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Missing -- Part One

by [Catriona Campbell Boyle](#)

I.

Night gave the small Rebel squad added cover during their retreat through the dense woodland. Their footsteps were slow, their energy low. Rain battered down upon their tired bodies, pulling their morale down further, into the pits. Their forced march was hampered by fallen logs, dense forest vegetation and pools of thick mud. Each of them longed for his own warm bunk back at the Rebel base. No one spoke; it would use up too much needed energy. They concentrated only on staying awake and moving their aching legs.

A flare rose from behind them, lighting up the night sky like a small sun. They dove for cover behind bushes, logs and in puddles of mud, as several laser bursts shattered the trees around them. Sharp splinters of wood, almost as deadly as the shots which caused them, rained down upon the drenched Rebels. The Empire had caught up with them once more.

The squad responded with their own volley of fire, taking small consolation from a cry of pain coming from the Imperials' direction. Their mission had been a fiasco, and they now doubted that any of them would survive the retreat back to their ship. When they left the base at the start of their operation, the squad had been at full strength: twelve men, plus two escort pilots. Their number was now depleted to six. The Empire had been waiting for them; their information had been false, and they had walked right into a trap.

The flare dulled and the shooting ceased.

Luke Skywalker sniffed and wiped the rain drop from the tip of his nose with the back of his hand. His eyes searched the dark forest for a glimpse of white which

would provide him with a target. In the temporary darkness, he crawled cautiously toward his neighbour, hardly conscious of the mud which squelched beneath him. Another flare illuminated the scene and he threw himself flat, covering his head with his hands as more trees splintered above. He heard a scream close by; nausea rising in his throat as another one of his companions died.

"Luke!"

He turned in the direction of the shout. "Yeah?"

Wedge Antilles crawled out of the undergrowth, ignoring the mud which clung to him; a trickle of blood from a grazed forehead ran down his cheek, mingling with the rain and dirt. Fatigue was clearly visible in his features. "Captain's dead."

Luke muttered a curse under his breath. "Now what happens?"

"That's up to you, Luke; you're in command now."

"I'm a pilot, dammit! I don't know anything about ground force tactics." Luke experienced a fleeting moment of panic, his mouth suddenly going dry. He glanced desperately around him at the men whose lives now depended upon him, feeling totally out of his depths and wishing that he had never suggested to Wedge that they join the squad during its re-con mission. Baby sitting the X-Wings and troop transport, and the boredom of waiting for the ground squad to return, suddenly seemed a lot more preferable to a wet and muddy death.

They hugged the ground as more fire from the stormtroopers whizzed overhead, thudding into the damp plant life. Steam rose, and the smell of smouldering vegetation assaulted their nostrils. The Imperials were gaining ground. Wedge squeezed off a few bursts of his own toward their concealed pursuers. "You've got the highest rank, pal; it's your show."

"Okay," Luke frantically searched his mind for a solution to their dire situation. "How far do you figure the transport is?"

"'Bout a kilometre."

"Think we can make it?"

"Don't ask stupid questions."

A tree burst above them, showering them with shards of wood.

"I figure we have about thirty seconds between each flare," Luke calculated wiping blood from a scratch on his face. "We have to make use of that time. When the next one dies, we run for it."

Wedge nodded, and crawled off to relay Luke's command to the remaining squad members. Luke prayed his idea would work; if it didn't then, for them, the Rebellion would end here among the damp flora. He wiped his dripping blaster with his equally dripping sleeve.

A new flare rose high among the trees. Both sides took full advantage of the light, and a brief, but fierce, fire-fight ensued.

The flare died. Luke sprang to his feet and sprinted through the drenched foliage, trying to ignore the dull ache in his legs. Sounds of footsteps around him told him the rest of the squad were following his example. As he ran, he counted the seconds; when he reached thirty, he threw himself down, shouting for the squad to do likewise. A second later, the forest was lit again. A cry from his left informed him that someone was too slow. There was another short exchange of blaster fire.

Taking thirty seconds at a time, the remaining Rebels slowly made their way to the transport. As Luke flattened himself in the mud once more, he caught a glimpse of their goal, flanked by his and Wedge's X-wings. He heard Antilles' whoop of delight. One more sprint should see them safe. His adrenaline flow increased, giving extra strength to his tired body.

The flare died. Luke dashed into the clearing, heading toward his fighter. These thirty seconds should see him sheltering under the ship; the next should find him in the cockpit with the canopy down, and the engine's gunning to life.

Wedge ignored his fighter, heading instead for the closer transport; with the captain dead, someone else had to pilot it. Behind him ran the two remaining squad members.

As he darted across the clearing, Luke counted the time: "Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen..."

The sky lit up once more. Luke hesitated in mid-stride. It was early! The tiny sun made the Rebels easy targets for the chasing troopers as they dashed across the open area. Luke threw himself onto the wet grass. He waited for the flare to die as doubts began to flood his mind, but the light remained bright and he glanced up in horror toward the glow as it continued to hover above them. Remote flood lights! He looked over at the ground troops as they zigzagged toward the ship. He saw Wedge following their example, dodging the red bursts of light that came from behind them. He forced himself up, only to fall back down as panic numbed his limbs. Light and noise surrounded him.

When he looked back up it was to see a final flash of green as the last ground soldier dashed up the transport's ramp. He gritted his teeth and pushed himself up onto his feet. He now ignored his fighter and headed for the transport's entrance. The ramp began to rise.

"No!" he screamed, as he threw himself forward in desperation. Then he was pushed hard from the side, thrown violently, crying out in sudden pain as his foot caught on a fallen log. He fell, rolled in the damp grass, his hand losing its grip on his blaster. Stars burst in his head as he tried to pull himself back to his feet. His arms had lost their strength, his legs had lost feeling. As the Rebels' transport slowly rose from the ground, and in the final seconds before he blacked out, Luke realized he'd caught one of the pursuing 'soldier's blaster shots.

The Rebels' ship gained speed as it rose into the night sky, followed by laser fire from the pistols of the Imperials who now spilled into the clearing. Their shots were in vain; the ship was soon out of range and out of sight. They lowered their weapons and turned their attention to the two Rebel X-wings, hoping the fighter's droids, or the ships' data banks held something of worth.

One of the white-clad soldiers spotted a patch of grey, illuminated by the overhead lights, in the long grass. He bent down and picked up a fallen blaster by the body of the Rebel officer. He noticed the scorched material around the large blaster wound in the soldier's side. Following the order to make sure that all the Rebels were dead, he drew back his foot and kicked the cauterised injury. He grunted in satisfaction at the lack of reaction, and knelt to rifle through the pockets of the grey uniform, but he found nothing other than a few credits and a holo-picture of a young woman. Disappointed, he dropped the holo and sauntered back to his companions, wondering if they had found anything in the two fighters.

* * *

The stars outside the cockpit window streaked to infinity. Wedge sat back in the pilot's chair, sighing with relief now that they were safely within hyperspace. There was a moment back there when he had thought they might not make it. Who could have guessed the Imperials would have search lights helping with the chase that had been an unexpected and unwelcome development. But they were safe now, and in a couple of hours they would be back at the base. He groaned as he realized he and Luke would have to explain to Princess Leia what had gone wrong. He hoped Luke was still on good terms with her. A yawn escaped him and he stretched his aching limbs. He decided he'd sleep for a week when he got back. He closed his eyes.

"Wedge."

He turned to face the squad's sergeant, who had just entered the cockpit. The non-com was covered with drying mud; leaves clung to his clothing, and dirt streaked his tired face. Wedge knew he also looked as bad. "Yeah?"

"Lieutenant Skywalker didn't make it."

The blood drained from Wedge's face; he felt it trickling down to his heart, where the pressure built up. He suddenly felt ill, his head hurt, bile rose in his throat. He laughed. "Sure he made it. I saw him heading for his fighter. He'll be right behind us." But his words sounded false, even to his own ears.

The sergeant shook his head slowly. "He caught a burst as he headed for us, and even if he wasn't killed, it's unlikely he made it to a fighter. The troopers were right behind us."

Wedge quietly nodded; accepting the soldier's words. He'd lost another comrade. He groaned once more. Not only would he have to explain the failed mission to the princess, but also that one of her closest friends had been killed. He cleared his throat and found his voice. "Thanks, Sergeant. I think we'd better get some rest before we get back." He closed his eyes as though to sleep, but he knew he wouldn't. He knew he'd play the last few hours through his mind, over and over, looking for an alternative ending to the mission; one in which Luke emerged alive. It was a pointless exercise, but one that was common to anyone who grieved.

The sergeant returned to his one remaining squad member, leaving the young pilot to mourn the loss of his friend in private.

II.

Leia Organa lay on her bunk, sound asleep. Her room was bathed in twilight; the only sounds were her contented sighs and the quiet rustle of the sheet as she moved. Various articles cluttered the small apartment: combs for her hair; clothes piled on a chair, ready lest she needed to dress quickly; several viewing tapes; a mixture of educational and historical holos, stacked next to her console. Two holo-pictures of Han Solo and Luke Skywalker took pride of place on her dresser.

She moaned as she dreamed, and pulled the sheet more tightly around her body, as though trying to defend herself against her mind's visions. Her eyes sprang open at the first chime of the intercom, suddenly afraid. They only woke her if something was wrong. She reached over and quickly flicked the appropriate switch.

"Your Highness?" It was the general. "I'm sorry to disturb your rest, but Captain C'raon's transport is just docking. I thought you would like to know."

Leia was completely awake. Luke was back; now, at last, she may have some company. Since Han had left, things had been so dull. Luke wouldn't be too pleased, though; he had wanted to go with Han on the supply run. "Thank you, General; I'll be right there."

She slipped into a light-blue jump suit, pulled on her boots, placed two combs in her hair to keep it tidy, and rushed out her door and into the corridor. She tried to keep the eagerness out of her steps as she walked toward the docking bay. The sergeant and two of the soldiers from Luke's mission passed her, and Leia was immediately concerned when she noted the dirty, bloodied faces, and the tired glazed eyes. The sergeant nodded a silent acknowledgement and walked on.

Unsettled, Leia watched them round the corner, before stepping into the docking bay. She immediately spotted Wedge talking to the general. He looked just as bad as the sergeant had, if not worse. Where were the X-Wings? Where was Luke? She saw the two men look in her direction; the general murmured a few more words to Wedge before he left. Leia watched him go, puzzled; her previous lightheartedness darkening as a feeling of tight dread crept over her.

"Wedge?" She spoke his name but she was actually asking what had happened

"They were waiting for us." There was a suppressed sob in his words. He leaned against the transport's lifters, drained. "We didn't stand a chance."

Leia reeled as the news struck her like a slap on the cheek. How many times had she heard that age old cliché? How many times would it have the same impact on her? She cleared her clogged throat. "How many did we lose?"

"Eleven."

Leia fought to control her rising fear. She whispered, "Luke?"

Wedge nodded, unable to speak.

Leia's hand went to her throat. She closed her eyes, steeling herself against the sudden pain.

Wedge reached out, touched her arm, trying to convey succour despite his own discomfort.

"Are you sure?" She forced out, her voice merely a whisper.

He nodded again, wet his lips nervously. "The sergeant saw him go down. We owe Luke our life...After the Captain was killed, he..."

Leia interrupted him. "Did you check that he was...?" She couldn't say the last word, couldn't think of Luke being dead.

"There wasn't time; the Imperials were right behind us. But..."

"Then he might've only been wounded!" Leia clutched at the thin thread.

"Your Highness," Wedge protested, "he's dead."

"Maybe not." She had to have something to hold on to.

"Princess, the sergeant saw him go down. There's not a chance in the galaxy of him surviving. The Imperials were seconds behind us; even if the blast didn't kill him, the Stormtroopers would have finished him off. "

Leia listened to his words. What he said was true; but Luke was a Rebel officer, he knew Alliance secrets, knew the location of their base. Surely the Imperials wouldn't throw his life away without trying to get something from him? She shuddered, upset with her thoughts; sudden images of Luke injured and in pain, chained in a cell as the black droid floated towards him. She shook herself disturbed by the clarity of the mental picture.

She nodded and spoke softly. "You've made your point, Wedge. He was your friend, too. I'm sorry." She looked at his appearance. "You had better rest and get cleaned up. You can make your report later."

"Thank you." He realized he was still holding her arm, and let her go. "You'll be all right?"

She nodded. "Yes." She watched him walk, slump-shouldered, from the hangar. She turned and looked at the transport, wishing with all her heart to see Luke run down the ramp; and grief swelled thickly within her. She looked around the hangar at the technicians tending to their duties, pilots preparing for patrols, all avoiding looking in her direction, all of them aware of the Rebellion's recent losses. Pushing back her grief, she returned to her quarters.

The door swished softly behind her and she fell against it. She took the combs from her hair and threw them onto the dresser next to the holo-pictures. Steadying herself, she crossed to her console and flicked on the intercom.

"Yes?" the general's voice responded to her paging.

"General, have..." she hesitated, swallowing hard. "Have Lieutenant Skywalker listed as Killed in Action."

There was a pause, then, "Yes, Your Highness and my condolences..."

"Thank you."

Leia switched the com off and reached for one of the holo-pictures. Luke stood proudly in his borrowed outfit of yellow jacket, and dark trousers, the gold medal around his neck contrasting sharply with his black shirt. He grinned at her. Leia smiled back, tears now blurring her vision.

She lay down, still clutching the holo, wondering when Han was due back. She dreaded telling him about Luke; in the short six months since the Death Star Luke had become like a younger brother to the Corellian. And to her, he was... A sob tore from her throat, and she buried her head in her pillow, wishing there was someone she could turn too, someone to hold her, someone in whom she could confide. Some one like Luke.

III.

The huge yellow sun rose over the acres of woodlands and farmlands, spreading much needed warmth. Early morning mists, which covered the ground, dispersed in the growing heat of the day. Small mammals appeared from their dens and burrows to continue their everyday fight for survival. Birds took to the skies in search of nesting materials and food to feed their young. Their songs intermingled with the chirps of insects and the mating call of a large beast.

A lone crow circled over a small clearing in the woodland, its multicoloured wings glittering in the morning sunlight. It landed gracefully on the grass and spent a short time pecking at seeds and scuttling insects. It then noticed the piles of twisted metal and flew to perch upon the bent framework. It picked at the flaking red paint a few times, before deciding the substance wasn't nutritious. It fluttered back to the ground, cautiously landing upon a small gray mound. The bird hopped along the fallen creature's back to the exposed wound, and looked around several times, making sure there were no predators nearby to interrupt its breakfast, before plunging its beak into the seared flesh. Blood welled where pieces of tissue were torn off; it trickled down the body and dripped into the grass.

Somewhere in the forest, a twig cracked. The crow paused in its feeding and cocked its head, listening. After a few seconds, it assured itself that it was still safe, and continue with its bloody breakfast. A minute later it was high in the air, squawking in fright, as the sound of running footsteps became clear. The crow circled in the sky once more, cawing in disappointment at its interrupted meal before disappearing over the trees.

The cause of the bird's distress stumbled into the clearing and the sight of two destroyed X-Wing fighters stopped the young woman in her tracks. She had heard the fighting and the explosions from the night before, but had not expected

to see any evidence of it. All thoughts of her mother's orders, to collect forest berries for preserving, were forgotten as her curiosity got the better of her.

Brushing back her red hair, she laid her basket down in the grass and walked slowly toward the nearest ship. She took hold of the structure and pulled herself onto a twisted wing. Climbing higher, she gazed into the ruined cockpit, half-afraid of finding the pilot, dead, inside. To her relief, it was empty. She wrinkled her nose as she caught a whiff of burnt plastics.

As she jumped back to the ground, she noticed something glinting in the morning sun. She knelt in the grass to pick up the object. It was a holo-picture of a dark-haired young woman; she didn't look much older than the girl who held her picture. She looked back toward the wrecked fighters, wondering if the picture belonged to one of the pilots. Was it a girlfriend, or wife, who now waited in vain for her lover to return? She placed it in her pocket; it was pretty, and she didn't have many pretty things of her own.

She crossed the clearing to the other pile of twisted metal. Wondering, as she did so, what had happened to the pilots; did they escape, or were they killed out in the forest somewhere? She shuddered as she peered into the second cockpit. They could have been killed here and their bodies taken away. Unsettled by her thoughts, she stood quickly as she spotted something else in the long grass.

As quickly as she could, she climbed down the other side of the fighter, catching and tearing her trousers leg in the process. Her mother wouldn't be too pleased. She walked cautiously toward the shape, which was partially concealed by the grass. Her eyes widened in horror at the sight of the twisted body as her legs took her reluctantly forward; part of her mind rebelling at the scene, the other part was morbidly curious to view something she had never seen before. She halted a few feet from the uniformed figure as a breeze blew the man's dirty blond hair, and she found this more disturbing than the festering wound in his side, which trickled blood.

She retched, gagged and turned from the body, trying to keep her stomach contents in place; she failed, and her breakfast landed on the ground at her feet. She gasped, tears spilling down her cheeks. She now knew what had happened to one of the pilots. Her stomach settled, having nothing more to expel. She looked back at the body as a small mammal moaned and, a cry escaped from her throat as the man's fingers twitched, and she realized the moan had come from him. She dropped to her knees by his side and with shaking hands she tentatively touched him, pushing him over onto his back. His uniform was damp and he was caked in mud; his face was streaked with dirt and covered with an assortment of scratches, some of which had bled profusely. He was also very young.

His eyes flickered open and tried to focus on her, but they never lost their glazed look. His hands weakly reached out for her, touching her arm. She jerked away, somehow afraid. A frown crossed his forehead and he opened his mouth to speak.

"Leia?" His voice was a dry, hoarse whisper. His eyelids fluttered as he fought to keep his consciousness; but he lost the battle, and his arm fell limply onto the grass.

The girl fell back, scrambled to her feet and ran from the clearing - already shouting for her parents.

* * *

Alex Lasjow cursed under his breath as thick black oil dripped onto his forehead. He lay under the family landspeeder, struggling to install a new part. The bolt had stuck fast, and he had spent the good part of a half hour straining to release it. It had given away suddenly, releasing the vile fluid. He slid out from under the belly of the vehicle and reached for a cloth to wipe his face.

He yawned and stretched as he gazed out of the garage window at his fields. The crops were growing nicely; it should be a good year. Good years meant more money, more money meant better machinery, better machinery meant a more efficient farm, and a more efficient farm meant more money. Perhaps he could trade in this old banger for a new model. His gaze went back to the stricken 'speeder and he sighed. For now, he would have to contend with it and mend it. Mhari had nagged him enough about having to walk into town for the groceries. He groaned when he thought about the amount of work he had to get through that day: first, the speeder; then the crop spraying; then the new storage barn's roof; feeding the animals; then... What he wouldn't give for a farmhand, or an agricultural droid. He thought about that for a moment before deciding the droid would be better; you didn't have to pay a robot.

He was just about to slide back under the 'speeder when he heard his teenage daughter, Tamara, shout for him from the yard. He cursed again, wondering what was so damned important for her to be screaming at the top of her lungs.

Tamara raced through the gate arch and into the yard, wondering whether to go to her mother first, or to her father. She shouted for both of them before bursting into the kitchen. Her mother was in the middle of preparing the lunch as she fell through the door, trying to calm herself before telling her parents what she had found. Her father appeared behind her, his face like thunder; but the darkness disappeared from Alex's face when he saw the state his daughter was in. Her face was pale, her body trembled, tears streamed down her cheeks. Her mother hurriedly wiped her hands on her apron before sitting her daughter down.

"What is it? What's wrong, Tamara? "Mhari Lasgow questioned, fearful. "Is it Brett? "

The girl choked back her sobs, shook her head, and gulped down breaths, "In the clearing, there's a man!"

"A man?" Mhari was immediately concerned.

"He's hurt bad," Tamara pleaded with her parents. "You've got to help him!"

Alex's face coloured once more. The fighting of the previous night had him worried, had kept his family awake and afraid, and now this. "Imperial?"

Tamara shook her head. "I don't think so; he's not wearing any armour. Please," She looked at her father and mother in turn. "If we don't help him, he'll die."

Alex exchanged glances with his wife; neither of them wanting to get involved, both of them wanting their simple life to stay that way, but both of them realizing they couldn't not help. "Okay." He conceded. "Mhari, find the medical kit; it's around here somewhere. Where's Brett?" He was referring to his young son.

Mhari gestured to the back yard. "Out playing."

"Let's keep him that way; we don't need him to know anything just yet. Tamara, show me where this man is."

It was with relief that Tamara lead her father into the woods.

* * *

Alex took in the clearing and its contents in a single glance, but he could not see the injured man Tamara had spoken of. He recognized the type of fighter immediately: X-wings. That at once pleased and disturbed him. He was relieved the casualty was not an Imperial, but only because he held no love for the government. However, Alex was deeply concerned that he might be a Rebel; that would create a dilemma that the farmer did not wish to even consider. He dearly hoped that it was a local who had somehow gotten involved in the battle. "Where is he?" he asked Tamara.

Tamara pointed to the other side of the glade. "Over there."

Alex spotted him, lying face-up in the grass. He knelt beside the uniformed figure, picking up a limp wrist to feel for the pulse. Tamara watched, holding her breath, hoping he hadn't died in her absence. Her father unbuttoned the young man's jacket and laid his head on the chest, listening for the heartbeat. Alex felt the cool

damp cloth of the under-shirt next to his ear; the rain of the past night had not yet dried from the thick material. He listened hard for the sign of life.

