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Means to an End

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"*Ghostrider*, this is Commander Davis of the Namol security authorities," a voice stated over the com. "Please power down your hyperdrive and follow my ship peacefully. If you do not comply, we will be required to use force."

Han cursed as he looked up and saw a contingent of fighters along with a larger ship appear within his view. Everything had just seemed to have been going so well. He'd exited hyperspace, landed, refueled, and taken off again without any problems. Now, mere minutes before he could enter hyperspace again, it looked like they might be discovered.

"This is the *Ghostrider*," Han replied using the name the Alliance had changed the *Falcon's* identification beacon to. Perhaps if he pretended that he was simply an honest merchant, he'd be able to get out of this. "What is going on, Sir?"

"There is nothing to be worried about," Commander Davis stated. "This is simply a routine check of outbound ships. We like to make sure that there are no illegal activities going on. To this end we search random ships. If you'll follow me, we can get this over with quickly and you can continue on your way."

Observing the fighters that were now nearly upon him and looking at the *Falcon's* scanners, Han realized that he couldn't make a break for it. They were too close to him to easily avoid and he was still within Namol's gravity well. Reluctantly, he reached forward and powered down his hyperdrive. At least it was the Namol authorities and not the Imps, which meant that they still had a chance.

"Lead the way, Sir."

"Why aren't we in hyperspace yet?" Leia demanded as she entered the cockpit and stopped as she looked out the viewport and saw the line of ships ahead of them. "What's going on?"

"They're going to board us," Han stated as he positioned the *Falcon* behind the last ship in line. "Random search, apparently."

"I don't believe this!" Leia exclaimed, wishing, not for the first time, that some other pilot had been assigned the task of taking her to the Alliance outpost on Sullust. But no, almost all of the other pilots, along with the majority of the other people, on the main base had fallen victim to the virus that was making its round there. The only pilots that weren't ill were needed to fly the patrols. Han had been the only option as he'd somehow managed to avoid getting sick even while Chewbacca had caught it.

"Yeah, well, its not like I like this any better than you do."

"If you hadn't been low on fuel, we wouldn't be in this mess," Leia accused.

"Indeed, we'd probably be on Sullust already."

"If your precious Alliance would allow me to fuel up with them, this wouldn't have occurred," Han retorted.

"If you'd only just join the Alliance, then you'd have access to our fuel supplies," Leia snapped back. "We don't have so much fuel that we can refill every single ship belonging to the people who simply run errands for us but who aren't officially members of the Alliance."

"I would pay for it."

"We don't have enough fuel to go around like that, whether you pay for it or not. We are already pressed as it is to fuel our own ships."

Han's mind raced for a solution as he looked out the window at the ships before him in line. It was only two months since the Battle of Yavin and his picture had not yet begun to circulate as one of the people involved in the destruction of the Death Star, so he should be safe from Namol's authorities. Leia, however, was another matter altogether. She was a known Rebel leader now and there was no chance that the Namol authorities would fail to recognize her. She needed to be hidden.

"I hope you're not claustrophobic, your Highness," Han said as he got up.

"What?"

"You're going to have to hide in one of my smuggling compartments until the authorities are gone."

"Joy," Leia replied dryly.

"What would you rather have? To have them recognize you and send you to go visit the Imps?"

The sudden blaring of an alarm caused both of them to jump. Cursing, Han approached the control council to see if he was right. "Damn! Well, scrap that idea."

"Why?"

"They just SA-scanned us," Han explained. "They now know that there are two sentient beings on board."

"Great, now what?" Leia demanded as she watched one of the ships ahead of them get clearance to leave. "It'll be our turn in ten minutes."

"I'm working on it!" Han exclaimed. "Normally I'd make a break for it, but there are simply too many fighters around. They definitely know how to run a search."

He turned to look at the princess and searched his mind for any possible covers she could take and how he could disguise her as such. Why would he have her on board? A passenger? No, then he'd need to show a contract. A crewmember? No, her hands were a dead giveaway that she hadn't done a lot of physical labor. If it had been Luke, then it would have worked, but not with the princess. Perhaps... perhaps... perhaps he could say that she was...

Han smiled at the idea that came to him. She wouldn't like it, not in the least, but it could definitely work. Besides, she didn't need to know until the Namol authorities came on board, and then she wouldn't be able to protest and refuse to play along.

