here...here..." No one answered.

"Let's try the other one," Han suggested, his reluctance to stay in the temple evident in his voice.

"We might as well." Luke agreed. "There's nobody here." They turned to go.

A dozen stormtroopers stood in the doorway.

"Oh, hell," Han Solo said and jerked up his own weapon. He didn't even have time to fire it.

Han revived in a dimly lit cell and looked around him, uncertain at first of what was going on and what had happened. The throbbing in his temples brought remembrance back to him, and he muttered a curse. Not far away lay the still form of Luke Skywalker, flat on his back, his face pale, his eyes closed. For a heartstopping moment, Han thought that he was dead, then his heartbeats settled back to normal as he realized that Luke was breathing.

"Hey, kid," he said, bending down beside Luke and shaking him lightly. "Wake up. Come on, wake up."

Luke stirred and muttered a fretful protest. "Wake up," Han insisted.

Luke's eyes opened and Han saw realization slowly filter into them. "What happened?" Luke demanded, sitting up and rubbing his temples. "Han, where's Leia?"

"I don't know, kid. She wasn't here when I woke up."

"Where is she?" Luke demanded, alarm showing in his eyes.

"I suppose she's being questioned someplace." *Don't think about that.* Han climbed to his feet, noting as he did that his blaster had been removed. He felt helpless without it. Looking around the cell, he saw that the walls were composed of large stone blocks that were grimy and worn with age. He and Luke must be locked up in one of the pyramids. The door that sealed them in, however, was much more recent. Unfortunately, but not unexpectedly, the controls were placed on the other side. Han investigated the door. Even with a blaster, he wouldn't be able to break out.

"You still got your lightsaber, kid?" he asked without much hope.

"No, it's gone," Luke said sadly, and Han realized how much the weapon must mean to him.

"Well, we'll get it back when we break out of here," he said comfortingly, not sure if he were trying to convince Luke or himself.

Luke looked skeptical, but he didn't communicate his doubts. Instead he got up and went over to try the door. "What about Leia?" he asked.

"What about her?"

"They must have taken her someplace else. We've got to help her."

"I think I've heard this before," Han remarked.

"We have to help her," Luke insisted. "What do you want, Han, another reward?"

Han turned away briefly. The accusation stung. His voice was flat when he spoke. "Have you got any bright ideas, kid? We're not exactly going anywhere."

Luke persisted stubbornly. "Somebody'll come for us eventually. We can jump them."

"Yeah, if it ain't a dozen more storm troopers with blasters," Han agreed. "First of all, we need more information. Find out the layout of this place. Maybe they've just put her in another cell. This one's not very big, in case you didn't notice."

Luke nodded. "Do you think they knew we were coming?" he asked.

Han nodded. "It had to be a trap. I thought so all along."

"To get the princess?" Luke asked, then added, "Han, I think Darth Vader is here."

An uneasy chill shivered its way up Han's spine. "You're crazy. How could you know a thing like that?" *You know how. You just don't want to admit the Force is real.*

"I think he's here, Han," Luke said stubbornly. "I can feel it. I think it was him I was sensing before. I wish I *didn't* think so. Do you think I *want* to be right?"

"No, I guess you don't. Okay, kid. We'll have to take things as they come. And you're right. We've got to get Leia away from here. Especially if you're right and it is Vader."

Luke looked at Han with obvious surprise, then the look was replaced by guilt. Han realized that Luke had been thinking he would hold out for another reward. He ought to know better than that. Han might hold onto his indifferent air, but he'd thought his friends could see past it.

"She knows a lot more about the rebellion than we do," Luke said without meeting Han's eyes.

Han knew that. He had made a point of learning as little as possible. He knew that Luke, who had flung himself wholeheartedly into the rebellion, had to have learned more. "Yeah," he said. "We'll make a break for it as soon as we can."

"And if either of us can get Leia free," Luke went on, "then he'd better do it."

Han stared at him. "You mean leave the other behind?"

Luke nodded. "What do you say, Han?"

"I say that's a dumb idea."

"At least it's a way to get a warning back to the base. If Vader, or whoever it is can learn its location, we'll be in trouble. We got the Death Star, but Starfleet's still out there. We'd have to relocate fast. That's got to be our first consideration."

"Yeah, okay." Han didn't let himself sound very impressed.