"Is he dead?" Tamara didn't know why she whispered.

Alex shook his head. "No, but he's very weak." And it was a wonder that exposure hadn't killed him. He turned his attention to the laser wound. He winced. "What a mess. Look's like every passing bird took a peck out of him." He picked a scuttling beetle off the ruined flesh in disgust.

"Who is he?" Tamara felt her previous sickness return.

"Rebel." He responded tightly, as he looked at the insignia on the uniform. "Lieutenant." He turned to her. "Run ahead and help your mother."

Tamara took to her heels once more.

Alex gently lifted the Rebel into his arms, and was rewarded with a low groan. The farmer grinned. "Atta boy." Sound meant life, but he very much doubted their ability to provide him with the care he needed. And this was where Alex's dilemma lay; conscience wouldn't allow him to turn the youth in, yet conscience also told him he was placing his family in terrible danger.

* * *

Mhari tucked the last corner of the waterproof sheet under the mattress. She reached for the white cotton sheet lying on the bedside table. Gripping two corners, she threw it over the bed and spread it flat with the palm of her hand. Once she had it tucked in at all four corners, she fluffed a pillow and laid it at the head of the bed.

Leaving the bedroom, she crossed the hallway into the kitchen. After searching through various cupboards, she finally found what she was looking for: the medical kit. Opening it, she found it virtually intact, missing only the thermometer. Brett had broken it when he was three. She placed the kit on the table along with sponges, cloths, soap and the basin to hold the hot water when it was needed. Mentally, she went over her list; she clicked her tongue on the roof of her mouth as she remembered she had forgotten to lay out blankets and more clean sheets. She returned to the bedroom.

As she placed the extra covers on a stool near the bed, she heard Tamara return. Mhari shouted that she was in the spare room. Tamara was breathing heavily after her second sprint of the day. She rested against the door post, catching her breath. "Dad told me to run ahead, to help out."

Mhari nodded. "I'm almost done. What did your father say?"

"Says he's a Rebel lieutenant."

Mhari didn't show any reaction. "Did you see Brett on your way in?"

It was Tamara's turn to nod. "He's still out back. I think he's found a mud puddle that suits him."

"Good." Mhari looked around the room. "I think that's all we need."

Together they went back to the kitchen to wait Alex's return. Mhari looked at the items on the table, suddenly remembering one more thing. "Tamara, go into your father's closet. Find some of his old bed clothes; they should be at the back somewhere." She handed her daughter the medical kit. "And put that in the room, please."

"Okay." Tamara was amazed at her mother's calm; but then her mother hadn't seen what he was like, how badly injured he was.

Mhari watched her leave the room. She was worried; a Rebel officer. An injured stranger was not the most welcome of guests at the best of times; no one enjoyed the responsibilities of caring for a sick person. But a Rebel. Anxious questions raced through her head. What would they do if he died? What would they do if he lived? What would happen if they were discovered? Would they be shot as traitors? He was putting her entire family at risk. She tried to shrug off her thoughts; if he were her son, she would want someone to care for him.

"Mhari!" Alex shouted from the yard.

She held the door open for him as he entered with his awkward burden. Mhari was surprised and how small and delicate the Rebel was. His head hung limply over her husband's arm; his entire body was filthy, and his hair was matted with blood and dirt. To Mhari he already looked and smelled dead.

She directed Alex into the bedroom she had prepared. Following behind him, she carried a basin of hot soapy water with a couple of sponges. Entering the room, she noticed Tamara had obeyed her request; the medical kit sat upon the extra blankets. The girl was obviously now hunting for the bed clothes.

Alex placed the injured officer on the bed. Mhari held him in a sitting position as Alex removed his jacket and T-shirt. "He's so cold," Mhari commented.

"We'll need the thermal blanket," Alex responded as they laid him on his back and Alex pulled the left boot off. He dropped it and frowned at the odd position of the right ankle; it was twisted to the side. Gently, he eased off the boot. The sock was thick with drying blood. He carefully removed the sock, starting a new flow of blood as the scab came away with the material. Alex winced at the sight of the

shattered bone sticking through the swollen, purple flesh. "We'll see to that once we've washed him and dealt with his blast wound."

Tenderly, not wanting to aggravate his wounds any more than they already were, they pulled off his combat trousers and threw them on the floor, along with the rest of his uniform.

"I think this is beyond us." Mhari gazed at the Rebel's wounded left side. "It's a deep burn, full of infection and made worse by the birds. How can we possibly do him any good with a home medical kit?"

Tamara entered with the requested bed clothes, as her father threw the last piece of Rebel clothing onto the floor. She stood in the doorway, trying to avert her eyes from the naked form on the bed. His discoloured wounds stood out against the rest of his pale skin. Her father looked over at her. "Bring the thermal blanket," He told her and gestured to the Rebel uniform. "And take those out and dispose of them. Somewhere they can't be found"

Tamara did as she was asked and then fled from the room, clutching the filthy uniform.

Mhari dipped her sponge into the basin, lifted it out, and squeezed off the excess water. She wiped the mud and blood from the young man's face. "He's so young, Alex. He shouldn't be here, fighting for his life; he should be at home with his own parents, enjoying his final years as a child. He's barely older than Tamara." As she spoke, the boy mumbled incoherently in his unconsciousness. Mhari placed her hand on his forehead and cheeks. "He's so cold," she said again. She reached into the medical kit and withdrew a bottle of antiseptic; after pouring a measure onto a piece of gauze, she cleaned his facial abrasions. "He'll need fluids."

Alex washed down the Rebel's legs and feet, carefully avoiding the open wound in his ankle. Mhari cleaned his chest and arms. Gently, they turned him onto his right side and washed his back and around the seared flesh. Mhari threw down her soiled sponge; picking up a comb, she cleaned as much dirt as she could from his hair. They would wash it properly when he recovered.

Alex rummaged in the medical kit for the burn lotion and a clear synthetic dressing. Asking Mhari to help him, he gently spread the clear, cool liquid over the burn area. Their patient moaned in protest at the pain caused by the thick lotion. Alex drew the clear bandage over the injury and sealed it with the tape provided.

Neither of them knew how to straighten the boy's ankle, so they could only administer first aid. Alex covered the wound with a clean piece of lint and placed

a gauze ring-pad over the protruding bone. He then bandaged the area to the best of his ability.

They changed the sheet under the youth, as it was now soiled with blood and dirt, and dressed him in the pair of Alex's bed trousers. They made him as comfortable as they could, and covered him with the thermal blanket. What was in their power to do for him had been done. All they could do now was watch him. The effort of staying alive was entirely up to him.

* * *

Five-year-old Brett Lasjow stood on his tiptoes to peer through the kitchen window. He was looking for his mother. He thought it strange that he hadn't been called in for lunch yet; his stomach growled hungrily. He wondered why today didn't feel right. What was different? Where was his father? Where was Tamara? Why wasn't she here to play with him? Why weren't things the way they should be?

He watched his elder sister enter the kitchen, carrying a bundle of old clothes; he could see the leg of the trousers hanging down. She opened the flap of the household waste disposal, stuffed the clothes in, and turned up the heat. Still carrying an object, she crossed to the yard door. Brett dropped down from the window and hid around the corner of the house as she stepped into the yard. He wasn't sure why he hid; he only knew, somehow, that what she was doing he wasn't meant to know about.

He spied on her as she entered their father's tool shed. What was she doing in there? Seconds later, she emerged with a spade. Did Dad know what she was doing? Should he tell on her? He decided to wait to see what she was up to; then he would tell on her!

Brett followed Tamara to the very edge of their father's property. There she dropped the object she had been carrying. Taking up the spade, she began to dig near a hedge. Brett was intrigued as he watched from among the growing crops. What was she doing?

It didn't take Tamara long to reach her desired depth. Picking up the object, she dropped it into the hole and covered it over with the soil. She then scattered dead leaves on the area to hide it. As she headed home she was blissfully unaware that her little brother had witnessed her every move, and was now in the middle of digging up what she had buried.

Brett's fingers scrabbled in the dirt, digging down. His hand closed around the prize and he pulled it out. His eyes bulged in surprise. A gun belt! Oh wow! His excited fingers pulled open the belt pouches, but he was disappointed to discover

that they were all empty. But a real gun belt! He couldn't wait for the school recess to end—he would be the envy of the class. Everyone would want to be his friend, because no one else had a real gun belt.

He stuffed the belt back into the hole; he'd leave it here for now. He marked where it was hid with a stick, and headed off home, wondering why Tamara was hiding something like that.

* * *

Alex watched Brett climb over the small fence which separated the dairy animals from the yard. He reminded himself he still had to feed them. So many things had been forgotten that morning because of the young Rebel; also, many things would have to change because of him. There was cold pool of fear in the pit of his stomach and the farmer had to keep reminding himself that he had done the right thing.

He shouted to his son, "Brett, have you been bothering the herd?"

"No." Brett shook his head, telling the truth for once. "Is lunch ready?"

"Almost," Alex took Brett by the hand. "I've got someone you have to meet." He chose his words carefully. "But we must be very quiet, as he's not very well."

"Is he sick, like I was?"

Alex remembered that episode of his son's life vividly. Brett had almost died from the viral infection. Thankfully, they had one of the best doctors in the system living in their area. They owed Denrick Janis a huge debt for saving their son's life. "Yes, just like you were."

The window of the room had been darkened and Alex had to switch on the lights. He took Brett to the side of the bed. Their patient seemed to be sleeping peacefully; though his breathing was slightly hoarse.

"Who is he?" whispered Brett.

"Your cousin Ryder," Alex lied. He dearly hoped that everyone in the surrounding area would believe the fabrication. He hoped that no one knew his nephew Ryder had died as a child. "From the south; you remember, we told you about him?"

Frowning, Brett stared at the figure on the bed. Was this why things were different? Because of a sick cousin? Was this why Tamara was hiding a gun belt? Was this why his father wasn't working? Was this why lunch wasn't ready? If so, he hoped his cousin wouldn't be ill for long; he was hungry. "Can we eat now?"

Alex smiled. "I think Mom'll have it ready by now." He turned out the light and both of them left the Rebel to sleep in peace.

IV.

Leia hesitated a moment before slipping the key into its slot. She pushed the side button and the door to Luke's quarters slid open. The first thing she noticed was the unmade bed and she smiled to herself; Luke had overslept that morning, the morning of the mission. It had taken Wedge over ten minutes to wake him by hammering on the door. Han was to blame, of course; he had been teaching Luke trick shots with a blaster into the early hours. Maybe that's why he didn't come back; maybe he had been too tired, hadn't been concentrating, and had made a slip that cost him his life.

The Princess shook herself, shedding her thoughts as she placed the small box she was carrying on the bunk. The domestic droids had obeyed her command and had left a large crate for the majority of Luke's belongings. Her box was for his more treasured possessions ones that she wanted to keep, that she didn't want sent into storage to be passed on to new recruits.

She had been told this chore wasn't necessary, that the domestic droids would save her the trouble; but she had wanted to do it. It seemed insensitive for the droids to clear all traces of her friend from his room, to prepare it for its next inhabitant.

Leia looked around the room, not knowing where to start. She pulled open the nearest drawer and found it full of neatly-folded shirts. Picking them out, she placed them in the crate, trying not to think of the young, live body which once wore them. She had only known Luke for a few months, but those months were enough to grow to love him. Who wouldn't love someone who rushed into your cell, telling you, "I'm Luke Skywalker. I'm here to rescue you." Such enthusiasm, such verve. That was Luke.

After that little episode the whole group of them grew close. If you saw one then, nearby you would find the others.

She opened the closets and took out Luke's spare flight suit and fatigues. She was surprised to find his Tatooine farm clothes; but then, they were the only things he had from his previous life there, the only things to remind him of home. She added these items to the shirts already in the crate. As she lifted the sheets from the bed, she was surprised to discovered his lightsabre hidden under the bed clothes. Luke really must have been in a hurry if he left his beloved weapon behind; he carried it everywhere with him.

"It was my father's," he had said with pride. "Ben gave it to me. He was going to train me, but I guess Vader put an end to that." He had looked at the sabre in his

hand, his voice quiet and subdued. "A couple of days ago, I never knew anything about him, not even his name. Now I know he killed my father, his troops killed my aunt and uncle, and I saw him kill Ben. Why does he have to destroy everything he touches?"

Leia had taken his hand in hers and spoken softly, telling him what she told herself. "That's why we're fighting them, to put an end to their destruction, and to rebuild what they've destroyed."

"You can't rebuild dead people," he had replied softly, sadly.

Leia placed the sabre carefully in the small box. She moved to clear the bedside table. An illegal history holo-tape about Jedi Knights sat next to Luke's comb. It disturbed her to see strands of blond hair still between the teeth. On a memo pad, written in Luke's scrawl, was a reminder to send Artoo to maintenance; one of his treads had been sticking. It was that message that had saved the little droid from the same fate as his master. She put the holo, the comb and the memo pad in with the Jedi weapon.

Her eyes followed the path of bright exotic ornaments along the top of his console. Luke liked brightly-coloured things. Whenever they were together on another planet, one which was alien to Luke, he would drag them off to the markets. Inevitably, they would hear his cry of, "I've never seen one of those before!" Out would come the money pouch, and another trinket would be added to his growing collection. Leia picked them up one-by-one, to place them in her smaller box. She remembered each one, and the moment they were bought: the Xalan dancer, purchased in the open market, was the first of the collection; the Verquan Warrior mask, the second. As she picked up the newest addition, a small musical box from Garthen, it occurred to her that the collection would grow no more.

* * *

Han Solo yawned as he shut down the engines of the Millennium Falcon. Another routine supply run over, and another carbon score on the hull of his beloved ship. One side of his mouth curled into half a grin. The trip hadn't been completely boring; and he'd managed to procure a much promised gift for Luke.

"That's it, Chewie." He nudged his dozing partner. "I'll find the deck officer, and then you can start unloading, while I report into Her Royalness."

Chewie growled, deeply.

"Yeah, well you slept most of the trip," Han stripped off his gloves and looked around the cockpit. "Did you see what I did with that blaster?"

Chewie jerked his large thumb toward the passenger compartment.

Han found the weapon resting upon the holo-game board. He grinned as he imagined Luke's face; the kid was going to love this! Han had always said Luke should have a good blaster at his side; now he was going to have one of the best, complete with new holster, of course. Putting a new blaster in an old holster was like putting new wine in an old skin: just not the done thing. The gun might make it up to Luke for missing the trip. Han knew he must have been pissed at missing Sandren, another new world to him. Still, Han had a few stories to tell him.

As the ramp of the Falcon lowered to allow him exit, Han tucked the weapon under his arm. The deck officer ran toward him.

"Captain Solo, welcome back."

Han grunted. "Chewie's up there. Princess Leia in the command centre?"

"Yes, sir."

Han strode off without another word. He'd deal with Leia first, then find the kid. They could have more target practice. Thing was, Luke was good; Han decided it was just beginner's luck. The door of the command centre swept open and he looked around for the princess. Frowning at her absence he tapped the shoulder of a nearby officer, who was monitoring the X-wing patrols. "Where is she?"

The man looked up sharply. "Solo!"

"Yeah, who else?"

"I - You're back early."

"So?"

"Nothing, but -"

"Where is she?" Han gestured at the room.

"Lieutenant Skywalker's quarters."

"Oh." He paused for a moment. "What's she doing there?"

The officer turned back to his read-outs. "She's--"

"No, don't tell me." He gave a wicked grin. "I'll find out!"

* * *

Han stopped outside Luke's apartment and rested his head against the door, listening as hard as he could. The room was silent and he was of two minds. Should he go in, or go away? Report to the general, and see the kid later? Han's respect for Luke rose a notch; the kid sure didn't waste any time. Once Han was away for a while he'd pounced! He thought about this for a moment. Maybe Luke missed the supply run on purpose, the sneaky little devil!

A satisfied smile rose on Han's lips as he came to his decision. He'd go in, but without knocking. He would enjoy the look on Leia's face if he caught them; she'd never live it down. He gleefully punched the side button and the door slid silently open. Han jumped into the room.

"Gotcha!!"

Leia dropped one of the small ornaments in shock; she whirled to face the intruder and instantly recognized him. "Han!"

"Right the first time." He was surprised to find her alone. Perhaps Luke was in the fresher?

"I - You -"

"Nice to see you, Han. You're back early. I hope nothing went wrong. How are you? Were you shot at? Were you damaged? How's Chewie? Are you—?" Han broke off as he spotted the crates marked with Luke's name, and the tears in Leia's eyes. "What's goin' on?"

"Luke--" The name stuck in her throat, and she couldn't say it, could not tell him.

"Luke?" Han frowned, immediately knowing what she was trying to tell him. Thick grief settled around him. It was a foreign feeling, an uncomfortable feeling. He cleared his throat. "He's dead?"

Leia nodded, not trusting her own voice, watching a myriad of feelings cross the Corellian's face. Finally he settled on one and his features darkened.

Han took the blaster and holster from under his arm. "I brought him a blaster; I always said he should have a good one..." He tossed it onto the bed and snapped, "put it with the rest of his stuff." He turned and stormed from the room, not understanding his emotions. He was angry, furious and he didn't know why.

"Han!" Leia called after him, wanting him to return. Wanting to support him, wanting him to support her. Distraught, but trying to control her grief, she turned

to clutch the edge of the console. The light shone on an object above her, and she glanced up at the wall. Hanging there, crudely pinned up, was Luke's medal.

V.

Leia grabbed Luke's arm and pulled him into a small alcove; he was just about to protest, when he heard the sound of marching Stormtroopers. They held their breaths until the squad had passed. Then they relaxed, and rested for a short time.

Luke was tired. It was hot in the alcove, but Leia didn't seem to feel it; only he did. The heat sapped his energy, leaving him feeling weak. He had an overwhelming desire to close his eyes and sleep, but he knew he couldn't; not until the princess was safe. He coughed, scraping his lungs. Sweat soaked his clothing, making them cling annoyingly to his body. Liquid ran from the pores in his brow, down over his face, stinging his eyes. He lifted his hand to wipe away the offending secretion, but Leia took his arm, stopping him. She spoke, but her voice sounded hollow and distant.

"You're safe; rest a while."

Luke shook his head, puzzled; how could she say they were safe? "No, I have to save you."

Leia wiped the sweat from his face with the sleeve of her gown. "Rest," she told him firmly.

His reply was to seize her arm and pull her into the corridor. They could not afford to waste time; they had to get to the Millennium Falcon. He was determined to save her.

They dashed toward the Corellian and his co-pilot, who rested against the metal wall of the corridor. In front of them was the entryway to the docking bay, showing their goal, surrounded by Imperial Stormtroopers.

"What kept you?" The pirate barely spared them a glance.

"We, ah," Leia's voice held a tinge of sarcasm, "ran into some old friends."

Luke stared out at the ship and the soldiers around it. "Is the ship all right?" He brushed his wet hair from his face, wondering when it would dry; it had been a few hours since the incident in the garbage-compactor, and the heat of the station should have dried it by now. He looked at his companions. They didn't

seem affected by the temperature, not even the Wookiee showed discomfort. Why was he the only one to suffer?

"Seems okay, if we can get to it," the Corellian answered his question. "Just hope the old man got the tractor beam out of commission."

Luke also hoped Ben had made it; otherwise, they would be stuck here.

He tried to see around the sides of the opening, wondering where the old Jedi was now. He watched the 'troopers leave their post and run toward something that was hidden from his view. "Look."

Han was pleased. "Now's our chance. Go!"

They dashed from the corridor into the docking bay, heading toward their only hope of escape. Luke glanced up. He slowed and stared toward the other side of the bay, where two figures were locked in combat. One was tall, dressed in black cloak and helmet. The other was smaller and dressed in a brown robe. "Ben?" Luke changed his direction, all thoughts of escape gone; he was concerned only for the safety of his friend. He stopped as he watched Obi-wan raise his sword into a salute. His opponent took the advantage and cut the old man down. The cloak fluttered to the ground.

"NO!" Luke screamed, horrified. He brought his arms up to aim his stolen 'trooper blaster at the Imperials before him, but someone grabbed his arms roughly and pinned them to his sides. The weapon dropped from his grasp. Laser bolts whizzed past him. He looked around, trying to see the person who restrained him.

Han shouted to him, "Come on!"

Luke tried to free his arms, to retrieve the fallen weapon. He failed. He lashed out with his right foot, trying to hit his hidden assailant; pain shot up his leg and he cried out. The pressure from his right arm vanished, and he reached out for the blaster.

Leia beckoned to him from the hatch of the Falcon. "Come on, Luke! It's too late!"

"Blast the door, kid!" shouted Han.

Luke turned his attention to the blast door. The Stormtroopers were gone, but the dark giant who had killed Ben was now crossing into the docking bay. Luke raised the blaster to shoot the door, to halt the Imperials' advance. Again the gun was jerked from his grasp. Panic coursed through his body. "I can't!" he told Han. He couldn't move. Tears mingled with his sweat. He struggled desperately

against his invisible bonds. Pressure grew on his chest, making breathing difficult.

"Calm down," a male voice told him.

"Ben?" Luke was confused; he glanced around, trying to see the speaker. He saw no one. The Falcon was gone! They had deserted him. Luke's terror increased; he was alone. He looked back and whimpered with desperation. No, he wasn't alone. The black knight moved closer, swinging his lightsabre. Luke pulled against his restraints, straining his muscles. The bonds tightened around his wrists. He cried out in pain and frustration.

