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## **Missing -- Part Two**

by [Catriona Campbell Boyle](#)

### **XII**

The night was warm and the room was stuffy. Tamara turned in her bed, unable to sleep in the heat. She kicked off her covers and slapped her pillow before settling back down. She lay still, listening for the night sounds: the animals, restless in their enclosure; the house creaking as it settled down for the night; her father snoring in the next room; and Ryder creeping out.

It wasn't hard to guess where he went. After that first morning, with his evasive answers, she had known what he was doing; and if he went tonight, it would make his tenth night a row. She held her breath as she heard the whisper of his door as it opened; she heard the quiet pad of his feet as he crept up the corridor. Sadness and fear filled her as the front entrance closed after him.

Tamara rose from her bed and crossed to her window, trying to make out his shape in the darkness. Why was he doing this? Why was he risking his life? Why couldn't he just settle down and be the farmer he said he once was? She wanted to run after him, to beg him to stop what he was doing. But like the other nights she had stood here, she knew she couldn't. Her father would hear, and that would only serve to make matters worse.

As before, a light appeared in the garage.

She'd found the blaster. It wasn't hard; she hadn't even been looking for it. Her mother had sent her into his room to collect any laundry he'd left laying around. He'd left the bureau drawer open; the gun's muzzle poked out from under the

clothes. She hadn't dared touch it. She knew by the wound on his side the damage they could do. Why did he keep it? She wondered, fearfully. He knew such weapons were illegal on Irlam. If he carried it anywhere on him, he could be arrested. Did he have it with him now?

The light bobbed its way across the yard and over the enclosure's fence. The thought of him being in danger caused an ache within her, and this feeling scared her. It wasn't the same as when he was ill; she hadn't known him then. But, she had liked him from that first day, the day he had been able to communicate rationally, the day he had pestered her with questions - the day he had made her laugh. It had been easy to like him; it was now easy to love him, and she knew she did. When he stole out to the Imperial base it terrified her. When he returned safe the relief she felt was overwhelming; it lightened her heart and made her smile.

The light disappeared into the forest, and Tamara returned to her bed, knowing she would not sleep until he returned.

\* \* \*

"Get up, Brett!"

Alex smiled at the tousled blond head that emerged from under the sheets. It was plain that the youngster was excited about his first day back at school; he had awakened with his father's first summons, which was unusual.

"You get dressed now, and come to breakfast."

Brett tumbled from his bed, knocking his carefully-folded clothes off the chair by his bunk. As he dressed, he could hear his father calling Ryder for the third time. He pulled on his shirt and pants, leaving the more difficult buttons and zippers for his mother. He rushed from his room, impatient for the day to begin so he could see his friends again; he had so much to tell them.

As he barrelled down the hallway, he bumped into his cousin, who had emerged bleary-eyed and yawning from his room.

"Slow down, Junior."

Brett took no heed and easily beat Ryder into the kitchen.

Breakfast was quickly over with, and as Alex pulled on his jacket to drive his son to school, he handed out the day's chores. "Before I come back, I want the herd fed. Tamara, you can help Ryder with that. Ryder, when I come back we'll mend the barn roof. Harvest is too near for us to leave it any longer."

Still sitting at the table, Ryder nodded. Everything was the same here as on Tatooine: the work, the harvest.

"Come on, Dad!" Brett pulled on his father's arm. "I'll be late!"

Mhari placed a small amount of money in her son's pocket and buttoned his coat. She combed his hair, much to Brett's annoyance. "There, we're all ready."

Brett shouted his goodbyes as his father led him from the room. He felt sorry for his sister and cousin; they didn't go to school anymore.

\* \* \*

Jair Colter smiled pleasantly at his class of five-year-olds. Like most of them, he was happy to be back in the classroom. The vacations always got a little boring toward the end, and he usually ended up yearning to get back to his work, to do what he did best - teach. This was his second term with this class, and he had another two to go before they moved up a year and he got a new class. He would start this term the same way he had started every new term since he'd begun teaching. It calmed the children down, got rid of their nervous energy, and helped them settle into the school atmosphere after being on holiday for a few weeks.

He cleared his throat before speaking, keeping his voice low so as not to frighten his charges. "Morning, children."

They spoke in chorus. "Morning, sir." There were a few giggles, but he didn't mind.

"I'm pleased to see you all back. Did you enjoy the break?"

There were several "yes's," but mostly the class just nodded.

Colter moved forward and sat on the front desk, making himself approachable to the children. His smile widened as he watched their young, eager faces, knowing each of them was bursting with stories from their vacation. "We'll take it one at a time, and you can all tell the class about your holiday." His eyes roamed the room, falling on a youngster seated at the back. "Why don't you start, Timi?"

The boy rose from his chair, glancing nervously at his neighbour, before plunging into his tale.

Brett only half-listened to his classmates, as they rambled, stumbling their way through their holiday adventures. Mostly the tales consisted of visiting relatives on the other side of the planet, throwing up in the speeder on the way, getting a new pet after the old one died, how an older brother or sister had just left for the

Academy, or helping on the farm or in a parent's shop. Brett yawned and twisted in his seat. His story would be the best of all; if only it could be his turn next.

Colter noticed the boy's agitation, and when the girl sitting in front of him finished her story about getting a new dress, he invited Brett to take the floor.

Brett jumped to his feet and was immediately lost for words. Now that it was his turn, he didn't know where to start. The teacher noticed, and tried to prompt him. "What happened to you during the break, Brett?"

Brett blurted it out. "There was fighting!"

"Fighting? Who was fighting?"

"In the forest, at night; there were flashes in the trees, and shouting. And big exp..expo...exposuns and fire! Dad said for us to stay in the house." Brett's eyes glowed with the memory. The rest of the class sat up; none of them had anything as exciting as real fighting to talk about!

"Do you know who was fighting?" Jair had to ask again. His own curiosity had been stirred. He had heard of the battle near the Lasjows' farm; the rumour was that it had been a Rebel landing.

Brett frowned, trying to remember if his father had said anything. "Stormtroopers, I think," he said, saying the only thing he could; after all, they were the only ones with guns. Who else could it have been? "I don't know who else." He fell silent.

"It all sounds very dangerous, Brett, and I'm very glad no-one got hurt."

"My cousin did."

"Your cousin?" Jair frowned, aggrieved that a local would have been caught up in the battle. "What happened?"

"I dunno," Brett vigorously shook his head scowling that he didn't know this part of Ryder's story. "But he had to come stay with us an' we never knew him before, an' Ryder knows lots of things! Mom said he knew a princess!"

The teacher smiled. The boy's story was going the same way his classmates' had, although Brett's suffered from over-imagination. But an active mind was to be encouraged. "Really?"

"Uh-uh," Brett nodded "But dad won't let him talk about his friends, and he says funny things...." he paused, recalling something and he looked expectantly at his teacher as he asked. "What's a Jedi Knight?"

Colter's smile froze on his face. He hadn't heard the Jedi mentioned for almost twenty years, and to hear it coming from a five-year-old child.... "Who told you that?" He had a feeling he knew.

"Ryder."

Jair's mind raced over Brett's words. A strange cousin turns up after a battle; he knows a princess and speaks of Jedi Knights. He had seen the youth in town a few times with the Lasjows, but had never given him a second thought. He shook his head, scolding himself for his thoughts. The lad was probably a farmer, like his relations; there was no sense in making something out of a five-year-old's ranting. He didn't want to make trouble for the Lasjows; they were good people.

"You can sit down now, Brett, and let someone else have a turn."

Jair Colter's suspicions remained.

\* \* \*

Alex stood at the gate arch, waiting for his neighbour's speeder to bring his son from school. Mhari was using theirs to visit friends, so he had to rely on Brett hitching a ride from his friend's dad. He gazed around him, relishing the peacefulness of the farm; a peacefulness which was about to break with the return of his youngest. An engine noise sounded down the road, and he prepared himself to greet the little whirlwind. The vehicle drew near and the canopy opened, revealing Brett and his friend talking wildly in the rear seat. The conversation was cut short as Brett grabbed his satchel and fell from the speeder. Alex picked him off the ground, dusted him down and lifted him onto his shoulders. He shouted his thanks to the driver, and both waved as their neighbour drove off.

"Did you have fun?" he asked, carrying Brett into the yard.

Brett's answer was a quick, "Yes." He closed his eyes, spreading his arms wide, making engine noises as he imitated an Imperial shuttle. Alex ran with him, making his own "zooms" and "phoewees," joining in with his son's game. He swooped past the animal enclosure, running in a circle toward the house. The farmer stopped in his tracks as a bellow came from the opposite end of the field. He glanced over, scowling; that wasn't a nerf calling.

He patted Brett's leg, telling him to be quiet. They both listened. There was a total silence, apart from the sound of Ryder's hammering coming from the barn roof. Soon, even it stopped. An unusual tension hung in the air. Absolute quiet.

A sudden scream shattered the air; the animals scattered, baying their distress and a huge, sleek black shape sprang for the running herd.

Quickly, Alex placed Brett on the ground. "Get Ryder - hurry! Tell him to get the stun-gun." Then he was over the enclosure fence, running towards his livestock.

Ryder ceased his hammering to wipe the sweat from his brow. He looked across the yard. From his vantage point, perched as he was on the roof, he could see Alex standing watching his animals, with Brett on his shoulders doing the same. There was an odd sensation like a breath of wind on the back of his neck. There was a scream, and the herd bolted across the field as one of their number fell under attack from a large beast. A spray of blood spurted from the nerfs neck as its throat was torn open.

"What the hell.....?" Ryder was down the ladder in a shot, grabbing Brett as the child tore around the corner, looking for his cousin. "What is it?"

Brett pulled on his sleeve. "The ribbies!" he panted out. "You've got to get the stun-gun!"

"I don't know where it is!" He glanced around saw Alex leaping the fence into the field. "Shit! Where's Tamara?"

They ran to the house, trying to find Tamara. Ryder burst into the living room. Tamara lay on the couch, watching a holo-movie with keen anticipation. She turned around in anger and guilt; ready to scold Ryder for interrupting the climax of the story and to offer an excuse for why she wasn't finishing the laundry as her mother had asked. But her anger faded with the urgency she saw the urgency on his face.

"Where's the stun gun?" he demanded.

She quickly switched off the movie as she stood. "Why?"

"Ribbies!" Brett blurted out.

Tamara's heart chilled. "Lowen? Where's Dad?"

"In the field." Ryder caught her arm as she tried to run from the room. "Where's the gun?"

She shrugged off his grip. "In the garage - locked drawer. The key's in the tin on the top shelf."

Too much hassle and no time. "Never mind," he told her running for the doorway. He still had the blaster in his room.

Tamara watched him go knowing what he was doing. And turned to Brett. "Stay here." she told him as she ran for the house.

Brett ignored her and followed.

With fear pounding her heart Tamara climbed the fence, straining to spot her father. She knew the Lowen, or "ribbies," as Brett called them. They were the most feared predators on Irlam. They were huge cat-like beasts, at least two meters long, and they were more than capable of killing a man. Brett's nickname for them referred to their jaws, which, when opened at full stretch, pulled the surrounding skin into "ribs." One bite was usually all it took for the kill. And her father had gone in unarmed.

"Tamara!" the shout came from behind her. "Stay put!"

Ryder raced forward, carrying the blaster. A second scream of death hurried his feet. He jumped up beside her. "Get into the house!" He warned her as he climbed over and dropped onto the grass, heading for the distant figure surrounded by three of the large creatures and the dead nerfs.

Alex Lasjow cursed himself for his stupidity. All his years as a farmer in this region should have taught him to be more cautious, but like an idiot he'd run right into danger. He had achieved one of his aims, though; he'd taken the lowen's attention from the herd. His animals were safe, but now it was he who commanded their unwanted notice. If he made any move - all it would need was a twitch of a hand - he'd be minus a throat. He gagged on the foul stench of death which rose from the bodies of the nerfs.

A low snarl issued from the throat of the largest beast; his two companions echoed the hoarse grumble. Their feeding had been interrupted, and their mood was one of ugly displeasure. The lowen crept closer to the terrified farmer. Alex felt the thin needles of fear pierce his lower spine, calling on his legs to move, to turn, to get away. But he obeyed his common sense and stood still, letting the animals pace and growl.

The shot, when it came, surprised all - not least the beast, which slumped heavily to the ground. This unexpected turn of events confused the two remaining lowen. They swung their massive heads around to stare malevolently at the youth who had so steadily crept up on them. The biggest animal, the one who seemed to lead, appeared to protect the others. Crouched low, slouching cautiously towards the human, warm thick saliva dripped from its jaws.

Ryder re-aimed the weapon; now that his advantage of surprise had been used, he had to act quickly.

"Brett, come back!"

Ryder spun around at Tamara's unexpected scream. Brett was tearing across the grass, heading straight for them.

"Brett, get out of here!"

A roar of bald anger rose from the creature as it sprang for its nearest foe. Brett froze, a look of sheer terror on his young face. Ryder whirled, facing the attacking creature, throwing up his arms in a useless gesture of defence. He caught the full impact of the lowen's body and fell, spinning to the ground, dropping the gun.

Alex, unable to stand still any longer, dove for the fallen weapon. He was clubbed down by the second lowen. Brett, seeing his father fall, turned tail and ran, pursued by his father's assailant.

"Brett!" Tamara screamed, watching helplessly, as Ryder fought for his life and Brett ran for his. She knew the agile beast would easily catch her little brother.

The large, clawed paws ripped viciously at Ryder's chest as his arm muscles strained to keep those open jaws from his throat. The weight of the animal squeezed his body, and he found it hard to draw breath, found it hard to get the oxygen he needed to continue the fight. The beast's roar echoed around the farm, blasting Ryder with the stinking breath of the carnivore. The head plunged for his throat. Acting on pure instinct, he met the attack with a blow to the lowen's trachea. It choked on the punch, surprised. Ryder used the time to his advantage, and plunged his fingers into the creature's eyes. It jerked and bellowed with pain, but it was too late. Blood and vitreous humor ran down Ryder's arm from the ruined sockets. The animal pulled away, pawing at its blinded eyes. Ryder lay still, coughing, fighting the pain from his shredded chest, feeling the blood swell and spill.

Tamara's scream brought him to his senses. He scrabbled in the dirt, frantically searching for the gun, unaware that it was now Brett and not he who was prey. He gave a silent thank you to the Force as his fingers closed around the weapon.

Brett screamed for his mother as he ran. His stomach retched, his small body finding it hard to obtain the strength it needed to cope with absolute fear and the physical need to flee. The lowen behind him leapt, and fell in a black heap on the ground. Brett ran on without looking back. He didn't stop until he was safe in his big sister's arms.

The injured animal caused no more problems, and Ryder shot it, before he slumped back, sore and exhausted.

Alex groaned, his hand going to his painful head. The lowen had dealt him quite a clout. He pulled himself up, gazing around the field. The three black beasts lay sleeping; the herd grazed unconcerned now at the other end of the enclosure; Tamara consoled a weeping Brett at the fence; and Ryder lay on his back, still. The farmer went to him.



"You're hurt," he observed, gazing with some concern at Ryder's tattered and bloody jacket and bloodied hands.

The boy opened his eyes and smiled wearily. "Just scratches, I think." He sat up and winced, his hand holding his chest. "I'm glad it was cold today." He hated to think what he would look like now if he hadn't worn his jacket.

Alex helped him up. "We'll need to take a look at you..."he hesitated. "Ryder, I..." His throat clogged; he forced it open. "I want to thank you. I..."

Ryder shifted his feet in the dirt uncomfortably as the big man tried to thank him for saving his son's and his own life. "Uncle Alex," he broke in, "you don't have to thank me. You saved my life; now I've paid my debt."

The farmer watched Ryder walk, limping again, to the body of a lowen. He glanced down at saw the weapon the boy had used on the animals and anger stirred within as recognised the handgun. The Rebel had brought a blaster into his house. He tuned to shout and saw a dead nerf nearby, its neck torn, its stomach ripped, its viscera spilling out. In its place, he saw his son. Troubled, he ran his hand through his hair and shook the vision off. The Rebel had paid his debt by saving Alex's life, but he'd put Alex in arrears by saving Brett.

He sighed wearily and lifted the gun from the ground. He crossed to the youth and placed the blaster into Ryder's hands. "I don't know where you got this, but I'd like you to remove it from my property."

"Of course, sir," Ryder agreed, tucking it into his belt. He bent to help Alex clear the lowen from the field.

\* \* \*

Dusk was falling as she spotted him sitting alone on the perimeter fence. His back was to her, his head tilted as he stared at the first stars of the night. Everything was quiet again, everything was peaceful. Brett was in bed early, recovering from the day's excitement. Her mother and father were talking in the living room, and Ryder sat outside stargazing. She wanted some company. Silently, she crept up on him and encircled his waist with her arms.

"Watcha doing?"

"Thinking," he replied, without taking his eyes from the sky.

"Well, don't over-do it; you might blow a circuit."

He didn't laugh, and his mood began to transfer itself onto her. She moved to his side her eyes following his, upwards. "You want to go back, don't you?"

His answer was simple. "It's where I belong."

"Can't you belong here?" It was out before she could stop herself.

He turned on the fence to face her, surprise clear in his blue eyes. He took her hand. "Tama, understand, please. As long as the Alliance fights, as long as the Empire has its hold, it's where I belong. I can't sit here forever. I can't forget my past, no matter how much your father wants me to." He gestured to the farm buildings. "I feel trapped. It's like I'm on Tatooine again. I have to choose between what I feel is right, and those I've come to..." He turned his eyes down to look at their entwined fingers. "...love."

Tamara was silent, trying to gain the courage to ask him the question that burned inside her. "Is that why you go out at night?" She felt his body stiffen and rushed on, "I've seen you. You go there, don't you--the outpost?"

He couldn't look at her, couldn't deny it.