"I don't like that look," Leia declared as she eyed him.

"Do you have anything more casual to wear?" Han questioned, ignoring her comment as he indicated the regal white dress she wore.

"Yes. Why?"

"Go put it on," Han ordered. "I've got an idea, but we'll have to dump all your formal stuff into the smuggling compartments so that they don't see it when they search the ship."

Leia hesitated slightly, regarding the Corellian suspiciously, before leaving the cockpit. She had a bad feeling about what he was planning, but she didn't have the time to argue. If anyone could get them out of this situation unharmed, she knew that it was him. Although she'd never admit that to him.

Leia entered the cabin he'd given her and walked over to her bag, quickly looking for the tan pants she knew she'd packed. Finding them, she put them on the bunk before looking at the shirts she'd brought. She rapidly decided that the pale

green one was the least formal of the lot. Changing, she quickly put all her belongings that were clearly out of place in the cabin, into her bag. Picking it up, she left the room and found Han waiting down the hall next to what was obviously one of the compartments.

Han took the bag from her and put it away before closing the compartment. Getting to his feet, he turned around and looked her over.

"This is the most informal outfit you've got?" he demanded.

"That I've got with me."

"It won't do."

"For what?"

"Come," Han responded as he walked to his own cabin. "The pants can work, but the shirt won't. You'll need to borrow one of mine."

"One of yours?"

"Don't worry, they're clean," Han assured her as he entered his cabin and pulled out one of his dark blue shirts. Unfolding it, he made to hand it to her before he changed his mind. Pulling his arm back, he crumpled the shirt into a ball, shook it out again and crumpled it up again.

"What are you doing?" Leia asked impatiently as she glanced at her chrono. "We don't have time for this!"

"Making it look like its been worn," Han replied. "Here, put it on over your shirt. But don't tuck it in completely, leave some of it out like some of the Rebels on the base do. We need to get you to look like an ordinary citizen."

Han turned back to his closet and kneeled down, looking for the pair of boots he'd bought a few weeks ago. The boots had been a few sizes smaller than the box had said and had thus been an extremely tight fit for him. Leia, however, would probably be able to wear them well. Finding them, he got up.

"Here, put these on."

He handed them to her and took her current shoes, flinging them into the closet. The moment she was ready, he took another good look at her. Despite the clothes, she still looked far too regal to fit his plan. She still had that 'princess look' about her. Stepping closer to her, he reached up and ruffled her hair which was braided and woven around the back of her head.

"What do you think you're doing, Captain?" Leia exclaimed as she knocked away his hand and felt her hair, dismayed to find it in disarray.

"You still look too much like the proud Rebel leader," Han explained. "Pull some of your hair out of that braid and let it simply hang loose. We need to change your appearance enough so that they won't recognize you. I need you to look like a pirate, and the female ones that I've seen don't care too much about their appearance. Your hair is far too neat."

"A pirate," Leia repeated as she walked over to the mirror and rearranged her hair. "Is it just you or are all pirates this messy?" she asked as she toed a greasy shirt with the knee-high boots she now wore.

"No, it's..." Han trailed off as he eyed the shirt. "Come on!"

"Now what?"

"Just come," he said as he grabbed her arm and dragged her to the back of the ship where he had pulled off some of the side panels so that he could repair the *Falcon's* temperature controls. Once there, Han released her and leaned into the wall. Looking around, he quickly found a greasy spot and proceeded to get the mess onto his hands.

"Oh no, you are not getting that stuff on me!" Leia declared as she hastily backpedaled when he approached her.

"With some of this on your face and clothes they'll never recognize you," Han argued. "We don't have time for your distaste of dirt, your Royal Highness, it'll be our turn soon."

Leia eyed the goo in his hands, hesitating briefly before she swallowed and sighed. "Very well."

"Good," Han stated as he stepped forward and rubbed some of it onto her face, arms, and shirt before he stepped back to inspect his work. "Much better."

Indeed, she truly looked different now. Anyone who didn't know her personally and had only seen a small wanted holo would never recognize the normally pristine princess now. With her disheveled hair and dirty face, she looked like any one of the females he'd seen who had been working on their ships. Glancing down at his hands, Han looked around for the rag he knew lay somewhere nearby before he stopped.

"Let me wipe my hands off on your pants."

"Excuse me?!" Leia demanded incredulously.