"You're hurting him," said another voice, a woman's voice.

The disembodied voices intensified Luke's fear. The warmth around him was unbearable. He could hear his heart pounding frantically in his chest; the sound was synchronized with the throbbing in his head. The black-clad figure drew closer; Luke could now hear the hoarse, dry, mechanical breathing. Somehow he knew this man's name; Ben had told it to him on Tatooine: Darth Vader. Vader had killed his father, Ben, and now he was going to kill him. Luke tried to back away. Tried to make his legs work. "Please," he pleaded, "no!"

"You'll be all right." The woman again.

The Death Star docking bay dissolved, leaving Luke and Vader in a grey void. He was helpless; there wasn't anything he could do to save himself. "Ben," he appealed, to the man who had gained his trust; but Ben was dead. His eyes were drawn to the lightsabre in Vader's hand. The Dark Lord seemed to take great pleasure in allowing Luke time to study his weapon. He raised it into an attack position.

Luke knew he couldn't allow himself to die without fighting. He relaxed for a moment, trying to gather his thoughts, and the hold on his wrists also relaxed. Vader brought the sabre closer and Luke, caught in a moment of panic, lashed out. His fist struck the helmet of the Sith Lord; but it was soft, not hard like it should be.

The male voice cursed. "Keep still, dammit."

The pressure on his body increased once again, sending Luke reeling into the depths of despair. Vader had him. The sword swept toward him; Luke was pinned where he stood. The sabre blade struck his side and he screamed as the light seared his flesh. His world disappeared into a cloud of red pain which enveloped him. Gradually the red faded, leaving a dull pink. Luke opened his eyes and blinked in the harsh light.

"He's awake."

Luke turned his head, trying to find the woman who spoke. His body still burned. The figure above him was blurred, out of focus. He reached for her, only to find his arms still locked down. His panic began to rise again. "No," he moaned.

"You're safe." A cool damp cloth was placed on his warm forehead. "Rest now."

Luke fought to focus on her face, but failed. "Aunt Beru?"

"Help me, Alex." Luke's head was lifted and a cup was placed under his parched lips. "Try and drink some." The cup tipped, and water ran into his mouth. He choked, coughed, causing some of the liquid to spill over onto his chin. The woman wiped it off with the cloth.

"Slowly, "he was advised. "Sip it slowly."

He did so, relishing the cool sweetness of the water.

"Thank you," Luke whispered. He had no idea where he was, or who these people were; but he believed the woman when she said he was safe. "It's hot," he told them.

"I know," she said. "You have a fever." She wiped the sweat from his face again. "Go to sleep; you'll feel better."

Calmed by her words and the cooling effect of the damp cloth, Luke found himself drifting into darkness; he didn't resist its pull.

* * *

Alex and Mhari breathed a sigh of relief as their newly-appointed nephew fell back into seemingly peaceful sleep. The last few minutes had completely drained them as they fought to keep him still, to prevent further harm to his injuries. Once his restless movements became more frantic, Alex had decided the best thing to do would be to restrain him, and so the battle had begun. Using bandages, they tied his wrists, chest and left ankle to the bed; his right leg was fastened down just below the knee. Alex checked the bonds to be certain they were secure enough to withstand more convulsions, should they occur. He noted, with slight irritation that the boy had managed to further aggravate his broken ankle; fresh blood seeped through the dressing. He reached for the medical kit for clean bandages.

Mhari rinsed the cloth in the basin of cool water. "Do you think he'll live through this?"

Alex didn't answer.

"His fever's high. He should reach the crisis point soon." Concerned about hypothermia they had slowly warmed him with the thermal blanket. Now, however infection had set in and his temperature had dramatically risen. They didn't need their thermometer to realise the youth was in danger.

"We need Janis," Alex stated. He threw the soiled dressing to the floor and applied the new one to the wound.

"Is that wise, Alex, to involve someone else?"

"We either trust Janis, or let this boy die."

"But can we trust Denrick. Alex? We have our family to think of, if..."

"Denrick doesn't have to know what he is," Alex interrupted. "All he needs to know is that the boy's ill and needs his help. Any questions Denrick asks will be answered by our cover story." Alex stood and stretched; a yawn escaped him. "And I am thinking of our family, which is why I want to help. These Rebels just may be the ones to restore the peace and happiness this galaxy once had, and give our children a decent future."

Mhari glanced to the door, "You shouldn't speak like that, Alex; if Tamara and Brett should hear?"

"Tamara's old enough to understand; she's not a child, and Brett is too young to understand."

"But he could repeat it outside; you know what he's like."

Alex looked to his wife. Even after twenty years of marriage and a hard life, she still looked as beautiful to his eyes as she did the day they first met. But at this moment that beauty was marred by fatigue and nervousness. He took her in his arms. "I know you're worried, probably more for our safety than for the Rebel's life. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't, too. But I think we can trust Denrick enough to bring him in. You have to understand why we're helping this young man. If we save his life, then it's our contribution to the Rebellion; the only one I'll allow us to make." He brushed her hair from her face. "Do you see?"

Mhari nodded. "Yes."

"Good. Now you go and wake Tamara. She said she'd take over if you got tired. Take some of the advice you gave him, and rest."

Mhari nodded once more and kissed him lightly on the cheek. "Thank you." She left to obey as Alex turned to pack away the medical kit.

Tamara appeared at the doorway after her mother's summons, still wearing her night clothes. She carried a book, an adventure story to keep her awake. Her mother had said watching someone sleeping wasn't much fun. "Mom said he'd convulsed," she said, warily glancing at the sleeping Rebel. "Is he okay?!"

"Seems so for now." Alex spread the blanket back over their patient. "I'm going for a few hours' rest; I've still got a farm to run in the morning. If he starts convulsing again, give me a call; but I think he should be all right now." He crossed to the door. "If he wakes at all give him some water; he'll need it." Alex left to join his wife.

Tamara settled into the chair next to the bed and pulled one of the spare blankets around her, to keep off the night chills. She lifted her book and began to read.

An hour later found her engrossed in the story; so far the hero had won the heart of the heroine, saved her from a fate worse than death in the swamps of Aarene III, and discovered the meaning of life in her arms. She was just about to dive into the fifth chapter when a slight moan from her charge frightened her from the story. She glanced at him, slightly alarmed. Putting down her book, she lifted her mother's cloth and tentatively dabbed his brow. He shivered, and she pulled the blanket more tightly around him.

She watched him closely, fearing another attack of convulsions; but he was quiet. She sighed with relief as she sat back, lifting her book once more; but she did not resume reading. Her gaze was drawn to the young man on the bed. It occurred to her that, although now his skin was sallow and his eyes sunken, he would be quite handsome when well. She found the cleft in his chin attractive, and the blue eyes she had seen so briefly in the forest had been alluring. Again, she wondered if the young woman in the holo-picture was his girlfriend or wife. Did she miss him terribly? Did she believe him dead? How would he react to being called by another name? Ryder: The name belonged to a cousin of hers, but he had died as a child, before she was even born. What was the Rebel's real name? Where had he come from? Would he want to return to his friends when he was better? There were so many questions about him she wasn't allowed to ask, and he wouldn't be allowed to answer. Her father was strict about that.

Tamara turned back to her book. Her stomach growled angrily. She glanced back to the bed wondering if it would be all right leave him for a moment? Her empty stomach gave her an affirmative answer. After all, he wasn't about to go anywhere. She placed her book on top of the bedside table and tiptoed from the room; not because she was afraid of waking Ryder, but because she was afraid of waking her father. She knew he would be furious at her for leaving the Rebel alone.

She crept down the hall into the kitchen and spent a few minutes rummaging around in the closets. She fixed herself a fruit juice drink and found a couple of biscuits, before hurrying back to the room, to find her little brother standing by the bed.

"Brett!" she hissed. "What are you doing here?"

"I was going to the 'fresher." Brett put on his "I am innocent" look.

"This isn't the 'fresher; you were told to stay out of here. Ryder's not to be disturbed. Get back to bed."

"But I wanna listen!" her brother protested.

"Listen? What are—" Tamara broke off as the boy on the bed mumbled something about "getting one." She grabbed Brett by the arm and pushed him from the room. "Get to bed — now! If Dad finds out you were here, you won't get out to play for a week!"

Brett considered the threat for a moment, and scuttled back to his room. Tamara closed the door quietly after him. Little nuisance! She turned back to Ryder as his mumbling continued. She set her drink and biscuits next to her book, then picked up the cloth once more and wiped the sweat from his face.

"Ben," he moaned.

"Shoosh," she whispered, wondering who Ben was.

"Jedi. ..father. .."

"Quiet."

He tried to move, and groaned when he found he couldn't; his body shuddered. Instinctively, Tamara rested her hand upon his, just as she had for Brett when he had been ill. His fingers closed tightly around hers. She looked down at their hands, startled.

"Leia?"

"What?!" He was awake!

A frown crossed his face, and his hand released its grip. "Where's Leia?" he asked.

"I'm sorry—I don't—"

He tried to sit up, struggling hard against the bandages which tied him down. He groaned at the pain his movements caused.

Tamara put her hand on his chest. "Please—don't move."

His eyes looked up at her, full of confusion. "Why?"

"You were shot," she told him, wincing at the bluntness of her words.

"Shot?" His voice trembled on the edge of panic. "I want Leia...please."

Tamara didn't know how to reply and so she settled on what she considered a kind lie. "I'll get her later, but you must rest."

"Where is she?"

"Busy." She reached for the glass and helped him lift his head. "Here, drink some of this."

His head sunk back onto the pillow, once he had taken his fill. "You'll... you'll get her?"

"Yes," She took his hand once more, feeling dreadful for lying to him. She wiped his hair from his face as he closed his eyes.

"Tired," he mumbled.

"You'll feel better soon," she whispered and smiled when his fingers lightly squeezed her hand. She remained that way for the rest of the night, all thoughts of the hero and heroine on Aarene III gone.

* * *

Brett lay in his own bed thinking about the strange things his cousin had said. As he drifted off to sleep, he decided to ask someone what a Jedi Knight was.

VI.

Mhari was awakened the following morning by Brett pulling on her arm. Groaning she reluctantly opened her eyes to find his young, angry face glaring at her. Sitting up, she discovered the bed next to her was empty and cold; Alex was obviously up and out working already. She turned to her son.

"What is it, Brett?" she yawned, glanced at the chrono by the bed and realised she had over slept.

"I'm hungry!" he stated, indignantly. "When's breakfast?"

"I'll be there in a minute; let me dress."

Brett flashed a sudden smile and rushed off as Mhari slid out from under the sheets. Quickly, she dressed and spread up the bed, before hurrying after her son. She paused in the corridor outside the spare room, wondering if she should see how Tamara was coping. Quietly, she opened the door. The room was dimly lit, the only light coming from the lamp over the bed. Tamara was sleeping, her head resting on the edge of the bed, her hand firmly grasping that of the ill Rebel. Mhari crossed the room to the window and flicked the switch to return the glass's transparency. The morning light flooded the room. She switched off the bedside light and gently wakened her daughter.

Tamara sat up with a groan, regretting falling asleep in that position; her back was stiff and sore. She eased her hand from Ryder's and stretched, trying to rid her muscles of their ache. She rubbed her eyes to remove the crust of sleep. "He woke last night," she remembered, as her mother felt his forehead and cheeks.

"He's still burning." Mhari glanced around for the cloth and water basin to wipe his face and chest, to cool his skin. Tamara handed her the wet cloth. "Was he awake long?"

"No, not really."

Alex appeared at the door. "How is he? "

"No different," Mhari answered, anxiously. "Have you gotten in touch with Denrick?" The boy moaned softly, his breathing quiet but harsh.

"He'll be here before noon."

Tamara looked to both of her parents, confused and concerned. "You're getting the doctor? But won't he—?"

Alex shook his head, not wishing and argument with his daughter. "You tell her; I've got work to do." He left, trying to focus on the work needed completed on the farm and not on the worries created by their unexpected guest.

Mhari turned to Tamara. "Your father assures me that Denrick Janis won't ask any questions; that we can trust him." She looked at the sleeping boy in the bed. "Besides, we really don't have any choice; I think he'll die without medical help."

Something smashed in the kitchen; obviously, Brett was trying to make his own breakfast. Mhari knew he'd grin endearingly at her, plead that it wasn't his fault,

that the dish just jumped from his hands. She also knew she had to maintain the stern mother image and make him clean it up while he fussed and whined.

"I think I'd better get in there, or Brett'll destroy the kitchen. Get dressed and come to breakfast; afterwards, you can help me change the bed sheets and Ryder's clothes."

Tamara headed for her room to dress as her mother headed toward the kitchen, and a show-down with Brett.

* * *

Brett giggled in delight as he shot down yet another pirate ship trying to penetrate his blockade. The computer-game in his hand made the appropriate explosive noise and played the usual victory tune, before resuming the action. The sound of a nearby landspeeder took Brett's attention from the game for only a moment — but it was long enough for the next pirate to blast his way through Brett's blockade. He frowned as the game flashed his score at him, his lowest yet. Disgusted, he flicked the game off and tossed it into the corner of his room, among his other discarded toys.

He turned to the window, curious to see if the 'speeder was coming to their home. It was. The large vehicle slowed as it approached the house, finally coming to a halt outside the main entrance. Brett thought he knew the man who drove the 'speeder, but he didn't know where he had seen him before. He watched as the visitor was greeted by his father; the two men exchanged a few words before entering the house.

Brett ran to the door of his room and silently opened it; he peeked out into the corridor as the men appeared and were met by Mhari. He couldn't quite hear what they were saying, as they spoke in low whispers, but the occasional words filtered through to him. "Ryder," "nephew," "farm accident," Brett frowned. What farm accident? What were they talking about?

"Is that Brett?" the stranger asked in a louder voice, as he spotted the boy's inquisitive face peering around the door.

Alex nodded, smiling. "I'm afraid so." He motioned to his son to approach, "Come and say hello, Brett."

Brett decided to play his "I'm shy" act. He hid behind Mhari, gazing at the stranger with large, frightened eyes. The adults laughed.

"He's not usually like this, believe me." Mhari smiled down at her offspring. "Brett, don't you remember Dr. Janis?"

Brett shook his head, his gaze going to the large medical kit the man carried.

Denrick Janis laughed. "I'm really not surprised; I'm a forgettable person." He became serious. "Can I see Ryder now?"

"Of course." Alex looked to Brett. "Go out and play now."

Brett scowled. "I don't want to!" His shyness was gone, now.

"We're going to be very busy, Brett, and you'll be helping if you go and play." Alex fought to keep his voice calm, appealing to his son.

"But I've no-one to play with..." Brett moaned.

"I'm sure I could find some chores for you," Mhari stated, with some humour to her voice.

"But..." Brett stopped already knowing his fight was lost. He sighed, petulantly. "Okay..."

He sniffed back tears and ran to the yard door as his parents led Denrick Janis into his cousin's room. Outside, he threw himself down on the grassy bank by the storage barn and sobbed. It wasn't fair, he told himself; Tamara was getting to stay in, he knew. He was always being shoved out of the way because he was "too young," or because "Ryder needs his rest." Lately, Ryder always came first, and Brett came last; no one had time for him, but they had plenty of time for Ryder. Why were his Mom and Dad putting a strange cousin above him? His tears came thick and fast. He was alone; even Tamara, who used to play with him, was spending all her time with Ryder, and hiding things from him.

Abruptly, his sobs ceased, and a smile settled over his lips as he remembered the hidden gun belt. He wiped his tears away with the edge of his sleeve and looked toward the house. No one was about; they were all busy with Ryder. He pushed himself to his feet and ran across the fields to his secret treasure. He'd pretend to be a spacer, and blast all the pirates. If only he had a real blaster, to go with his real gun belt!

* * *

Luke laughed as he chased the small, frightened rodent across the sand. His foot caught on a small rock and he fell, sprawling on the grainy surface. He rolled onto his back and closed his eyes, letting the twin suns' heat waft over him; even with his eyes shut, he could make out their images. The heat was a little bit uncomfortable now, but he knew in an hour's time it would be unbearable, and

he'd have to go in, to spend midday in the shade. He pushed himself to his feet, looking around for his quarry. He grinned when he spotted a small lump in the sand; the lump moved. Clearly, the animal had sought shelter under the sand. He crept up on it.

"Luke!" A woman's voice called to him from the homestead's courtyard. "Time to come in!"

He frowned and ran to the edge of the courtyard. He saw his aunt walking toward the kitchen. "Aunt Beru?"

She turned and shaded her eyes with her hand as she looked up at her nephew, "yes?"

"Can't I stay out a little longer, please?"

"I don't want you sun-scorched, Luke."

"I won't be. Let me stay out until Uncle Owen gets home. "It's not midday yet."

With a sigh she gave in to him. "Very well, but you come in as soon as he arrives. Do you hear me?"

"Yes." Luke turned his attention back to his game of "find and annoy a defenceless little animal." He wasn't too pleased to discover that the lump in the sand had gone. He looked around the sand's surface for a few moments before deciding that the rodent had escaped him; thanks to his aunt. He may as well go in now. He started toward the main dome.

A movement caught his eye and he gave a silent cry of triumph; there it was, a bump in the sand. Once more he crept toward the animal. The grains began to erupt - it was re-surfacing! Luke lifted his foot, ready to give it a gentle kick, to start it running again. The creature's head emerged from the sand. Luke froze, his eyes wide in terror; despite the desert heat, a chill settled over him. It wasn't the harmless rodent that appeared, but a sand-viper.

The lizard's head was oval and coloured white, to reflect the sun's light. The red eyes, full of malice, carefully watched the boy's foot above them. The lips drew back, revealing vicious, hooked teeth. The rest of the creature's three-meter-long body lay hidden in the sand. It lay as still as Luke stood.

Luke's mind raced over all he'd been taught in his Desert Survival Classes; stay still, stay calm, stay silent. Let the viper lose interest in you and when it turns from you, slowly move back. Easy to say when you're an adult; harder to do when you're a ten year old boy who's seen a friend die from a viper bite.

Thankfully, the lizard turned away from him. Hardly daring to breath, Luke slowly lowered his foot to the ground. The movement drew the 'viper back to him. Once more, Luke stood statue-still . He felt like crying, but he knew he couldn't. Long seconds passed; cold sweat formed on his upper lip, tears welled in his eyes, he fought to control his breathing. Why didn't it go away? Why didn't it leave him alone?

"Luke!" his aunt called him.

Luke jumped at the sound of her voice, and immediately he knew he'd made a mistake. The 'viper lashed out, sinking its teeth into his ankle. He screamed as he fell to the ground.

* * *

Denrick Janis carefully removed the dressing from the boy's injured ankle. His patient groaned as the bandage lifted away part of the scab. "Give me a swab." Alex handed him one, and Denrick cleaned up the new blood which welled from the torn flesh around the protruding bone. The boy's eyes flickered open, but Denrick knew he probably had no idea where he was, or what was happening. Mhari and Tamara fought to keep him calm as Denrick spoke to Alex; they were losing the battle.

"Fibula's broken. Quite a bit of infection, too," he said, throwing the soiled swab down.. "This boy really should be in the medi-center."

"No hospitals." Mhari spoke too quickly, but Denrick seemed not to hear her fear as he set about cleaning the wound.

"We can't afford medical bills," put forth Alex, trying to explain. "Our harvest was poor last year."

"Hand me another ring pad, please." Denrick concentrated only on redressing the boy's ankle. As the bandage was tightened around the injury, the youth cried out, once again struggling against his restraints.

* * *

"Aunt Beru!" Luke screamed for his aunt as he pulled on the wriggling body of the 'viper-, trying to tear the teeth from his flesh. The animal had a firm hold, its neck glands pulsating as it pumped venom into Luke's veins. Luke beat upon its back, calling upon his guardian to help him. Why didn't she come? Blood flowed from between the lizard's lips, and Luke's fingers to dribble onto the sand.

Strong hands took him by the shoulders, keeping him still as a blaster bolt killed the attacking creature. Soon Luke was up in his Uncle Owen's arms, being carried back into the homestead.

"Perhaps this will teach you not to play with the desert animals," his uncle scolded, not entirely unkindly.

Luke just sobbed.

* * *

Gently, Alex and Denrick untied the boy's bonds and rolled him over onto his right side, giving Janis better access to the burn wound. He removed the thin plastic covering. "I'll have to remove that scab before I apply the bacta dressing," Denrick thought out loud. "Otherwise he'll scar badly." He chose his words carefully, watching the Lasjows' reaction. "He was shot from a distance; the blast wound isn't that deep. If the person who shot him had been nearer, his internal organs would've suffered, too. He's been quite fortunate." He smiled at their shocked stares. "I may be a back-world doctor," he explained, "but I wasn't born yesterday. I've treated blast wounds before."

Alex slowly handed him the container of burn lotion, unsure of what to say now that their carefully-crafted story had been shattered.

"He's one of the Rebels," Janis stated, as he applied the cool liquid. "Am I right?"

The family exchanged glances; Alex nodded, slowly. "Yes."

Denrick covered the blast wound with a fresh plastic sheet. "I'm not a lover of the Empire; you don't need to fear me informing on you."

Relief was clear on all of their faces.