"What if you're caught? Do you think of that?"

"It's the only hope I have of getting off-planet," he argued gently. He wouldn't mention that so far he'd been unable to find a way to break into the base, to get to a shuttle; but he wouldn't give up. "And if I'm caught doing that, then I'm the only one to suffer. They can't trace me to here. Tama, I can't stay hidden indefinitely. It's inevitable that I'll be found someday."

"What would happen?" she had to ask. Her curiosity made her.

"If I'm caught here?"

She nodded.

He looked away, to the house. "It depends on who's in command here. I guess they'd probably take control of the farm. You'd live here, but slave for them." He hesitated and looked deeply into her grey eyes, not wanting to hurt her, but having to be truthful. "They may execute your father."

Horror slithered up her spine. Could they really do that? Just because they had helped someone? Could they kill her father? If they did that to them, what would they do to Ryder.

"What about you?" she asked.

"Interrogated, executed."

He said it so simply, as if he were telling her she had a mark on her jacket, or that it was getting dark. Wasn't he scared?

Ryder felt her distress and tried to reassure her. "I won't let anything happen to you. I'll be gone before anyone suspects."

That was not what she wanted. She wanted him to stay. "We've been careful!" she protested, her eyes searching his. "No one will ever suspect; you don't have to go."

He smiled sadly. "I have things to do, Tama. One day you'll understand." The Minoan assault was only three weeks away, and he was needed for that. He was being given a squad to lead; he couldn't stay here. But for now, there was Tamara.

"I'll tell you what; I'll stay in for tonight. After today, I need the sleep anyway. "

His words seemed to make her happier. "You will?"

He nodded, smiling, not only to cheer her up, but to cheer himself up. "How's Brett doing?"

"He's sleeping it off; by tomorrow he'll have forgotten all about it. How do your wounds feel?"

"Not too bad." He unconsciously rubbed his chest. He had been lucky; if he hadn't been wearing his jacket his flesh would have been torn from his bones; as it was he'd suffered vivid red weals and several deep scratches and bruises; but they would clear up soon enough. But the appearance of the lowen had given him some cause for alarm. Had they about when he was out at night?

"Those things, will there be more of them?" he voiced his concern.

She knew what was on his mind. "There could be, but the packs are migratory they don't stay in one place for very long."

Ryder didn't feel terribly reassured by her answer and vowed to hang onto his blaster for a while longer, despite Alex's request to ditch it.

It was almost fully dark, the yard lit only by the light coming from the house. A chill settled over the farm, and Tamara shivered. Ryder pulled her up onto the fence beside him, so they could take warmth from each other's bodies. Sitting with him like this, she felt as though nothing in the galaxy could harm them. She glanced out the side of her eyes at him; once again, questions sprang to her mind. "What's it like out there?" she asked, as a shuttle flew overhead. "You know—space travel, other planets?"

She sounded the way he used to, always inquisitive about things that had been out of his reach. "It's not as exciting as you think," he informed her. "Still, it was for me, at first. But that's only because of the way I joined the Alliance. After a while, though, the excitement wears off. Travelling in space can get pretty boring and routine."

Tamara knew by the way he spoke and by the gleam in his eyes that he loved that life, and couldn't wait to get back to it. "There are so many different planets, it's almost unbelievable! And so many life forms that you end up with several culture shocks! There are planets of water, snow, sand, forest, grass, rocks, even gases. Or you get a mixture, like Irlam."

She leaned against him, dreaming. "I wish I could go."

"You will," he said, thinking of his own past. "I thought I'd never get off Tatooine. The day I did leave, I woke up thinking, 'Another boring day on the farm.' His voice turned sad. "I couldn't have been more wrong."

"Why? What happened?"

*Smoke billowing on the horizon. Panic beating in his chest. "Uncle Owen! Aunt Beru!"*

He cleared his throat, brushed away the grief and horror of that day. "By the end of the day I was fugitive from the Empire."

Tamara knew he was reluctant to speak about himself, she sensed sadness and a raw sorrow. But her forbidden question returned. "What's your real name?"

He hesitated, feeling a little defensive and Alex's warnings repeated in his mind. But it had been so long since he had even thought of his own name. "Luke; Luke Skywalker."

Tamara pulled away from him as she considered his name. She looked at him quizzically. "You don't look like a Luke."

He grinned. "Oh? And what do I look like?"

"A Ryder."

He laughed again and pulled her close. "I'm beginning to think of myself as a Ryder."

"Good," she smiled against his chest, feeling the warmth of his arm around her. A silly idea occurred to her, a past-time she and her brother enjoyed that she wanted to share with him. "Have you ever skimmed stones?"

"What?"

"Good, you haven't. Then since Dad has given you the day off tomorrow, we'll go to the river and I'll teach you."

Mhari stood at the kitchen door, watching and listening to them talk. Ryder laughed quietly and kissed Tamara lightly on the forehead; he nodded, agreeing with her daughter's proposition. She knew it was inevitable that Ryder and Tamara grow close; both she and Alex had feared it, but now she knew his name she feared it even more.

"Come on, you two," she called to them. "It's getting late."

\* \* \*

The chime for afternoon recess echoed through the school and, for the second time that day, work was forgotten as the children ran helter-skelter for the exits. They pushed their way, shouting and screaming, into the yard. Jair Colter watched his class split into several small groups, starting the same number of games. The girls huddled in little corners to play "house," or chased one another while shrieking if a boy dared come too near. The boys, on the other hand, enjoyed rougher games, and battled it out with toy blasters.

He smiled, laughing to himself, as little Brett Lasjow screamed past, waving his weapon. The "dead" dropped, clutching their chests — although they had been shot in the back — and lay still until their "killer" had passed. Then they were on their feet again, howling out murderous war cries. Brett, in his excited hurry, ran into his instructor. Colter grasped his small arms, avoiding an accident, and sent the boy off in the opposite direction, chased by his "enemies."

It was then that Jair Colter noticed what the child wore, wrapped twice around his small waist.

\* \* \*

"Three, four, five, six, seven!" Tamara watched with pride as the stone she had thrown bounced across the river's smooth surface. "Betcha can't beat seven."

Ryder chewed his bottom lip as he considered the challenge. If he had known stone skipping had meant coming this close to this much water, he wouldn't be here now. Coming from a desert planet had left him uncomfortable around open bodies of water, and it was an anxiety which he was finding hard to conquer. He hadn't even known he had a fear until he had been pulled under the foul water in the garbage crusher aboard the Death Star; that left a bad memory which still gave him nightmares. But not wanting Tamara to know he was afraid, he

swallowed back hard and lifted a round, smooth stone. It looked easy enough. He stepped as close to the river as he dared, and threw the rock.

"One," he said, as the stone plopped into the water.

Tamara giggled. "That wasn't 'one,' it went straight down."

He sighed. "I can't get the hang of this."

Tamara picked up another stone and showed it to him. "Get a flat one, like this; and it must be smooth. Now hold it like this..." She demonstrated the grip to him. "Now watch this," she boasted, as she threw the stone across the water and counted, "Six, seven, eight — see?"

He selected another water-polished stone, determined to champion over this child's game, "Okay, move back." His face fell as the stone joined the other rocks on the river bed.

"Not like that—like this."

As he watched the water surface ripple from her skipping stone, an idea grew in the back of his mind. He tried to push it away, but the harder he pushed, the more it appealed to him. It had been a while since he had even thought about the Force much less tried to use it. He had managed to teach himself some little tricks with which to amuse his comrades in the squad even though he had the feeling Ben Kenobi might have disapproved of them. He glanced at his companion, a wicked gleam of fun sparkling in his eyes, and he smiled. He lifted another stone and stood at the water's edge. "Right," he said, mimicking her. "Watch this. ..."

Tamara stood aside to let him throw. She watched sceptically and, as she watched, her mouth dropped open. Ryder gently sent the stone on its way; it bounced fifteen times before disappearing under the water. She turned to face his smug grin in disbelief. "How did you do that?"

He chuckled loudly, enjoying his own joke. "All it needed was a little Force!"

\* \* \*

Brett felt his tears trickle lightly down his cheeks. They dripped onto his small hands, which fidgeted upon the desk at which he sat. His bottom lip trembled, threatening a larger deluge of salt water. He couldn't understand why he had been kept after school. What had he done wrong? And why had Mr. Colter taken his gun belt from him? Why did he ask all those strange questions about Ryder? He sniffed and glanced cautiously at his teacher, who now sat staring silently at

him. Dad would be worrying; he'd think Brett had been bad, and he'd be standing outside angry. More tears spilled over; he wanted to go home.

Colter was troubled. There was no doubt in his mind now that Ryder Lasjow was not from Irlam. This child in front of him was infamous for having a vivid imagination, but even he couldn't have made up what he'd just told his teacher. He could only have learned of the Jedi from an off-worlder. Information on that ancient brotherhood was forbidden in this sector; children under the age of seventeen had no knowledge of them. It had been the gun belt which put the clincher on it. Brett said he had found it after Tamara, his sister, had buried it, on the day Ryder had arrived.

The boy sat before him, quietly weeping. He didn't understand; all he cared about was his confiscated toy. Colter had no wish to upset the child's life, or make trouble for the Lasjows, but this matter had to be investigated. And he was duty-bound, as an Imperial servant, to report any suspicious behaviour or person.

"Brett," he said, his usual soft tones heavy with regret, "you can go now."

The tears stopped almost immediately. He wasn't in trouble after all; he wasn't going to be punished. Gratefully, Brett stood, grabbed his satchel, and ran from the room.

Colter watched from the classroom window as Lasjow lifted his son into the waiting speeder. He said a silent apology to the farmer as the two drove off; then he turned quickly to the com-unit in his room, punching out the appropriate numbers.

\* \* \*

They had tired of the game. Both now lay flat on the grass, staring up at the sun shining through the trees which rose above them. A cool breeze wafted over them, tugging gently at their hair and clothing. The leaves rustled lightly and the river gurgled. Birds circled in the air; small mammals poked their heads out of dens to stare curiously at the two humans before ducking into the undergrowth to forage for food. A fly buzzed over Tamara and she waved it away.

Ryder noticed movement in the branches above him. A little furry animal stared down at him, its brown eyes wide with inquisitiveness. It chattered as it scurried along the tree limb. "What's that?" Ryder asked, pointing upward.

Tamara's eyes followed his finger. "Tree myre."

"Oh." He thought of the lowen. "Is it dangerous?"

"No."

They watched the tree myre disappear into a thick clump of leaves, and then returned to their own private thoughts.

Ryder's stomach rumbled loudly. "We should've brought some food."

"Mom'll have dinner made soon; we'll have to get back."

Neither of them moved, each enjoying the peace of the forest too much to go home yet. Tamara spoke again. "Ryder?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you really know Princess Leia?"

The image of the princess as he had last seen her sprang to his mind: her long hair down, framing her face; her petite body clad in her blue jump suit, as she leaned forward to plant a kiss on his cheek, telling him to be careful. He smiled. "Yes."

"What's she like?"

He sat up and looked down at her. "What is this—question time again?"

"I just want to know, that's all." She hesitated, unsure. "Do... do you like her?"

So that was it. Their feelings for each other had been apparent last night, but nothing had been said. They couldn't hide it or try to pretend it wasn't there, and now, in her own way, Tamara had swung the first pick-axe at the ice. It cracked. But he had to tease her, to be sure himself that her feelings were true before he allowed his shield down fully. So he answered with the truth. "Of course; I joined the Alliance because of her." He failed to mention that he doubted his chances with Leia; she was too involved with the Rebellion to let love into her heart.

Tamara was shocked at the envy which coursed through her. She hadn't realized her feelings were so strong. "Really?" Her voice sounded disappointed, and her face echoed the same sentiment.

He'd hurt her, and he was sorry. His eyes smiled down at her hesitantly. Ignoring Han's teaching, he leaned toward her, brushing her lips with his own. Her eyes widened in delighted surprise, and he held her gaze. "Does that answer your question?"

Tamara nodded and cleared his hair from his eyes, tentatively stroking the blond strands. Again his mouth covered hers, his hands exploring the back of her neck. She knew by his touch that, unlike her, he was not new to love. He moved down,



planting small kisses on her neck, before finding her mouth again. His embrace tightened as the kiss deepened.

Tentatively Tamara allowed her hand to stray around his back; caressing him through his shirt. She shifted slightly, bringing her leg up, bending the knee to cradle him in the nook of her body. She smiled into their kisses as he groaned and a heat swelled within as she felt his hardness against her. She gasped; spoke his name as his hand wandered to the fastening of her pants.

"Ryder...."

He hesitated, paused and pulled away. Looking at her with a mixture of confusion and uncertainty. "I.... I can't... I mean, we can't... I..."

"Don't... don't you want me? Her voice was small, hurt and unsure. Her breasts still tender, wanting to be touched and caressed.

Ryder rolled away and stood, attempting to steady his breathing, to fight his arousal. He was furious—not with her but with himself. How could he have let it get so far? He wasn't Ryder Lasjow. He was Luke Skywalker. He didn't belong here. He belonged with the Alliance. He couldn't do this to Tamara; he couldn't allow this relationship to develop any further, not when he was planning on leaving. "It's not that," he tried to reassure her. "I just... we can't....It wouldn't be fair..."

"Fair?" She was starting to get angry

Ryder stood on a large boulder at the very edge of the water, his anger at himself causing him to forget his fear. He hefted a large rock and, with a cry, he threw it as far and as hard as he could at the river. The boulder under him rocked with his weight and movement; he lost his balance and plunged into the water.

The tension was broken immediately. Tamara could do nothing else but laugh as he flailed, splashing, with his arms and legs, trying to stand. He slipped and his head was engulfed with water; it entered his nose and his mouth, making him choke and gasp for breath.

Tamara's giggles faded as she realized his screams for help were real. Quickly, she joined him in the river and grabbed him, pulling him up. She knew it was panic that held him under. He coughed, clearing his lungs and bringing up water. He shivered, but not only with the cold.

"Are you all right?" She helped him to the bank and sat him down.

"I'll be okay in a minute." He coughed again as he tried to calm himself after the fright. He felt foolish at getting into a panic over knee-deep water, but when it went over his head, he felt— He shuddered.

Tamara studied his pale face and his hands, which shook as he brushed his wet hair from his face. "We best get home now, and get changed before we both catch a chill."

He nodded in agreement, the previous incident gladly put behind them for now.

\* \* \*

Ryder squished into his room, with Mhari and Brett's laughter still ringing in his hears. He had been told that when you fish, you don't jump into the river with them. Brett ever offered to teach him how to swim; it would have sounded all right coming from an adult, but coming from a five-year-old, it was downright embarrassing. He pulled off the sodden clothes and towel-dried his body. He searched his drawers for dry, clean clothes and dressed. He dried his hair, already feeling a lot better, and combed out the tugs. The beautiful smell of his dinner drifted into the room, making his mouth water; all he needed was one of Mhari's meals and he'd feel great.

He glanced up toward the window at the sound of approaching vehicles, but they had pulled around the side of the house and were hidden from his view. He sat on the bed to pull on his socks. It must be friends of the Lasjows', although Alex hadn't mentioned anything to him when they'd spoken that morning. He shrugged. The farmer had no obligation to tell him everything. He reached for his boots and drew them on. He frowned. It seemed awfully quiet, the way it had been just before the lowen attack. A feeling of apprehensive dread raised the hair on the back of his neck. He didn't like the silence and he started to rise from the bed...

The door to his room flew open, revealing the white armour Luke instantly recognized. He dove for the open drawer, attempting to close it before the Imperials spotted the blaster he kept there. He never got to complete the move, as he was seized from behind and thrown against the wall. Without thinking of the consequences, he lashed out at his captors. They clubbed him with their weapons; and he fell to the floor, stunned. Then he was on his stomach as they cuffed his hands firmly behind his back. Wordlessly, they pulled him to his feet, and he groggily watched as others of their number searched his room. They found everything: the blaster, the datapad he kept with his accounts of the nightly excursions, and the hologram of the princess. He felt their smug satisfaction as they dragged him from the house.

The Lasjows stood lined up against the barn wall at gun point. They were silent, apart from frightened sobs from Brett and Tamara. Mhari reached for her

husband's hand, seeking some kind of comfort. Fury at this invasion of his life was clear on the farmer's face, but he held his tongue, fearing what would happen if he were to protest. They all waited quietly.

There was a commotion at the house as the young Rebel was forcefully hauled from the building by two Stormtroopers. Alex placed his hand gently on his daughter's shoulder, knowing she was the one who needed the most succour.

Luke quickly took in the scene before him; and if things looked bleak in the house, then they were a hundred times worse out here. Two troop transporters sat, waiting for their passengers; four Stormtroopers guarded the family, as though they were dangerous criminals; others searched the surrounding farm. In shocked disbelief, he watched the Imperials prod the Lasjows toward one of the waiting vehicles. He dug his heels into the dirt, pulling against the troopers' vice-like grips.

"No!" he yelled at the soldiers. "Don't take them!"

Mhari lifted Brett into her arms; he clung to her, staring teary-eyed at the troops. Alex held Tamara's hand; his daughter looked at him, her eyes pleading with him to do something. But he couldn't. He could only wonder where they'd gone wrong, and fear what would happen in the near future. The soldier behind Alex pushed him on with the butt of his blaster.

More Imperials emerged from the house, their search over. The officer in charge, a lieutenant, carried the small evidence box. Luke knew what it contained. His death warrant was probably already signed. He looked back over at the family and locked eyes with Tamara. Her despair was deep; she glanced away, and he struggled, more determined.

"Leave them--let them go!" He strained against the manacles on his wrists, shouting, appealing with Alex to say something. "Uncle Alex— tell them!"

The lieutenant gestured at him, talking to the troopers. "Shut him up."

Alex turned away as the Stormtroopers holding Ryder struck him, using the armour plates on the backs of their hands as effective weapons.