"I'd come back for you," Luke promised earnestly, "if I were the one to get away." And he waited for Han to return the offer. Hell, he must have known Han would come. He'd come at the Death Star, after all.

"Dumb kid," Han muttered under his breath, and surprised himself by adding aloud, "Yeah, me too, Luke." He pasted a very long suffering look on his face and prepared to fend off Luke's enthusiasm.

Behind them, the door whooshed open.

Unprepared for it, neither of them could get there in time to take action. Princess Leia was thrust unceremoniously into the cell, and the door was already closing before Luke and Han could even get close to it.

"Leia," Cried Luke in alarm, and although there was no visible signs of damage, he asked hastily, "Are you hurt?"

"No, " But she said it too quickly.

While Luke stared at her in dismay, the more practical Han acted, going forward to take her by the shoulders and steer her over to the cot. "Sit down," he instructed, giving her a light push. When she was seated, he sat beside her and put his arm around her shoulders.

Luke came hastily across the room to sit on her other side, and took her hand. "What happened?" he demanded.

She roused herself a little, like someone coming out of a trance. "Luke, Darth Vader is here."

"He knew Vader was here already, " Han told her, giving Luke a look of grudging respect.

"Never mind that, " Luke said impatiently. "Leia, did he hurt you?"

"No," she said again. "Not yet. I didn't tell him anything. In fact, I learned something. They captured one of our pilots a week ago. Vader found out about this mission but the pilot died before he could learn the location of the base. You know, I think Vader may be in trouble over the destruction of the Death Star." This happy thought seemed to recall her completely to her surroundings, and, realizing Han's arm was around her, she gave him a cool look and moved a little away. She also freed her hand from Luke's. Han rose abruptly and went to lean carelessly against the wall.

"Anyway," Leia went on, "Vader is expected to deliver the information this time about our base. So I think we're in trouble if we can't get away. "

"Did you get a good look at the layout?" Luke asked. "And how many storm troopers did you see?"

I saw about a dozen, no more than the ones who captured us. There's a huge room, big enough to store ships in. I got a look at that when they brought me back here. There are a few TIEs there. The outside doors are open now and I could see a couple of transport ships outside. There were two guards at the door. I suppose there are more outside, but I didn't see them. They took me to the control room. Vader kept asking about the location of the new base and what our plans were. He says he'll question me again, and you'll come too, Luke. He seems to know all about you."

Luke looked uneasy at the thought, but angry too. All he said was, "Let's go over the layout of the place a little. We'll have to be ready to make a break at any time."

Luke and Leia were not summoned to Vader's presence until the following morning. Five storm-troopers came to collect them, two of them leveling their blasters at Solo until Luke and the Princess had been removed from the cell. Even Han knew better than to take on two blasters at point blank range when he

didn't have a chance. He fumed silently as they were taken away, his mouth tight and determined.

Vader received Luke and Leia in the same room where he had questioned the princess the previous day. After one burning glare at Vader, Luke looked around in hopes of finding some way of escape. It didn't look very promising. Two storm troopers stood guard at the door, and Vader was enough of a threat on his own.

He stood, hands on hips, watching them, until they began to feel uncomfortable, which was undoubtedly his intention. The silence stretched out so long that Luke was driven to break it, and that, too, was to Vader's advantage.

"You're not going to get anything out of us, Vader, " Luke said.

"I was not aware that I had asked you anything, young Skywalker."

"We're hardly your guests," Leia pointed out sarcastically. "If you don't want anything of us, we'll be happy to relieve you of our presence."

"I think not," said Vader, a hint of amusement in his voice.

She nodded. "We're here. No doubt you'll tell us what you want of us in your own good time."

"Sit down," Vader said in what passed as a pleasant tone, and waved his hand toward two chairs that had been placed side by side nearby. "I want to talk to you."

Luke eyes met Leia's. They were both suspicious of this apparent good will, but they sat down anyway. This time, Luke followed Leia's example and didn't speak.

"There. " Vader chose to remain standing. "Now we can talk more comfortably. "

" It won't work, Vader, " Leia said calmly. "I won't betray the rebellion. Nothing you can do will change that."

"No? Your rebellion will fail, Your Highness. The Death Star was only one battle. The Imperial Star Fleet can easily crush your puny Alliance."

"Governor Tarkin thought the Death Star could crush the Alliance," Leia replied. "He was wrong, just as you are. You should not underestimate us."