* * *

Luke felt strange. His world was a mixture of loud, slow sounds and blurred figures. He felt afraid and lonely. He reached for his aunt, who, he knew, was standing nearby. "Aunt Beru?" he asked for her. No one took his hand, and his fear grew. He tried to sit up, but his limbs wouldn't answer his commands. The only thing he was aware of was the slow, steady throb from his ankle and his side. He frowned; why his side? The 'viper had only bitten his ankle. He concentrated on forcing his hand to move to his side, to find out for him what was wrong, but his arm didn't budge. "Aunt Beru?" He questioned desperately. She had to be there.

She came to him, taking his hand, her touch giving comfort.

"I'm hot," he told her, his words slurred.

"He's convulsed like this before?" someone asked.

"Yes," someone else answered.

* * *

"He's convulsed before?" Denrick retied the last restraint.

"Yes," Alex picked up the soiled dressings and swabs and handed them to Mhari.

Denrick frowned. "We need to get him stabilised, get his temperature down. I'll set up an IV of fluids, give him a course of strong antibiotics for the infection. Some analgesic for the pain. I'll reset his ankle once he's more stable, but I'll need to immobilise it so he can't cause himself anymore damage in the meantime."

Tamara stood to the side watching the doctor work as he set up the field IV he had brought with him, as he inserted the needle into the back of the youth's hand and carefully watched the device's monitoring system as it began delivering fluids and medication to his patient.

"How did you know what to bring?" she whispered.

Janis smiled at her. "Farm accidents can be quite nasty, can't they?" He rummaged in his med-kit bringing out a vial of honey coloured liquid and a syringe. He injected a small amount of the liquid into his patient's thigh. "A strong local anaesthetic," he explained to Tamara. "It should help keep his leg still until I can return tomorrow with the equipment I'll need to properly treat his injuries."

He turned stared to pack away his gear, speaking to Alex and Mhari as he did so. "I'll leave some more fluid pouches and medication. Only 10ccs of each to be added when the pouches need changed." He hefted his kit up and paused on his way out. "Take that frown off your face, Tamara. As far as I'm concerned, he's your cousin Ryder, and no one else. I'll see you all tomorrow."

* * *

It was quiet now. Luke found the silence more terrifying than the slow noises, and Aunt Beru was gone again. He was afraid of being alone, with no contact. He didn't want to die alone. He knew he was dying. He knew of no one who had survived a 'viper bite; Dru had died, Biggs's little sister had died, and now he was going to die, too. He didn't like how dying felt, and he cried in despair. The heat from the suns added to his misery. If they would just go, he knew he'd feel a lot better.

Where was his aunt? Why didn't she come? Why did she leave him alone? Didn't she care? "Aunt Beru!" He pleaded with her to come to him; sobs shredded his words. But she heard him, her hand took his and she cooled his brow. Luke was relieved. She wouldn't leave him, ever; she'd stay until he was well.

"Suns are hot," he told her. "Turn them off." He knew once they were off, his heat would be gone and the desert would cool; then he could go back out and play—if he didn't die.

* * *

Tamara turned to her father. "What does he mean?"

Alex shrugged. "I don't know."

* * *

Luke heard his uncle's voice. Now there was someone who could help; his uncle could do anything. "Uncle Owen, please—turn the suns off."

There was no answer.

"Turn them off." The warmth built up around him, smothering him like a heavy quilt. Tears formed in his eyes, taking much-needed fluid from his body. Luke knew death was a certainty if his uncle didn't do as he asked; the heat was unbearable.

* * *

Mhari relieved Tamara and told her to fix something to eat for herself and Brett—if she could find him. Mhari took her daughter's place. The Rebel looked up at her as she sat down. His eyes implored her to help him, to ease his discomfort.

"Turn the suns off," he begged her.

"I wish Denrick had stayed." She had no idea what to do; now the fever's peak had been reached. If it broke that night, the boy would live; if it didn't, his body's catalysts would de-nature, his cells' functions would cease, and he would die.

"He would only be doing what we're doing now," answered Alex. "Watching and waiting."

Mhari could hear Tamara outside, shouting for her little brother. "Why don't you go and help Tamara find Brett? Or try and fix that 'speeder? We don't both need to be here."

"You'll be all right?"

"Put them off," Ryder mumbled.

Mhari nodded in reply to Alex's question.

"Okay, then."

* * *

Luke was nearing the end, his fevered despair reaching a peak. He couldn't understand why no one would help him; couldn't they see how hot he was? Didn't they understand? Were they just going to let him die? "Turn the suns off."

"You'll be all right," his uncle told him.

Luke felt a flicker of hope in his racing heart. Was he going to help after all? "Put them off," he told him again.

"Okay then."

Luke cried with joy; his uncle was helping, he was turning the suns off. The desert would cool and so would he. He relaxed with relief and allowed his fatigue to close his eyes. "Thank you," he whispered. The sleep he fell into was deep and healing.

VII

"Leaving?" Leia's voice was full of disbelief. Trying to keep her voice as quiet as possible lest the other personnel in the command centre should hear. "But why?"

"There's nothing to keep us here, now." *Now that the kid's gone*, Han thought. *Stupid, dumb kid. I hang around this pit for months, trying to teach him how to save his ass, and the first time he's outta my sight, he gets it shot off.* "Nothing," he repeated somewhat sourly. "Sides, I got things to do, places to go, people to see—and a price tag around my neck to remove."

"What about..." Leia started to protest; but Han cut her off.

"I don't want an argument, so don't start with your 'what about the Alliance?' speech, I've heard it before. I told you, I ain't a Rebel."

"What about Luke?" Leia asked softly watching Han's features darken and harden.

"What about him?"

"He'd want you to stay."

"He's dead."

"We don't know that for sure. Wedge..."

"Wedge told you what happened!" Han snapped, angry at Leia for bringing Luke into their conversation. "Why can't you just accept it?"

"Because I don't believe he's dead!" She realized this was the first time she had fully believed it herself and she wondered where this sudden conviction had come from. "No one was able to check and see if..."

"Leave it!" he shouted, losing control of his short temper. "He's gone. Finished!"

Leia sank down into the nearest chair ignoring the startled looks they were now getting from the others in the room. "Don't you feel anything, Han?" She asked softly.

He turned away from her, to study the star chart on the wall; she spoke to his back. "You spent hours with him, working on the Falcon, going on supply runs and small missions. You taught him to shoot like you, to chat up the girls like you, to fly like you. I can't believe you're ready to dismiss him, just like that."

Han spoke quietly, his anger gone. "You can't allow yourself feelings in my line of business. You can't care for someone, 'cause they're liable to be burned down. You can't allow yourself to get sappy, 'cause the guy who got him may be out to get you, too. You learn not to get involved; that way you don't get hurt. After a while, the guys you flew around with just become faces from your past. It's best that way."

"Is that what Luke is? Just another face?" Leia didn't mean it to sound like she was baiting him, but that's how it came out, and she regretted her quick tongue.

Han hesitated for a moment. "Yeah, that's what he is. I've run into a few like him: stupid kids who thought they could take on the galaxy and win. All of them met the same death."

"Weren't you once like that, Han?"

"Yeah, maybe I was; but I grew up fast." He turned back to face her.

"Did you?" Leia couldn't help smiling.

Han had no answer, but he smiled. "Look, can we just drop this conversation?" He gestured at the Rebel personnel around them.

"There's nothing I can do to make you change your mind?" Leia wanted to ask him to stay — because of her. With Luke and Han she'd been able to be just Leia. Not Princess, not Rebel leader. Just Leia. If Han left her now Leia was afraid she might become lost in the titles once more.

Han shook his head. "No."

Leia nodded with sad resignation. "When will you leave?"

"I'll be around for a while. Wedge asked me to take Luke's place beside him when he weds Kandi I leave after the ceremony."

Leia cheered up slightly. "That's not for several days Would you consider staying for the assault on Minoan? I know it's several weeks away yet, but we could use you."

"I could use me." Han openly grinned. "No thanks, your Highness; I'm not getting involved in another suicide attack." Leia opened her mouth to protest, but he held his hand up, silencing her. "No, no speeches; I don't have the time. Chewie's waiting on me."

"Does he want to go?" Leia questioned with a smile.

"What?"

"Chewie; does he want to leave?"

Han returned her smile. "You just don't give up, do you?"

Leia shook her head, mocking Han's previous gesture and expression. "No."

"I'll see you around, Princess."

Leia watched the door slide shut behind him and she smiled sadly. The Corellian had given away more about himself than he had meant to. She now knew that beneath the hard exterior he was feeling Luke's loss and she felt desperately sorry for him. He had lied about not getting involved; he had broken his own rule and he was hurting badly. She wanted to comfort him, wanted to tell him that she understood but she knew he wouldn't let her. And now he was leaving; because Luke was missing, because he'd let his shield drop, and because he didn't want it to happen again.

VIII.

It took effort to drag open his heavy eyes lids and he glimpsed a cream ceiling briefly before his eyes closed once more and darkness enfolded him.

* * *

There was a dull heavy beat of music and a voice close by. He forced his eyes open again and blinked through thickening fog before succumbing to his fatigue.

* * *

Strange bellowing and calling from alien creatures joined in chorus with the throb of music that penetrated the darkness once more. He lay with his eyes closed, realising that he didn't feel as tired or as leaden as his first attempts at waking up. He was warm and comfortable and... awake. Slowly, he opened his eyes and gradually allowed them to focus on his surroundings.

He was lying on a bed in a small, dimly lit room, the only visible furnishings being the bed, two chairs and a bureau that was piled with white sheets. Turning his head on the pillow he noticed a field med-kit IV set up by the bed and a tube leading from it down to his left arm; and there was a glass of water resting on the bedside table. He ran his parched tongue over his dry lips and reached for the glass. His arm didn't budge. He tugged his wrist hard, trying to free it; but it accomplished nothing apart from making him aware of a sharp, searing pain in his left side and he stifled a cry.

He lay still as memories of recent events surfaced from his befuddled mind. The mission; the retreat through the forest; the captain's death; the flood-light-lit clearing; the ramp of the shuttle lifting; then an excruciating pain, followed by darkness. Where was he now and why was he restrained? How long had he lain here? He pushed back his alarm, telling himself not to panic. This wasn't an Imperial cell - but neither was it the Rebel medical centre on Ahana.

He tried to wriggle into a more comfortable position, but being tied down did not give him much room to manoeuvre. He counted the bonds: one across his chest; one on each wrist; one on his left ankle; one on...

He couldn't feel his right leg nothing from the thigh on down! He couldn't feel any bond, couldn't feel the blanket, couldn't feel...

The panic he had fought earlier surged forward. as he struggled against the restraints, trying to sit up, straining his mind to receive some sort of message from the limb. Nothing. His head fell back on the pillow in despair. He remembered the cry of pain he had given during his sprint to the transport; remembered the fire from his leg before he blacked out. Was that the last

sensation he would ever feel? Had he lost his leg? How could he continue with the Alliance? They didn't have crippled pilots. Would they turn him away now?

"Tamara, turn that music down!"

Luke froze at the sound of a woman's voice just outside the door. It seemed familiar somehow. He calmed his breathing and partially closed his eyes as the door to the room slowly swung open. He wanted to see his visitor before he allowed her to see that he was awake.

The woman who entered was carrying a large bundle of sheets and blankets, which she placed on one of the chairs. She was middle-aged, petite. Her slightly rounded face was fair and her mop of red curls was lightly sprinkled with silver. Luke watched her through his lashes as she crossed to the window; and daylight suddenly filled the room. The woman turned back to the bed and she checked the IV at his side before gently pulling the blanket up around his neck and smoothing out the creases.

Mhari smiled at his half-lidded gaze; she had known he was awake from the moment she'd entered the room. "How are you feeling?" she asked softly

The woman's accent was alien to Luke, thick and guttural, and he had difficulty understanding her at first; but at least she spoke Basic. She placed her hand on his forehead and cheeks, just like Aunt Beru used to when he was ill. "Still a bit warm. You gave us quite a fright, you know."

"My leg..." His voice was a hoarse whisper and the sound of it frightened him.

"It's all right," she told him quietly, reading his fear. "You've been hurt, but you'll be fine now." She turned from him for a moment and called toward the open door. "Tamara!" There was no answer; the thudding music still blared. Mhari sighed, took in a deeper breath. "Tamara!!"

Luke winced as her shout sent shock waves through his pounding brain. The music abruptly ceased, a door slammed shut, there were a few muffled footsteps and a girl appeared in the doorway. She was a younger version of her mother, perhaps seventeen or eighteen. Her curls were caught and pulled back into a tail, her eyes were dark and she looked slightly exasperated.

"What is it? Is his bed needing changed again...? Oh..." She smiled shy at Luke's staring eyes.

Luke felt a hot flush flood his face at the implications of the girl's words and he quickly glanced away from her.

"Tamara, go and fetch your father," her mother instructed. The girl disappeared to obey, and the woman turned back to Luke. "My husband will explain everything to you." She picked up the glass and helped Luke raise his head. He gulped down the cool liquid and choked.

"Take it easy - just sip."

"Thank you." His voice was stronger, lubricated by the water.

"So, he's finally awake."

Luke turned toward the man who spoke. He was large, his body obviously adapted to heavy work; he sported a full black beard, which obscured much of his face. He looked awesome but he smiled widely, putting Luke at ease.

"A little while ago," his wife replied to his statement.

"You've caused us no end of trouble and worry, young man," he grinned. "How do you feel?"

"Tired."

The man laughed. "You hear that, Mhari? He sleeps for almost three-days, and he's still 'tired'."

"Three days!" Luke was horrified. Was it three days since the mission? Leia and Han would be worried.

"You've slept for three days, but you've actually been with us for five. You were pretty much out of it for most of the time."

"Five!" Luke exclaimed, horrified. He pulled against the restraints once more. "I've got to get back..." He looked to the farmer for an explanation. "Why am I...?" He tugged hard, crying out at the pain he caused himself.

Alex sat by the bed and placed his hand firmly on the boy's shoulders, calming his panic. "Just lay still, rest, and let me explain. I know you're scared and confused; that's to be expected." He paused as he felt the boy's muscles relax. "That's better." He released his grip. "I'm Alex Lasjow; this is Mhari my wife. The girl you saw is my daughter Tamara; we also have son, Brett, whom you'll meet later." The Rebel opened his mouth to introduce himself; but Alex cut him off. "No—don't tell us who you are. Let me finish." Alex sat down as Mhari busied herself putting away the blankets she had carried into the room.

"My daughter found you, in the woods. You realize you've been shot?"

Luke nodded slowly, fearing the worst.

"The local medic has been in and out to see you. "He'll be back later this evening, so I'll let him explain your injuries."

"My leg," Luke said, with suppressed panic. "I can't feel my leg!"

"Your ankle has a bad break and, since you seemed hell bent on wriggling about. Janis anaesthetized — temporarily, of course. That's also why you're restrained. We didn't want you harming yourself." He hesitated, glancing at Mhari, before rushing on. He didn't want to confuse the boy with too much information, but he felt that he had to settle things from the beginning. "This may sound harsh," he began hesitantly, "and in a way it is; but I want you to listen carefully to what I have to say."

"Alex, I don't think..." Mhari tried to interrupt.

"From the start, Mhari," Alex reminded her. "We agreed." Mhari nodded and Alex turned back to the youth. "I need you to listen carefully to what I'm going to tell you."

"Yes, sir," Luke was curious to hear what was so important; but he had a feeling he wasn't going to like it much.

Alex took a breath. "We don't want to know who you are. Or where you've come from," he frowned, "we already know too much. From now on, to us and anyone else you're our nephew, Ryder Lasjow." He said the name slowly, emphasizing it. " You need to forget your own name. You are not a Rebel. You grew up in the farm lands and you don't know a thing about the civil war. Remember that, and you may go undiscovered here. Understand?"

"Yes," Luke answered, a little confused. "But I won't be here that long; I have to get back. My friends..."

"Your friends will have to manage without you," Alex told him. "There is no way off this planet, apart from the Imperial lines, and you can't chance that. Get used to that idea from the start. You are now Ryder Lasjow, I can't stress that enough." The boy's distress showed clearly in his features and Alex couldn't help but feel sorry for him; he was being told to forget everything he once had, and everyone he loved. He pushed on, almost hating himself for what he had to do. "Also you must never mention your Alliance in this house or outside of it. It may reach the wrong ears. You have to remember that I have a family and a livelihood to protect."

"I understand, sir." Luke's voice was quiet, resigned.

Alex patted Ryder's shoulder, smiling kindly. "Don't look so damned depressed; you just may like it here." He turned to Mhari. "Help me take these restraints off him; let him get a little more comfortable."

Carefully, they removed his bonds and lifted him higher onto the pillows. Down the hall, small footsteps ran. Alex opened the door and called to his son. A small red-blond head appeared around the doorpost and grinned cheekily. Luke smiled back as the child entered the room.

"Oh, Brett, " Mhari groaned when she saw her son's clothes; they were covered in dirt and grass stains." How do you manage it?"

Alex laughed. "Ryder, this is Brett."

"Hi, Brett." Luke smiled as he remembered the time when he appeared in front of his aunt covered in Biggs's father's hopper oil; her reaction was similar to Mhari's.

Brett stared at his elder cousin; a small frown crossed his forehead and he risked a glance at his father before pushing on with his important question. "What's a Jedi Knight?"

Luke looked to Alex, unsure; should he answer?

Alex's face darkened; he gripped Brett by the arms and crouched down beside him. "Don't ever ask that again!" He said, angrily. "It's a bad thing, don't say it again." Brett squealed and pulled free; he ran to his mother, seeking solace. "Do you understand me, Brett?"

Luke turned away, a little embarrassed.

"Yes!" Brett screamed, not really understanding why he was being punished. If Ryder could say it, then why couldn't he? It wasn't fair.

"Go and find Tamara, Brett." Mhari spoke softly to her squealing off-spring and the boy ran from the room. His footsteps thumping down the hallway.

"I'm sorry." Luke realized Brett could only have heard of the Jedi from him.

"It's not your fault," Alex told him, but his tone implied otherwise. "If you'll excuse me, I have a farm to attend to."

"I'm sorry," Luke apologized to Mhari, once Alex was gone.

"No harm done, "Mhari assured him, but Luke winced at her sharp tone of voice; he'd been awake for barely an hour, and already he'd upset everyone. "Tamara will be in to sit with you." She spoke more kindly. "Try and sleep more. I'm afraid Alex may have worn you out. I'll bring you some soup a little later." She quickly left the room, leaving Ryder alone once more.

A heavy depression settled over Luke as the door closed. He sighed wearily and closed his eyes. He'd been here for five days - *five days!* Han and Leia must think he was dead; and he might as well be. After a few short months of the kind of life he'd always dreamed of, he was now, once again, stuck on a back world: a farm boy who could only yearn for greater things. Luke's thoughts hung on sarcasm; at least he'd fit into the role, he knew all about it.

Ryder Lasjow. His mind went to his new name: Ryder Lasjow. Luke screwed up his nose. He hated it, but he supposed he'd get used to it. He would also have to get used to being here and living with these people. Who were they? Why had they taken him in? Why had they taken the risk? There was a large Imperial presence on this planet; he searched his mind for its name . . . Irlam that was it. He and the squad had run into a few of the Imperials' number. Why all the hardware here? He shook his head, trying to dispel his thoughts, remembering Alex's words. He was thinking like a Rebel lieutenant, not a simple farm boy. He must forget his past; it would be difficult, but he would have to try. Forget about the brutal murders of his aunt and uncle, forget the teachings of Ben, forget the Death Star, the supply runs with Han and Chewie, the training flights, Leia--

Leia! How could he forget his princess? She was the one who had really started everything for him.

No, it was no good. He would never be able to forget his life with the Alliance; he would have to get back, somehow. He couldn't give up all he had fought for; he couldn't sit around on his backside on another dead-end farm, while his friends continued their fight. He'd bide his time, obey Alex for now, regain his strength; then he would plan his way off-planet. He could watch the Empire's movements here; try to find out the things the Alliance had failed to uncover. Perhaps he could steal a ship—risky, but staying here was not something he was thrilled about.

He smiled as he imagined his reunion with Leia. She'd be...

"Are you sleeping?" Tamara's inquiry jerked Luke from his daydream; he opened his eyes to see her standing by the open door.

"No," he answered, as she approached the bed and lowered herself onto the chair beside him.

"You're looking better," she commented, studying his still-pale features.

"I wish I felt as good as I look." His brain hammered against his skull, sending waves of dull pain down the back of his neck and his side burned. His whole body felt weighted and lethargic.

Tamara smiled the same shy smile he's seen earlier. "Mom said I should sit with you, keep you company while you sleep. " She picked up a book from the table. "So please, don't mind me. " She found her place in the story and settled down to read.

Luke watched her for a while, his gaze hidden from her by the blanket. He sighed, turning his head on the pillow. He closed his eyes, seeking the peaceful darkness of slumber. But, tired as he was, sleep eluded him. He lay listening to the farm work, machinery whining from the fields, animals bellowing in their enclosures, something dropping in the kitchen. Tamara giggled. Luke opened his eyes, glancing toward his companion; obviously, she had reached a humorous part of the story.

"What's it about?" he asked; partly out of a genuine interest, but mostly out of his desire to have something to talk about.

Tamara barely spared him a glance. "It's the latest book in the Nor Vanhal series," she told him slowly, still concentrating on the story. "In this, Nor finally finds Kanera and saves her from the evil Cranlor. There's a big battle at the end."

Luke had never heard of the Nor Vanhal series. He craned his neck in an attempt to see the print. "How do you know there's a battle if you're only half way through?"

Her answer was short. "I've read it before."