"No!" Tamara screamed, as his shouting ceased. She threw off her father's hand, trying to run to Ryder, wanting to stop the Imperials who were beating him. Alex caught her and pulled her back. She turned on him, crying, "Don't let them hurt him!"

He held her as she sobbed, heedless of the impatient Stormtroopers behind them. "There's nothing I can do." The boy had saved his son's life and there was nothing he could do to help save him, nothing but betray him to safeguard his

family. He watched as the troopers bundled the subdued youth into the transport; then he and his distraught daughter joined Brett and Mhari in the other vehicle.

The nerfs bellowed a lone farewell as the Imperial carriers swept through the gate arch.

### XIII

With great gratification, the Imperial general surveyed the ruins that had once been a Rebel outpost. The buildings lay in various stages of collapse; many were on fire, the flames casting an eerie orange light over the destruction. Bodies lay scattered amid the debris, most of them Rebels who had been unlucky in making an escape. Imperial casualties had been low, Alliance casualties high. The general's only disappointment lay with the Rebels captured alive. None of them had been among the higher ranks and all of them were now dead. The Imperial informer planted among the Rebels had said Organa and Rieekan were in charge here, but they had eluded capture once more.

"Sir."

He turned to find one of his officers behind him. "Yes?"

"We have managed to break into their data banks, sir. Unfortunately, the majority of the information has been wiped; but due to the damage the computer suffered, they didn't—"

The general broke him off. "Get to the point, Major."

"Yes sir! They were building up for a strike. There are parts of an attack pattern, squad hit points and a few coordinates. As far as we can gather, the strike is for the near future. But we can't work out where or when with the information we have. We do know, however, that it's for one of our larger installations."

The general reviewed the area again, then issued his orders. "Finish up here. We'll leave a small garrison to set up a post of our own, and relay the information you've learned to all commands. Someone else may learn something."

### XIV.

Captain Jordan Donat yawned as his eyes wandered over the information flashed at him from the monitor screen on his desk. He paused the read-out and relaxed back in the chair, letting his brain familiarize itself with the subject before he arrived. He frowned and sat straighter as the words before him sparked questions in his mind. He tapped one of them out on the keyboard. It was answered immediately. No, there had been no error. A smile crawled over Donat's thin lips. The school instructor had said Ryder Lasjow; but according to the records, there no longer was such a person. He sat back again, his fingers unconsciously playing with the gun belt which lay on his desk top. No Ryder Lasjow? Then who was being brought in?

He sighed; he would find out soon. Then he would decide on what further action should be taken. It was a pity the whole Lasjow family had to be arrested, but if the youth did indeed turn out to be a member of the Rebel Alliance, they might have to be punished.

The com on his desk buzzed, informing him of the prisoner's arrival. All questions would be answered now. He reached over and flicked the switch, speaking into the mike. "Bring him in."

As the door to his office slid open, Donat feigned a disinterested air. He busied himself with the computer read-outs, building up the charge sheets, while he worked out his method of approach. The open door revealed two Stormtroopers, flanking the bound youth. They pushed him into the room, causing him to stumble. Then they stood guarding him as their lieutenant entered behind them. He saluted his captain and placed the small box he was carrying on Donat's desk. The captain nodded his thanks and turned his attention from the computer screen to the box's contents. He lifted them out one by one: a blaster—he smiled; data pad—he flicked through it, taking note of what it contained; a holocube—his eyes glittered with recognition. He set the items out in a line before the captive. He leaned on the desk top with his elbows, resting his head on his hands, and studied the boy before him.

Whoever he was, he could not be Ryder Lasjow, for obvious reasons— the first and main one being that Lasjow had died nineteen years ago. If he had lived, he would be in his mid-twenties now, and this boy looked as if he had not yet left his teens. The final reason: Lasjow's mother had been dark-skinned, and dark haired and her child had inherited her looks. The suspect in front of him was fair, and blond. Donat's scrutiny moved on. The prisoner was slight, looking pitifully insignificant between the towering, armoured soldiers. His clothes were dishevelled, his hands tied behind his back, his face bruised and bloodied; evidence of a struggle. His jaw was set in a brave attempt at determination, but his eyes darted nervously around the office, betraying his fear.

Donat pushed himself from his table, his inspection over. He turned to his lieutenant, who now stood by the side of the desk. "Resist arrest, did he?"

"Yes, sir."

Donat noticed the boy glancing apprehensively at him and the lieutenant. "It's funny how they all do that." He murmured, putting a hint of humour into his voice as he rose from the chair.

Luke fought to keep his body from trembling; he did not want these Imperials to know how scared he was. His eyes followed the captain as the officer walked around his desk toward him, and he wondered frantically how he should handle this. Should he grovel and plead for mercy, act like the terrorized farmer he was? Or should he stand his ground and say nothing, like the Rebel he was supposed to be? He licked his dry lips and swallowed hard, trying to decide.

The captain sat on his desk in front of Luke. He swirled the screen around so he was able to read it from that position; it also gave Luke an unobstructed view of the data displayed there. The Imperial spoke to him the way a school principal would address a misbehaving pupil.

"I'm sure I really don't have to explain to you why you are here, but it's regulations." He turned to the screen and read aloud. "You are charged with treason against the Empire, illegal possession of lethal fire arms, espionage and, resisting arrest." He looked back at his prisoner. "Quite a little collection. Do you understand the charges?"

Luke remained silent.

Donat lifted the data pad, flicking through it once more. He glanced up at Luke, who gnawed his inner cheek, dreading the next question. The captain held it up. "What were you going to do with this?"

Again Luke said nothing.

"Don't you have a tongue?"

Luke fought an insane urge to stick his tongue out at the officer.

The next question came. "What do you know of the Alliance?"

Luke knew what Donat was thinking. Here were notes of Imperial movements on Irlam, shuttle times, the numbers of patrols around the outpost, approximate Imperial numbers and the amount of weaponry they had. There really was only one conclusion to make and so Luke didn't answer that question, either.

Donat sighed and placed the book down. He pursed his lips, musing over the situation, trying a different approach. "You're not making it any easier for yourself... or the Lasjows."

The statement struck a chord in Luke. He chilled. "Please. let them go. They haven't done anything!"

The captain smiled, happy to get a response. "And you have?"

Luke bowed his head, angry at himself for dropping his guard.

Donat took the action as defeat. "I ask again, what do you know of the Alliance?"

Luke saw no point in remaining silent, now that he'd already answered. He tried to obey Alex's command to think before he opened his mouth. "Only what I've heard on Imperial broadcasts." As he spoke, he could see from the corner of his eye the lieutenant consulting a hand held scanner. He didn't get a chance to question this as he captain laughed, drawing his attention back.

*"Imperial broadcasts?"*

Luke could feel himself dying inside; he'd said the wrong thing again.

"Are there any other kind?"

"No, I meant—" Luke tried to rectify the situation, tried to gain control, but Donat cut him off sharply.

"I know what you meant." The boy had divorced himself from the Empire; that was enough for Donat. He turned to the other objects on his desk, going over them. "A blaster; a gun belt — Rebel issue; and a hologram of the Princess Leia Organa. You don't get many of these at the local market."

Luke spoke quickly. "I found them." Well, it was almost true. He had found the blaster, Tamara had found the hologram, but he had no idea where they'd gotten his gun belt.

"Where?"

"In the woods, after the fighting."

A smile crept over the Imperial's face; the steely grey eyes stared at Luke sceptically. "I would believe you, but that's too simple; the answer is too convenient." He paused, preparing his strategy, getting ready to throw the boy off balance with an unexpected question. "Tell me, what do you know about the Jedi Knights?"

The inquiry had its desired effect. Horror widened Luke's eyes. He paled, remembering Brett's first question: "What's a Jedi Knight?" He faked innocence, hoping his act was bought but knowing it wouldn't be. "I don't know what that is."

"Don't act simple," Donat advised him. "It doesn't suit you somehow. Young Brett Lasjow told his instructor that you knew about Jedi Knights." He let the information sink in, but the Rebel didn't look surprised. His expression was one of sadness. He'd been betrayed by a five-year-old's curiosity. Donat continued, "If you were from Irlam, and if you are who you say you are, then you never would have heard of the Jedi."

"I haven't, and I am from Irlam." Luke spoke as firmly as he could under the circumstances. He could still see the lieutenant busy with the small scanner, and it nagged at him.

Donat brought Luke's attention to the screen; there was a picture of a dark-skinned child. There was print underneath it, but Luke didn't try to read it. He had a sinking feeling that told him what it said.

"Lasjow, Ryder," read the Imperial. "Died in a speeder accident with his parents. Age six." He turned his gaze from the screen to the Rebel, who once more hung his head to stare hopelessly at his scuffed boots. Carefully, Donat watched for the youth's reaction as he spoke to the lieutenant. "Do you have the voice analysis results?"

Luke gave a start; a cry of disbelief almost escaped his lips. Voice analysis? If only he'd thought, if only he'd kept his mouth shut. He forced calmness over himself, although he knew he was lost. He waited for the lieutenant's conclusions.

The officer handed Donat the computer print-out. The captain read over it slowly, relishing every word, making the captive sweat. Finally he told Luke what he already knew. "Your accent is a good impersonation. Probably good enough to fool the locals, but not good enough to fool the scanners. You are from Tatooine." There was some surprise in Donat's voice and he looked at Luke inquisitively. "Which gives me another charge to add to your collection; you are here illegally. It also gives me another question: How did you get here? There are no commercial flights."

Once more, Luke did not answer.

Donat breathed a heavy sigh of exasperation. His frustration, born from not receiving the answers he wanted, was building. The Rebel just stood there, silent. He rose to stand in front of Luke, a good head taller and several pounds heavier. He breathed down on him. "I ask again, boy; who are you?"

Luke gave him the only answer he could: "Ryder Lasjow." Why did it sound so strange again?

"Are you one of the Rebels who landed here a few weeks ago?"



"No, I was born here."

"You're lying." Donat snapped.

"No, I....

"Give me your name, rank and number and end this charade!"

"My name is Ryder Lasjow. I have no..." The slap caught Luke unprepared. Tears, caused by the sting, prickled; they rose in the corners of his eyes and fell, sliding down his reddening cheek. He blinked, desperately trying to stop the flow.

Donat laughed, mocking him in front of the troopers. "I do believe the child is crying." His laughter abruptly ceased, his mood ugly. "Who are you?" he hissed, lightly spraying the Rebel with droplets of saliva.

Quiet anger, the result of the taunt, simmered within Luke, temporarily over-riding his fear. "Go to hell!" He winced as the Stormtroopers' grips automatically tightened on his arms, digging into his muscles.

The captain was pleased with the outburst of defiance. He smiled. "That's the Rebel spirit. I wondered when it would show itself." Donat drove his gloved fist into the Rebel's stomach. Luke's knees buckled as his body tried to double up in the customary reflex action; but the soldiers held him where he was. He gasped, coughing, trying to regain his breath as renewed pain flared from the results of the previous days lowen attack. He struggled to loosen the Imperials' hands; then he was lost under a rain of blows as Donat rid himself of his anger. The final stroke lashed his head backwards, painfully jerking his neck and bursting his lip. The Stormtroopers released him. Weakened in body, he slumped to his knees, shaking his head as he tried to clear the fog in his mind. Donat spoke, but the words were far above him, and their meaning was lost to him. An armoured hand grasped a fistful of his hair, pulling his head up and back, forcing him to face his assailant. The fog lifted, leaving everything unclouded, crystalline.

"Who are you?" the captain breathed in a voice heavy from his exertion.

Luke gasped, spat blood, almost smiling as he answered, "Ryder Lasjow."

Donat was surprised. "Still spirited?" He raised his fist once more. Luke flinched, expecting the thrashing to continue. The Imperial smiled as he saw the effect his gesture had on the boy. He wasn't as brave as he would have them think. Donat lowered his hand and backed off to perch on the edge of his desk, as the troopers lifted the boy to his feet. Blood from his lip dribbled down the Rebel's chin and dripped onto his jacket. The bruises were already beginning to darken and swell his face; his head hung low and he would collapse to the floor if the soldiers were to release their grip of him. If he had looked pathetic earlier, then it

was more obvious now. Donat almost pitied him. He spoke slowly, making sure the youth heard every word.

"Lieutenant?"

The officer snapped to attention, the grin he had been wearing immediately disappearing. "Yes, sir?"

"Escort this prisoner to Detention and Interrogation."

The lieutenant's grin returned as he obeyed his order.

Donat massaged his knuckles, easing the pain caused by the beating, as the boy was dragged from his office. He reached over and lifted up the hologram of the Rebel princess and smiled at the image; it looked liked the Princess Leia was about to lose another one of her recruits - Colonel Dassu could be quite inventive when it came to breaking down a person's spirit.

\* \* \*

A barely-perceptible hum issued from the control panel as the technician's fingers danced over the buttons, activating the systems one at a time. He looked into the one-way view screen before him, watching as the lights in the cell grew bright, bringing its emptiness into sharp focus. It was larger than most, but its designers hadn't strayed too far from the standard Imperial lay out. A thick metal slab jutting out from the wall served as a bunk; a food and water dispenser had been set into the wall next to it; and in the far corner, as though to give the prisoner some privacy, was the waste disposal. Unit. Byron Jared laughed, scoffing silently to himself. Privacy? In this particular cell there was no such thing. As well as the view screen he was looking into now there were hidden cameras and audio systems. They added up to a perfect view of every activity that would occur within the cell's confines. The technician shivered, feeling nauseous, as his mind cast unwanted memories at him; other cells, other prisoners, same duty. He ran a nervous hand through his short, cropped hair. He would rather repair droids or clean out Stormtroopers' barracks than sit here for hours, watching a prisoner live out his last days in terror, participating in those terrors and listening to every scream and plea echo in his dreams.

He glanced uneasily at his duty partner, hoping to see some of his concern mirrored in the older man's face; but the rough, craggy features remained totally impassive, and Jared turned in disappointment back to his work, feeling almost alone.

His counterpart noticed that glance and sensed his younger companion's restlessness. He smiled to himself. Second Class Technician Jared always did have a weak stomach. The rumours around the base suggested that was the

reason he had been demoted from his captaincy in the Emperor's Elite to a lowly detention centre tech on the backside of a nowhere planet.

Kasden hit his final switch, and the cameras sent pictures of an empty cell to the monitors on their desk. He slumped back in his chair, watching Jared closely. The younger man's fingers twitched hesitantly as he adjusted the brightness of the monitors; his jaw was set rigid, determined; his pale face contrasted sharply with his jet black hair. He had attempted to put an air of confidence and indifference around himself, but he failed miserably. By looking at him, anyone would think he was the one the cell was waiting for.

"You look as though you've just eaten something that doesn't agree with your stomach," the older technician commented, putting the emphasis on "stomach."

Byron tensed visibly at the taunt, but tried to shrug it off. He knew what was sniggered about him behind his back by his colleagues; but they didn't know the whole truth behind his disgrace and, if he had his way, they never would. If it was ever exposed, his secret would bring him more than hurtful taunts and whispered rumours. It would bring open hostility, total mistrust, probably court-martial and imprisonment. He was eternally grateful to his Elite superior for not reporting all of the facts of the incident, but he damned him to all the hells for sending him into this service. He sighed audibly, debating whether or not to answer the insult. He decided he would, and smiled humourlessly at his partner. "It's just the presence of your company, Kasden."

The older man's face coloured with displeasure, but he laughed off the sarcastic remark. It wouldn't do for ill feelings to exist between partners. Besides, there was no telling how long they would have to endure each other's company; that depended on how long the Rebel lasted.

"You know something, Jared? I might just get to like you."

"I'm honoured." Byron sat back in his chair, trying to relax.

"I'm pleased to see you're both settling in and getting acquainted."

They both spun at the unexpected voice from the doorway. The person who filled the opening was tall and broad, his grey uniform was starched stiff and his black boots reflected all. Despite his formal appearance, his face held qualities that were rare in Imperial officers: a twinkle in the sky-blue eyes, happy lines around the soft mouth and jaw. His white hair collected in a gentle ring around the back of his head, leaving the top a polished bald. He could be anyone's grandfather.

The technicians stood rigid and saluted as Colonel Dassu entered the viewing room, allowing the door to close behind him.

"All systems activated, sir." Kasden told him in clipped tones.

"Good." Dassu waved at them to take their places. He stood behind them, staring into the cell, waiting for his charge to arrive.

The colonel's presence added to Jared's tension. The man's nearness caused an invisible slime to crawl slowly over his skin, and cold beads of sweat to gather on his brow. Dassu might look like a grandfather, even speak softly and caringly like one, but that was a disguise to put everyone, including the prisoners, at ease as the work was done. But it never took long for his true sadistic colours to emerge.

Byron jerked his eyes away from his control panel and his thoughts away from Dassu as the cell's door finally opened. Muffled protests issued from the corridor, and Byron unconsciously leaned forward, curious in spite of himself. A small figure was tossed into the room by the accompanying guards. He fell heavily, skidding on the smooth floor. A curse floated through the audio systems, and Byron saw Dassu smile in response. The Rebel, his hands bound behind him struggled to sit up. The door slammed shut and he slumped against a wall. He sighed deeply, shaking his head before lifting his eyes to study the four bare walls of his prison.

Byron gasped aloud as he caught his first glimpse of the prisoner's face. It couldn't be! He couldn't be here; but the build was the same, the hair the same blond, the features were battered, but--was that a cleft chin?

His intake of breath caught Dassu's attention, and the colonel glanced at the technician as he peered closely at the cell's occupant. Kasden also turned in Jared's direction.

"Is there something wrong, technician?" Dassu asked pleasantly.

Byron shook himself, tearing his eyes away from the youth who looked so chillingly familiar. He stammered, fighting to come up with a suitable answer. "Uh, no, sir...I..."