"I have never underestimated your Rebel Alliance. However, the loss of Princess Leia cannot help but have an adverse affect on your rebellion."

"The rebellion is not just one person, Vader. Killing me won't defeat us. You'll only give the rebels a martyr for their cause. I realize you don't understand the concept of loyalty, so you can't take it into account. With or without me, the rebellion continues."

"There are many ways to defeat you," Vader said. "First, I will require specific information about your purpose here."

"I will tell you nothing. "

"I was certain you would say that. That was why I had Skywalker brought here. "

"I won't tell you anything either," Luke cried.

"That is not why you are here. Princess, you will talk. If not, things will go badly for your friend."

Leia's eyes flicked sideways to meet Luke's. He said with more calmness than he really felt, "Don't tell him anything. He'll kill us anyway."

"Perhaps," Vader replied carelessly. "But a painless death is preferable to one that is not."

Luke shivered but he said bravely, "I'll be dead either way. Don't tell him anything."

"I won't," she said defiantly, then turned to Luke. "I'm sorry"

Luke nodded, absolving her of the responsibility. He could make choices too. "Whatever happens," he said, "don't worry about me."

"Nobly spoken," Vader commented, "But perhaps you will change your mind when the time comes." He turned and busied himself with items that lay upon a nearby table. Picking up his lightsaber, he said, "You are almost a Jedi, young Skywalker, so you should know how easily a lightsaber can kill. Maybe you are not aware of how much pain it can inflict without doing any significant damage."

Luke could guess, but he made himself stare calmly at Vader without flinching. Beside him, the princess made an involuntary sound of distress. Luke gave her a smile in an attempt to reassure her. It was not remotely convincing, but she smiled back.

The light saber hummed into life, and Vader moved its tip slowly, weaving it back and forth, inches from Luke's face. It had a strangely hypnotic effect. "Do you have anything to say, Princess?" Vader asked.

"No."

"That's unfortunate." The blade moved slightly, just barely brushing Luke's neck. He stiffened in the chair, drawing in his breath sharply. Leia saw the color drain from his face and went pale herself.

Vader withdrew the lightsaber and waited, turning to study the princess. She glared back at him with hatred and contempt and said nothing.

Vader moved again, and this time the tip of the lightsaber touched Luke's chest. The pain was excruciating. He bit his lip and closed his eyes. Leia winced as she watched.

"Stop it!" she cried.

The lightsaber withdrew. Luke sagged a little in his chair. "Are you ready to talk, Your Highness?"

"No."

"Then I've scarcely begun."

Leia flung herself at him, grabbing his arm to arrest the movement of the lightsaber, but he shook her off with no effort at all, motioning for the two storm troopers to come forward. They drew her back and stood, one on either side of her, holding her firmly by the arms.

"Now we will continue," Vader told her and touched the lightsaber to Luke's chest again.

Luke slumped in the chair. Leia began to cry soundlessly, the tears sliding down her cheeks unchecked, though she stiffened her spine and held her head up high. Vader looked at her and withdrew the lightsaber. "You can stop this, Leia," he told her, his voice suddenly softer. "You would not want to be responsible for Skywalker's death."

"I can't tell you anything," Leia said. "And nothing you can do will change that."

Vader studied her resolute face for a long moment, then he shook his head. "This is not the end of it," he said. "We have other ways of making you talk."

"The way you did on the Death Star?" she asked, hoping she sounded scornful. She did not want to face a mind probe again; there were limits to how long anyone could resist one, and they had been very close to discovering what hers were when they had interrogated her there.

Vader was silent a moment, then he said, "Take them back to their cells. I will talk to them later."

It was delay not triumph, Leia knew, and the sight of two storm troopers lifting Luke's limp form sent a pang through her. She had caused this, just as she had caused the destruction of Alderaan, but there was nothing else she could have done, now or then. The knowledge did not ease her guilt or make it any easier to bear.

Despondently she trailed along before Luke and the two troopers. They had him in a careless grip, his feet dragging behind them as they passed down the corridor. They seemed to be paying him scant attention.

But Luke had not really fainted. He let himself sag a bit lower, then when one of the troopers pulled him out, he shot out a hand and snatched the blaster away from the other one. He fired before either one of them could react, and Leia jumped forward to join the fray. The two storm troopers fell.