Ask a silly question! Luke thought. "Is it any good?"

She frowned at the book, slightly annoyed by his questions. "It's okay, I guess." She looked at him as he strained to read the words over her arm. She offered him the book. "Do you want to read it?"

He realized he was intruding. "No—I'm sorry." He lay his head carefully back onto the pillow. "Maybe some other time."

"Okay."

End of conversation!

Luke turned from her, striving to either sleep or think of something to occupy himself with. He knew he shouldn't talk too much, that he should try and conserve what little energy he had; but he was bored. He hoped he would not be

bed-ridden for long; he hated not being able to do anything for himself. Although if Han were here, he'd tell him to lie back and enjoy it. He tried to imagine what his life here would be like. He was supposed to be the nephew of these people. Nephew: that sounded too familiar. In fact, it all sounded too familiar, too much like his old life, too much like the life he couldn't wait to get away from; it brought back memories best not dwelt upon. The only difference was that he now had two cousins, which could be fun, especially little Brett. It'd be like having a younger brother. Luke liked that idea; he'd be the big brother figure, Brett would look up to him, Tamara would— Luke gazed back at the girl by the bed. If his friends' sisters back on Tatooine were anything to go by, he and Tamara would probably fight non-stop! He smiled to himself as he realized that one of his dreams of his childhood was coming true, his dream of having a family. Of course, he'd had his aunt and uncle, but he had really been alone. Contrary to popular belief, being an only child had not meant being spoiled, it meant loneliness. Now he had a new aunt, a new uncle, and two cousins. His time here might not be that bad.

Luke was drawn from his thoughts by Brett shouting to his mother that he wouldn't be long, that he was just going to the 'fresher and could she watch the console game for him? The Zweifel were about to attack, and he couldn't hold it in any longer. Luke grinned. Brett sounded just like he did when he was younger: a constant pest!

Slowly, Luke's grin faded as he became aware of a soft pressure in his own bladder. He turned his head on the pillow, wishing he could turn his whole body, cross his legs—anything! He knew it was Brett's shout that had started his own body calling for relief. Well, as long as it was only calling, and not screaming, he could ignore it.

The pressure increased and Luke cursed to himself. What was he going to do? He couldn't go himself; he couldn't just lie here; he couldn't tell Tamara, as he was too embarrassed. Stop it! He told himself. Thinking about it only makes it worse! He wriggled under the blanket as the desire to pass water grew, and the dull ache in his abdomen began. He glanced desperately at Tamara, to see if she had noticed his distress. She had not. Well, there was only one thing for it. He cleared his throat. "Ah...could you tell me where the 'fresher is?"

"Just across the hall," Tamara answered, not remembering that Ryder was an invalid. The book fully commanded her attention.

A quiet crimson coloured his cheeks. "Could you help me, please?" His voice wilted with embarrassment.

His question jolted Tamara from her book; she stared at him with wide eyes. "What?!"

His look was pleading. He pointed to his injured leg, jiggled the arm that was tethered to the IV.

Tamara's mouth curled up at the corners; she began to laugh at his urgency.

"It's not funny!" protested Luke, biting his lower lip in effort.

"If you can hang on for a bit, I'll get Dad," Giggling, she placed her book down and ran for her father.

Luke had reached crisis point by the time Alex arrived. The farmer grinned at him, shaking his head for several long, excruciating moments. "We didn't have this trouble with you when you were unconscious," he told the desperate youth as he handed Luke a urinal bottle...

The look of horror and the deep blush which crawled over Luke's face, as the implications of what Alex had said sunk in, brought a deep bass chuckle from the farmer. Alex was enjoying himself. "Tamara and Mhari did a good job," he laughed as Luke stared in dismay at the bottle. "Of course," he continued, "Tamara was shy at first; but I told her, 'If you've seen one, you've seen them all.' Don't you agree?"

"No!" Luke squeaked.

* ... * ... *

Tamara settled back into her chair and pretended to stick her nose in her book as Alex carefully spread up Luke's sheet and blankets.

"Next time, don't wait so long." The twinkle of fun was still present in Alex's eyes as he lifted the full bottle and covered it to ease Luke's embarrassment. "I don't think Tamara would appreciate it!" He winked at his daughter on his way out.

A heavy, uncomfortable silence settled over the room. Luke stared out of the far window at the grey, clouded sky, unable to even glance at the girl by his bed. Surely Alex was just pulling his leg. Tamara wouldn't have helped Mhari, would she? Even just thinking about it made him cringe.

"You shouldn't pay too much attention to Dad," Tamara said, breaking the quiet, trying to ease Ryder's embarrassment. "He likes to tease." Relief flooded Luke's body for the second time that hour. "You mean you didn't—?"

Tamara laughed. "Of course I did. Dad was needed on the farm. Who else could help Mom? Brett's a little young." She watched the redness creep over Ryder's cheeks once more. "There's nothing to be embarrassed about; I had plenty of practice when Brett was sick."

"There's a bit of a difference between me and Brett!" Luke declared indignantly.

Tamara's eyes gleamed mischievously. "I know."

Luke groaned. Things were going from bad to worse. He didn't like the way the conversation was heading; he couldn't think of anything to say to her. He pointed at the book in an attempt to change the subject. "What's happening?" he asked as lightly and as innocently as he could.

Tamara smiled into her book, seeing through his ploy. "The battle's about to begin."

Luke perked up; battles he could handle. "In space?"

"No."

"Where, then?"

"On Arene III."

Luke frowned slightly. "I've never heard of it."

"It's fictitious, I think," Tamara started at the name on the page, frowning slightly as she tried to concentrate through Luke's questioning.

"Who's fighting who?"

"I told you already. The Forces of Nor Vanhal are fighting those of Cranlor," she explained a little irritably. "I'll let you read it once I'm finished, okay?"

"Okay," Luke stared up at the ceiling for a moment or two. "What was that music I woke up to earlier?"

"What music?"

"When I woke I could hear music."

Tamara cast her mind back. "Oh... that, just some local band."

"Do you think I could listen to it?"

The girl threw her book down exasperated. "You sure ask a lot of questions!"

The dam burst. "You'd ask questions, too, if you woke up among strangers and were told to forget everything that went on before—to forget your past, your friends, your home. I just want to get to know you, that's all." Luke looked to the

ceiling as tears of frustration appeared in his eyes. "It's difficult to come to terms with all that's happening."

"I'm sorry," Tamara apologized, realizing she'd added to his frustration by almost ignoring him. She smiled sympathetically. "Dad lay it on thick, did he?"

Luke nodded. "You could say that."

"Okay, I'll answer your questions. What do you want to know?"

Wincing, he struggled to sit up; pleased he'd gotten her full attention. "Well, you can start by telling me about this planet; I only know what the Command—" He stopped himself and gave a weak grin. "I only know a little about it."

Tamara gazed out the window. "There's not much to tell. It's a small planet, mainly agricultural. It's pretty much under the control of the authorities. There are no commercial lines; what we get, we get from the Empire. Also, it's kind of boring; there's not much to do, apart from work."

"Sounds a bit like home," Luke mumbled to himself; but Tamara caught his words.

"You'd better not let Dad you say something like that," she advised. "He'll blow his top."

"It's hard to forget," he told her. "Especially since it's all so similar to my own life."

Her curiosity got the better of her. "It is? How?"

"I grew up on a farm. Not one like this, though; we farmed water."

"Water?!" she laughed. "Who farms water?"

Luke smiled. "I come from a desert planet, where water is scarce. We had to take it from the atmosphere."

"That's another thing; don't let Dad know you were a farmer, or he'll have you out working."

"I don't think I'd mind too much; I never was a very good patient. Aunt Beru used to say that it was because I didn't have any patience." His voice turned sad as he mentioned his aunt. The conversation had been turned around on him; now Tamara was learning about him, not the other way around. He forced a smile. "Tell me more. What about the planet's population?"

"Civilian, or Imperial?" Tamara wasn't sure why she added Imperial; perhaps it was because Ryder was a Rebel.

"Civ —" Luke hesitated; this would be a good place to start learning about the Empire's presence here. "Both."

"Well, I'm not sure of the whole population," she told him, "but in Darel, the local township, there's a couple of thousand. As for the Imperials, there's a small outpost a couple of kilometres from here, but their headquarters is about fifty kilometres away. I've seen it; it's pretty big."

Great, Luke thought, I'm surrounded by them! "Why is there such a large number?"

Tamara shook her head. "I dunno."

That was a big help. So far he'd only found out what he already knew. "What do you farm here?" She could tell him that easily enough.

"Cereals, mostly; and we have a few animals." A bellow from the enclosure outside provided the proof. "Nerfs, mainly."

Luke's eyebrows raised a notch. "Nerfs? Really? I've never seen a nerf. Heard about them, though." And he chuckled.

"What's so funny?" she asked, beginning to laugh as well.

"Nerfs!" Luke said, laughing a little more, wincing as his movement jerked his injured body. He explained as he flinched at the flaring pain... "Where I come from, if you call someone a 'nerf herder,' it's an insult!"

In spite of herself, Tamara joined in with Ryder; she found his humour infectious. A thought occurred to her, and she stared at him. "I suppose you could say I was a nerf herder."

Luke roared with laughter; tears formed at the corners of his eyes; and he yelled in pain. Tamara chuckled furiously, taking enjoyment from his comical attempts to ease his laughter.

Mhari stood outside the bedroom, smiling as she listened to the laughter coming from Tamara and Ryder. They seemed to be getting along all right. She opened the door to find Ryder desperately holding his side, trying to stop laughing, and Tamara wiping tears from her eyes.

"What's all the hilarity about? Her inquiry abruptly ended the two's giggles; they exchanged knowing glances. Mhari sighed. Why was it that the appearance of an

adult always resulted in silence? She bent over the boy, checking his side dressing; luckily, he hadn't broken the seal. "You are supposed to be sleeping, Ryder," she scolded, in good humour.

"Sorry," he mumbled, visibly flinching at his new name.

"Your IV will need changed soon. I'll add in some of the painkiller Janis left. I think you might need it." Mhari smiled. "Do you feel like some soup now?"

Although he hadn't eaten since the day of the mission, Luke's stomach rebelled at the thought of food. But he knew he had to eat something. He glanced at Tamara before answering her mother. "I could eat a nerf."

Mhari was left guessing as Tamara collapsed. Ryder grinned, pleased with himself.

* ... *

"A simple procedure?!" Luke echoed Denrick Janis's last statement derisively. The medic had arrived late that evening, just as Alex had promised. After cursory introductions, the doctor had proceeded to explain Luke's wounds and the treatment they needed. Luke didn't appreciate the graphic details Janis supplied; besides, it sounded painful.

Denrick laughed "Don't look so worried. I assure you, you won't feel a thing."

"Last time someone said that to me I didn't sit down for a week," Luke grumbled, " Funny thing is—he was a doctor, too!"

"You'll have a strong local anaesthetic and the bacta dressings are quite effective, you know," Denrick rummaged in his kit. "How's the leg? Can you feel anything from it?"

"Just a bit. Why don't you just dip me in bacta instead of the dressings?" he wanted to know. "It'd be a whole lot quicker. Not to mention less painful."

"A Bacta Tank?" Janis glanced up at him. "A question like that shows that you're from off-planet. I'm afraid the Empire is rather selfish with its medical supplies." He removed a syringe from his kit. "I'll give the block a boost, to keep you from moving that ankle. You'll have to watch what you say."

"I've been told that already." Luke winced as the needle penetrated his skin. "Are you sure the calcium cement will heal the bone quickly?"

"Who's the doctor—me or you?" Denrick cleared his instruments away. "It won't heal it as fast as bacta would, but you should be able to hobble around with help

in a couple of days. You'll limp for a while; but, like the burn on your side, it'll gradually disappear. Happier?"

Luke shook his head. "No."

Denrick laughed once more, "Well, it's the best I can do." He lifted his kit. "I'll see you tomorrow. Sleep well. "

Luke watched him leave. Sleep well? Who did he think he was kidding? He's probably have nightmares. He listened as Alex and Mhari said their goodbyes to the medic. The house's main door closed and a speeder drove off. Luke reached up and flicked his light off as someone rapped softly on the door before opening it.

"You still awake?" Tamara whispered quietly.

"Yes," He smiled when he saw her silhouette in the doorway; her hair was down, curling softly over her shoulders.

"I just wanted to say goodnight."

"Oh, goodnight," Luke acknowledged.

She softly closed the door. Luke lay back on his pillow and closed his eyes. "Tomorrow," he said reluctantly, "here I come!"

ix

The small reception hall was packed with several hundred guests, most of whom hovered around the newly-wed couple. Conversation was loud, punctuated with the clinking of glasses. Music blared from the sound system, droids hung around various groups, offering drinks and party fares. Someone laughed boisterously.

From a quiet corner of the hall, Han viewed the celebrations with contempt. He refilled his glass with the last dregs from the bottle he was holding, and downed the fiery liquid in one mouthful. He exhaled heavily and reached for a new bottle. He watched Princess Leia float through the crowd to greet Wedge and Kandi. Han laughed humourlessly to himself; Wedge had been grinning so much that evening, it was a wonder his mouth didn't freeze up. Han popped the top off the bottle and filled his glass with a healthy measure, ignoring a growled warning from his partner.

Chewbacca carefully watched his friend. He would allow him one more glass before taking control of him. That was their agreement: Neither would let the other get so intoxicated that they couldn't shoot straight, and Han was fast approaching that state. The large Wookiee knew Han was drowning his sorrows

for several reasons, the first being that he hated functions like this, and the second...

Well, the second was apparent to all, except Han himself. He missed the Skywalker cub. Chewbacca missed him, too, and his absence stood out at this gathering. Luke had agreed to stand by Antilles as he took his vows, to help organize the celebration afterward. His place had been taken by the Corellian, who now regretted his decision as it meant he had to stay until the end of the reception and deliver the closing speech, and Han would rather be elsewhere.

Han reached for the bottle again, conscious of the Wookiee's gaze. He remembered their agreement, too; but right now he didn't give a damn. He was going to enjoy getting drunk; it would make up for being bored out of his skull. He groaned as Wedge spotted him through a break in the crowd. The pilot gave a wide grin and pulled his bride towards the spacer. Han looked around for somewhere to retreat to, but they reached him before he could make good his escape.

"Captain Solo!" Wedge had to shout above the din of the gathering. "We'd like to thank you again for taking Luke's place. We realize it must be hard for you."

"Why should it be hard?" Han's indifference wiped the smile from Wedge's face. Kandi shot an uneasy glance toward her new husband; the air around them thickened. Solo was drunk, and in no mood for niceties.

"Why does everyone think it's hard to me to take the kid's place? Why is it if someone mentions Luke, they look at me? Should it bother me that he got himself killed?" Chewie placed a hairy paw on Han's arm, trying to calm him. The room had grown quiet. The Corellian shrugged off his partner's concern.

"He was your friend," Wedge said, not understanding Solo's outburst.

"So? What am I supposed to do? Walk around in black, wailing in mourning?" Solo belched. "He was your friend, too—but I don't see you grieving too much. You've been too busy wearing that stupid grin .."

"Han!" Leia quickly interrupted him, "That's enough!"

Han turned on her. "Anything you say, Your Highness." He grabbed the bottle and stormed through the stunned crowd. Leia and Wedge ran after him.

"Han!" Leia called after him as they entered the hallway. "Wait!"

He stopped in his tracks, and whirled on them. "What?"

"You can't leave," Wedge protested. His great day had just collapsed around him. "You agreed.."

"I just resigned." Han walked on toward the hangar.

Leia turned to the stricken pilot. "You go back, Wedge; I'll try and talk to him."

"But, he's to close the proceedings."

"Ask Chewbacca; he'll be only too glad to do it." Leia followed the pirate's path.

Wedge watched her go. "Chewbacca can't deliver a speech," he quietly told her retreating back.

Leia reached the hangar's door just in time to see the Falcon lift off and soar out of Ahana's atmosphere. She leaned against the wall and sighed heavily; she should have known something like this would happen. She doubted Wedge would be able to fully forgive the Corellian for upsetting his wedding. Perhaps it would be best for Han if he were to leave them. Feeling troubled, she returned to the hall.

* * *

Han settled the Falcon into a gentle orbit and placed his beloved ship on auto. He flicked the last switch and slouched back into his chair. All was quiet here, all was peaceful, and soon his anger began to fade. He had no idea why he was angry. Was it with Wedge, with Leia, or with himself? He shook his head and lifted the bottle to his lips; he swallowed and licked his lips as he- mused over his feelings, feelings he didn't like or really understand.

No, he wasn't angry with Wedge, or Leia. A bit annoyed with them, yes. They were trying to be sympathetic, and Solo hated that. He was angry with himself; but only because he'd shot off his mouth in front of all those people. He frowned as the truth tried to push forward from the back of his mind. He drank more from the bottle in an attempt to keep the thoughts at bay. He failed, and they rushed in, filling his mind.

He'd done the one thing he'd vowed he'd never do: he'd gotten involved. He'd allowed himself to let down his shield, and now he was paying for it. He missed the kid, it was as simple as that. Despite his words to the contrary, that was the trouble. But he also knew the moment he was sober again, he would deny everything. However, for now, he dwelt on the truth.

Everything had happened to Luke so fast that he hadn't had time to think about the more unpleasant parts of his adventure. Once things had calmed down a bit, Han had found him sitting alone in a tree. Luke had said he'd never climbed one

before', and he wanted to see if he could. Han had laughed, asking if he thought he'd be able to get back down; but Luke had only managed a slight smile. It was then that Han had noticed the boy had been crying. Tears were foreign to Han, and he had been unsure how to react to Luke's. He had helped him down, trying to crack jokes; but Luke had not been in a joking mood. His grief had finally caught up to him. Han had listened as Luke told him about his aunt and uncle, about how he'd been an orphan and how they had raised him from a baby. And how they were slaughtered by Vader's Stormtroopers.

On the outside, Han had never changed; but inside, his heart had altered, shifted. He had been moved by Luke's story. They had something in common; they were both parentless. Neither had felt the love of a mother and father. Han had slapped Luke on the back, attempting to cheer him up. Feeling like an older brother, he had asked Luke if he'd like to join him on a supply run to Xalan; maybe Miss High and Mighty would come along, too. Luke had grinned, the excitement clear in his eyes.

Han finished his drink and placed the empty bottle on the cockpit floor. His gaze turned to Chewie's co-pilot chair and console. Yes, he missed Luke—Luke, with his smart mouth, his dumb suggestions, his overwhelming enthusiasm for everything in life...

"No, no no!" Solo slapped Luke's inquisitive hand away from the controls. "Not yet; wait until I show you first."

Luke grinned widely. "You said that the other night--in the mess."

Han grimaced as he flicked a switch above Luke's head; that night had been embarrassing. They had spotted what must have been the best-looking female in the Alliance. Han had then proceeded to teach Luke his best chat-up lines. Han had struck out miserably—and Luke had walked away with her. The grin the kid had worn the next day had been infuriating! "Shut up." He hated to be reminded of his failures. "Who's the expert? Me or you?"

Luke chuckled gleefully. "You said that, too!"

"Listen, Junior—if you want to learn to fly this bird, keep that mouth of yours shut and pay attention. Show some respect."

"Yes sir!"

"That's better." Han patted Luke on the head. He climbed into his own chair and began pointing out switches and dials to his young friend. He had surprised himself, not to mention Luke and everyone else, by offering to teach Luke how to

fly the Falcon. "That, that and that start her up—don't touch!" He indicated a small screen. "That's the scanner...."

"I know that," Luke said. "Do you think I'm stupid?" Solo flashed him a knowing grin. Luke groaned, regretting the rhetorical question.

The Corellian continued with his lesson. "Switch on running lights," he told his pupil. Luke's hand hovered, uncertain, over a button. Han cleared his throat loudly, attracting Luke's attention, and shook his head. Luke's hand moved to another switch; Solo nodded, and the lights were activated. "Good; now, the console on your left. .. activate auto systems check." He watched Luke carefully. "Right; acknowledge it." He tapped his finger on an indicator. "Now, this is your power-train monitor. If you get a green light, you're in great shape." The light blinked on cue. "That's all systems A-okay. We can prepare to take off. Set your power flow for ten--no, not that one--that one; and apply some throttle. Clear your lifters, change power flow to drive, and give it more throttle." He grinned. "There, now you're air-borne."

"No, we're not," Luke protested. "We didn't budge at all."

Han's smile widened. "You didn't think I was going to let you fly her on your first lesson, did you?. Maybe next time, if you're lucky..."

"But Han? I...."

Chuckling Solo rose from his chair and sauntered from the cockpit; now he'd gotten Luke back for that little incident in the mess!

Han turned away from the co-pilot's area and heaved himself from his chair. He staggered through to the passenger compartment and threw himself onto the recliner next to the game board. There he fell into an uneasy, drunken slumber.

* * *

Rieekan rose to greet the Princess Leia as she entered the room, breaking off his conversation with Commander Narra. She was startled by his appearance, the heavy shadows beneath his eyes being the only colour on his pale face. "Your Highness." His voice sounded tired. "I'm afraid I have some grave news. We've lost liam's squad."

Leia's eyes widened in disbelief. "The whole squad?"

"Every man, every fighter."

"But that area was supposed to be quiet!" She lowered herself into a nearby chair.

"So was Irlam, if you remember." Rieekan quickly regretted mentioning the system where the princess had lost her friend; he glanced at her, watched her features darken. "This, of course, puts the Minoan assault in jeopardy," he continued. "We've lost too many good pilots and too much equipment in recent missions to continue with the preparations for the attack. We may to call it off."