The door behind Dassu swept open, and the two guards who had escorted the Rebel entered the viewing room. The colonel's attention shifted once again, and Byron breathed a sigh of relief, hoping his officer would not ask more awkward questions. Kasden nudged his elbow and he looked in the direction of his partner's nod; immediately he had to suppress a grin. The guards looked rather the worse for wear, and a little sheepish as they reported to their colonel. Their black uniforms bore scuffs, their helmets scrapped and one bore a freshly injured eye.

"What happened, Thaler?" Dassu demanded.

Thaler looked and sounded decidedly embarrassed as he answered. "He tried to escape as we entered the turbo lift, sir."

Dassu's mouth curled into a satisfied smile. "A fighter, eh?" He glanced back at the Rebel, who had managed to work his way onto the bunk. He sat, swinging his legs over the side, looking utterly miserable. "In that case," he said thoughtfully, "I want him controlled."

Kasden moved to obey the order, but Dassu placed a restraining hand on his shoulder. "Not you." He turned to Byron. "Jared."

Byron's already pale cheeks lightened by another shade of white. He knew why the colonel had turned on him; it was obvious to anyone. Dassu knew the Rebel's appearance had an effect on him, and now he was testing him, digging for a reason for that effect. Reluctantly, Byron hauled himself from his seat and pulled a small gun from his desk drawer. With shaking hands, he loaded the small cartridge and motioned to Thaler to follow.

Dassu resumed his place behind Kasden. "I want full monitoring, life signals, lie detection and charge."

"Yes sir," Kasden answered, secretly relieved to have the job passed on to someone else.

Byron hesitated outside the solid door of the cell. He looked down at the small weapon he held in his trembling hand. It wasn't designed to kill; its only purpose was the application of a small monitoring disc into the skin of the prisoner. But to Byron, at that moment, its meaning was the same as any weapon of death. Damn it; he was scared to go in there. He could not do this if it was him; and if it was him, then Byron could kiss the remainder of his career goodbye. Every thing would be out in the open; there would be nothing left to hide. Perhaps that would be for the best, though; who knew what fate had in store for a man? But could he do now what he had been unable to do a year ago?

*The docking bay was silent and empty of all activity. Captain Byron Jared stepped carefully into the open space, searching for the Rebel pilot he had seen duck in here. A Rebel X-wing stood cold and alone on the bay floor; there was no movement near it. His eyes cautiously scanned the area, falling on a patch of Rebel orange flightsuit among the packing crates. He smiled as a blond head disappeared down behind a box. Byron hadn't been seen yet. Stealthily, he crept up on his prey and pressed the muzzle of his blaster against the back of the man's head. The Rebel stiffened.*

*"Stand up, very slowly." The captain spoke calmly and softly. "Raise your hands and place them on your head."*

*He was obeyed without question.*

*Byron quickly took the Rebel's blaster. "Now turn around."*

*"Hi, Bro." The captive used Byron's childhood nickname. "Never expected to see me again, huh?"*

*"We—we thought you were dead!" Astounded, Byron gazed into the hazel eyes. He lowered the blaster.*

*"You don't look too pleased to see me," the Rebel grinned.*

*Byron exploded. "You're a gods-be-damned Rebel, Sam!"*

*"An' you're an Imp—but I'm sure as hell pleased to see you!"*

*Distant shouts from outside trickled into the bay. The young Rebel turned in their direction. "Sounds like your friends—I guess I best get out a here." He started off in the direction of his fighter.*

*Byron came to his senses. "Don't move, Sam; you're under arrest." "The blaster once more pointed at the pilot.*

*"Don't talk shit; you want them to get their hands on me?" Was there uncertain panic in the cocky voice? He continued slowly toward his ship.*

*"I'm warning you, Sam." Why did he have to put him in this impossible position? His finger tightened on the trigger. The shouts grew louder.*

*"You ain't gonna kill me, Bro." It was said almost as a question.*

*Their eyes met once more, and happy childhood memories passed through each of their minds: vacations with their parents, battle games and fun fights. Byron lowered the gun once more.*

*A huge grin, a mixture of relief and joy, played over his younger brother's face. "Thanks, Bro." He ran to the waiting X-wing.*

*By the time his comrades reached him, Sam's ship was roaring into the sky. Byron handed himself over to his major for allowing the Rebel to escape. As he was led away, he glanced back up at the clouds. "An' I never want to see your ugly face again," he whispered with love.*

And here he was again—maybe— behind that door. He wasn't afraid for himself, but for Sam. How could he possibly take part in his own brother's interrogation?

"There something bothering you, Jared?"

Thaler's query jerked Byron from his troubled thoughts. He mustered his resolve and palmed open the door. "Let's just get this over with, huh?"

The Rebel's eyes followed them as they stepped into his cell. Byron noticed the blue eyes, narrowed with suspicion, and an enormous weight lifted from his mind. It wasn't Sam! He smiled compassionately at the youth, who frowned, obviously unable to work out what there was to smile about. He was about to speak when Thaler took charge.

"On your feet, Reb." The guard hid none of his distaste for the boy.

Shakily, Luke obeyed the command as he watched the men approach him. He glanced behind them at the open door, at the beckoning corridor beyond.

Byron brought the gun into view to check if it was ready for discharge. At the sight of the weapon, the Rebel bolted; ducking down to avoid Thaler's outstretched arm, he headed for the door. Lulled by the previous compliance of the prisoner, Byron was slow to act; but Thaler, having previous experience with him, shot out a foot, catching the Rebel's ankle. He fell down and Thaler was on him immediately, straddling his back, keeping him pinned down.

"Get off me!" Luke bucked and wriggled violently, the weight of the man pinning him to the floor grating. He turned his head toward the technician as the Imperial kneeled quickly beside him and brought the small gun into his view once more.

Byron firmly pressed the weapon against the base of the youth's neck in line with his spine.

"Let me up!" The cool metal chilled his skin, and adrenalin flashed through his body in quickened waves. He wasn't going to make this easy on his captors. He twisted his head, reared up again, tried to turn his body to unseat the Imperial who was holding him down.

*Not Sam: but it could have been. Not Sam: but someone else's brother...* Byron lifted the gun away.

"Get a bloody move on, Jared!" Thaler growled, fighting to keep his balance; he grabbed a handful of hair and bounced the boy's head off the floor.

Pain lanced through his skull, giddiness blurred his vision and groggily Luke felt his head being pushed forward until his neck was once more exposed.

*He's a Rebel, damn it!* Byron replaced the muzzle against the boy's skin.

"No," Luke moaned, "don't..."

Byron closed his mind, his ears, and his eyes and gritted his teeth. He pulled the trigger. The soft *phut!* was instantly followed by a cry of pain, and the youth's body shuddered and relaxed as the fight left him. Jared stood and watched as Thaler checked to see if the control had been correctly placed. Blood swelled around the metal disc, ran down the sides of his neck, and stained the Rebel's shirt. Thaler nodded, indicating their work was complete. The guard removed the cuffs from the boy's wrists and both exited the cell, leaving him to lift himself from the floor.

Dassu allowed a slight smile to flicker over his thin lips as he watched the short struggle in the cell. His eyes narrowed with a frown when he noticed Jared's hesitancy, the reluctance clearly reflected in the technician's features. It was not only the weakness of his stomach that was Jared's problem; there was something else, something the appearance of the Rebel had sparked off. If there was one thing Dassu could not stand, it was a mystery, especially one which might disrupt his operations; his curiosity had to be satisfied. Jared would have to watch himself.

"The control unit is fully operational, sir."

Kasden's voice brought Dassu's attention from the cell activities to the instrument read-outs in front of the older technician. His eyes skimmed over the small screens; the boy's vital signs were strong and rapid—he was scared. He already knew the prisoner's background. Captain Donat had relayed a full report of the arrest to him. Also, from the marks on the captive's body, it was clear the captain had reached his usual standards by attempting to take matters into his own hands. And, as usual, he had achieved nothing apart from making the Rebel more stubborn, and Dassu's job harder. The first part of that job concerned the Lasjow family; the second part would be the Rebel's admission of guilt. And from his own past experiences, Dassu knew this was the most vital element in any interrogation; for the more guilt was denied, the harder it was for information to be drawn from the subject. Once they had admitted their crime, they were usually easier to break. The information gathering was part three, and part four was the execution.

The Rebel lay still on the floor until he was alone. Tentatively, a shaking hand went to the wound on his neck, and he hissed in pain. Slowly, wincing, he pushed himself from the floor and sat on the bunk. He leaned against the wall as he lifted his hand away from the unit in his skin, and wiped the blood from his



fingers onto his prison shirt. Then the same trembling hand lightly touched the growing lump on his forehead. Looking dangerously near to tears, he drew his legs up to his chest and hugged them, as though he had just curled into a protective cocoon. He was shivering uncontrollably.

Dassu knew the procedure; he and his staff had practiced it to near perfection. Let the prisoner sweat, keep him alone and in silence, disorient him by altering light and temperature, and keep him awake, hungry and thirsty. When the time for talking came, he would be grateful for the company. The colonel looked forward to their first meeting; but first, he had a family to greet.

"You know the routine, Kasden?" he asked, unnecessarily.

"Yes, sir."

He turned to leave, gesturing at Thaler's partner to accompany him. Byron, just about to enter the room, jumped aside as Dassu brushed past him. The colonel stared at him with seeming contempt.

"You took your time, Jared." There was hidden anger in the statement.

"Yes, sir; I'm sorry."

Dassu had no more words for the technician, and strode away down the corridor, closely followed by the two guards. Byron watched their retreating backs. Gradually, their footsteps faded, leaving an uncomfortable silence in the walkway. He turned his gaze to the cell door before him and sighed unhappily. He knew Dassu would be watching him now. He punched open the door to his and Kasden's chamber, then noticed the flecks of blood on his hands. He would have to wash them.

## XV.

"All I have is problems," Han Solo mumbled to himself, as the Millennium Falcon spat out of hyperspace in the wrong solar system. There was a grunted laugh in response to his moan and Han threw a dirty look to his partner. "Don't know what you're smirking about, Fur Face; you're one of 'em."

He ran his hands over the ship's controls, compensating for the slight pull of gravity which emanated from the grey, dead world they now skipped past. It was sheer luck that the failure of the nav-computer hadn't resulted in a quick death for them both, sheer luck that the co-ordinates had drifted into a civilised system

"Just where in the hell are we, anyway?" he asked, staring at the orange sun he felt he should recognize.

Chewbacca pointed to the screens, which flashed out data on the system they were currently in the middle of.

"Hasthaal?" Han voiced his surprise as he read the print. "Hasthaal? That's no where near Raymar?" He turned accusingly to Chewbacca. "Did you uncross the navi-circuits like I said?"

Chewie nodded, trying to look as innocent as his Wookiee features would allow.

"Then it must be something else that's causing the drift." Solo mused over their problem. He was a little worried; not exactly for themselves, but the Ahana evacuation ships would arrive at Raymar without them, and without the field equipment some clever Rebel had stashed aboard the Falcon as she sat in the hangar. To say that Leia would be furious at their disappearance would be an understatement. But he couldn't trust the Falcon to get them to the Rebel outpost; besides the drift, their fuel was low, they were tired, and they had a ship to repair. He sighed and came to a decision. "We're goin' down."

His partner nodded again, agreeing, looking forward to scenery other than that of a Rebel base.

"Okay." Han adjusted speed as they made their approach towards a small blue planet nearer the sun. "Have we been here before?"

As he looked over the log, Chewie grunted that they had.

Han frowned. "Were we in trouble?"

There was a negative reply from the Wookiee, and Han grinned. "Good." That was one worry dealt with. "Still, I think we'd best use a cover."

Again, there was agreement from the Wookiee.

"Who were we last time we were here?" He glanced at the log, avoiding floating space debris at the same time. "Hmm... It's been a while since we've used that one; I wonder if—"

"Unidentified ship," the traffic controller's voice crackled into the cockpit, "state your registration and purpose of visit."

"No-nonsense like, ain't they?" Han adopted his business voice. "This is Captain Hanani Farrell, on board the freighter White Feather. Registration number—" He

paused, flicking through his log. "I12987DC. We need to refuel and service our vessel."

Silence, broken by static. Han tapped his finger impatiently on the control board. Then—

"White Feather, I12987DC, you are cleared for landing; docking bay five."

"Thanks." A confident grin grew on Solo's lips. "You know, Chewie, I feel good about this place. Maybe we could hang around for a while; get a little action in before heading for Raymar. What d'you say?"

Chewbacca thought it was an excellent idea; a few days of hanging out would do them both good. But wouldn't the princess worry? He voiced his concern.

"Nah," Han drawled, forgetting his previous worries. "She don't own us."

The Falcon dropped into the clouds of Hasthaal, missing the enormous Imperial cruiser which floated out from the dark side of the planet; a new, permanent addition since their last visit.

\* \* \*

A soft night breeze rustled through the branches of the trees, and whispered prayers in the undergrowth. Crickets twittered and chirped, giving vent to their quiet choruses. The cloudless sky cast no shadow over the planet, and hid nothing from the observant Rebels who had set up their post here. The structures of their base lay concealed among the trees, safe from prying eyes, but all too apparent to prying sensors. However, this was a danger any revolutionary organization faced, anywhere in the universe, and mainly they learned to live with the constant tension.

Leia Organa rested against the wall of her makeshift quarters, staring at the sky, searching among the stars for all the answers to all her problems, and wishing that someone would wave a wand to make the Empire disappear and give her back her home and family. Giggles from behind the bushes brought a small smile to her lips. Wedge and Kandi emerged from the flora, brushing leaves and dirt from their clothing. They wiped the grins from their faces as they passed the princess, calling a quick greeting. Then they were gone, laughing again, and Leia was alone once more.

Her eyes went back to the clear heavens, and her mind returned to her troubling thoughts. The Empire had won again. Ahana was lost, betrayed, taking with her many friends and much-needed equipment. They had run again, putting an added burden on Jan Dodonna and his outpost. But where else could they go?

They had lost fighters, including two of the reinforcements. Could the Minoan assault go ahead? And where the hell was Solo?

"Is it private thoughts? Or can an old man join you?"

Dodonna's sudden appearance startled her. "General!" She smiled, gesturing at the stars. "I was day dreaming."

"At this time of the night?" he quizzed. "Besides, daydreams don't cause frowns to cross pretty faces."

Leia glanced at her feet and sighed. "Where have we gone wrong?" she asked suddenly, angry at not having the answer herself. "After Yavin, after the Death Star, we were all on a high. But now—" Exasperated, she shrugged her shoulders. "Now all we do is run... I'm scared, Jan," she confessed, her voice trembling. "I'm scared that one day we'll lose whatever it was we had, and be overrun. I mean, we've failed in everything we've tried lately."

Dodonna put a comforting arm around the girl, looking so young and frail in her distress. "You know as well as anyone, your highness, that in war, especially one like this, you can't expect to win all of the time. What happened at Yavin worked both for and against us. We showed the galaxy that the Empire isn't indestructable; but we also brought the whole of the Empire down on top of us. We had false optimism and a new hero; but now the Empire's hitting back, and we've lost the hero. We feel as though we're losing everything. But we can't ever let our morale ebb. We have to remember Yavin, and tell ourselves that we can do that again." He smiled into her troubled eyes. "And our chance to win again is with your planned Minoan assault."

"Do we have enough men?" Scepticism dragged on the ends of her words.

"More than enough. You forget, Raymar is bigger than Ahana. And Narra has assured me that with the help of his officers, he has just enough time to train our pilots in the techniques you've been using for the attack."

Relief played over her features and sparkled in her eyes. "That's good news, General, but..." She tilted her head upwards once more.

Dodonna followed her gaze, knowing her thoughts and feelings. "You're alone."

She turned to him, confused. "What?"

"You miss Solo, and young Luke." Leia looked away to deny it; but he didn't let her. "Leia, when Han was here he told me how you reacted to Luke's death, and—"

"Did Wedge tell you what happened at Ahana?" Anger bit the sentence.

The elderly general nodded. "Lieutenant Antilles was worried about you, Leia. You're usually so rational; but going back for Luke's lightsabre was—"

"Irrational?" Leia finished his sentence for him. "Jan, I know what you're thinking, I know what Wedge is thinking; but for some reason I had to get that sabre." Frustration from not knowing how to express herself built in Leia. "I—I just know Luke isn't dead."

"Then why doesn't he get in touch?"

"Maybe he's tried, but can't. Jan. Maybe he's just hiding out until he gets the opportunity to get off Irlam. The planet's pretty much locked down and... I'm afraid he may have been caught....."

Dodonna draw her closer. "Leia, torturing yourself like this will only make you ill. It's been weeks now and we've not heard anything from the system either from Luke or through the Imperial channels about any prisoner - don't forget Vader himself has been looking for him. We would know if they had him. Let yourself grieve for him, Leia"

He felt her relax a little. "Maybe you're right," she said softly. "But the longer he's gone, the more I feel he's alive." She shook her head, dislodging a strand of dark hair. "With both Han and Luke away, I feel incomplete. Does that make sense to you?"

"Of course. You three spent so much time together after your little adventure that you grew close very quickly. When one or two of you are gone, you're no longer whole. But —" He paused and grinned. "Your diplomatic training doesn't help you hide your feelings; when someone even mentions Solo's name, your eyes sparkle! "

She blushed, shook her in denial. "He annoys me!"

Dodonna laughed lightly at her protest. It was his turn to look to the stars, almost expecting to see a familiar saucer-shaped freighter. "I wouldn't worry too much about Han if I were you; he'll be back."

"You're sure?" She couldn't lose them both.

"I'm sure. Han is more of a Rebel than we'll ever be."

They laughed, and it felt good to hear as it resounded in the cool night air.

"Now," Dodonna spoke firmly, "I came out here for a reason. This old man is looking for a game of Corrichip; and you are the only person around here who I haven't beaten, so—"

"You want a chance to beat me?" Leia copied Solo's cocky tones.. "You won't win, you know."