"Come on," Luke said urgently, grabbing Leia's hand. "We don't have much time." Remarkably enough, no one seemed to have heard what happened. Leia grabbed the other trooper's blaster, and they fled.

There were storm troopers at the entrance to the cell bay, and Luke pulled Leia back out of sight before they could be spotted. "Too many of them," he said. "Come on. We've got to get you away."

"But Han..."

"I'll come back for him. Come on."

They disregarded the TIE fighters and headed for one of the transport vehicles. "I've got an idea," Luke said with a sudden grin, and told it to her. "Shall we try it?"

"I think it will work," she agreed. They climbed into the ship.

It was some time later that Han Solo was fetched into Darth Vader's presence. The Dark Lord was speaking into a com-link when Han was brought in. "Range?" he asked.

"Closing," the voice replied.

Vader turned. "Ah, Captain Solo. So good of you to join us." He gestured for Han to come closer. "Your friends have escaped. "

"Good for them," Han said with a big grin.

"It is quite unselfish of you to be glad of their escape. I notice that they made no attempt to rescue you in the process. They left you here, Solo." He paused to see if his words were making any impression.

But Han could play it cool when he needed to. "They would have rescued me if they could," he said, unwilling to let Vader, or himself, know that he was really a little hurt at being left behind. "Anyway, we agreed on this beforehand. I ain't worried about it."

"Then you are a fool, Han Solo. You are still my prisoner. You will not know as much as Princess Leia, but you will know something. You will tell me all you know."

"The hell I will."

The voice over the com-link said, "The ship is now in firing range, Lord Vader."

Vader nodded. "You see, Captain Solo, escape is not possible, after all. Skywalker may be an excellent pilot, but our transport ships are new to him." He turned back to the com-link. "Destroy the ship," he ordered.

"No! " yelled Han in horror .

Vader gestured to the screen, and Han saw the two blips so near each other, the fighter drawing steadily closer. Why didn't Luke go into hyperspace, Han wondered. There had been more than enough time. Come on, kid, he urged mentally. Come on.

"Firing," the Imperial pilot reported, then, "A direct hit, Lord Vader." Even as he spoke, the leading blip blinked and went out.

Han felt like somebody had hit him with a board. For a moment, he stood there in total dis- belief, shock and grief evident in his face, then he masked it quickly. Vader gave him a scornful look. He was certain that Solo would be easy to break.

He was wrong.

Solo stood there a moment longer, then all at once, he went berserk. His dejected pose had put the storm troopers off their guard for just long enough, When he had been brought into the room, Han had spotted his blaster on the table, and beside it, Luke's lightsaber. All at once, he dived for the table,

scooping up both weapons. Vader moved suddenly, and Han fired instinctively, not at Vader, but at the ancient ceiling overhead. The old pyramid was not as stable as it looked, and with an ominous rumble, the entire ceiling collapsed. Han jumped back hastily out of the way, and through the rubble pouring down, he had a hasty glimpse of Vader backing frantically out of range.

But the storm troopers were on this side of the fall. Suddenly, Luke's lightsaber came to life in Han's hand, cutting down the nearest storm trooper, even as Han fired his blaster at the other one. He spun to face the door as more storm troopers came pouring in, firing at him. Han blasted them and ran past their bodies out into the hall.

His only thought was to get to the *Falcon* and get as far away from here as he could. It was too late to help Luke and Leia, but he could get back to the base and give the warning and report what had happened. He owed them that much anyway.

He was glad that he had to fight his way back to the ship. It kept his mind off the other ship, the one that had been blown up while he stood there helplessly, unable to do anything to prevent it. He didn't want to think about that yet, so he concentrated fiercely on fighting his way out of the pyramid. There were two storm troopers guarding the *Millennium Falcon* who weren't prepared for the approach of a lunatic waving a blaster and a lightsaber. Han had no trouble with them. Then he was aboard his ship. It wasn't easy to handle the *Falcon* without a co-pilot, but Han had done it before and he could do it now. The *Falcon* took off fast.

There was pursuit at once. Two TIE fighters were after him immediately, followed by yet another transport ship. That was the least of his problems though; transports didn't have a whole lot of firepower. But the fighters could be a problem. It wasn't really possible to handle the guns and the controls at the same time, so he angled the deflectors and punched numbers hastily into the navicomputer. Once in hyperspace, he would be safe enough.