"No, General." Leia shook her head, disagreeing. "We've spent too much time planning and exercising for this attack. It's the only chance we'll have of getting a shot at Governor; Amand, and at least bring a halt to the weapons production there and it would be a severe blow to the Empire. We have to go ahead with the attack; with Amand out of the way, we then have a chance to bring his region into the Alliance. To pull out means we lose too much."

"Your Highness," the general protested. He saw her view of the argument, but they lacked sufficient numbers for the attack. "The attack is no longer feasible for us at this time. Perhaps if we postpone until——"

"We'll miss Amand. He'll only be there that one day."

Narra listened to their debate, weighing up each side of the argument. He cleared his throat before speaking. "May I make a suggestion?"

Leia looked toward him, as though just noticing his presence. Narra addressed them both. "I agree with Her Highness; but I also agree with you., General. Ahana no longer has the resources for the assault; but if we were to make the operation a joint effort between bases, say Ahana and Raymar, then we'd have the necessary numbers. The manoeuvres have been going well, sir; the men are almost ready. They'll be disappointed if the attack is called off now."

A sparkle showed in Leia's eyes for the first time during the meeting. "It is possible," she said, trying to hide her enthusiasm. "I'm sure General Dodonna will agree."

"It means releasing one-another's location," Rieekan thought out loud, "so that collaboration is possible; but it's a small risk, one that I think we can afford." He smiled. "I think we're all in agreement, then. I'll get in touch with Dodonna on Raymar at once; the sooner we...

The conference room's door swept open, cutting Rieekan off in mid-sentence, and a very angry Wookiee entered. He charged straight to Leia as he barked and howled his grievances, emphasizing his point with wide arm gestures. Leia, taken aback by Chewbacca's outburst, could only gape at the awesome sight before her.

"Chewbacca, I don't—" she began, as the door opened once more. Threepio bustled in, followed closely by his smaller counterpart.

"Princess Leia! Princess Leia!" The golden droid skirted around the Wookiee, carefully avoiding his flailing arms. "I told Chewbacca he couldn't come in here; but as you know, a Wookiee's manners—"

"Thank you, Threepio." Leia didn't let him continue; Chewbacca was angry enough. "Chewie, calm down, please." She turned to the two men and gave an almost embarrassed smile. "Gentlemen, if you'll accept my apologies." She strode from the room followed by the Wookiee and the two droids.

Once in the corridor, she attempted to sort things out. "Chewie, tell me what's wrong." She didn't really have to ask. The sensors had been monitoring the Falcon's orbit around the planet since her captain had placed her there the night before. It was now mid-afternoon, and still Han had given no sign of coming back down.

The large Wookiee spoke slowly, allowing Threepio time to translate for Leia.

"He says that since Captain Solo left the ceremony last night, there's been no sign of him. Chewbacca is worried that the captain has left the base without him, and he's..." The droid trailed off and stared in shock at the Wookiee. "I'm not saying that!"

Leia smiled in amusement as Chewbacca growled threateningly.

Threepio glanced around him, making sure there was no one nearby to hear the Wookiee's obscenity. He lowered his voice and leaned toward Leia, hoping he wouldn't offend her. He whispered in her ear, as Artoo Detoo tittered.

"It's okay, Chewie." She jerked a thumb skyward. "Han's in orbit. I'm sure once he's worked off his hangover, he'll be right down. As for your own..." she paused debating whether or not to use Chewbacca's own words. She decided not to; Threepio's processors might short-circuit. "...headache, you can get something from the medical centre. I understand they've had quite a few of the wedding guests."

The Wookiee barked a question, and Threepio relayed it to the princess.

She nodded. "Yes I'm sure communications will allow you to contact Han. Now, if you'll excuse me, the general will be waiting." She returned to the conference room as Chewbacca trudged down the corridor to the Command Centre.

Threepio watched him go. He turned and looked at the closed door, then glanced down the corridor. What were his next orders? He turned back to Chewbacca's

receding Perhaps he'd better watch him; sure the Wookiee didn't cause trouble. He tapped his friend's head. "Come along, Artoo."

* * *

Wedge Antilles hesitated at the foot of the Millennium Falcon's ramp. He had put this off ever since the Falcon had returned several hours ago and he didn't think he could let it wait any longer. He wasn't even sure he was doing the right thing; perhaps he'd only make matters worse by trying to apologize to the Corellian, but he wanted to clear the air between them. After all, they couldn't avoid one another forever. He glanced toward the fighters at the other end of the large hangar, knowing he should get his butt over there. The commander would give him hell if he was late for the latest manoeuvre, and he had a squad to lead in the attack now.

Wedge felt a tremor ripple down his spine. A squad of his own! Married one day and given a command the next! He sighed; there was no time for a honeymoon in the Alliance. Kandi was needed med-centre and he was needed in his fighter. Only, did it have to be Luke's squad they gave? Did it have to be Luke's Minoan target he had to hit?

"Hey, Lieutenant!"

Wedge didn't respond to that shout.

"Hey, Wedge!"

Wedge turned to find his wingman behind him. "What?"

"You coming? Or are you planning to stay here all evening?"

Wedge laughed. "I'll be with you in a minute, Jansen. I've got something I have to do first."

Jansen glanced at the freighter. "You'd better only be a minute; Narra's been kind of touchy lately. If you're late for—"

"I know. I have to do this while I'm in the right frame of mind. I just hope I don't make things worse." He gestured at the waiting fighters. "You'd better go; Narra would really get hot if we both were late."

Jansen ran on as Wedge started up the ramp. The ship was quiet. It would just be his luck if Solo wasn't there after all. There was no sign of the Corellian in either of the passenger compartments or in the cockpit, although they both were strewn with tools. Wedge knew he had to go; his minute was up long ago.

A spanner landed at his feet. Startled, he looked up to find Solo staring down at him from a hole in the ceiling. The pirate climbed down and picked up the fallen tool. Ignoring the young pilot, he strode through to the cockpit. Wedge was uncertain how to react to Solo's hostility, but he couldn't back out now. He followed Han to the flight deck.

"Captain," he began, unsure how to phrase what he wanted to say, "I'd like to apologize...for last night."

No reaction.

"I shouldn't have said anything about..." He stumbled on, his ill-prepared speech faltering, watching Han's impassive back. "I was only trying to thank you for stepping in at the-last moment. I had no idea you felt that way..."

Han was glad his face was hidden from Antilles. He wouldn't have like the pilot to see the confusion or surprise he was feeling. Why was Wedge apologizing to him? It should be the other way around. He didn't know what to answer; he wasn't used to these kinds of situations. Why were things so difficult these days? Even Chewie was acting strange. Instead of complaining and sulking for an hour, when he returned with the Falcon the Wookiee had handed him some medication for a headache and told him to rest for a while. Perhaps the bawling-out was for later?

"...I think we both were to blame for what happened," Wedge continued. "And I hope you'll accept my apologies."

Han turned to face the Rebel, trying to get his tongue to speak the strange words. "If you'll accept mine. "

Wedge stared at him in surprise, a grin beginning to grow on his face. He nodded, pleased. "Of course I will; I--"

"Good." Han turned back to his repairs.

Antilles watched him struggle with an unyielding screw. "You getting ready to leave?"

"Why?" asked Han, grimacing as the muscles in his hand cramped. He shook it, trying to loosen it up. "Are you in a hurry to be rid of me?"

Wedge laughed. "No, but Princess Leia said you were going after the ceremony."

"Well, it just shows that Her Highness doesn't know everything. He tried the screw once more. "We can't leave until we've got this bucket repaired."

"Problems?"

"Navigation's been showing some drift again. It'll take some time to fix, so I guess I'll be around for a while yet." He looked up and grinned. "You can tell her for me if you want; save me the trouble. He looked thoughtful for a moment "'S funny how she always seems to get her way.

"Antilles!" a voice shouted from the open hatch.

Wedge's face fell. "Oh shit—the manoeuvre! The Commander will kill me!" He ran in panic from the cockpit, only to immediately reappear. "Try turning the screw the other way." And he was gone.

Han looked at the screwdriver in his hand. "The other way?" He tried Antilles's suggestion. The offending screw turned easily. "Well, I'll be damned!"

* * *

Leia smiled to herself as she watched Lieutenant Antilles race from the Falcon towards his furious Commander. Narra's voice floated above the din of the fighters' engines.

"Glad you could make it, Antilles. Is it common for married men to be late; or didn't the little woman let you out without changing your underwear?" He didn't give Wedge time to answer. "To your fighter—and count yourself lucky that I'm not taking this any further!"

Wedge ran to his ship and climbed aboard. Nara glanced over to the princess. He grinned and winked. Leia knew he'd give the pilot hell during the exercise, criticize every move he made, countermand every order he gave. She also knew he was planning on inviting Wedge for a drink afterward, to celebrate his promotion.

Leia walked toward the Falcon's ramp as the fighters lifted off, and she wondered how many of the pilots were leaving to practice their deaths. She shuddered at the thought, and dismissed it as she entered the freighter.

She found Han where Wedge had left him, on his knees in front of the controls, trying to remove a panel to gain access to the workings underneath. He was having difficulty with the final screw.

"Why is it always the first and the last?" he muttered to himself, not realizing Leia was behind him.

He turned it one way and cursed. He turned it the other way and cursed. He pounded on the panel and turned the screw again. He gave a small cry of triumph as it loosened and the panel lifted off.

"Working hard?" she asked his back.

He looked around at her. "If I could get peace, I would be." He swapped tools and peered into the open console.

"I saw Wedge leave."

"You've got good eye-sight."

She smiled at his sarcasm. "Have you two made up?"

"Yeah, everything's all buddy-buddy." He handed a spanner to her. "Here, hold this." He reached into the hole. "Did he get it from Narra?"

"Probably still getting it!" She watched him work for a while, trying to pluck up her courage, to ask him what she'd come to ask. "You leaving?"

"Nope."

"What made you change your mind?"

"Sick ship."

That always was his answer. She sat on the navigator's chair. "So, you're here for a while yet?"

"Looks like it." He glanced up at her. "You're sitting in my light."

"Sorry." She shifted over to Chewbacca's co-pilot chair.

He turned back to his repairs, taking the spanner from her hand. "How's the exercises goin'?"

He'd hit the nail on the head. "That's partly the reason I'm here."

Her words were enough to make him put down the tools. He stood up and stretched before settling into the chair behind him. "Okay, run it by me."

"Well, as you know, we've been short of pilots and fighters due to one reason or another; so we've been forced to bring in another Alliance outpost for the assault. Dodonna, on Raymar, has agreed that crippling Minoan and killing Amand on his

visit there would further the Rebellion's cause, and so he's sending us some men and machines--"

"Wait a minute," he cut her off. "I thought the other bases were to remain unknown to lower ranks and non-Alliance members. Why are you telling me all this?"

"Well, since Raymar is sending men, it would be hard for us to keep them from saying where they came from," she explained to him. "But everything else is still classified. Only the men involved with the attack know the date and the targets, so I'm not telling you anything secret."

"So what's this got to do with me?" Han flicked a switch on the console and frowned when there was no response. It must be worse than he thought.

"Dodonna's also sending us the medical supplies we asked for, and--"

" — And you want me to go and pick them up," Han finished for her.

She smiled and nodded. "Right first time."

"I've got this sick ship, remember?"

"Use one of ours."

"Those old cargo barges?" Han scoffed, and reached for his tools once more. "They wouldn't even make it out of this system, let alone travel to another."

"They're perfectly all right. They've done us okay."

Han paused in his work and stared at her, the businessman's gleam in his eye. "How much?"

"Same as the other times; but Raymar has a good supply, and you need parts for the Falcon, so we could throw in what you need."

He pursed his lips as he mused over the proposition. Free parts were a good offer. "I'll have to see Chewie."

"He's already agreed," Leia laughed.

"I guess I've got no choice then — okay, I'll go."

"Thanks, Han." She bent down and lightly kissed his forehead.

Han stared after her as she left the cockpit. A slow grin appeared on his face and he turned to continue his work.

* * *

"General," Leia said into the intercom on her console, "Captain Solo has agreed to bring our supplies; but the Falcon isn't space-worthy, so he'll be borrowing one of our cargo barges."

Rieekan's voice filtered through. "Very well, Your Highness, I'll have one prepared for him and Chewbacca. You are retiring now?"

"Yes; unless there's something...?"

"I'll wake you if you're needed; sleep well."

"Thank you, General." She flicked off the intercom and sat back on her bunk. She yawned as she pulled her hair down and untied the braids. She shook her head, loosening the strands, allowing her hair to tumble over her shoulders. As she reached for her comb, she knocked something off the dresser. It landed hard on the floor with a sharp crack.

Uttering a short curse, she picked up the stricken holo from the floor. The image caught her eye and she stared at the figure who grinned at her from the thick plastic.

Guilt filled her heart as Luke reminded her he was no longer there. So many things had been on her mind lately, she had begun to push him to the back of her mind, begun to lock him in the same closet as Alderaan. There, he couldn't cause pain; there, he wouldn't get in her way; there, he would stay until quiet moments like this. She moved to place the holocube back on the dresser; but she hesitated as she realized with horror that she had accidentally pushed the small button at the back of the picture.

The small figure in her hand moved and an embarrassed laugh giggled from the tiny speaker.

"I can't say that now!" Mock horror spread over Luke's face. He looked to the side, listening to someone speak. Leia knew it had been her, trying to persuade Luke to say what she wanted.

"Are you sure that's what you want?" he asked, not knowing Han was recording every word and gesture he made. He shrugged and turned to face the holo-recorder. He became serious and raised his blaster. "I'm Luke Skywalker—I'm here to rescue you!" He paused like that for several seconds before turning to the side again. "That was awful!" he grumbled, and started laughing once more.

The recording stopped, and the figure returned to his previous position. Leia set the plastic holo back in its place next to Han's.

"Oh, Luke!" she sighed heavily, tears slowly forming at the edge of her eyes. "I miss you..."

X.

"...In bed," Mhari finished, as she helped Ryder pick himself off the floor and get back onto the bed. He settled back against the pillows, feeling foolish. He glanced at her from the side of his eyes, waiting for the ticking-off that always followed when she found him out of bed and sprawled on the floor. He didn't have to wait long.

"Maybe after this, you'll do as you're told and stop behaving like a child! When you're told to stay put, you stay put!"

"But Mhari..." Ryder started, immediately on the defensive.

"Aunt Mhari," she reminded him, sternly.

"He rolled his eyes. "*Aunt* Mhari....." he conceded and then continued. "'I only wanted to see if I could manage on my own. You said I could get up today, and--'"

She fluffed up his pillows for him, annoyed. "After finding you on the floor again, I don't think you're quite ready yet!"

"Aw, come on! You said I could," he whined, disappointed. "Denrick Janis told me I could get up two days after the surgery; that was days ago! My side hardly hurts at all, and my ankle is only weak because you won't let me up to exercise it." He had begun to sulk now. "And you said I could join you all for dinner."

Mhari felt her annoyance dissolve and her hardened attitude crumbled under her adoptive-nephew's pleading stare. She laughed. "Okay, you win. I'll bring through some clothes, and when Alex gets back I'll get him to help you through to the kitchen."

Ryder grinned. "Thanks, Mhar....I mean Aunt Mhari. "

"And I thought I had trouble with Brett," she complained to herself, as she departed to hunt some of Alex's clothes for him to wear.

Alone once more, Ryder reached for Tamara's book, which rested on the table next to his bed. Idly he flicked through its pages, pausing every now and then to

read a passage or two. It looked quite interesting, but it was the last of the series and he didn't want to read then end before he knew what happened at the start. He placed it back on the table.

He relaxed in bed, beginning to enjoy its warmth now that he'd been given clearance to get out of it. All he had to do was wait patiently until Uncle Alex got back, then...

He smiled, laughing silently to himself. After only a few days of being awake and coherent he was already finding it easy to call Alex and Mhari his uncle and aunt. It had been awkward at first; several times he had called them Owen and Beru. . But now... well, they no longer felt like strangers, and they did treat him like one of the family. He was even getting used to his new name, Ryder Lasjow, and found himself answering to it more quickly when someone called him.

It was surprising how quickly you could grow to care for people when you were suddenly thrown together. He would be forever grateful to them for risking their lives to save him and care for him. He hoped one day he could repay them, and not bring them grief as he had with his aunt and uncle on Tatooine. If he hadn't taken Artoo's restraining bolt off he would have been there when the storm troopers arrived.

And you would have died....

He turned his gaze to the window as he heard Mhari shout for Brett. He was glad his thoughts had been interrupted, but he dearly hoped his aunt wouldn't send the boy his way. Brett he could do without for now. The five year old seemed to take great delight in annoying his older cousin. He'd even put a small reptile under the bed clothes as Ryder caught an afternoon nap. It had almost cost him a relapse! He had grown fond of the little tyke, though; even enjoyed playing with his blasted computer games, although he lost most of the time. He decided he'd have to review the Alliance attack and defence patterns; several of them had failed against a child's game.

"Hi, Ryder!" Brett dashed into the room.

"Hey, Corellian!" Ryder was deliberately cheerful, although inside he was cursing Mhari for sending the boy in. "How's it goin'?"

"We gonna play tonight?" Brett brought a game out from behind his back and shook it in front of Ryder's face.

Inwardly, Ryder groaned. "I don't know, kid. Tamara was wanting to--"

"Brett!" Both of them turned at Mhari's shout, "Are you bothering Ryder again? Come out of there and let him rest."

"Maybe later, okay, Brett?" Ryder could have kissed his aunt for shouting.

The younger boy nodded sullenly and slipped from the room, leaving Ryder breathing a sigh of relief; what he didn't need was yet another dent in his ego.

His door opened once more, and a bundle of clothing landed on his head. The buckle of a belt struck his chin. "Ow!" He pulled the clothes off and stared up, into Tamara's grin.

"Sorry," she apologized, in a voice that hinted that she wasn't sorry at all. "Mom said you needed these."

"Thanks." He opened the shirt out; it looked massive.

Her voice turned husky as she asked, "You think you'll need my help getting into them?" She raised her eyebrows; a coy smile hovered on her lips.

Ryder made a play of considering her offer. He shook his head. "No, I think I can manage."

"Aw!" she sighed with mock disappointment, and grinned again. "You were more fun when you were unconscious. "

He frowned, blushing furiously.

"Your accent's getting better," she complimented him, laughing at his reaction.

"You think so?" He hoped so. They had spent hours together trying to get him to speak with the Irlami dialect and accent. If he couldn't master the way people spoke here, then his cover would be broken the first time he opened his mouth in public.

"Yes. Mom said you were almost perfect this afternoon; said you sounded exactly like Brett does when he complains. How did she phrase it?" She gave the pretence of searching her memory. "A right little whiner," she laughed.

Ryder was not amused. "Thanks a lot!"

"No, really, she did say you were getting a lot better. Besides, remember what Dad said? He said that it would improve naturally." She watched him throw back the bed covers. "You sure you don't want help? I could get Dad."

"It's okay; I can dress myself," he told her dryly. "I don't think I've forgotten how."

"Okay. I'll see you in a little while." She closed the door, giving him some privacy.

Slowly, carefully, not wanting to hurt himself, he eased his legs over the side of the bed and sat on its edge. Gently, he pulled off his bed clothes, wincing as he irritated his side wound. He reached for the clothes Tamara had thrown at him, and drew on the shirt. The sleeves hung down over his hands, and he sat for a moment flapping his arms allowing the extra inches of fabric to flop about before he smiled and rolled it up.

Pulling on the pants proved to be a little more difficult; he had to avoid hurting both his side and his ankle. He tried lying down; it didn't work. He tried standing up; and fell on the bed. In the end, he sat on the edge of the mattress and drew the trousers up to his knees; then he shifted to first one side and then the other, pulling the material up over his thighs. He finished the job by leaning on the bedside table. He tucked the excess shirt tail into the trousers and held everything in place by tightening the belt.

The door swung open and Alex chuckled at the sight of the boy dressed in clothes several sizes too large for him. "You're smaller than I thought," he told him as he helped him to his feet. "Looks like we'll have to make an early visit to town; get you some clothes you can wear."

Ryder tripped on the trailing fabric of the pants... "Good."

"You hungry?"

"Famished!"

"That's a good sign. " Alex took a firm grip on his nephew's arm. Ryder leaned on him, and together they limped through to the dining room.

* * *

"I think we're going to have a good year this year, Mhari." Alex placed his knife next to his empty plate and sat back in his chair, waiting for dessert. "Might even afford to buy ourselves a droid for next year, lighten the work load." He reached over and lightly slapped his son's wrists. "Brett, don't pick your nose at the table." The farmer looked over at his nephew as the boy struggled to force the last remnants of his meal down his throat. "Tell me, Ryder, do you know anything about farms?"

Ryder hesitated in mid-chew. "A little, sir," he answered cautiously.

"Good."

Tamara flashed Ryder an "I told you so" look across the table as her mother dished out the pudding.

Ryder was enjoying himself. This meal had been like no other he had ever eaten. He hadn't had home cooking since he'd left Tatooine, and he'd never had a family dinner like this. This was something new, something different, a totally novel experience, and he was loving it. So perhaps it wasn't as lively as his meals in the base mess had been; but the food was far superior and there were no foul habits here to put one off eating. He glanced at Brett whose finger was firmly wedge up a nostril once more; well, not so many, anyway. The banter was different, too. Here there was no talk of the Empire, no talk of death. Here you didn't look across from you and find an empty seat where a friend once sat.