"We'll see," Dodonna chuckled.

Arguing softly, they walked toward the recreation centre. A infantryman passed them on the forest path. Leia recognized him as the sergeant who had survived the Irlam mission with Wedge. He smiled and said hello before disappearing into the trees. Leia's spirits lifted a little more; it was good to see a familiar face from Ahana.

\* \* \*

"Starlight and moons..." sang Han, loudly and off-key. He twisted the ends of three wires together and reached into the workings of his ship. "Pretty ladies with pink—ouch!" He quickly withdrew his hand and stared at the bright red burn mark. "Oh! Ah!" He blew on the wound, cursing himself for not switching the section off before starting to work on it. "Ow!"

Chewbacca sighed in relief as he heard the sounds of pain. There was no torture worse than Han Solo in a good mood, especially if that same Han Solo decided to give a rendition of his favourite songs.

Han heard the loud sigh. "You're just jealous 'cos you can't sing!" he bellowed good-naturedly.

Chewie growled, "Neither can you!" from across the hold.

"Great," Solo grumbled. "Just what I need, a smart-mouthed Wookiee." He pushed himself up from the floor and stretched, wincing as a joint cracked. He yawned. "I'm famished. How about you, Chewie?"

The Wookiee shook his head, turning his gaze away from his captain. He buried himself in his repairs, mumbling something Han didn't catch. But Solo recognized the guilty look; he'd seen it before.

"Aw, Chewie--you haven't cleared the stores again?"

A slight, ashamed nod was his answer.

"Hell, those steaks cost me both arms and legs." He sighed, annoyed. "Did you leave the fruit?" he asked hopefully.

A negative reply.

"That's the last time I leave you alone in this ship when the store's full." He threw himself onto a recliner. Then suddenly he sat up, a little brighter. "Hey, those Rebel boxes — are there eats in there?"

Another negative reply.

"Yeah, I figured you might have looked. Just my luck to have an empty stomach for a partner." He rolled his shirt sleeves down and reached for his vest, feeling in its pockets for some cash. He counted the coins and grinned; just enough for a meal and a couple of drinks. "I'm goin' to the cantina; you coming?"

Again, the hairy Wookiee shook his great head. No, he wanted to get the circuits back together. Besides, he wasn't very hungry.

"Please yourself."

Han drew in a deep breath of polluted air as he stretched, once again, in the city street outside the docking bay. He glanced up at the crowds, letting his eyes roam over the different life forms, the different fashions, and the different weapons many members of the crowd wore. He winked at a passing human female. He felt good. He felt free. He and Chewie were on their own again; no Rebels here to hassle them or plead with their consciences. Here, there was only the kind of freedom he enjoyed best. He was his own boss, and he was reluctant to give it up again. During the two days since he and Chewbacca had landed on Hasthaal, they had been playing with the idea of selling the Rebel equipment and disappearing, never to return to the Alliance; but so far they had resisted the temptation. But his feeling was to get a job and pay the Hutt his debt. Jabba was getting annoyed with him. Once that debt was paid, then he really would be free.

He stepped out into the street, joining the waves of life forms, enjoying the aromas emanating from the restaurants and stores, and listening into several conversations in several languages. He quickened his step as he spotted the bar in which he and Chewie had spent many hours and many credits. A grin flickered on his lips: such was life. He ducked into the doorway, relishing the savory smells which tickled his olfactory sense.

He stopped and blinked in surprise. He was flooded with lights, which were set up just inside the entrance. Holo-cameras pointed at him from all angles; someone tapped him on the shoulder, and he turned to find a microphone thrust under his chin. Suddenly panicked, he hid his face behind his hands. The patrons at the bar counter laughed.

"Sir," warbled the purple, buck-toothed creature who brandished the mike, "we're conducting a survey for a consumer program. Can we ask you a few questions?"

"No," Han said, his voice muffled under his hands. "Go away." He was a little scared. Here he was, in the middle of a bar, accosted by a film crew. His face would be broadcast the-gods-knew-where, and the-gods-knew-who would be watching! He could not afford this.

"Sir, surely you have some contribution to make?"

"No." Han's voice was low, warning. "No comment." Beneath his panic and anger, he felt a little satisfaction; he'd always wanted to say that. He fought to push his way through the crowd of technicians and customers.

The interviewer was not easily put off. "But, sir—"

Han walked into a camera, and the microphone was once more pushed in his face. Enough was enough. He shoved the interviewer to the side and threw a desperate punch at the cameraman. He did not want his face broadcast. The camera fell to the floor, and Han was suddenly grabbed from behind. He bent forward, pulling on his assailant's arm at the same time. The man flew forward over Solo's shoulder and crashed onto a table. It was then that he noticed the green uniform of the Hasthaal police unit. He groaned and turned to run, stepping on the fallen cameraman in the process. He reached the door only to find the exit blocked by the partner of the fallen officer. Behind him, the film crew picked up the pieces and laughed as the spacer was placed under arrest.

"All I have is problems," was Solo's only comment as he was led out the door.

## XVI.

Tamara shrank back from the Stormtrooper as he reached in to remove her from the transport. Fear widened her blood-shot grey eyes as the tall soldier blocked out the sunlight. The Imperial cursed her for making his job harder and gripped her arm, ignoring the yelp of tight pain which escaped her lips, and almost lifted her bodily from the vehicle. He planted her feet on the ground and reached for her mother, who moved with less fuss. Brett needed no help; he scampered from the back of the carrier, jumped to the ground, and raced over the farm yard toward the silent house. Alex joined his wife, placing an arm around her shoulder as she surveyed, with tears, the ruins of her home. Her home—their home — but not their property; not any more.

"Confiscated," the Imperial colonel with the sparkling blue eyes had said. They were now tenants of the Empire, turning over any profit the farm made, "Until," the colonel had said, "you have made amends for your crimes. I could have had you executed, so count yourselves lucky."



Behind them, the Imperials gunned their engines and departed, leaving the family to pick up the pieces of their lives and come to terms with the path their fates had taken.

*"Count yourselves lucky."* Those mocking words echoed in the large farmer's mind, and he shook his head despairingly. If this was luck, then he spat on it; he wanted none of it. He felt his wife tremble, and knew it wasn't cold that caused her to shiver; he saw his daughter, his child, walk stiffly and without emotion toward the house; and he heard his son, his baby, shout from his room that all his toys were broken. As for himself, he saw his life in ruins, he saw himself as an Imperial slave, and he viewed life itself without the hope and enthusiasm he once had. With clouded eyes, he scanned his farm, the broken fences, the smashed windows, the dead animals—the lowen had been back to feast on an unguarded farm—and the shattered machinery. The storm troopers had ransacked the entire farm looking for evidence. What had they hoped to find? A squad of X-wings?

Alex threw his sarcasm aside. It was over now; in time they would forget, in time Ryder Lasjow would become the dim memory he once was and should have stayed.

*"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. "*

The farmer shook his head once more, as the Rebel's words, spoken in anger, surfaced in his memory. This time they had meaning. *No, Ryder, he thought, I'm not a fighting man; I have a family. I don't have the idealism of youth, or the zeal for revolution you do. I'm sorry.*

Alex gently nudged his wife and, together, they walked across the yard to the house, each dreading the chaos they would find inside.

Unconsciously, Tamara rubbed at the bruises on her upper arm as she stood at the door of her young brother's room. She watched with curious eyes as he fussed over the ruins of his possessions, and as a small tear of self-pity traced a thin, wet line down his cheek.

"Tama?" Brett asked, at last noticing he was being watched. "Why did they break everything?"

"Don't call me that!" Her eyes spoke with simmering rage, and Brett shrank back from the tone of her voice. Suddenly, his big sister scared him. "Only Ryder calls me that." Her voice shook over the name. Deliberately, she stepped into Brett's room, her foot crunching on one of his toys.

Brett's tears betrayed the silent hurt and fears. "Tama—don't!"

Her eyes flamed and her hand lashed out for him, but she was caught as her parents rushed into the room. Alex held her wrist tightly.

"Tamara! Enough! There's been enough hurt."

Brett ran to his mother's arms; she scooped him up and held him tightly.

*Hold me, too, Mommy, Tamara cried silently. Hold me, too.*

She turned to her father, while pointing at Brett. "It was him! He told!"

Alex, shocked at his daughter's venom, dropped her arm. "He's a child, Tamara; he doesn't understand what he's done."

Tamara stepped away from her father, putting distance between them; she glared at him. "You did the same!" She spoke with furious disbelief. "Do you understand what you've done? You all killed him! He told me what would happen — and you've killed him!"

Mhari handed the sobbing, frightened child to Alex. "Tamara." She soothed stepped toward her daughter. "We did what we had to do. We only wanted to protect you and Brett."

"But you told them what he was, you told them and you condemned him!" She shook her head, tears spilling over her cheeks. "How can you live with that?"

"They threatened you, Tamara. They threatened your brother. What were we supposed to do? "You and Brett were our priorities, Ryder would understand that," Mhari explained gently. "He was a soldier, a pilot, he knew the risks. "

"We are alive, Tamara, can't you be thankful for that?" Alex broke, in still hugging his son to him.

Tamara turned on. "Do you think Ryder's thankful? Do you think he'll thank you for what you've done to him? They're going to kill him!"

"Tamara..." Mhari reached for her again; wanting to console her, wanting to calm and comfort her, knowing her daughter's innocence had been sorely shattered.

"Leave me alone!" Tamara turned from her mother, turned from them all and ran from the room.

\* \* \*

Sudden darkness.

Luke lifted his arm from his face and peered into the blackness, waiting, almost expecting some monster to suddenly emerge from the solid darkness which surrounded him. He licked his parched and-dried lips with an equally dry tongue. He had been lying on his back on the slab of a bunk for some time as the banks of lights from above had blazed down, as the heat in the cell had grown to intolerable levels and the air had become thick and difficult to breathe. His shirt and pants were soaking with sweat and his hair was lank and wet His head pounded painfully from the effects of dehydration.

He allowed his arm to fall back over his face when he satisfied himself nothing more was about to happen. Nothing. Nothing again. Each time the light changed, each time the temperature suddenly rose or sharply fell, each time the cell rang with noise or was plunged into silence, he waited, geared up for something to happen. But each time, like now, there was nothing. Nothing but his own quick breathing, nothing but his own imagination and even that was growing foggy through dehydration and lack of sleep.

"Hey," he croaked into the cloying darkness, "who turned out the light?"

He laughed uneasily; fighting off the frightened sobs of wretchedness he felt building to clog the back of his throat. He pulled his tired body up and slid backward on the bunk until he rested against the wall being careful to keep the base of his neck clear. Whatever they had shot into him that first day had caused the tissue to swell, and he now endured a constant throb which, if touched, flared hotly. He wiped his hands over his face and his palms scraped on several days' growth of stubble; but he didn't know how many days. He knew what they were trying to do; soften him up, wear him down, through hunger, thirst and fatigue, make him crazy with anticipation of what was to come, so that when it did come he would capitulate easily to their demands.

He had been clever; though. He had done what the Alliance had taught him. At first he had worked out, keeping himself as fit as possible until the hunger and thirst had made him rest more and conserve his energy; he had sung to himself to keep his morale up (though often the notes would crack and crumple; but Luke chose to ignore those moments); he had gone over Alliance battle procedures to keep his mind active and tried not to think of Leia's recollections of the torture she had endured at Vader's hands; the droid, the drugs and the pain.

His stomach cramped, and Luke doubled up, hugging his abdomen tightly, trying to rid himself of the strong hunger pangs. The pain passed, but left him light headed and coldly sweating. He hadn't eaten anything since the day of his capture, whenever that had been and water in the cell had been scarce. The small faucet set near the waste disposal unit was obviously controlled by an outside source and water only ran intermittently and then only for a few seconds.

It was clear they didn't wish him to die of thirst, but also clear they wanted him as weak as possible. He sighed and rubbed at his stinging eyes with the heel of his hands. If only he could sleep, if only they would allow even a few moments of rest but he knew from experience that should his eyes close, should he doze he would be wakened suddenly by blaring noise, by searing cold and light.

And a bitter thought struck him. Were they doing this to the Lasjows? Were they being held close by? Was Tamara in the next cell?

"Tamara," he whispered, squeezing his eyes shut to stop the swell of tears, his body couldn't afford to lose anymore fluid. He shivered as the temperature in the cell began to fall and his wet clothing began to draw heat from his limbs.

*"What's it like out there?"*

Why had he stayed there? Why hadn't he just left once he was well? He'd known the dangers. He'd failed them, just as he'd failed Owen and Beru on Tatooine. Only this time, it wasn't innocence or ignorance that had caused his failure; it was desire and selfishness. Yes, Alex and Mhari reminded him of his aunt and uncle, Brett was the little brother he'd always wanted but never had; and Tamara— Tamara had shown him a naiveté he'd lost, a naiveté he'd fallen in love with. He'd stayed because they were everything he had wanted in the way of a family. It had been an environment he'd never known before. And he had failed them. "I'm sorry, he whispered, as salt water trickled down his cheeks and dripped onto his blood-stained shirt; he didn't know if the tears were for the fate of the family and Tamara, or if they were tears of self-pity.

Quickly, angrily, he shook himself and dried his tears away, realizing he was doing something he'd vowed he wouldn't. He was letting them get to him, he was allowing himself to despair, and he was falling for their tricks and manipulations. He was stronger than this, he wouldn't falter, he wouldn't fail the Alliance, he wouldn't fail Leia.

"Starlight and moons," he quietly whispered one of Han's bawdy Corellian songs, trying to focus his mind. "Pretty ladies with... Pretty ladies with..." His voice cracked, and he realized he'd forgotten the words. "Pretty ladies. . ."

Why didn't they come? Were they leaving him to rot? Were they starving him to death? Why didn't they come?

"Pretty ladies. . ."

He looked into the darkness and saw swirling shapes there, watched them dance and frolic. He squeezed his eyes shut and looked again. They were gone. He was alone.

"Pretty. ..."

He strained his ears, trying to hear what was beyond the four walls of his prison. But there was only silence. His throat burned with thirst.

"Pre..."

Alone, in silence; nothing, no one, forever.

A sound sliced through the silence; water dribbling from the faucet. He rose as fast as he could from the bunk and threw himself across the cell to get to the cool liquid his body so badly required. His searching hands found it in the darkness and he bent his lips towards the running water.

It stopped.

"No..." he whispered, desperately, knowing it would be several hours before it ran again. "No." He fell to his knees, his hands moving quickly across the floor looking for any remnants of liquid, but there was nothing apart from the cool metal grating that covered the ground. His hand went back to the tap seeking any lingering droplets. But there were none.

He swallowed hard, as cold panic broke and washed over him. The cry built in his throat, his chest aching for its release; it screamed in his mind. And he buried his head in his hands in desperation, pulled his knees up to stifle his moans, struggling to keep the call to himself. And despite his best efforts; he heard it bounce off the walls. "Please..... Please?!"

Luke wilted, he slid to the side down the wall and curled on the floor by the dormant faucet and waited, shivering in the darkness.

Silence.

\* \* \*

Byron Jared grimaced as Kasden, sitting beside him, chuckled at the Rebel's plight.

"Time for business, eh?" the elder man noted with some glee.

"I'll alert Dassu," Byron replied in monotone as his hand reluctantly reached for the com.

\* \* \*

Tamara halted in her run at the door to the guest room. She bit her lip and wrapped her hands around her body while fighting the sobs which built within her chest. She stood at the door to Ryder's room. No, she reminded herself, not Ryder— Luke. The pretending was over. She could hear her parents talking in quiet whispers and Brett asking where Ryder was, and why his big sister didn't like him anymore. But she ignored the sounds, as she let her eyes wander around the bedroom and let her mind wander around the memories now associated with the room.

She stepped further into the room and into its devastation. Automatically, she set about tidying the mess. All of the drawers of the bureau were open, the clothes scattered. Tamara lifted the shirts, the socks and the sweaters, folding them and placing them in the drawers, which she then quietly closed. Looking around, she spotted her book lying in a corner, where it had fallen during the troopers' search. She knelt and picked it up.

*"What's it about?"*

She placed it on the bedside table next to the overturned lamp, which she righted. Something cracked under her foot; surprised, she looked down and saw she had stepped on the porcelain figure Luke had bought on their trip into town.

*"I've never seen one like that before!"*

With a shaking hand, she picked up the pieces, silently apologizing to Luke and telling him she would fix it. Tentatively, she touched the cool clay face, as though she thought that by trying to give comfort to a doll, she would somehow be giving comfort to Luke, wherever he was. Her tears returned to prickle her eyes, but she pushed them away, knowing he wouldn't want to see her cry—not over a broken doll, anyway. She placed the figure next to her book.

Turning to face the room again, Tamara noticed a pair of boots sticking out from under the mused-up bed. As she bent down to lift them, she also saw a small pile of clothing she had missed; and suddenly she realized it was the pants and shirt Luke had been wearing when he had fallen into the river.

*"Does that answer your question?"*

Her hand went to her lips at the memory of the kiss; so warm, so tender. She sank to her knees and lifted the shirt, she ran her fingers over the fabric, clutched it to her chest, holding it, wanting so much to hold the person who had worn it. It was too much for her; she buried her face in the material and cried, no longer able to hold her emotions in. She sobbed, her breath coming in little hitches and moans, at her pain and his loss.

Footsteps made her look up; through her teary haze, she saw her mother standing at the door, deeply concerned.

"I wanted him to love me," she said simply; suddenly understanding what had happened between them. "But he wasn't Ryder, he was Luke."

Mhari joined her daughter on the floor and took the girl into her arms; the shirt was pressed between them.

"He was Luke..."

\* \* \*

Sudden light.