The transport had fallen behind; it was no threat. Han checked his instruments, then checked again. The transport wasn't pursuing him. As he watched, it vanished into hyperspace. That made no sense, but Han didn't have time to puzzle over it because an Imperial Star Destroyer was suddenly drawing near. He couldn't hope to take on a Star Destroyer, not alone.

The Star Destroyer was nearly in range when he finally pulled the levers and sent the *Falcon* into the safety of hyperspace.

He had no intention of heading directly back to the rebel base. There might well be another homing beacon on the ship, and he wasn't prepared to lead the Empire to the Alliance a second time. He'd stop off someplace else first to check

the ship out and make a few repairs. The news he had to take back to the base could wait a day or two. Let the rebels keep their illusions a little longer. At the memory of the exploding transport, he felt suddenly weary, and he put everything on automatic and climbed to his feet. The movement sent a sudden wave of pain racing through his left arm, and he looked down at it, puzzled. Sometime during the fighting, he'd been blaster burned and not even felt it. Now that the surge of adrenalin had faded, the pain was intense.

He knew from past experience that it wasn't really a serious wound, but he made himself treat it very carefully all the same. It took a long time. Good. That kept his thoughts at bay. The synth flesh would take about a week to heal properly, but it felt better as soon as he sprayed it on.

But as the pain faded, the truth would no longer be denied. Luke and Leia were dead. Even now, Han could hardly believe it, but it was true. A cold hard weight settled in his chest. He hadn't quite admitted to himself now how much Leia and Luke had come to mean to him. Somehow, without even trying, they had worked their way into his affections. He'd never told them; he was not a man who could express his feelings easily. Coming back at the Death Star was a statement, if they could only read it. But now he was face to face with losing them, and it hurt. It hurt like hell. And he didn't know what to do about it.

Han Solo was not a man who could let his feelings show, except maybe to Chewie. To show grief, to cry, these were signs of weakness in his world, and Han didn't think he could handle that. He could only express his sorrow in anger, and already the anger was burning out, leaving him drained and empty.

Once he told the rebels what had happened, he was getting out. He'd pick up Chewie and they'd resume the life that had been interrupted back there on Tatooine when he'd taken on four passengers, two human and two droid. He'd be back where he belonged, living the easy, comfortable life that he knew best, a gypsy pilot with no ties but Chewie and his ship. Chewie would understand; he always did. Yeah. That was the best plan.

He went back to the passenger lounge and stopped as he saw the lightsaber where he had left it on the table. Reluctantly he went over and picked it up, not activating it but just holding it for a minute. "Damn it, kid," he said, "Why did it take so long to go into hyperspace?" And in a rage, he flung the light saber away from him. Even if the movement had not jarred his injured arm, he would have regretted it. When the waves of pain had faded, he went over and retrieved the lightsaber, checking it carefully for damage. He was intensely relieved to find it still intact.

Wearily he collapsed into a chair, still holding the weapon. At least he'd got Vader when the ceiling collapsed--or had he? Somehow he didn't believe that Vader could have been killed so easily; he would have found a way out of that

collapsing room. But at least Vader had no prisoners and had gained no information.

It was four days before Han returned to the rebel base. He had found the expected homing device before he had come out of hyperspace the first time and had deactivated it, then he had fed new coordinates into the navicomputer and gone elsewhere. When he was sure he was free of pursuit, he had taken a couple days to make some minor repairs on his ship and to scan as thoroughly as possible for hidden tracking devices. There had only been the one.

Now he was out of hyperspace above the rebel base. He'd called in for clearance to land and was puzzled at the unfriendly attitude of the ground controller. It was almost as if the man had guessed his news and didn't want to have it confirmed. Han didn't care one way or the other. He would make his report to General Dodonna, collect Chewbacca, and get the hell out of here.

After Han had landed, nothing much happened right away. He stayed in the ship for awhile, preparing himself for the story he had to tell.

"Solo! Where are you?"

Han recognized the voice of Wedge Antilles, the young pilot who had flown with Luke against the Death Star. In a minute he was on board. Wedge glared at him. "You've got a lot of nerve coming back here, Solo," he said.

Han stared at him in blank surprise at the unexpected attack, and then he was angry. "What the hell do you think I could have done?" he demanded furiously. "Do you think I liked what happened?"

"It was your choice," Wedge insisted.

"The hell it was."

"Save yourself, that's what you thought. Luke kept saying you'd changed, but he was wrong, wasn't he?"