He laughed to himself as Brett reached out for a second helping of dessert. Where did he put it all? He was having a hard time with his first serving. He burped, loudly.

There was a short, sudden silence, as all eyes turned to look at him. Ryder flushed, giving a sickly, apologetic smile. Brett giggled behind his spoon.

Alex slapped the youth on the shoulder, laughing. "Boy sure knows how to show his appreciation of good food, eh, Mhari?"

"I'm pleased he enjoyed it." Mhari lifted Tamara's empty plate and placed it on top of her own. "Would you like some more, Ryder?"

"Oh, no, ma'am; that was great." He patted his stomach, feeling bloated. He turned to Alex. "Sir, I was thinking..."he shot a hesitant glance at Mhari, knowing she wouldn't like what he was about to ask. "...I was wondering if there was anything I could do; I've been pretty bored, and I thought maybe tomorrow..."

Mhari didn't look pleased. "I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"I'm fine; I..." Ryder tried to protest as he lifted his glass of water.

"Mhari, give the boy a chance." Alex responded on Ryder's behalf. "If he wants to do something, then let him. I won't do him any good being cooped up in the house. Besides I could use the help." He turned to the grateful boy "You know anything about mechanics?"

"Sure. I'm pretty good at fixing things."

"Well, we've got a dud speeder."

Ryder took a long drink from his glass, and then smiled. "Sounds like the one I had back home." he didn't notice Alex's frown. "What's the problem with it?"

"Fuel-injection system's clogged. I can't get it out to replace it."

"I think I could handle that. What make?"

Tamara and Mhari rose from the table, exchanging "men!" glances as they set about clearing up. Brett ignored everyone as he polished off the remaining pudding.

"Old XP make," Alex answered Ryder's question. "Twenty-three, I think."

Ryder's surprise was genuine. "You're kidding?!"

Alex shook his head.

"Mine was a twenty-nine. Sand played havoc with the engine. I'll see what I can do with it."

The farmer was pleased. "I'll get the manual, show you what's wrong." He heaved himself from his chair.

Tamara watched her father leave the room. She slipped her hand into her pocket, fingering its contents. She bit her lip, a little unsure. "Ryder?" She held the object out to him. "I found this; I thought it might be yours."

Mhari and Brett both looked over in interest as a large smile broke over Ryder's face. He stared at the holo-picture in his hand.

"Who is it?" Mhari asked, curious in spite of herself.

Without thinking, Ryder answered, "Princess Leia."

Mhari's eyes widened at the casual mention of the young Rebel princess. "Organa?"

He nodded absently, forgetting Alex's warning. "She's a good friend."

"You have friends in high places."

Ryder laughed. "I've got friends in low places, too." He thought briefly of Han. "You wouldn't believe the mixture of worlds and cultures that makes up the Alliance. We have—"

"Ryder!"

They all turned at the sudden shout from the doorway. Ryder quickly slipped the holo into his pocket. He turned his gaze to the empty table top, knowing he was about to be dragged over the carpet.

"Tamara, Brett, to your rooms!" Alex didn't take his eyes from the Rebel.

"But why?" Brett moaned; he enjoyed a good row, as long as it wasn't him that was in trouble.

"Go!"

Brett realised that now was not the time to argue. He obediently hopped off his stool and followed Tamara from the room. Mhari disappeared into the kitchen, leaving the two men alone.

Alex slammed the speeder manual on the table. Ryder jumped.

"I thought I had made it quite clear that you were not to discuss your past." Alex's voice was quiet, but his anger was cutting.

Shamed faced, Ryder answered. "I'm, sorry; I forgot..."

"You must understand it's for your own safety as well as ours. Idle talk can get people into trouble."

"I said I was sorry," Ryder spoke tersely. "What more do you want?"

"What good is 'sorry,' going to be when the Imperial troops arrive for you? You must learn to control what you say. Think hard before you open your mouth."

"But it was only..."

"I don't care what 'it was only.' I have a family to protect. I told you before; we don't want to know anything about you." Hurt showed plainly on Ryder's features. "We don't want to get involved."

Ryder nodded slowly; how many times had he heard that in the past? "You sound just like my Uncle Owen."

"I don't want to know about your uncle."

For the first time, the boy met Alex's gaze; his blue eyes blazing with anger and grief. When he spoke his voice shook with suppressed emotion. "Well, you're gonna know. He was a farmer like you, who didn't want to 'get involved' with anything. And you know what happened to him?" Tears were swelling, spilling down Ryder's pale cheeks. He didn't give Alex time to respond. "He was murdered - he and my aunt, all because he bought a couple of droids who had been owned by the Rebellion."

"That doesn't concern us," Alex told him softly, feeling pity now instead of fury.

"Maybe it should!" Ryder's voice rose slightly in pitch. He stood to face the larger man. "Like you, he thought if he sat around on his backside, then no-one would bother him, upset his simple little life. But things change. One of these days, you might just have to fight for your little plot of dirt. I hope you're man enough to get involved then, you..."

Alex lashed out striking the youth across the face. The slap stopped Ryder mid-sentence and he realised that he'd insulted the farmer. His hand went to hold his stinging cheek.

The noise brought Mhari running. "That's enough!" she barked at them both.

Alex turned away, ashamed he's lost his temper; sorry he's struck the youth.

Mhari turned to the hurt boy. "Ryder, perhaps you should go and rest. Calm yourself down."

Stiffly, he turned from them, Alex reached out to help him, but Ryder shrugged him off. "Don't touch me!" He held his side as he limped from the room.

Deeply concerned, Mhari watched him leave before turning to her husband. "I think we should talk."

* * *

Tamara stood listening just within her open bedroom door. She caught her breath at the loud sharp crack of flesh striking flesh, knowing her father's fragile temper had snapped. The shouting abruptly ceased and the voices were low. She heard the kitchen door open and close and a muffled thud as something landed on the hall floor. She peeked around her door and saw Ryder lying on the floor clutching his side and hissing in pain.

As she went to his aid he tried to get up by himself, determined to go it alone, not want to lose face in front of her.

"Are you okay?" she asked, bending down to help him.

"I can manage," he answered her through gritted teeth. "Leave me alone."

Not listening to him, she slid her arm through his and helped him to his feet and through to his room. There she sat him on the bed and closed the door behind them. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Never felt better." Angry sarcasm tinged his words.

She smiled at his "hurt little boy" look. "If Mom could see you now, you wouldn't get to work on that speeder tomorrow."

"Yeah? Well, your mother's got no authority over me."

The belittlement of her mother sparked Tamara's own anger. "Who do you think has done everything for you? Show a little gratitude."

He looked up at her his mood softening somewhat. "I'm sorry, Tama; I mean that."

She sat beside. "I know. But you need to understand dad. He's scared; he'd never admit it, but he is. We're all scared, Ryder, and not just for ourselves but for you too."

He stared out of the window toward the forest. Night was falling. "Maybe you should have left me out there. I've brought you all too much trouble; put you all in too much danger. If anything were to happen it would be my fault." His voice was heavy, sad.

Hesitantly, she took his hand. "Don't talk like that." She looked into his eyes, seeing mild surprise there, and an unspoken question. "I'm glad I found you. We've all grown to... to care for you. To Mom and Dad, you're their nephew, no one else." She laughed softly. "And I don't think Brett could survive without his big cousin. And I..." She turned her eyes away from him. "... I've got someone I can talk to. That's why Dad flew off the reactor; he cares for you, he's got someone to help around the farm, someone who knows and understands what he talks about. You saw the look on his face when he went for the manual; he was enjoying himself."

Her words reminded him of something. "The manual." He gently took his hand from hers, his. "I left it on the table. I'll need it to fix that darned speeder."

Tamara smiled as he returned to the dining room, knowing he was going back to apologize.

Ryder shuffled down the corridor holding onto the wall for support, wondering what had just happened between him and Tamara; whatever it was subtle, quiet and would remain unacknowledged for now. He reached the kitchen and paused with his hand on the door handle, as muffled voices came from the room. He pulled his hand away, deciding not to interrupt their conversation. He'd get the book later; he didn't want to cause any more trouble. But he faltered as their words caused a chill to nestle within him.

"Go easy on him, Alex. He's still feeling strange."

To Ryder, it sounded as though Mhari was picking her words carefully, not wanting to re-ignite her husband's anger.

"He has to be more careful..." There was a pause; either that or Alex had crossed the room to where Ryder couldn't hear him. Then; "Perhaps we were wrong to take him in."

Ryder's heart froze, fearing what he would hear next.

"Perhaps we should have reported him to the authorities."

Were they that scared?! Would they turn him in now?

"Alex!" Mhari sounded shocked. "You were the one who said saving him was our contribution to the rebellion; don't you ever forget that."

"I know, Mhari; but I have doubts now. I look at Brett and Tamara and I find myself wondering if we did the right thing. Maybe it would be best if asked him to give himself up, and..."

Ryder leaned against the wall, light-headed with fear. They make him well, only to request that he go to his death? Bile rose in his throat; he felt sick, he felt betrayed.

"I don't want to hear anymore, Alex. You're talking nonsense! One little slip from the boy and you panic. Okay, so you want to protect this family; well, Ryder's part of this family now. And don't you forget it!"

There was a long silence. Ryder held his breath.

"You're right, Mhari; I'm sorry," Alex's voice was quieter, chastened.

Relief flooded Ryder's fearful heart, but the doubt would always be there now. He had to show Alex that he was sorry, give the farmer some reassurance, let him know that he meant no harm to the family, let them all know that he would do nothing to endanger them. Drawing on his courage, he knocked softly on the door before opening it.

There was an awkward silence as he entered the room. Even if he hadn't overheard them, he would still have known that they had been talking about him. He hoped his fear didn't show on his face as much as their shame showed on theirs.

He gestured at the speeder manual. "I, uh, left the manual." Alex handed it to him, and he nodded his thanks. He looked to them both. "I'm sorry for what I

said; I—" He stammered uncomfortably. "I want you to know that I'm grateful to you, and I — well, I'll watch my mouth in the future."

Alex nodded, accepting his apology. "The sooner you get that, vehicle repaired, the sooner you get into town for some clothes that'll fit you. Don't take too long, though; Brett also needs some outfits for school resuming next week, and Mhari needs her groceries and--"

"Okay, okay," Ryder laughed, holding his hands up to stop Alex from going on, glad of the farmer's attempt at humour to break the awkwardness of the moment. "I get the message! It shouldn't take that long."

* * *

Brett shifted his bottom on the cold, oil-stained concrete floor of the garage, regretting his agreement to help Ryder fix the speeder. It had been fun at first, handing the tools to him, holding the occasional wire for him, bringing him a drink when he got thirsty. But it got a little bit tiring after three days. He had said the speeder would be easy to fix, so what was taking so long? The five-year-old sighed the heavy sigh of boredom. He'd rather be out playing space pirates with his gun belt. He looked at his cousin's feet sticking out from under the- stricken vehicle, and giggled at the curse that floated to his ears. Should he tell Ryder about the belt? He had told him many of his secrets, like how to chase the herd without getting caught (except when Ryder did it they were caught), or where to find the best mud to make pies for throwing at Tamara. He'd even shown Ryder his secret den in the big tree in the east field. But should he tell him about the gun belt?

There was a small metallic clank from under the speeder as Ryder dropped a spanner.

"Hey, Corellian?"

Brett smiled at the nickname Ryder had given him. Corellians, Ryder had told him, were the best star pilots in the Galaxy.

"Hand me the wrench will ya? This valve's stuck."

The small boy complied, peering under the speeder as he handed over the implement. He watched his cousin wrestle with the valve; a drop of oil dripped from the vehicle's belly onto Ryder's clothes, adding yet another stain for Mhari to moan at as she washed them.

"Brett, I can't see; could you turn the light a bit to the left?"

He did as he was asked; hoping Ryder was going to play with him after this was done.

"Thanks."

There was a short period of grunting as Ryder fought to turn the valve, followed by a short period of hammering as Ryder decided to kill the damned thing. The valve gave way.

"Oh shit!" Ryder roared, as he rolled too late to avoid the thick black stream of oil which poured from the open tube. He stood, letting the fluid drip from his shirt and face. He shook his arms, spattering oil onto the floor.

Brett doubled over, giggling in delight as Ryder opened his eyes and blinked, revealing the only white area visible on his face. He coughed, spat oil from his mouth and reached for the rag he's left on the work top.

"Well, look at you."

He glanced up to find Tamara standing in the doorway, with a smug grin on her face.

"Taking an oil bath, are we?! She asked, trailing her eyes up and down his body. "What do you think you are? A droid or something? "

"Ha Ha," he responded.

"You look better like that. Black hair suits you."

He smiled a sarcastic "thank you" as a gleam of mischief sparkled in his eyes. He gave an evil chuckle and lifted his goo-covered hands.

She backed away as Brett watched, enjoying the fun. "Oh no, Ryder—you wouldn't!"

He lunged for her as she screamed; laughing, she ducked away too late to avoid his attack. He gripped her jacket, wiping his hands on her sleeves. Brett giggled. This was more like it! He went to his sister's aid, tackling Ryder's legs. They all fell down in a heap of flailing limbs.

Brett found himself on top of the older boy. Immediately, he took advantage of his position and set about finding Ryder's ticklish spot. Tamara, caught under Ryder's body, joined in. His pleas for mercy fell on deaf ears and soon all three were caked in oil and dirty tears of laughter streaked their faces, tired stitches knitted their sides.

Ryder was forced to call a halt, not being able to withstand their assault any longer. His side was beginning to hurt once more. Tamara, knowing she and her brother had won, accepted his surrender. Brett, enjoying himself, refused to stop. Tamara rolled from the fun fight and pulled her brother off an exhausted Ryder, who lay gasping for breath.

"Two against one isn't fair," he complained between pants.

"You started it," she reminded him. She offered him her hand to help him up. He resisted the urge to give it a hard tug, to pull her back down, and stood. "You're a mess," she told him.

"You're not so hot yourself."

"Thanks to you."

He shook his head. "Uhn-uh, thanks to your dad," he fibbed, not wanting to lose face any further in front of her. For some reason what Tamara thought of him was becoming important. "He left the sump valve open and all it needed was a little nudge."

Brett sat on the floor again, with a spanner in his hand, making pretty patterns on the floor with the oil. He dipped his fingers into the gook and flicked it at his sister. He tittered as the droplets hit her pants.

"Oh," Brett!" she moaned. "Don't you know when to stop? Go and cleaned up."

"Aw, I wanna stay and help Ryder," he whined, twirling the spanner sulkily in the black pool.

"I'm nearly finished, Brett." Ryder knew that Brett would do almost anything he said. It helped sometimes if someone looked up to you. He wondered if Han and Leia felt that way about him. He hoped not. "Besides, if I get it fixed now, we'll be going into town, and the sooner you get cleaned up, the sooner we go."

The boy dropped the tool and ran toward the house, forgetting he would have to face his mother. She wouldn't like the state he was in.

Ryder turned his attention back to the sick speeder. He pushed himself back under its belly, conscious of Tamara watching him. He closed the valve, thankful that his earlier hammering hadn't damaged it. He tightened the last screw in its place and slid out. "That should do it."

Tamara raised her eyebrows sceptically.

He leaned into the speeder and flicked the ignition, expecting it to roar to life. It didn't. He frowned and re-checked his repairs. Everything seemed to be in order; what could be wrong? He tried the ignition again; not even a cough.

Tamara cleared her throat. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

"What?"

She pointed to the pool of oil. "That'll need to be replaced."

"Oh." He picked up the can of oil, screwed off the cap and refilled the sump. "There, that should do it," he repeated. Confidently, he switched the ignition. The engine rumbled, burped and died. His ego started to deflate. Annoyed, he thumped the dashboard, and attempted to start the engine again. He threw Tamara a pleased grin as the speeder came alive.

"I'm impressed," she told him, in a voice that said she was anything but.

"I'm not," Mhari said from the doorway. "Look at the mess in here! I thought Brett was bad!" She pointed toward the house. "Get over there, both of you." They ran past her, ducking the playful swipes she made at them. "And there'll be no trip to town until everyone is spotless!" she shouted at their retreating backs.

* * *

The room was in darkness. Its sole occupant sat next to the window, waiting for the house to sleep, waiting until everyone was safely asleep before venturing out. An Imperial shuttle thundered overhead. He watched impassively as its lights faded into the distance. He turned his head at a sound from the corridor, hoping it was Alex and Mhari going to bed. It was not, and he looked to the window once more.

Ryder yawned, relaxing in his new clothes. The visit into Darel had gone well. Both he and Brett had come home with several new outfits, although he felt a little guilty about the amount of money Mhari had spent on him. The town was larger than he had thought, and the number of Imperials had given him some cause for concern. There had been one scary moment when he found himself standing in line for a checkout next to an Imperial major. He couldn't look at the man for fear of giving himself away, and when the major asked him a question, he had stammered out an answer, hoping — praying--his accent was good enough to pass. It had, and his legs had almost given out with his relief.

Mhari had been kind enough to lend him some money to buy himself a small ornament to brighten his room. The stall-keeper had given him a strange look when he commented that he'd never seen one like that before. The purchase was followed by a ticking-off by Mhari, who reminded him that he was from Irlam,

and ornaments like that were common. The small model of a girl wearing the traditional Irlami costume was the start of a new collection. He may have a new life, but why give up old hobbies? As he stared out the window into the Irlami night, he wondered what had happened to his old collection. He knew that by now his quarters would have been cleared for someone else, but what did they do with his things? He'd left everything there: his collection, his clothes, his friends, his life. A sudden cold thought struck his heart. He'd left his lightsabre. Silently, he cursed Solo for keeping him up late the night, before the mission. If he hadn't have slept in, then he might not have forgotten his weapon. He smiled briefly, imagining Alex's reaction if he found out his "nephew" was the son of a Jedi Knight. If he really was anything like Owen Lars, Alex would freak out; imagine having a sorcerer in the family! Well, Alex had said he didn't want to know anything about Ryder, and this was one piece of information that he was going to keep to himself.

But his thoughts sobered him, made him remorseful. He hadn't kept the vow he had made after the Death Star. He had let himself forget about his desire to become a Jedi Knight, like his father. But he didn't have his lightsabre here, so he couldn't practice the drill Ben had taught him on the Millennium Falcon; besides, there was no one to train him, now that Ben was dead. He was alone with a power which a few short months ago he had never even heard of, much less knew he possessed. He had been opened to it, and then left with the frustration of not knowing how to use it properly. Okay, so he could do a few tricks and gimmicks that he had taught himself, but they didn't make him a Jedi Knight.

Another shuttle passed over the house, interrupting his thoughts.

He had to get back to the Alliance somehow. He couldn't stay here; couldn't stay even if he'd wanted to. He knew it was only a matter of time before he was found, made the slip that would cost them all. It was being unrealistic if he thought he could stay hidden; someone was bound to get suspicious, another farmer, perhaps, who remembered that the real Ryder Lasjow had died nineteen years before. No matter how much risk it involved, no matter how much he liked it here, no matter how much peace he found here, he had to get back. His life was with the Rebellion; Ben and Leia had shown him that. Perhaps on one of the other Rebel outposts he'd find another Jedi. It was a slim hope, but it was there nonetheless. Ben had spoken about "others of our kind," so somewhere in the galaxy there was someone who could teach him. Then, instead of running from Darth Vader and his armies, he could stand and face them.

He would, of course, be upset to leave. He loved this family...especially one of its members; and he knew that they loved him. But that was one of the reasons he had to go; he didn't want them to be hurt because of him, because of their goodness and kindness toward him. Tonight would be the start. Tonight he would watch, study the Imperials' movements, see if he had any chance of boarding a

ship or shuttle. Also, he would see if he could uncover why they were here in such large numbers.

He paused in his thoughts as he heard voices from the corridor; Alex and Mhari turning in. He sat for a while, letting them settle into bed, letting them doze and finally fall asleep before he lifted his jacket from the bed and opened his door. He listened for signs of anyone being awake. The house was silent. He fumbled in his pockets, searching for the data pad he'd bought in town, behind Mhari and Tamara's backs. It was there. Quietly, he slipped down the corridor and out of the house.

It was cold in the night air, and he closed up his jacket to protect his body from a chill. He walked in the direction of the garage. Irlam had no moon, so he would need the flashlight Alex kept there. Entering the garage, he slipped on the remnants of the oil slick, knocking over an empty can of lubricant. It fell, clattering noisily on the floor. Ryder froze, staring out the window at the house, fearing he would see a light appear and the door open. He stood for several long seconds before being convinced that all was quiet. In the dark, he felt along the bench, groping for the light. His fingers grasped its handle and he switched it on. That was better; now he could see what he was doing. Leaving the garage, he pointed the beam towards the forest. He'd take it easy; he had all night no need to rush things. He plunged into the foliage.

It took him a while to find the path he and the squad had been retreating down that night almost a month ago. But once he found the first shattered tree, it was only a matter of following the rest. He had the overwhelming feeling of *deja vu* as he made his way toward the Imperial installation. He felt as though there should be another thirteen men with him. They hadn't used lights, not wanting to reveal their presence to the Empire and he would kill his as soon as he neared the base. But that night during the retreat, to show a light meant death. Nearby, he heard the cry of an animal under attack, and he paused, suddenly nervous. He hoped there were no large carnivorous creatures here; he should have asked Tamara... He pushed on.