Luke cried out in surprise, pain slicing through his thudding head. He buried his face in his elbow to protect his eyes from the blinding light. The cell door opened for the first time since his incarceration, the sound sending cold terror running down his spine. He uncurled, and sat up, eyes squinting in the light, as three Imperials entered the cell. He now regretted his shout; he'd rather be alone.

Two guards - Luke thought he recognized them as the ones who had tossed him in here - positioned themselves on either side of the door, as a grey-uniformed officer entered. The door closed and Luke suddenly felt very small, and very vulnerable.

Dassu smiled at the youth as he stepped down into the cell after the guards. The boy had lasted longer than he had anticipated; but the cry of desperation had come as expected, and now the second part of his job could commence. He needed a confession before he could extract any information the Rebel may hold. He tapped the small, one-way com that was inserted into his ear to make sure it was working. Jared's voice from the observation chamber told him that it was.

The guards grasped the boy by the arms, drew him up and walked him to the bunk. They sat him down and moved back.

"You may leave us," the Colonel told his companions, waving his gloved hand toward the door.

Thaler stepped forward. "Sir, I..."

"It's okay, Sergeant, we're just going to chat. There won't be any problems," he glanced at the boy on the bunk. "Will there?"

He saw the puzzlement cross the prisoner's face, then suspicion.

Luke nodded toward the guards as the cell door slid open once more. "Aren't you going to work me over, too?" His dry voice wobbled, betraying his anxiety.

Dassu almost laughed. He knew to whom the Rebel was referring; the results of the beating were still apparent on his face: large yellow blotches of fading bruises. "We're not all as violent as Captain Donat," Dassu informed him as he sat on the end of the bunk. "Besides, you resisted arrest, and that only serves to make matters worse, and makes you look guilty."

"I panicked..." Luke protested, wondering why he was even talking to this man. The Alliance warned against conversations.

"—and went for a blaster?" Dassu threw the question.

"No!" Luke rose to his feet. "I—"

"Sit down!" the colonel warned as the guards turned towards them once more; he waved them back.

Luke quickly sat. There was silence in the cell again. He hung his head, unable to look at the Imperial officer. His hands trembled and he clasped them between his knees to stop the shakes. Again, he waited.

Dassu leaned against the wall, looking almost leisurely at Luke as the guards left the cell. He broke the clinging, heavy quiet that followed. "You do understand why you are being held?"

Luke glanced up at the grand-fatherly features, then dropped his eyes to the floor and nodded. "You think I'm a Rebel," he answered quietly, sounding almost ashamed.

"And are you?"

"No." The answer came too quickly; he might as well have said yes.

Dassu sighed heavily. This boy would be the average case; he would flatly deny everything, he would be easy to break, and he would spill everything. He was hardly a challenge. He rose from the bunk and crossed to the faucet as water began to trickle freely. A panel opened at the side and he lifted out a cup and filled it. "We have evidence that suggests otherwise," he told Luke as he returned to his perch on the bunk, and looked to the youth for a reaction. Blue eyes watched him guardedly. "But I'm sure I don't have to repeat what the good captain has already explained to you."

Luke shook his head. No, he remembered it all.



"Here, you need this." The colonel offered Luke the full cup.

Luke stared at it, tried to lick his lips, his body burning with thirst. "No thanks."

"Don't be ridiculous," Dassu chided, softly, holding out the cup

Luke reached for it with a shaking hand, almost dropped it.

"Let me help," the Imperial offered, cradling Luke's hand with his own and guiding the cup to the youth's cracked lips. "Just sip," he smiled. "That's it..." He allowed the Rebel to take his fill before removing the cup and setting it aside.

Luke watched the man closely, confused at his gentleness, his concern. This wasn't what he had expected.

"Captain Donat has also explained the charges that have been laid against you?" Dassu lightly questioned, leaning leisurely against the wall.

"Yes," Luke glanced away, raised his eyes to bank of lights in the ceiling. He blinked and rubbed at his heavy stinging eyes. His head was buzzing, his thoughts hazy and he felt sick with fatigue.

Dassu smiled reading the boys thoughts. "You may sleep in a little while; I only have a few questions for you." His voice was soft, reassuring.

Luke looked back, warily. "And if I don't know the answers?"

"I won't ask you anything you can't answer," Dassu assured him, easily. "This won't take long, and you can get some rest."

Luke swallowed, cleared his throat, and said nothing.

"We don't have a name for you, it would help if I had something to call you. "

Luke could hear the blood rushing in his head, he felt dizzy, nauseous. "Ry..." his voice stuck, and he cleared his throat again. "Ryder Lasjow."

"Ah, yes," Dassu sighed. "I rather expected that. The farmer did say he had called you Ryder. If I recall correctly he felt that the less they knew about you, the less trouble your presence would cause. It hasn't quite worked out that way though, has it?" He sat forward fixing Luke with his stare. "Let's not get bogged down in a charade shall we? You were part of the Rebel reconnaissance team which landed here several weeks ago. You were shot in the side while trying to reach your ship; you also fractured your ankle. Tamara found you and, foolishly, the Lasjows took you in. Denrick Janis treated your wounds and you've lived with them as "Ryder Lasjow" while continuing to reconnoitre our facilities here."

Bitter desolation filled Luke as the Imperial Colonel spoke. They knew everything that had happened. Alex and the Doctor had been questioned. And Tamara? What of Tamara? Had they questioned her? What had they done to her? What had she told them? He didn't say anything, he just sat looking at his bare feet, and thinking that they'd gotten rather grimy since he'd been here.

"Have I missed anything?"

Luke remained silent, trying to fight the shudders which rippled through his body. He had been backed against a wall; he had entered a no-win situation, and suddenly he wished he'd never persuaded his Uncle Owen to buy some droids to help with the harvest.

"You're worried about the Lasjows?" Dassu asked, though the question was more of a statement. He watched the Rebel's reactions closely while listening as Jared fed him information on the boy's vital signs through the ear piece.

The question surprised Luke, scared him. "Yes," he answered truthfully.

"Why?"

"They're my family."

"Of course they are." Dassu's tone of voice told Luke he didn't believe a word he said. He brushed the sleeve of his uniform as he asked, "You like the girl, Tamara?" He lifted his eyebrows with the question.

Luke chilled. "Yes," he answered, carefully.

"Yes," Dassu echoed. "Did you tell her you were a Rebel?"

The question was asked so casually, it almost threw Luke. "I...no, I'm not a Rebel." He spoke slowly, trying to organise his thoughts, fighting to put order to his jumbled feelings. Trying to keep control.

Dassu pressed on. "That's not what Tamara told us."

The news didn't seem to surprise the prisoner; he glanced at Dassu with a sad understanding.

The Colonel shifted his buttocks to the side as he dug deep in a pocket and drew out a candy bar, he passed this to his other hand and burrow into the pocket once more. This time he produced the holo of the Princess Leia. He held it up for Luke to see.

"This yours?"

Luke shook his head. "No," he said thickly, knowing the Colonel wouldn't believe him. He also knew there would be no chance to sleep anytime soon.

"You're sure?" his tone was light, sounding perplexed. He tore the wrapper off the candy bar with his teeth while looking at the holo. "Tamara said it was yours, said you knew who it was." He took careful note of the boy's reaction to the continued use of the girl's name. For the first time, the prisoner looked him in the eyes, with an almost warning glare. "Tamara told me you said the holo was of the Princess Leia Organa."

"In fact, she said you were a friend of Princess Leia's." He broke a piece of candy from the bar and popped it into his mouth. He chewed thoughtfully, purposely ignoring the hunger the Rebel must have been feeling.

Luke's eyes widened at the mention of Leia's name. He paled, and again his hands shook as he realised there was very little chance for him to get out of this situation. But he knew from the few training sessions with the Alliance that his main job here was to delay the Imperial's, to feed false information, to buy time for whatever the Alliance was planning.

The Minoan assault was taking place soon; planned for only a few weeks from the day he was captured; he had to keep them from asking him questions that could lead them to the information he held about it. He had to stall, to play for time, to keep up the farm boy façade he had assumed here - even though both he and the colonel knew it was false.

Dassu listened as Jared informed him of the building pressure within the youth. He didn't need the bio readouts to tell him about the stress building within the Rebel or how his heart beat accelerated and his blood pressure rose. He could see the results in the youth's reactions. But with the control questions asked and answered Jared was also able to tell him when the boy lied.

"She didn't want to tell us," Dassu informed Luke, sorrowfully; "but she did, just as you will, too."

Luke's gut coiled; not out of fear, but from fury and disgust. "You hurt her?"

Dassu broke another piece from the confection and this time he offered it to Luke as he explained. "Sometimes if prisoners are reluctant to speak we are authorised to use more... ah..." he smiled, and shrugged, "alternative methods."

Without thinking, Luke slapped the offered candy from the colonel's hand, it flew across the cell and struck the opposite wall. Enraged he pushed himself up and staggered to his feet. Then his legs buckled for seemingly no reason, and he fell to his knees. Pain flared from the back of his neck, coursing through his nervous

system, igniting and searing every nerve ending. His body stiffened as his spine arched and he howled in agony.

It was there—then it was gone. And Luke found himself lying on his back on the floor staring at the bank of cold lights that illuminated the cell. He swallowed, squeezed his eyes shut trying to remember how he had fallen and why his limbs felt heavy and numb.

\* \* \*

Byron lifted a shaking hand from the controls, wishing he could have let the Rebel strike Dassu. He wiped sweat from his brow and glanced at Kasden, who was completely unaffected by the events.

\* \* \*

Luke opened his eyes as a face appeared above him. The Imperial shook his head and spoke, but the words were muffled, and indistinct; lost among the roaring in his head.

Dassu frowned down at the youth at his feet as blue eyes blinked hazily up at him. "That was foolish," he smiled, reproachfully. "Very foolish." He reached out, offering the younger man his hand.

Luke grimaced with pain, summoned his strength and batted the hand away. His body was immediately afire once more; convulsing uncontrollably.

Dassu crouched by the prisoner as the movements stopped. The boy heaved in air and groaned pitifully. "Perhaps you'll answer my questions now?" he suggested.

Still stubborn, Luke answered through gritted teeth. "I... can't. I don't know the....ah... answers."

Dassu didn't need Jared to tell him the boy was lying, but still the technician relayed the information through his ear piece. He sighed, looked pained. "Why don't we forget your name for now then, and the Princess Leia. Why don't you just tell me your rank?"

Luke glared up at the man hovering over him. "I don't... have a rank," he explained wearily, his body aching, cool sweat gathering on his brow as he feared his answer would bring another jolt to rip through his body. "I help out on my uncle's farm."

\* \* \*

Byron Jared hesitated, looking at the reading on the controls feedback monitor. He frowned; there was some truth to the boy's statement.

\* \* \*

"Come now," Dassu smiled. "We both know that isn't true. Please don't waste my time or ridicule my intellect. Just tell me your Alliance rank."

"Farm Boy," Luke told him, wryly, closing his eyes as a wave of dizziness hit him. He felt giddy, felt the room spinning and didn't know if it was the effects of dehydration and starvation, or a residual effect of whatever they had sent coursing through his body. "First Class."

The Imperial laughed delightedly. "Now that sounds much more rebellious!"

Luke pushed himself up into a sitting position with a soft groan. Only to be slammed back down with another blast of pain. He screamed; hands clutching his head as the searing energy slammed into his skull.

Dassu sat back on his heels waiting for the violent spasms to stop once more, waiting for cries of agony to abate and watching as the Rebel's fingers tore and dug at the device in his neck as he struggled to stop the pain, but ultimately caused more.

\* \* \*

Jared allowed the current to continue for a few seconds more before shutting off the control with a trembling hand. He turned away from the view before him as the loud howls subsided to little hitches of breath and muted sobs.

\* \* \*

He couldn't move, had no will to command his muscles to work. He couldn't feel anything apart from the pounding, thudding from his brain which sent nausea churning through his stomach. Something trickled at the back of his nose and his throat and he choked, coughed as it pooled and clogged, hampering his breathing. Strong hands took him by the shirt and turned him onto his side. And he coughed again, spat; feeling more liquid spill down inside and drip from his nose. He gagged and retched dryly.

"Take it easy, Lieutenant," Dassu advised, using the rank Alex Lasjow had given him for the boy. "You've burst a blood vessel in your nose. It happens sometimes with the pressure. Rest for a moment and we'll talk some more."

One word penetrated Luke's wretchedness. "What?" he gasped, realising with horror the Imperial knew his rank. "I...never..." he groaned as his limbs cramped. "I didn't say anything..."

Dassu chuckled and scolded softly. "Of course you did."

"No..."

Dassu ignored him. "Now, why don't you just confess to what you are? And this can stop and we can sit down and talk like civilised beings."

"I never... said anything," Luke persisted, trying to open his eyes, trying to focus his jangled thoughts, horrified that he may have unwittingly given the Imperial his answer.

"Come, come, Lieutenant just tell me you're a Rebel and this pain will stop."

"No," he had to play for time, he had to resist. He had to protect what he knew; the bases, the personnel, the missions. He had to take the pain.

Dassu frowned, his lips pursing in annoyance. He stood and moved back from the sprawled youth and glanced at the wall opposite to where he knew Jared and Kasden were observing. He nodded.

This time screams were heightened in pitch as the energy levels increased.

"Are you a Rebel?" Dassu repeated, his voice a cold monotone, almost bored as he watched the youth's body stiffen and jerk; more blood flowed from the boy's nose from the force of the charge and he knew he couldn't sustain this level of punishment for much longer or else the blood vessels in the Rebel's brain may also rupture.

Luke could think of nothing; all rational thought driven from him as wave after wave of pulsing energy punched into his nervous system. He only wanted it to stop.

"Yes!"

"Say it," Dassu ordered, prolonging the agony, allowing Luke to convulse on the floor.

"Please—"

"Say it!"

"I'm a Rebel—please!"

Suddenly, it stopped. Luke gasped, sobbed; his muscles cramped and he groaned. His limbs disobeyed him when he told them to move; his head throbbed, sending more waves of cold nausea through him. He heaved and vomited water and blood while vaguely aware of the cell door opening once more. There were boot steps around him, hands lifting him from the floor, stripping the sweat sodden shirt from him. He tried to struggle as his bare back hit a wall, as his arms were lifted above his head, spread wide and his wrists fastened in tight binders; palms facing outwards. He was confused, puzzled, scared; the Imperial had got what he wanted why didn't he just leave?

Dassu stepped forward as the guards moved back. *First, the admission of guilt*, he thought; watching the youth futilely pull against the restraints, *then the extraction of information*. "Lieutenant?" He beckoned, attracting Luke's attention, blue eyes locked with his own and he turned his head toward the door.

Luke followed Dassu's gaze curiously. The door opened. Luke whimpered, a low moan escaping his lips, and he weakly fought against his restraints as the beast from Leia's nightmares entered his.

*"You have to see it, Luke; you have to see it and you have to suffer it to understand what I mean...."*

He shook his head. "No! No, no, no..."

"Lieutenant," Dassu's voice called to him again, as the droid floated closer, its whine filling the cell, overpowering all other sounds. The door closed as the Imperial spoke to him again but he couldn't tear his eyes from the extended mechanical arm which carried the full syringe. "You have information we need."

Luke heard Dassu, but couldn't see him as the spherical droid filled his vision. His tears ran freely as he finally realized the full implications of his situation. It wasn't a bad dream, it was real; it was happening, and it was happening to him. The droid reached him, the needle slid into his arm, the drug shot into his bloodstream, and he heard someone laugh as he shouted for a mother he had never known.

\* \* \*

Alex threw the last dead nerf onto the burning pile and covered his nose with a handkerchief to stifle the smell. It was useless, he knew; the smell would hang over the farm for several days. Death was hard to disguise. He turned and looked at his house as night fell. Apart from the crackling and popping from the fire, the evening was silent and peaceful.

\* \* \*

Byron Jared pushed through the crowded mess hall with his meal tray balanced precariously on one hand. His eyes roamed the crowded room, searching for an empty table. Gratefully, he saw a group of engineers vacate one near the back of the hall. He hurried his steps, lest someone should reach his goal before him, and threw himself into one of the empty seats. He placed his tray on the table and stared at the cooling, congealing food on his plate; his stomach twisting tightly. He pushed the tray to the side, not having the appetite to even lift a spoonful, wondering what had possessed him to come here rather than going to his quarters, where he could really be alone.

He slumped back in his chair, loosening his stiff collar with a shaking hand.

*"Please!"*

Byron squeezed his eyes shut, wanting to close off the image which forced itself upon him. He wished he could shake away the memory; but he knew from past experience that these memories were the kind that persisted, the kind which gnawed at him, gradually wearing him down until the day came when he wouldn't be able to take any more. Byron knew that day was fast approaching, and he feared it.

"Bad day, Jared?"

The low, bass voice jerked Byron from his thoughts. He glanced up at his friend, unable to find even a small welcoming smile for the large medical captain. The newcomer planted himself opposite Byron, stirring the food on his plate with a spoon. Byron's stomach leapt, nausea pushing at his throat.

"I've been waiting all day for this," Bower grinned at his food, as he tucked into the meal.

Byron turned away. "You can have mine, too."

The medic smiled, showing a row of white teeth. "It really was bad, huh?"

"Yeah." The reply was quiet. The worst."

Bower set down his spoon, interested. "Who is it?"

"A Rebel lieutenant." Byron told, brushing back his hair with a shaking hand. "He won't give a name, won't give anything."

"I'll bet that pleased Dassu," the larger man laughed, picking up his spoon again. His hunger was still to be sated.



"He's a kid." Byron shook his head, almost incredulously. "The Rebels have kids for officers." His mind went back to Sam, and the fear he had seen in his younger brother's eyes—fear of him. That fear had been mirrored by the boy who, at this moment, would be fighting the effects of a powerful drug. Byron shivered.