"That's none of your business. And how did you know what happened anyway? Did the Empire announce it?"

"The Empire?" Wedge echoed.

"Yes. I suppose they'd love to have it known that Luke and the Princess are dead."

"Dead?" Wedge's predominant expression was one of surprise. Not grief, not anger, not shock, but surprise. Han decided he must be crazy.

"Look," he insisted, "I saw it happen. I saw their ship blown up. That's when I escaped, afterwards. I suppose you don't believe that, but it's true." It occurred to him that nobody but Chewie was going to believe him. They'd all think he took off first. Luke had believed that Han had changed, although even he seemed to have a few doubts. Maybe Han had, but he realized that without Luke around to encourage him, it would be a temporary change. If nobody believed him, the hell with the lot of them. Han had had it.

Wedge said doubtfully, "What ship?"

"The one they tried to escape in. It was an Imperial transport, and Luke didn't get it to hyperspace in time." He was angry. Being angry helped. "That's when I made my break for it. There was nothing to hang around for after that, and I sure as hell wasn't gonna let them get the location of this base out of me. And I don't give a damn if you believe me or not."

But Wedge's voice became apologetic. "Hey," he said, "I'm sorry, Han. I didn't understand. You did a good job getting away." He spotted the healing injury on Han's arm. "You're hurt. I'll get a doctor or a medical droid."

The sudden concern was almost too much for Han. He said stiffly, "Nah, I don't need a doctor and I don't want any droids messing with me. Look, I'm sorry. I know you liked Luke and the Princess. Oh, hell, do me a favor and go tell General Dodonna I need to talk to him. I better explain what happened. And find Chewie for me, will ya?"

"You stay right here," Wedge said. Damn it, he was actually smiling. Han couldn't figure it out. He wanted to be left alone.

He couldn't take much more of this.

He said urgently, "Go on, will ya?" and turned his back on Wedge.

Wedge hovered a moment longer. He reached out awkwardly and patted Han on the shoulder: Han shrugged away from the touch. Wedge said, "You wait here, Han."

He left, and Han walked back to the cockpit of his ship and flung himself down in the pilot's seat. If Chewie were here, he'd be tempted to just leave and let Wedge spread the bad news for him.

His arm ached. Maybe he should let the doctor see it, if Wedge sent one. And then Han was leaving. At least when he was hauling cargo, legal or otherwise,

things didn't get this complicated. He could handle being a smuggler. Being a rebel, even a reluctant one, took too much out of him.

He folded his arms across the control panel and lay his head against them.

After a bit he heard someone come into the ship at a run. Whoever it was stopped just behind him and a hand came to rest on his shoulder. Han stiffened, but he didn't raise his head. A heavy weight had settled on his chest and his eyes burned with unshed tears. He wasn't sure he would be able to get through this.

"Han?"

His whole body went rigid. That sounded like Luke. "Go away," he said and was horrified to hear that his voice wasn't quite steady.

"Han, are you all right? What happened to your arm? Han, will you please listen to me?"

It was Luke's voice, but how could that be? Luke was dead. Or was he? Han sat upright and turned.

Luke Skywalker stood there grinning from ear to ear.

"Kid?" Han asked shakily. "Luke!" He jumped to his feet and grabbed Luke by the shoulders. "You're alive." He threw his arms around Luke in an enthusiastic hug, feeling almost lightheaded with relief, then drew back and stared at him. "What's going on?" He demanded. "I saw that damn ship blow up. Vader had me brought to the control room to watch."

"We didn't think of that," Luke said apologetically. "We rigged the transport on automatic to act as a decoy."

"Why?"

"Because that way we had a chance to come back and get you out," Luke explained.

"Oh," said Han Solo. He was silent a moment, then said, "But if you'd really been on that transport, you could have made it to lightspeed before the fighters could have blasted you."

"Maybe. But we weren't about to leave you behind."

"That ain't what we agreed on, kid."

"I know," Luke replied with a cocky grin he must have borrowed from Han. "So?"

Solo only looked at him, then he asked, "How'd you really get away?"

"On the other transport," Luke said cheerfully.

"I forgot about that," Han admitted. "You followed me up. I didn't have time to wonder what was going on then, and I didn't really give a damn. Maybe I should have figured it out."

"You thought we were dead. It wouldn't have occurred to you. What did happen there? How'd you get away?"