"If you were working, had dirty hands, and were interrupted, where would you clean your hands?" Han inquired. "Personally, I rub them clean on my pants."

"You clean your hands on the rag and I'll get grease on my pants," Leia stated, her voice leaving no room for argument as she stepped up to the hole in the wall.

"Ah, come on," Han teased. "What's wrong? Afraid you might like my touch?"

Catching the laser beams Leia targeted him with, Han quickly took a few steps back as she withdrew her now greasy hands from the hole, not wanting her to decide to return the favor and decorate him. Watching as she cleaned her hands on her pants, he took the rag and cleaned his own hands.

"I'll go see how long we have," he said as he headed off down the corridor.

Walking too close to the side, the door to the princess's cabin opened as he passed it. Glancing inside, he caught sight of the few belongings she had left strewn about. This wouldn't do at all, not with his plan. Entering the room, he gathered together all the things, taking special care not to forget anything, and then left.

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As he felt the slight shutter of an airlock being established between the *Falcon* and the Namol authorities' ship, Han stepped back to admire his work before running off towards the hatch. "Come on," he called out as he went. "We need to meet them like the good citizens would do."

"What are you planning on doing?"

"You'll see. Just play along."

"Why do I get the feeling that I'm not going to like this?"

"Look, your Highness," Han stated as he watched the lights on the panel next to the door alter color as she arrived behind him. "I'm not the one here that's on the Imperial Most Wanted List. I'm just trying to save you, so could you please just back off for once?"

Although all her instincts were screaming warnings at her, Leia forced herself to calm down and relax. He was right, much as she hated to admit it, her life was in his hands. Besides, it wasn't like she could make him change whatever plan he had now, not when the authorities were going to walk in at any moment. She'd just have to play it by ear and hope that the Corellian didn't overdo it.

As if. Solo seemed to take each and every opportunity to annoy her that he got. Why couldn't he just be kind and considerate for once? Why did he always need to be so infuriating? She was surprised that he hadn't left the Alliance long ago if he hated it and her so. Why was he hanging around, running errands when he had, as he always claimed, a serious debt to pay off? He just didn't make any sense! And he always managed to catch her off guard and bring out the worst in her. Despite her hardest efforts not to let him affect her, he always managed to worm his way around her barriers like no one else could. She just couldn't figure out how or why, and it irritated her to no end! He was just another man like any other, she'd think that she would just be able to put him out of her mind like any other man that had irked her, but no. Something about him eventually brought her thoughts and attention back to him. Something...

"Welcome, Sir," Han said as the hatch opened and a major stepped onto the *Falcon*. Figuring that the ordinary citizen wouldn't be able to tell one officer from another, he decided to stick with the generic title 'Sir.' "It is my pleasure to have you aboard the *Ghostrider*."

"Who are you?" the officer demanded coldly, ignoring the pleasantries as his eyes swept the area before coming to rest on the two of them. "And what is your purpose here in the Namol System?"

"I am Serge Nelson and this is my little wife, Connie," Han introduced himself and Leia as he reached back and snaked an arm around the princess's waist, pulling her against him, feeling her stiffen and resist before giving in. Sudden protective feelings flared within him as he observed the way the officer was ogling her, clearly liking what he saw. Pushing aside the unreasonable feelings, he continued on in the same, servile voice he'd first addressed the man with. "We recently got married and are traveling around. We stopped here to refuel so that we can get to Corellia."



Leia felt indignation flash through her as she heard Han's plan. His wife indeed! As if she'd ever consider, much less like, the likes of him. Resisting the temptation to argue with him, she allowed herself to be pulled to him, pretending that she liked him. She only needed to play nice while the Namol authorities were on board, once they were gone she could tell the Captain exactly what she thought of him and his stupid plan.

"I see," the officer replied as he turned around and signaled the men waiting on the other ship to board. "These men will search the ship."

"Very well," Han agreed with a pleasant smile. "They will find part of the wall open near the cargo area, Connie was working on fixing the temperature system. It's been acting up lately."

"She was fixing it?" the officer inquired as he glanced down at the beautiful woman's hands and saw that they were smooth and completely undamaged by physical labor.

"Yes. Once we got married I figured that I might as well teach her how to repair the systems so that she could do so when I don't have the time," Han quickly explained as he smiled at Leia, pretending to be a dotting husband. "She's been a very quick learner."

"I see," the officer stated before turning to the men. "You know the drill."