"Scraping the bottom of the barrel," Bower commented, shovelling in more meat, oblivious to Jared's mood. "Getting them young and twisting their minds." He brushed a speck of dust from his dark uniform.

"I'm not so sure; sometimes it takes innocence to see anything that's rotten."

The captain choked on his food. He nervously glanced around the tables nearest to them, but no one appeared to have heard. "Suns, Jared!" he breathed angrily. "Do you want to join the Rebel? Pipe down!"

A muscle pulsed in Byron's cheek as he answered, "I am in with the Rebel; I'm the one who has to watch and listen, not you!"

Bower realized the effects Jared's duty had on him. "I'm sorry," he apologized, noticing the pale face, the shaking hands, and the frightened eyes. "Can't you get a transfer?"

Jared laughed sarcastically, derisively. "Fat chance! With my record?" He picked his spoon off the table, absently playing with it. "Besides, Dassu's on my case. If I ask for a transfer, I'll end up lower than I already am."

Bower could feel his friend's depression; it was a heavy, solid pall. "You need a drink," he stated firmly.

For the first time, a slight smile played on Jared's lips. "That's what I like about you Tatooins—you always state the obvious!"

The captain laughed, pleased to see the technician's humour return. "That way you know where you are with us." He took another mouthful of food and mumbled through it, "Let me finish eating first; then I'll find that bottle I've got stashed away." Bower reached over for Jared's dinner plate, and scraped the meal in with his own.

Byron winced. "No wonder they call you Tank."

Chewbacca closed the section he'd been toiling over, and lumbered into the cockpit. He threw himself into the co-pilot's chair, flicking several switches as he settled. He grinned, pleased, as the correct lights flickered on. He ran a test navigational program, watching very closely for any wrong responses; there were none. The Wookiee deactivated the controls and slouched back, tapping the panel in front of him. Hopefully, now the Falcon's problems were over.

His large, blue eyes stared out of the window into the cluttered docking bay. He frowned, glancing up at the stars which winked in the darkening sky. It was evening, and Han wasn't back yet. He pulled himself from the chair, reluctant to venture out into the cool night, but eager to find Solo, whom he feared would be crooning drunk in a cantina by now. He gathered up his bandoleer and bowcaster before he left the ship.

\* \* \*

The warm, plush room was lit only by the flickering, dancing light of the holonet screen. It brushed the edges of the furniture, ran up the legs of the two occupants, and blinked, mirrored in their eyes. The images moved fluidly, smoothly, over the screen and the sound was even, unbroken by static.

"Lastly this evening, during research for Hasthaal's consumer magazine, Presenter Sarid Vynar and a cameraman were assaulted as they spoke to the clientele of a local cantina."

The picture changed to one of an irate Corellian spacer. "No," said Han, hiding his face behind his hands, "no comment; go away." He lashed out, the picture wobbled before switching to show a meek Solo being led away by the authorities.

"The pilot has been charged with assault and public disorder. He will—"

A small, stubby finger pointed at the screen as one of the room's occupants recognized the spacer. His voice was squeaky with excitement. "That's him! That's the one I told you about! "

"You're sure?" The other figure leaned closer, peering at the screen.

"Yes! That's Captain Solo."

\* \* \*

Chewbacca stopped dead in the street. He stared in shock and anger at the Holo that played mutely in the store window. He groaned in dismay as he watched Han being led out of the cantina by law officers, and he turned from the window. He growled, a low rumble in the base of his throat that caused the people around him to hurry in their steps. Trust Han to find trouble, just when the ship was ready

to leave! The Wookiee glanced around, wondering where they kept the local jail in this city.

\* \* \*

Han lay back, hands behind his head, on the cot in his cell; he whistled happily, quite unaffected by the situation he was in. Chewie would figure out soon enough where he was, and come to get him out. At worst, he would be fined or sentenced to a few days in jail. And this place was one of the nicest jails he'd been in—and Han had been in many. It was rather old-fashioned in lay-out: bars on the windows and doors (it was strange how sometimes things remained the same for several centuries); one cot with mattress; and a latrine in the corner. Han sat up and swung his legs over the side of the cot. He squinted, trying to read some of the graffiti scratched onto the walls.

He giggled at one of the lewd jokes, reminding himself to tell it to Chewbacca.

Han stood and crossed the cell to the window. Although he was tall, he had to stand on the tips of his toes to peer out. The window looked out on an open courtyard, surrounded on all sides by other cell blocks. He waved across the yard to another peering prisoner, and sniggered a little more over the joke.

A jingling of keys brought his attention to the door of his cell. It swung open, revealing a grinning guard.

"You're free to go, Farrell."

Han looked almost disappointed. Chewie must be playing it low-key. "Huh?" he asked.

"The charges have been dropped," the guard explained, the sides of his mouth still curling.

Han hesitated, suspicious; if anything was guaranteed to make him uneasy, it was a smiling uniform. It usually meant something was going down. "Why?"

The man shrugged. "You've been lucky; don't question it."

As Han stepped from the cell and followed the guard through the prison to the desk area, his feeling of unease faded, until he felt almost elated. He was being freed quicker than he thought he would be. As soon as he made it back to the Falcon, he and Chewie could blast off from this rock and head back to Raymar. He took his gun belt from the desk officer, strapped it on and, saying a jaunty goodbye to them all, stepped from the building.

It was cool outside and a light night breeze wafted along the city street. Han shivered, drawing the collar of his shirt together. He glanced around, looking for the big Wookiee, almost certain now that it was his partner who had twisted a few arms to get him freed. But there was no sign of Chewbacca. Han shrugged, figuring Chewie was back at the ship, getting her ready for take-off. Whistling again, he started up the street; then stopped, suddenly wary.

At a far corner stood five beings. Two were scruffy humans, the others looked like some creative deity's discarded mistakes. Han instantly recognized the type: Jabba's hunters. They must have seen the Holo broadcast. He groaned inwardly, but turned nonchalantly to walk the other way. He stopped again, not believing his poor luck. A squad of Stormtroopers was headed toward him. It was a choice between two evils, and the way Han figured, neither of them was any less evil than the other.

"Captain Hanani Farrell?" the uniformed officer with the squad called Solo's alias.

Han looked behind him, watching Jabba's men melt into the shadows; then he turned back to the soldiers. "Yeah," he said slowly, "what of it?"

"You will accompany us, please."

Although the Imperial had said "please," Han knew it was an order, and not a request; there was no room for debate. He nodded, joining in formation with the white-clad soldiers. Talk about going from bad to worse.

\* \* \*

"Is he coming?" The voice was eager with excitement and anticipation.

The elder man nodded, pulling closed his uniform jacket. "He's coming. I sent some troopers out to pick him and his partner up. They'll be here soon."

A huge grin played over the delighted face. "I can't wait to see him again."

\* \* \*

Chewbacca cursed as he hit yet another dead end street. He stopped and glanced around, scratching and shaking his head in frustration. He was lost. An hour of tramping through the city hadn't produced the jail house; all he'd gotten were sore feet, a headache and a blistering temper. If Han dared to ask him, "What kept you?" he would find two very large and very hairy paws around his neck. The Wookiee started back up the street, turned a corner, and spotted a patrol of law officers walking their slow beat. He followed them, certain he would find their headquarters when they returned to it.

The night was deeper and the streets emptier when the Wookiee finally found his goal. He allowed the patrol to enter first, as he stood examining the building. If Wookiees could whistle, Chewbacca would have. The prison was enormous, even for the size of the city he was in; many lights shone in windows, casting an eerie yellow hue across the street. There were look-out posts set at regular intervals along the walls; armed officers slouched in boredom at their stations. Still, he surmised, he and Han had gotten into and out of places more heavily-guarded than this.

Chewbacca crossed the street, avoiding a near-collision with a landspeeder, and ducked down into the door. He hoped he could persuade the officers to release Han. If persuasion failed, then it would have to be another jail break, which would add another "not-to-be-visited" planet to their list.

The desk sergeant's eyes bugged in their sockets as the very large and extremely fierce-looking Wookiee entered his office. He stood and walked calmly to the desk, unbuckling the safety strap on his holster. He cleared his throat and craned his neck as he looked up at Chewbacca. "How may I help you—uh—sir?"

Chewie glanced around the room, taking in the number of law officers present as he growled out his request, knowing the human wouldn't understand a word he said.

The sergeant's face remained blank when Chewie had finished. "Eh?" he said.

Chewbacca threw his arms in the air, pretending to be exasperated by the puny humans. He wanted them to be as nervous as possible, and he had learned that an irate Wookiee was a good way to achieve this.

He started to mime. First, he pointed to the Holo screen in the corner of the office; then he mimicked Han's gestures by hiding his face behind his hands and punching out a pretend cameraman. He finished by holding a glum expression, and putting his hands together as though they were bound. His encore of pointing to the cells completed his act.

The law officer stared at him, perplexed; then understanding washed over his face. "You're here about Farrell?" he laughed.

Chewie nodded, pleased that he'd been understood, but not liking the laughter.

"Oh, he's long gone," the sergeant chuckled, motioning to the door. "Minute he walked out of here, he got picked up by the Imps."

Chewbacca howled angrily, his eyes fixed on the laughing officer, his teeth bared. Had Han been set up somehow? If so, by whom?

The officer held his hands up, trying to pacify the Wookiee. "Don't get all riled up! The Imperials have their headquarters on the west side; you can see your friend there—maybe."

The angry Wookiee stepped back into the Hasthaal night. He was troubled. Han was in Imperial hands again. It seemed that no matter where Solo went, he attracted those white-armoured devils. Chewie sighed heavily, starting his long walk back to the Falcon. A break-out from jail would have been hard enough, but to attempt one from an Imperial holding area was suicide—usually, he reminded himself.; after all, they had saved the princess. This called for some deep thinking, detailed planning, and some gear from their ship.

"Chewbacca?" a voice asked.

Chewie whirled, half-expecting Han to be behind him, and for the desk sergeant's story to have been an elaborate joke. It wasn't Han.

"Chewbacca?" the Imperial captain asked again.

Chewie glanced behind him as he heard many armoured footsteps. A squad of Stormtroopers encircled him. He surrendered without a fuss, knowing that he would be seeing Han sooner than he had figured. Well, there was a bright side to every situation .

## XVIII.

"It's not real!"

The scream reverberated around the cell and ricocheted off the walls of the observation room. Dassu stood calmly at the side of the view screen, impassively watching the prisoner for any sign of submission. The Rebel frantically pulled against the restraints that held him firm to the wall, tugging his wrists, trying to twist them out of the tight cuffs to no avail; he had merely abraded his own skin with his efforts. His face was a mask of terror, his eyes wide, glazed - staring at some horror only he could see.

The droid floated at his side, waiting for further orders.

"It's not real!" the youth cried again.

The colonel spoke smoothly, authoritatively, into the com which was set into the wall by the screen. "It *is* real, Lieutenant — very real."

"No!" It was a gasp. "It's a trick!"

Kasden flashed a glance to Jared, who was watching the Rebel's vital signs, not having the courage to look into the cell itself. He flicked another switch on his console and the gurgling sound of running, pouring, filling water became a roar. The panic-torn screamed jerked Byron from his attempt at casual indifference; he read the jumping lines on his screens, watched the heartbeat race, and he wiped a cold sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his uniform.

"Sir," the younger technician dredged his voice from through his blocked throat, "his life signs are becoming erratic. The drugs are..."

Dassu raised his hand sharply, cutting Byron's warning off, determined not to let the Rebel beat him again. After several sessions it had become clear that the boy was a challenge after all; but challenges only made him more dogged. "No tricks," he told the youth, then calmly suggested; "the water's getting higher, getting faster—give me the name of your base!"

"I can't!" Luke wrenched on the cuffs, gagging on imaginary water as it crept over his chin. It was cold, so cold it numbed his body. It lapped at his lower lip and he swallowed and choked, coughed as it entered his lungs. He tilted his head up, stretched his neck as much as he could lifting his face away from the chilled water. "This isn't real!!"

"But you know it is," the tinny voice rang above the sound of the water.

"Please.... Don't do this... Please..."

Caught in the strangling grip of terror and convinced his cell was flooding; Luke began to submit to the manipulations of Dassu and his drugs. His fear of water, his fear of drowning, exacted too strong a pressure on his mind to resist grabbing at any lifebelt thrown to him. He stared at the water, stared *through* the water—and saw bloody spots on the grating of the cell floor. He frowned slightly, wondering where the spots had come from, and why they weren't spreading out, mixing in with the water.

"Lieutenant," Dassu called to him, seeing the first indications of compliance. All it needed was a little more prodding. "The location of your base?"

Luke shook his head, blinked his eyes, as sweat dripped from his plastered hair, he tried to clear his fogged senses. He gazed at the blood on the floor, watching as another droplet landed. He lifted his head, saw his wrists, saw blood swelling from behind the binders, it trickled down his arm and dripped from the elbow to the floor. It wasn't pooling out in the water, it wasn't dispersing. It was dripping down the grating of the floor.

Dassu saw the direction of Luke's attention and anger played over his features; he turned to Kasden. "Have the droid give him another ten units, " he ordered, and "enhance the sounds."

"Sir!" Jared protested. "He'll be over-dosed... his body is already struggling with...."

"Another 10 units," Dassu bit, impatiently.

The droid floated closer; the hypodermic needle pausing for a moment as the droid scanned for a fresh injection site, and then it slid into Luke's vein injecting more of the drugs into his blood stream. Then the cell thundered with the sound of pounding water, wrenching Luke back into the drug-induced hallucination. The wave knocked his head hard against the wall, white foam obscured his vision. He yelled and water filled his mouth and nose. He spluttered, coughed, tried to turn his head away, cried in bitter fear.

"It's getting higher now," Dassu told him, pleased he hadn't lost him.

Luke lifted his head his gaze going to the ceiling, and he squeezed his eyes shut against the effects of the drug; his body was trembling, his breathing haggard, his head fogged and fuzzy, his thoughts confused between the real and the imagined. But he knew something, he had understood something. If only he could remember. If only he could clear his thoughts. Something about the water and...

He turned to face the view screen; eyes blazing with a wild triumph. He tugged his wrists harder against the binders; pulled and twisted his arms; the cuffs digging deeper into his flesh. Fresh blood swelling and spilling as he cried over and over. "It's not real! It's not real, not real...."

Jared winced as the prisoner worked against his bonds. He had seen this reaction before: a captive would inflict real pain to overcome the imaginary pain. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't. "Sir," he spoke again, reminding the colonel of his previous warning. "We can't keep this up, we'll lose him."

"One more chance, Rebel!" Dassu's stern tones broke over the microphone. "Tell us the location of your base, or we'll fill your cell completely."

Luke was confused, scared. He knew the water wasn't really there, that it was a trick. But the voice told him that it was there, his eyes told him that it was there, and he felt it. "It's not real!" Fright cracked the words as he fought to convince himself of the truth. More blood dripped, faster now. "It can't be real!" The water level reached his head, covering him; he couldn't fight anymore, his strength ebbed. Mists rolled in over his mind, swaying and billowing pleasantly; a tightness constricted his chest as he tried to draw breath.



"Sir, we're going to lose him!" Byron tried to keep the anxiety from his voice, knowing death would be best for the Rebel—but remembering that if the prisoner died, then it would be his fault for not informing Dassu.

The Imperial colonel cursed, but spoke quickly into the com. "Lieutenant, listen to me! You're safe — safe! The water is draining away, it's falling below your head..... now chest level, moving lower... draining away... And it's gone. There is no water. You're safe now. Safe." He watched the boy's head fall forward as he gasped in a breath of air and fall limp against his restraints.

Furious, Dassu slammed closed the wall com... He turned to the two technicians. "Get a medic down here." With that he stormed, defeated again, from the room.

"Phewwweee!" Kasden whistled. "That was a close one!"

"Yeah," Jared breathed, agreeing, as he slumped back with relief in his chair and looked in on the silent boy hanging from the wall and the droid still hovering nearby. He glanced at his read outs frowning at the low bio-readings. The boy still reminded him of Sam; was still too young to be where he was, to be subjected to more of the same torture. There was no future left for this youth, nothing apart from more pain, more anguish followed by a painful death once Dassu had broken him and milk him of his information. Best he should die now while quiet and unconscious and unaware.

It was with regret that Jared opened the com to call the medical staff.

\* \* \*

Although it wasn't night, the room was in twilight, the windows darkened artificially. It was quiet here, calm; here she could find a peace which eluded her anywhere else in the house. Tamara relaxed on a chair by the window of Luke's room, her eyes closed, and her breathing steady, her heart worn and sore. A smile grew on her lips as she heard little footsteps running in the hall, and her mother's voice shouting at Brett to wash his face. The door to the room slowly opened and her little brother peeked meekly in at her.

"Tamara?" he whispered, a little fearfully. His sister had seemed different since they'd come home from visiting the Imperial soldiers. At first she had shouted at him, then she hadn't spoken to him for days; she had been quiet and hardly ate anything at dinner times and then she sat in either her own room or Ryder's room for hours and hours. And she cried a lot.

The girl looked toward him, the apprehensiveness of the young face bringing remorse and guilt to mingle with the grief she felt. She knew her little brother had been having a hard time at school; knew he's been getting picked on since Ryder's arrest two weeks ago; knew he's been excluded for a few days for

fighting back. And she knew her own behaviour towards him at times had been unforgivable. He was a child and could not understand what had happened; what he had done.

"Oh, Brett," she said, tears filling her eyes. She held out her arms for him. "I'm so sorry."

He approached her cautiously. "You're not angry with me?"

Tamara laughed at his filthy face and grimy hands. She pulled him into a hug. "No, I'm not angry."

The five-year-old's body relaxed with relief as his big sister cuddled him. These last few days had been confusing and strange and Ryder had gone and he missed him. "You're sad because Ryder's away?"

"Yes," she said quietly, as a new surge of emotional pain cramped her chest.