Han told of his escape, enjoying Luke's interest. "Do you think you really got Vader." Luke asked eagerly.

"Nah. I doubt it. Even I'm not that lucky."

"Well, it's the second time you almost got him. They say the third time is lucky."

"I hope you're right, kid. Anyway, there's something I did get. C'mon, I'll show you."

He led the way to his cabin where he opened a small chest. Turning with a flourish and a grin a yard wide, he presented Luke with his lightsaber.

Luke's whole face lit up. "Han! My lightsaber. I can hardly believe it." He took it eagerly, examining it in detail for signs of damage. "I thought I'd lost it for good. Thanks."

"It wasn't anything," Han said, embarrassed at Luke's gratitude.

"Yes it was. That's one I owe you." He grinned. "Thank the Force you're back. We really need you here."

Han gave him a sideways look. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. You see, I had to explain to Chewie how we happened to come back without you."

Han laughed. "I'd like to have seen that--it must have been something. I notice you're all in one piece. Chewie didn't try to rip your arms off or anything, did he?"

"Well, I think he wanted to," Luke admitted. "But I talked him out of it. I told Wedge to let him know you were back. He's been waiting for you ever since we got here. Now the whole base can relax."

"Yeah, I believe it," Han said, and they both laughed.

Princess Leia arrived then. "Han!" To the Corellian's surprise and pleasure, she threw her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly. "I owe you an apology," she said.

"This is gonna be good," Han remarked. "What are you apologizing for, sweetheart?"

She looked uncomfortable. "You're going to be mad at me."

Probably."

She glared at him. "I thought you'd run out on us," she confessed.

"I got that impression when Wedge was in here," Han told her sourly. "Thanks for the vote of confidence, your worship."

"Well, what were we supposed to think when we saw you take off? That you would be back to pick us up?"

"I thought so," Luke said.

Han and Leia ignored that. "You know the damn transport blew up," Han argued. "What was I suppose to think, that Vader was using his own ships for target practice?" Then, to her astonishment, he grinned at her. "Ah, what the hell. We got away, didn't we? That's what matters."

She smiled doubtfully.

Han shook his finger at her. "Just don't let it happen again," he told her sternly.

"Are you actually giving me orders, Han Solo?"

"Yes."

And Leia laughed.

A roar sounded and Chewie burst into the room. He grabbed Han in a fierce hug, then took him by the shoulders and shook him, complaining all the while about people who didn't come back when they were suppose to and didn't let anybody know why.

Han collapsed with a sound. The Wookiee caught him as he fell, alarmed. Luke jumped forward, a worried look on his face, and helped Chewie get Han on the bed.

It was fortunate that Wedge returned then with the doctor in tow. Chewie spotted the doctor and pulled him over, growling questions that only Han could have understood. While everybody watched, the doctor made a hasty examination. Even as he did, Han's eyes opened. He struggled to sit up, but Chewie reached out and put a huge hairy paw on his shoulder.

"Hey, let me up, Chewie," Han protested. "I'm okay."

"You're almost right," the doctor said. He had taken a look at Han's arm and was pleased to see that it was healing normally. "But tell me this. When is the last time you had anything to eat?"

"Well...uh..." Han couldn't remember.

"That's what I thought. And any sleep?"

"I've been flying the *Falcon* singlehanded. When was I supposed to sleep?"

Will he be all right?" Luke asked anxiously.

The doctor frowned. "He's all right now, at least as all right as anyone could be who's gone without sleep and starved himself for the better part of a week." He turned back to his patient, who had again tried to get up only to be forcibly restrained by the Wookiee. "I suppose I ought to be glad that you bothered to do something about your arm." He turned to Leia. "Bring him some food; something light would be best to start with. Then we'll let him sleep."

Han made one last attempt to get up, then realizing it wasn't doing him any good, he lay back. He would be lucky to stay awake long enough to eat anything. Let them wait on him and take care of things for a little bit. He deserved it, he decided. But nobody was gonna keep Han Solo down for very long, and they better not try.

He caught Luke's eye to reassure himself that the kid was really all right, then grinned broadly and winked at Leia. Before either of them had a chance to respond, he closed his eyes.

The others watched him silently, then tiptoed from the room. Chewie lingered a moment, growling a soft question.

"Yeah," Han said without opening his eyes. "Go on, Chewie. I'm okay--now."

end

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