"Would you like something to drink, Sir?" Han politely asked the officer as the others split up to search.

"Some water would be nice."

"Honey, get the officer a glass of water," Han said as he turned to Leia and gave her a little shove before he hit her rear.

"Hey!" Leia exclaimed, caught completely off guard even as her indignation flared within her at such treatment. No one had ever touched her like that before. Seeing the amused look on the officer's face, however, she forced down the urge to comment, knowing that she was expected to do as her 'husband' wanted. "Sure thing, Sweetie."

Han winced inwardly as he heard the undercurrent in her voice. Someone who didn't know her wouldn't notice it, but he did. He knew exactly what that tone meant. It promised that he'd pay for his current attitude and actions towards her. Perhaps the slap hadn't been necessary, but it had seemed like a good touch and he hadn't been able to resist.

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'Little wife indeed! Leia fumed as she neared the *Falcon's* food processor and opened the cabinet containing dishes. Taking out a plastic cup, she banged it against the counter, resisting the urge to fling it across the room. *'Honey!* What was next? Darling? No wonder he had been unwilling to inform her of his plan, there was no way in the galaxy that she would have gone along with this had she had the option of coming up with something else! And how dare he slap her bottom like that?

Putting the cup under the processor, she got some ice and water, secretly promising herself that, as soon as she returned from this mission, she wouldn't come within ten feet of the Corellian ever again. Indeed, she'd do everything she could to get the errands he ran for the Alliance to take him to the other side of the galaxy and away from whatever base she was on.

Heading back towards the hatch and the two men, she plastered a sweet smile on her face and gathered herself together to play the part of the loving wife. The only good part of the whole situation was that she wasn't required to say much.

She knew that if she'd have to, she would probably be able to, but it wouldn't be easy to make it sound like she loved Solo.

"Here you go, Sir," Leia said as she reached them and handed over the glass.

"Thank you," the officer replied, purposely brushing his hand against hers as he accepted the refreshment. "I'd like to take a look around at how my men are doing."

"Sure thing, Sir," Han stated, his arm already around the princess's shoulder before he realized what he was doing. "Do you want us to accompany you?"

"Yes," the officer responded as he walked off towards the cockpit.

On the way there, he passed Han's room and stepped inside to watch the two men there conduct their search. Absently scanning the room, he noticed how various accessories were strewn around the room in obvious disarray. His and her stuff were jumbled together, clearly indicating that they shared the room.

Leia hid her surprise as she spotted all the items which she hadn't packed away laying around the Corellian's room. So this was what he had been doing while she'd been greasing her pants!

"Isn't that bunk a little small for the two of you?" the officer demanded suspiciously as he eyed the small bed.

"It's cozier that way. You must remember, Sir, we're newly wed," Han explained before he leaned a little closer to the officer, so that the other men wouldn't overhear, and winked. "Besides, she likes to snuggle up to me."

As she felt her face go red with anger at the words and the understanding reaction they drew from the officer, Leia was silently thankful that the officer was certain to mistake her coloring for embarrassment. It took all her self-control to not slap Solo here and now. If it didn't mean almost certain discovery, she would do it.

"I see," the officer replied as he turned his attention back to the young woman. Pity she was already married. "I need to see the cockpit now."

"Right this way," Han said as he lead them out of his room.

"How long have you had this wreck?" the officer questioned as he eyed the condition of the ship warily.

"Ten years," Han lied, biting back a response about the man's opinion of his ship. "Bought her from a friend when he decided to get himself a new model. He wanted something with more hyperspace capability."

"I see."

Upon reaching the cockpit, Han let the major enter first and then followed him, Leia still at his side. As the man looked around, he took the moment to regard the princess out of the corner of his eye. It wasn't often that they were this close to each other, much less touching, and it felt strange. And right, somehow. She was watching the officer like a hawk and didn't even notice his scrutiny. Taking a good look at the hazel shade of her eyes, the curve of her lips, and the shape of her nose; he suddenly realized just how beautiful she truly was.

Sure, he'd caught her beauty from the moment he'd first laid eyes on her back onboard the Death Star, but this was different. It was as if she had grown prettier somehow. Either that or... Absently he began to massage her tensed shoulder with his hand and she turned to look at him, their eyes meeting.