He stopped as he smelled something rotten nearby. He couldn't tell from which direction the stench was coming; probably it was just something's dinner from a week ago. Covering his nose and mouth with one hand, he continued on. Not keeping his eyes on the path he stumbled, crying out as he wrenched his ankle once more. He dropped the flashlight as he fell, and he lay stunned for a few moments, cursing the primitive medical treatment Janis had been forced to use. If he's been treated at the base he would be fully fit by now. He pushed himself to his feet, and reached for the light.

What is that stench? He wrinkled his nose as he grabbed his torch and swept it in wide circles, trying to find what had tripped him. The light settled on the object. It was a man's leg. Or rather, it had been a man's leg. The trousers were torn and

stained with dark, dried blood. Festering flesh clung to the bone. Clearly, the animals of the forest had fed upon it. Against his will, Ryder shone the light on the rest of the body. It was in worse condition than the leg. His stomach lurched, threatening to eject Mhari's well-cooked steak, as he recognized the markings on uniform. It was the captain.

He turned from the body, leaning over the side of a tree, gasping, trying to keep his meal in place. He retched as another stinking wave of putrefying flesh assaulted his nostrils. The torch beam wavered over the nearby foliage as he was sick, the beam landing on something metallic. He allowed his stomach to settle before reaching for the object. It was the captain's blaster. It would need cleaned probably recharged, too; but it would come in handy. He shoved the weapon into his jacket and continued on, not daring to look back at his dead comrade.

He was tired and his leg was hurting badly by the time he reached the concrete road leading to the Imperial garrison. Tamara had said it was two kilometres from the farm; it felt more like twenty. He just hoped he could get back to his room before Alex got up for the day, or else he would have a lot of explaining to do. He ducked behind a bush and shut off the light as a troop carrier swept past. He'd have to keep his mind on what he was doing, now that he was entering enemy territory. Keeping to the undergrowth, he crawled on his belly toward the base, just as they had done on that fateful night. He swore when he drew near; the place was lit up like Anchorhead at the End of Harvest Celebrations. Sweeping floodlights filled the night sky and brushed the ground around the perimeter. It looked like they had tripled security since the night of the mission. Perhaps they were expecting company again, or maybe they'd just become paranoid.

He crept closer, freezing as two Stormtroopers appeared near him. He lay holding his breath, fearing the sound would attract their attention. They strode closer, stopping in front of him. Tears of fright filled his eyes, his heart hammered in his chest, while a small voice inside his mind screamed at him to keep calm, that panic would only get him caught. A light washed over him and he knew the game was up; he waited for the sharp cold command to stand up and show himself. Then the light suddenly vanished. He looked up to see the soldiers move away. He let out his breath, wiping his sweat-dampened brow with a shaking hand. That had been too close! He moved back, selecting what he thought to be good camouflage. He pulled the data pad from his jacket and settled down to observe the Imperials' movements, reminding himself to watch out for further patrols.

* * *

"Ryder? " Tamara tapped on his door. "Hey, are you awake? "

There was no answer.

Cautiously, she opened the door and entered. The room was in darkness. His steady breathing told her Ryder was still sleeping. She crossed window, tripping over his that clothes lay on the floor. She opened the blinds letting the morning light stream into the room. She bent to lift his discarded clothes and frowned when she noted the dirt on them. They also smelled damp. She placed them on the chair.

Puzzled, she turned to the occupant of the bed, and gave him a gentle shake. He grunted, twisting his body around and pulled the covers more tightly around him. His breathing deepened again.

"Ryder!" She shook him harder, concerned that he might be ill again.

His eyes flickered open. "Whaddya want?" he mumbled.

"You promised you'd help dad in the south field this morning, remember?" She watched as his eyes widen as she reminded him. "You've slept most of the morning. Mom's worried that you're sick again. What's wrong?"

He sat up, throwing off the covers. He groaned as his stiff muscles protested the sudden movement. "I'm fine," he told her, as he stood up and stretched. "I guess yesterday's shopping trip tired me out. Is Uncle Alex...?"

"He's gone hours ago." She frowned as he hobbled over to his clothes. He still had had a limp, but it hadn't been that bad the day before.

"Was he annoyed?" he asked, already knowing the answer; a lecture about his responsibilities already playing out in his head.

"A little, but ..." She noticed a cut on his chin. "What happened to your face?"

His hand went to the wound. It must have happened last night when he had fallen. "Oh, a battle scar from the oil fight," he grinned, his excuse sounding false even to his own ears.

"I guess..." she said slowly, Why was Ryder acting so strangely? The only person she knew who acted like this was Brett - but only when he'd done something wrong. "Mom's kept breakfast warm for you. " She left him to dress.

Ryder cursed himself for his stupidity. He'd have to be more careful in the future. He looked at the dirt on his clothes. How the hell would he explain that to Mhari? He opened the bottom drawer of the bureau and stuffed the trousers and jacket into it. He'd wear them only when he went out at night. Taking out another outfit, and hoping his aunt wouldn't ask about the others, he dressed. His eyes grew large as he spotted the blaster under the chair. Had Tamara seen it? Picking it

up, he quickly shoved it into the drawer along with the soiled clothes. He'd have to keep it hidden; Alex would kill him if it was found.

Whistling jauntily, he hobbled out of the room heading for his breakfast.

XI.

The silent, burning white chaos of hyperspace raged outside the cargo barge's cockpit window. The spectacular sight was ignored by the barge's two occupants, who had witnessed it countless times before. Their run was coming to an end, and both were looking forward to getting back to their own ship, which sat alone in an Ahana hangar, waiting for them to return with her much-needed parts. Both figured they'd come out ahead: a nice fat lump sum, and spare components for the Falcon's navi-computer. Once she was repaired, they could wave goodbye to the Alliance and rocket back to their old life, the life they preferred.

Still, neither of them could shake off the feeling that they had been used. Leia hadn't mentioned anything about having to show the replacement fighters the way. Han didn't like the responsibility of looking after twenty X-wing fighters and their pilots. Perhaps he could argue more money from Her Highness for the extra duty.

But it had been a good trip, with a minimum of danger, and staying on Raymar for a few days had given them a change of scenery. Dodonna had certainly seemed pleased to see them; the old general had been waiting to greet them personally.

"Captain Solo, Chewbacca—this is a delight!" Dodonna beamed as they shook hands... "I'm pleased to see you're still with the Alliance."

"Not for long, General." Han gazed around the base. It was larger than Ahana; its buildings were in better condition, there were more personnel and better facilities. He had winked at a passing female pilot and sighed; this place certainly seemed to hold a lot more potential than Ahana.

The general laughed. "You said that last time I saw you." He looked over the barge the pirate had arrived in. "But where is your ship? Surely—"

"She's on downtime just now. That's why we took this job," Han explained, as they walked together toward the nearby building. Both he and Chewbacca hoped it would provide them with some refreshments. "The princess said we could get the parts we need here."

"Of course, of course." Dodonna motioned them through the door. "But there's plenty of time for that; you'll join me in the commissary?"

Chewie barked readily and Han smiled. "That'd be great. Thanks, General."

"Tell me, how is everyone? The Princess Leia?"

"She's fine; still bullying folks around. I tell you, General, if you were to stick her in the same room. as Palpatine for an hour, your Rebellion would be a sure thing. She could argue anyone into submission."

The two men laughed, their chuckles echoing with heavy grunts from Chewbacca.

"Somehow, that reminds me.' The general looked thoughtful; the heavy lines on his brow deepened. "Tell your young friend Skywalker to watch himself. I'm afraid it didn't take too long for the Empire to trace him and identify him as the pilot who shot up their toy." He raced on with his information, not noticing that both of his companions had grown quiet. "He's got some very high Imperials angry at him. Lord Vader himself has issued the warrant for his arrest. He's wanted alive, too. I just don't know why..."

"General," Han cut him short, "you don't need to worry about Luke; he's dead."

"That's sad news indeed." Dodonna answered looking vexed; he had liked the enthusiastic youth. "A sad loss. The boy was a born pilot."

"Yeah, "Han responded tightly, "but not a born ground-fighter."

"You'll accept my condolences, and convey them to Her Highness?"

"Thank you, General."

The moment they had entered the commissary, their grief had been forgotten. Raymar proved to be livelier than Ahana, and Han and Chewbacca had both made the most of it. They had also made the most of Ahana's stores, taking just a little more than they needed; but who would notice?

A light on the barge's control console blinked for attention, and a tone sounded in the cockpit, jerking both partners from their reveries. Han sat up first, nudging Chewbacca's large arm.

"Come on, Chewie; we're back."

They assumed their roles of pilot and co-pilot as they prepared for reversion to normal space.

"Shields up," Han ordered.

The stars outside streaked and slowed to their customary pinpoints. The barge settled into sub-light speed as Han checked to be sure the fighters he was accompanying had done the same. A quick account assured him that they had. The small planet of Ahana was now visible, glowing blue in the distance.

The comlink opened, crackled, and a pilot's voice filtered through. "Captain Solo, I've picked up something on the scanner; a large shape, over the third planet of this system. Can you confirm?"

Han quickly scanned his own instruments. The third planet? That was Ahana! The shape was there and the nearer they got the larger it became. It was obviously a ship, but the Alliance didn't have anything that size.

"Sir," another pilot voiced his concern, "something's jamming the scanners!"

Han's heart chilled as they drew nearer, and a young pilot gasped out what he had feared: "Imperials!"

The Star Destroyer sat, hovering like a bird of prey, over its victim. Streaks of green death sought the tiny Rebel ships which swarmed like flies around it. The destroyer's own TIEs spewed from its bowels in squads of eight, prepared to obliterate all opposition in the area. Large Imperial bombers ran over the planet, delivering their packages of destruction onto its surface. Flashes of explosions lit up space, and as Han neared the battle zone, screams of the dying echoed over the comlink.

"Form up!" Han yelled to his companions. "Keep 'em off our backs!" Recklessly, he headed straight for Ahana. "We've gotta get down there, Chewie, or the Falcon's junk!"

"Solo!" a familiar voice howled at him. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Hi!" Han was deliberately flippant. "Just delivering your fighters to you, Commander!" He winced as Chewie manned the single weapon on the barge, bringing down an Imperial vessel.

"Get your ass out of here—now!" Narra growled. What he didn't need now was a stubborn Corellian with a creaking old barge entering into things. Clearing a path for the evacuation was going to be difficult enough without Solo causing trouble.

"My ship's down there, Commander, and I'm not leaving here without her." He paused, pointing out an enemy fighter to his co-pilot. "Get that one, Chewie!" he grinned as the TIE exploded. "That's it!"

"May I remind you, Captain," Nara returned with all the coolness of a seasoned warrior, "that you're carrying vital medical supplies?"

The barge rocked as it took a hit.

"I wouldn't care if I was carrying Mon Mothma herself—I'm not leaving my ship!" He turned to Chewbacca. "We're going down."

"Solo, I—"

Han switched off the commander's protest. Chased by several TIEs the barge plunged through the fighting.

Narra watched in amazement as Han piloted the lumbering ship through the battling fighters, dodging and evading any bursts that came near. Miraculously, the barge reached its captain's goal. He knew the ships still evacuating below would have to plough through the battle field in a similar fashion if they wished to save this section of the Alliance and that Solo was the least of his worries.

"Renegade Squad lets clear a path!"

* * *

The Imperials' shots were too precise, too accurate; they knew where to hit. It was this thought that plagued Leia as she evacuated the command centre. She pressed herself into the corridor wall, shielding herself, as part of the ceiling caved in. Dammit, they knew the base lay-out! How? Who had told them?

"Come on!" Leia yelled to the personnel around her. She grabbed the arm of a woman who had stumbled over the debris and pulled her to her feet. "Get to your ships!"

She ran on, only one of a crowd fighting to reach their passage off world before they were overrun by their foe. Luckily the Imperials had given them enough time to relay the emergency evacuation code signal before they had unleashed their attack. Hopefully the Alliance could salvage something from this disaster. She paused, bending over a soldier who had dropped in front of her, down by falling masonry. He was dead. She lifted his blaster, saying a silent thank you to his nameless body.

"Your Highness!"

She turned in response to the call. See Threepio and Artoo Detoo fought their way toward her. The golden droid was overjoyed to see her. "Your Highness, I'm so glad to see you're unhurt. Artoo and I..."

"Where did you two come from?" Leia didn't know whether or not to be relieved to see them.

"We were at the data centre," Threepio started to explain. "Artoo wanted..."

She cut him off again. "The data centre!" Her stomach plunged with sudden fear. "Were the data bases wiped?"

"There was no one there, Your Highness."

"Shit!"

Threepio was somewhat taken back by Leia's profanity.

Leia was furious. "Threepio get to the ship. Tell the general if I'm not there in fifteen minutes, to forget about me. Artoo you're with me." She started back the way she'd come.

"But, Your Highness!" Threepio shrieked after her. She ignored him as Artoo blooped a forlorn farewell. "Artoo!?" The ground shuddered, the building shook under another barrage. Threepio stumbled on toward the evacuation point.

Leia knew that what she was about to do would probably amount to suicide. But she had to erase all information from the data bases; otherwise the Imperials would gain every piece of Alliance knowledge they contained, including the attack on Minoan. She pushed her way through the throng of retreating Rebels, knowing every minute she was kept from her goal was another minute in the Empire's favour. Several of her comrades warned her of the danger she was heading into, but she threw their concern for her to the wind. A hand caught her arm, halting her in mid-stride.

"Princess!" Wedge Antilles gasped, puffing from his exertion. "You're going the wrong way!"

"Lieutenant, you should be in your fighter!"

Guilt briefly flitted across the pilot's face. "My fighter was destroyed in the first strike. I've been trying to find Kandi."

An explosion blew out a wall further along the corridor. Wedge grabbed Leia and covered her body with his own as debris spattered down around them. There were screams and howls of pain from among the fleeing rebels.

Leia pulled away and stared in horror at the sight before her. Bodies of those injured and dead lay among the bricks. Those able to pulled themselves up and staggered on.

Wedge tried to lead her toward the evacuation site. "Your Highness, please... they'll be landing soon!"

She shook herself, tearing her eyes away from the smashed corpses. "I can't, Wedge. The data bases haven't been wiped. They have to be erased," She glanced around. "Artoo!" She smiled as the little droid trundled toward her. "Otherwise we lose everything."

Wedge fought against two conflicting desires. She wanted to go on and find his wife and get the hell out of there. But he knew of the importance of the data banks, and of the princess's concern. He shook off his personal needs; the Alliance was more important than he or Kandi. "I'll go with you."

Leia smiled, grateful for his help. Together they picked their way over the wreckage with Artoo following behind.

* * *

Han left the barge engine running in his hurry to get to his own ship. Chewbacca ran behind him, carrying the heavy equipment case full of the parts they had scrounged on Raymar. The hangar was a mess. Several X-and Y-wings lay shattered under a ton of ceiling, their pilots either crushed to death in their ships or next to them.

So much for the reinforcements. Han dashed toward his ship. She sat, looking quite at home, among the ruins.

"Come on, Chewie!" Han shouted at his friend as he ran up the freighter's ramp. The rumbles of explosions sounded too close for comfort. The sooner they patched in the new parts and closed her up, the better.

Han dived under the controls as soon as he entered the cockpit; he howling at Chewbacca to shut up aft. Quickly, he tore out the old Navigation system and Chewie lumbered in the new. He threw the system together, fingers flying as he tied bare wires together. The Falcon rocked as more bombs fell from above.

"How we doin', Chewie? " He roared as he pushed himself into his seat and started her up. He grinned as the engines throbbed to life. He knew she wouldn't let him down.

Chewbacca dropped in the seat by his side.

"Get those deflectors up, charge up the guns!" He pushed the throttle open.
"They're gonna need some help up there!"

* * *

Narra watched in despair as another Imperial troop shuttle headed for Ahana's surface. So far, only six Rebel ships had made it into lightspeed, and he doubted that with his depleted fighter numbers he could protect any more. How many were still down there; stranded and alone; facing annihilation.

"Renegade flight, stick close. Three, watch the port side you..." He blinked in surprise as a white conflagration flared where the Imperial shuttle had been.

"Hey, Commander," Solo's voice crackled over his headset, "you in some difficulty here?"

Narra smiled for the first time during the battle as the battered freighter appeared. Never had he been so glad to hear the Corellian's sarcastic tones. "I hate to admit this, Solo, but I'm actually pleased to see you!"

"It's mutual. Where do you want us?"

"We need to protect the ships coming through."

"Are there many more to off?"

"No, I figure there's only four ships left." As Narra spoke, another barge appeared from surface.

The Falcon swooped in to give it cover "Okay, Chewie," Han roared gleefully, "let's bake some Imperial butts!"

The commander was more at ease now. With Solo's crazy skills, the remaining ships had a better chance of making it. He almost felt sorry for the Imperials.

* * *

Wedge groaned in dismay as an Imperial troop carrier lumbered overhead. Their chances of escape were growing smaller with every passing second. He pulled the princess on, knowing the data centre was not far. No longer did they have to fight against a tide of panic-stricken beings. Everyone who had sense had gone to the hangars and now there was an almost eerie silence, split only by the occasional bomber or shuttle.

Breathless from their sprint, and with Artoo trailing behind, they reached their destination. The door lay open, jammed by a large block of concrete. Wedge lifted Leia over it.

Leia cleared the small fragments and dust from the console and punched in her personal code. The computer's screen remained blank. She cursed and gave it a thump. She repeated the code still nothing. "Artoo!"

Twittering nervously, and with Wedge helping lift him over, Artoo fought his way into the room.

"I need you to plug in," Leia told him breathlessly as Wedge waited by the door anxiously watching for Imperial troops. "Erase all information."

Wedge groaned as he spotted the first white-armoured soldier pass by a hole in the corridor wall "Your Highness, they're here!"

"Artoo!"

The little droid worked as quickly as he could. He bypassed commands re-routed commands around damaged areas and deleted all he could. He whistled happily as he withdrew from the mainframe.

"That's it, Wedge!" Leia almost shouted with relief.

The trio left the room, picked their way gradually over debris and exited into the compound.

"We ain't gonna make it." Wedge groaned as he saw the enormity of their situation. The base was crawling with soldiers. Small arms fire could be heard coming from the back of the commissary and infantry dorms.

"Don't be such a pessimist," Leia scolded him. "You're just like Luke was... Damn!" She stopped and stared at him as she suddenly remembered something.

What is it?" Wedge's anxiety grew.

"Luke." She saw his uncomprehending look, and tried to explain. "I've left his lightsabre in my room; he'd never forgive me if I left it."

The pilot experienced a fleeting moment of panic. "Your Highness," he said, as gently as he could under the circumstances, "Luke's dead; he doesn't need his lightsabre any more. We should try to get back to the hangar."

Leia could almost read Wedge's thoughts. "Lieutenant, you go on to the hangar if you want, but I'm getting that weapon." She ducked out of their hiding place, heading toward her quarters.

"Princess!" Wedge called after her, but she was gone. Wedge looked at Artoo as the astromech droid trundled after the princess. He cursed and followed. With the condition she was in, she would need his help more than ever. There was no telling what she might do next.

He found her raking around in the rubble that had been her apartment. Smiling, she placed a couple of holo-pics in her pocket and lifted the Jedi weapon out of the corner it had obviously been knocked into. She glanced up at his worried countenance as he helped her to her feet. "Okay, Lieutenant, get us out of here!"

Slowly, avoiding the growing numbers of Imperial troops, they picked their way back to the hangars. Both of them knew that by now all the transports would be away; but since Han had yet to return they hoped the Falcon may prove them with their only means of escape; if they could patch her up quick enough.

The noise of running engines lifted their hearts. Had someone waited for Her Highness, despite her orders to the contrary? Climbing over the remains of the surrounding wall, they entered the hangar. The Falcon was gone, but a cargo barge sat a few yards from the area where the freighter had been.

Wedge gave a whoop of delight. "Han must have made it!"

A red burst of light flew over their heads. The Imperials had spotted them... Wedge grabbed Leia's arm, pulling her quickly toward the waiting ship, as she squeezed off a few shots of her own. He immediately closed the hatch behind them, giving them the safety of the ship. Han had clearly left her running in his haste to reach the Falcon.

From the cockpit, they could see the Stormtroopers piling into the hangar; but both of them knew the ground soldiers were no longer their concern. What they had to worry about were the fighters above the planet, who would be waiting for them. Wedge opened her up and left the Imperials alone in the hangar, amid the Rebel dead.

* * *

"Renegade flight." Narra prepared to give the final order to his squad. "Form up on the Falcon. We've done what we can; it's time to high-tail it out of here!"

"Leaving without out us, Commander Narra?"

Narra turned quickly to look out his starboard side. The cargo barge that Solo had taken down appeared from the planet's surface. The feminine voice identified one of its passengers as the Princess Organa. He blasted a TIE as he welcomed her into the flight. "I'm glad you could make it, Your Highness!"

Wedge banked the ship to avoid more Imperial fire, but the ship rocked under a salvo. Leia shot him a foul look as she answered Narra. "We nearly didn't, Commander!"

"Can we quit the socializn', and get out of here while we still can?"

Leia grinned at Han's dry remark. "Whenever you're ready, Captain."

The remaining Rebels fighters surrounded the barge, giving it protection. And, with the Falcon taking the lead, the assembly jumped to lightspeed, leaving Ahana to its Imperial conquerors.

End

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