As she looked into Solo's brown eyes, Leia felt her heart constrict momentarily. There was something different about him all of a sudden, but she couldn't put her finger on just what it was. She did know, however, that it was the same thing which made it impossible for her to simply shove him out of her mind whenever she had tried to do so in the past. It was something important, but she still failed to grasp exactly what it was. Searching his eyes, she felt her muscles relax somewhat under his massaging fingers. What was it about him?

"This doesn't look like any of the standard control panels," the officer stated, breaking the moment.

"Uh, well I guess it wouldn't anymore," Han said as he turned his attention to the man, caught off guard. What had just happened? "It's been tinkered with a lot of times over the years. Small adjustments here and there, so I guess its probably quite different from what it originally was."

"Just how old is this ship exactly?"

"As I said, I bought it off a friend ten years ago. Not sure how old it was then."

"You bought a ship without knowing its age?" the officer asked in disbelief.

"I knew it worked well enough," Han shrugged. "I'd accompanied my friend on trips quite often and he offered me a bargain price. It was too good to turn down."

The officer snorted and simply shook his head, his eyes briefly skimming the rest of the room. Hearing approaching footsteps he looked towards the corridor as one of his men arrived.

"Major, we've completed our search," the man stated. "They're clean."

"Good, get the others back onto the *Justice*," the officer stated before he reached out and handed Leia the cup. "We'll be on our way now and you'll be able to go just as soon as you receive permission."

"Thank you, Sir," Han replied as he and the princess walked the man back to the hatch. "Have a pleasant day."

The officer nodded and left the *Falcon*. Han quickly closed the hatch and waited till he felt the airlock dissipate before he braced himself and turned to face the princess.

As she regarded the Corellian, Leia didn't know how to react. The way he'd treated her was outrageous and she couldn't understand why she didn't simply tell him exactly what she thought of him now that it was safe to do so. But she couldn't. Something about the way he'd looked at her in the cockpit wouldn't allow her to. But she still failed to understand what it was.

"There, that wasn't so bad, now was it, honey?" Han asked, not liking the silence.

"Not bad?" Leia exploded, his form of address instantly dissolving her hesitation. "You knew that I would not stand for such a plan and purposely kept it from me! And how dare you touch me like that? Don't you have any manners at all?"

"Well I'm sorry, your Royal Highness," Han replied, stepping closer to her so that they were only inches from each other as his own anger rose at her ungratefulness. "But it was necessary to save our lives."

"It wasn't necessary for me to be your wife!"

"What else could you have been? I have no contract as I would have had had you been a passenger, and you don't have the hands to be a crewmember. If you can think of another cover you could have taken, then, by all means, inform me of my oversight."

"I... I could have been..." Leia started, but realized that she couldn't think of anything on the spot. But then, pretending to be his wife hadn't been what troubled her. "Fine, I can't think of anything else. But there was no reason for you to treat me the way you did!"

"It needed to look convincing, and that's what we were," Han stated. "It wouldn't have looked very realistic if we were in the same room together and didn't even touch each other. Besides, don't tell me that you didn't enjoy the attention."

Feeling her indignation and anger grow within her, Leia did what she couldn't do earlier; she moved to hit him. Han, however, was expecting the blow and caught her wrist, looking down at her as he did so.

"Are you sure you want to do that? After all, it would leave a mark on my face and someone is bound to ask me how it got there. And if they ask that, well, then I'll have to tell them exactly what transpired here."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"What would you want me to do?" Han inquired innocently. "Lie to them?"

"I... I..." Leia began, but stopped, unable to think of what she wanted to say. Clenching her hands into small fists at her sides, she spun around and stormed off down the corridor. She wasn't sure where she was headed, but she knew that she had to get away from him. Away from this impossible man who had once again somehow managed to circumnavigate her defenses and get to her, frustrating her beyond rational thinking.

Han couldn't help but wince as he watched her storm off. He'd never yet seen her so angry. Sure, he'd gotten her riled in the past, but not like this. She had definitely never made to slap him before. Perhaps he had pushed things a little too far. There definitely hadn't been the need to say the things about the bedroom and call her '*honey*,' but he had been unable to resist the temptation. The fact that he could do and say whatever he wanted and that she had been powerless to stop him had simply been too great for him *not* to do those things.

With a sigh, he turned around and headed back to the cockpit. At least they were both safe and free, even if she was going to be ice-cold to him for the rest of the trip. And, no doubt, for a while after that as well.

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