"Dad said Ryder wasn't ever coming back," he began tentatively, upset at losing such a good playmate. "Is that true?"

Although the words hurt her Tamara answered; "Yes, Ryder's gone, Brett."

"Is he dead? Like the Nerfs were when we came home?"

Tamara choked, cleared her throat and willed her tears away. "No... not yet..."

Brett was silent for a moment mulling over Tamara's answer. "Is he sick again?"

Tamara almost answered with the truth, but stilled her anger at the Empire. "Yes," she said once more, speaking softly. "He's sick again."

"Mum says if people are really sick it's a blessing when they die," he stated with childish certainty. "That there's no pain any more and they're happier. So you're not to be sad as he'll be happier."

She ruffled his hair, her eyes shining with salty tears, her throat blocked with solid anguish "I'll try not to be," she said thickly, and she smiled at her brother and mimicked Luke. "Now, Corellian, you'd best do what your mother said, or she'll be in here after you."

Brett squeezed his arms around her and planted a huge, wet kiss on her cheek; then he ran from the room. Her hand went to the honoured cheek in delighted surprise and she smiled through her grief.

Perhaps her brother was right. At the moment she didn't know if Luke was alive or dead, didn't know if he was in pain and suffering at the hands of his captors, or if he was at rest and oblivious of the galaxy. If she was to think only of the latter then she could still her heart and fully grieve without thinking of any uncomfortable alternatives. Luke was dead, at rest, at peace.

No longer sick.

Tamara reached for the switch and let the daylight flood the room, no longer wishing to sit in the dark. She dried the tears from her eyes and followed her brother's path from the room, pausing for a moment to look back into the chamber. Luke might be gone, but the room would always be his. She quietly closed the door, listening to Brett splashing in the bathroom. From the sounds, it was obvious that the youngster had ceased washing and was now playing with the water, or "scuddling," as Mhari would say. Tamara left him to it, wanting to find her mother.

Mhari wasn't in the house and neither was Alex, so Tamara went searching in the yard. The day was warm, the sun casting light rays which brushed her face pleasantly. There was no breeze to interrupt the heat. A multi-coloured crow squawked overhead, swooping to the ground; a speeder passed by the farm. Voices, muffled and quiet, whispered from the garage, catching Tamara's attention. She walked toward the sounds, but hesitated a few feet from the open door. Her mother was speaking, the words clear from the short distance.

"I should have known." Mhari sounded angry with herself. "I should have recognized him."

"It all happened a long time ago; you can't expect to remember everything," Alex replied, almost chiding his wife. "Besides, knowing wouldn't have stopped what happened from happening."

"We should have told Tamara, Alex. We should have told them both."

"Why? What difference would it make? It's safer for them not knowing. Can you imagine what would happen to that boy if the Empire knew what they had?"

"I don't think it would be any worse than the situation he's already in; and it may save him from execution." Mhari's voice was sad, not hopeful, as she said the words.

Tamara took a step back from the garage, not daring to stay any longer, her mind in turmoil. Why should her mother have recognized Luke? What had happened a long time ago? What should she have been told? Who, or what, was Luke? Question after question sprang to her mind as she raced back to the house.

What was it that could save Luke's life?

Mhari turned at the sound of running footsteps and caught a glimpse of her daughter's back as the girl disappeared into the house. She looked back at Alex. "She heard," she told him.

\* \* \*

Bower stepped reluctantly from the elevator and entered the detention block. He glanced nervously around the large, oppressive hallway before reporting to the bored desk officer.

"Medical Captain Bower. What's the problem?"

The officer gestured up the corridor. "Self-inflicted injury in maximum security."

Surprise played over the big medic's face. "The Rebel?"

The officer nodded.

Bower thanked him and lifted his medical pack. He started down the corridor between the numerous blank doors which led into the small dark cells. He shivered as he imagined the occupants of those tiny holes, human and alien spirits locked away, languishing in despair, waiting for the miracle release or praying for the freedom of death. His boots echoed on the walkway, the sound hollow and empty, like the souls of those who designed this place. As a medic, this prison was against everything Bower lived and practiced. And, like any other medic, he abhorred the duty of patching up a prisoner for another session of interrogation.

He reached the observation chamber and palmed open the door. He grinned a false smile of calmness as he entered the room, and threw a greeting to Byron's partner who was lounging with his feet up on the console desk. "Hi Kasden, if Dassu catches you relaxing on duty he'll bust you."

Kasden laughed. "I think he's finished for today."

"Thank the gods," Byron mumbled.

The older technician chuckled louder. "That's probably what the Reb's thinking."

"Speaking of whom..." Bower interceded, before an argument could begin. "How is he?" He glanced up into the view screen, immediately spotting the pathetic figure fixed to the wall with head hanging forward and blood trailing down his arms; a low moan rose from the cell.

"His life signs have levelled out; they're still weak, but steadier," Byron reported.

"Good. Now, who's going to have the honour of helping me with him?" Bower raised his eyebrows with the question.

Byron stood. "Kasden's relaxing, so I'll help; wouldn't want to make him break the habit of a life time..." He grinned at his jibe, but the humour failed to reach his eyes.

"Suits me," Kasden yawned as Jared and Bower left the room.

\* \* \*

Darkness, loneliness, pain.

Luke's muscles contracted and shivered; he groaned, giving vent to his misery. He floated on the penumbra of consciousness, bewildered by real and imagined images. They danced together in his head as he struggled to sharpen his senses. Figures and scenes intermingled, one superimposed upon another, like a faulty holograph. Water swirled, shots burst around him, sand-vipers struck, lowen snarled, a syringe pierced, laughter was joined with screams. His muscles contracted painfully and he groaned.

"Ahana," he thought he heard himself whisper. "It's Ahana." But no sound escaped his lips. He was totally oblivious to the door opening and Jared and Bower stepping down into the room.

"You can release him, Kasden," Bower called handing his pack to Byron, and he caught the Rebel as he slumped forward and carried him to the bench. The boy struggled weakly, protesting the touch. Gently, the medic laid his patient on the cold bunk and took his case from Jared.

"Hallucinogenic?" he asked, fishing out the required equipment, a small cauterising unit.

Byron nodded. "Phentroxalene."

The captain frowned. "Strong stuff," he noted.

"Dassu made him think his cell was flooding," the technician put forward, watching Bower's reaction.

The medic shuddered; coming from a desert planet had not given him a love of water. He took the Rebel's arms, turning them as he examined the wounds - also noticing the various puncture wounds where the droid had injected him. He grimaced at the gashes around the wrists that still leaked blood. "He did this?"

Byron sat on the bunk, holding the Rebel still. "Yeah," he exhaled, flinching back from the stench of sweat and blood and fear which rose from the prisoner. "He pulled against the cuffs."

Bower suppressed the sickness he felt, knowing it wasn't unusual for a subject to mutilate himself in an attempt to escape the hallucinations. He worked fast and proficiently, cleaning the injury of blood before he reached for the cauteriser. At the first touch of heat, the Rebel shrieked and bucked, trying to free himself from their grip.

"Take it easy." Bower fought to reassure and still his patient. "I'm trying to help."

"Don't hurt me — please! I — don't — can't--" The plea was slurred, stilted by the effects of the drugs.

Bower glanced at the Rebel, knowing eye contact would help calm the fright. "It's okay," he said kindly to the half-lidded eyes. "Just you--" He broke off, staring in shock at the hazy blue irises that were fixed on his own darker brown ones. He looked at the bloody, sweaty, tired face. "Sweet Suns!" he whispered, reaching up to brush wet blond hair from the younger man's brow, for a better look at the puzzled features.

"Is something wrong?" Byron asked.

His companion's words drew Bower from his shock; he glanced nervously at the technician and shook his head. "This whole place is wrong," he said quickly, trying to cover his surprise. Determinedly, he lifted the cauteriser again. "Hold him, Jared," he ordered, and applied the heat once more.

"Tank?" the Rebel questioned; and then yelled again.

Byron strained to hold the boy down. He watched his friend closely, puzzled by the medic's reaction. He had never seen Bower so edgy before.

The cries stopped, to be replaced by soft little breaths of pain, as Bower finished closing the wound. Again, the Rebel turned to the medic. He reached out, trying to gain his attention. "Tank, please—"

"Bower?" Jared asked, confused.

The captain ignored the questioning voice. "He's delirious. He'll be like this for a while." He spoke shortly, stiffly. "They gave him too much of a powerful drug; it's a wonder they didn't kill him." Gently, but still firmly, he applied a dressing.

Hope filled Luke as he heard the familiar deep voice which chased away the dreams. This was real. Tank was real. He had to be. This wasn't a vision to

confuse and frighten him. Tank was Biggs's friend, Tank was his friend. They had planned to go to the Academy together—before Uncle Owen had said no. Tank would help him. Tank had to help him. He had to explain what was happening. "Tank, they wanted me to—to tell."

Tank ignored Luke's words, his heart hammering. "He's hot, running a temperature. Help me turn him over."

Jared manoeuvred the youth's hips and Bower turned him by the shoulders and pushed the Rebel's head forward to get a clear view of the control unit. The medic gently probed the swollen, crusted wound around the small metal disc and pus popped free.

"Tank...." the prisoner murmured.

"This is infected," Bower stated with some anger. "You're meant to monitor his vitals; couldn't you tell he was fevered?"

"Dassu didn't consider it important."

"When did he last have some fluids?"

"Several hours ago."

Bower brought his pack closer and drew out a vial and hypo syringe. "I'm gonna give him an antibiotic, and set up a rehydrate pack."

"Dassu...."

"Dassu needs him alive, leave him like this and he'll die!"

Jared frowned at Bower's fury. "Sure, whatever you say, Bower."

They turned the boy onto his back.

Tank filled the syringe and lined up a vein that was already pock marked and bruised from numerous injections, he glanced at the younger man. "Luke, I'm going to give you shot; it won't hurt you, okay? It'll help."

"Tank..." Luke's voice was a whisper. "Help me... please..."

Bower slipped the needle into Luke's arm, administering the dose of antibiotic and then cleared the vial away. He fix the rehydrate pack to Luke's limb and set up the auto-feed to deliver the right amount of nutrients, fluid and electrolytes into his young patient's blood stream.

"Tank," Luke mumbled again, his eyes closing. There was something he needed to say, something he had to tell. "Tank... Biggs... He...Biggs...was... Tank...Help me..."

Bower packed his gear away, trying not to take any heed of the Rebel's words. He stood and washed his hands at the faucet, shook them dry, and picked up his case.

"Tank..."

"Bower?" Jared stared at the Rebel, then at the captain.

The medic motioned to Jared to leave the cell and then followed, glancing back one last time before the door closed.

"Tank — don't leave me!"

The door slammed shut, cutting off any more pitiful protests.

"You know him," Byron challenged the medic, the moment the door shut them off from the sound sensors in the cell. He leaned against the corridor wall, studying his friend. "Don't you?"

"How could I possibly know him?" Bower's face was blank, a wall hiding everything. It was a practice he had learned, being a doctor.

Jared persisted. "He called you 'Tank'; he knows you."

Bower shrugged. "He must have heard you call me that. You have to remember he's drugged, he--"

"I never said your name," Jared interrupted, still digging. "And you called him 'Luke'." He pointed out.

Bower's back was up; he was fighting for an excuse. "No.... I said 'look" with a double 'o'. I was surprised— like you were—at how young he is; that doesn't mean I know him."

"You're from Tatooine," Byron stated.

"So?"

"So's he."

"That doesn't mean a thing!" Bower exploded, using anger to get away from the prying questions. "What are you trying to do? Implicate me as a Rebel?"



"No, of course not; but I—"

"That's all right, then," he said, now dismissing the incident. "Just watch his signs. But you can tell Dassu he'll need to give him at least twenty-four hours before the next session." He stared at the cell door for a moment, and then glanced back at Byron. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have other things to attend to." Woodenly, he turned on his heels and strode quickly down the corridor.

Byron watched his back recede, then joined Kasden. He threw himself into his seat. Reaching to his console, he switched off the sound system, not wanting to listen to the prisoner weep.

"What's wrong with the medic?" Kasden asked, scratching his nose. "He looked like he was spooked in there."

Byron gazed at the hunched body on the bunk; the boy still reminded him of Sam and he just couldn't shake that first image off. "Maybe he was," he whispered, leaving Kasden perplexed.

\* \* \*

Tank threw his gear into his locker and slammed the door closed. He punched the metal panel, giving vent to his anger and ignoring the pain he caused himself. Then he leaned against the locker, massaging his knuckles.

*"You know him, don't you?"* Byron's accusing voice echoed in his mind.

*"Tank—don't leave me!"* Luke's voice begged.

He crossed his small room and sank onto the bed, letting his head fall into his hands. How did Skywalker get to Irlam? How did Skywalker become a Rebel? The last time he had seen Luke was before he and Biggs left for the Academy, over four years ago. And now Luke was a Rebel.

Tank shook his head, smiling slightly at the irony of someone once so set on going to the Imperial Academy, turning out to be a Rebel. He lifted his head and stared at the blank screen of his computer console, then glanced away, denying his curiosity. But the grey screen demanded his attention. He rose from the bed and seated himself before the computer. He heaved in a breath and switched it on tapping in his request.

The activated screen cast a hazy, flickering green light over his face as it searched its banks. Then set up the list of known Rebel Alliance personal he had asked for.

"What the hell?" Tank jumped at the familiar name at the top of the list, again his heart hammered in his chest as his eyes stared at the name; Luke Skywalker.

What had Luke done to merit such attention? His fingers tapped quickly over the keys and the picture Luke used to carry on his ID appeared on the screen, and a blurb, giving Luke's name, birth date, guardians and planet of origin. Then more information, which Tank paused on the screen:

LAST KNOWN ALLIANCE RANK: LIEUTENANT

WANTED FOR THE OFFENSES OF TREASON, MURDER, AND FOR DESTRUCTION OF IMPERIAL PROPERTY.

APPROACH WITH CAUTION—SUBJECT REPORTED TO HAVE JEDI ABILITIES

REPORT LIVE APPREHENSION DIRECTLY TO LORD VADER.

Tank read and reread the information in disbelief. Luke was Jedi; Luke was wanted by the Sith Lord himself!

He relaxed back into his chair and flicked off the computer. A small smile flickered over his lips. He wanted off this Rim-world. Luke was here. Vader wanted Luke, and only he knew who Luke was. Bower's smile widened as unexpected opportunities seemed to beckon before him.

*"Tank—don't leave me...."*

## **XIX.**

It was like stepping into another time. A thick, plush carpet covered the floor, giving warmth and comfort for walking; colourful wall decorations played mind's delight with the senses; expensive, antique furniture added extra richness to the room. A log fire popped and crackled pleasantly in a large, ornate fireplace, casting a pale orange-yellow glow over the luxury. Only the hard plastic holocubes along the mantle piece, and the computer console on the desk, spoke of modern times. Even the Holo-net unit was disguised in dark wood to fit in with its surroundings.

Han Solo let his eyes trip along the cosy room. He felt totally incongruous in such opulence, and totally uncomfortable, despite the soft, snug chair in which he sat. This had been a surprise. He pushed himself from the chair and paced the floor, impatiently waiting for his host to arrive. When he had been picked up, he had expected a long charge sheet to be read out, and a cold, black cell. But not this. It wasn't that he was unhappy with the situation, just surprised; and Solo hated

surprises. When it came to Imperials that usually meant they were up to something.

He stepped up to the fireplace, letting the heat warm his legs as he stared at the numerous holocubes. They were mainly family pictures, smiles in exotic settings. They were also full of Imperial uniforms. He lifted one, smiling at the image of a young, dark-haired woman holding a newborn child.

"Captain Hanani Farrell?"

Han quickly replaced the holo and turned to face the unexpected speaker. It was an Imperial major. The soldier spoke again. "It is Hanani Farrell?"

Han nodded, still recovering from the shock of finding himself with company; he hadn't heard the door open.

The major seated himself behind a large desk. When he smiled at Han, dimples danced in his cheeks, giving him the appearance of youth, and near-vulnerability. But Han knew that no man got so high in the Imperial Army by being weak. "I think not," he said in answer to Han's nod; his voice was clearly cultured.

Han blinked, suddenly worried.

The Imperial continued, "Captain Han Solo, you've caused the Empire quite a bit of trouble through the years with your illicit activities. But now it seems you have become more of a Rebel." He gestured to the chair opposite him.

Feeling somewhat hostile, Han refused to sit.

"If you know who I am, then why the charade? Why not just lock me away?"

"Because, Captain, I am in your debt."

Han sat. "Huh?"

"Two years ago, you were on Zerain III when that moon was destroyed by a meteorite."

Han nodded; he remembered the destruction of the little paradise well.

"After you and your partner had made your escape, you discovered a stowaway; a little boy who had been placed on your ship by his mother."

Han started to catch on. He and Chewie had been on a job for Jabba the Hutt, smuggling a shipment of stolen ammunition packs and a significant amount of spice, when the meteor had struck. It hadn't been instant destruction, but the rock

had been so large as to disrupt the moon's gravity and upset the atmosphere. Death had been slow suffocation for millions. He and Chewie had grabbed what they could and run, ignoring the dead woman at the hatch to the Falcon. It hadn't been until they had made the jump to light speed that they had found the child in a closet, crying for his mother....

*"Oh, hell!" was Han's immediate moan. "A kid! Just what we needed!"*

*Chewbacca glanced reproachfully at his captain and lifted the child from the cupboard. It was then that they noticed the black, scaled-down Imperial uniform the child wore.*

*"A little Imp—as if the full-sized ones aren't enough trouble!"*

*The little boy howled louder, clinging to Chewbacca and pushing his thumb into his mouth. The Wookiee growled softly, not wanting to frighten the small human any more, but wanting Han to be sensible about the situation.*

*"Sensible?" Han rasped, sitting down behind the game board. "We can't take a kid to Jabba."*

*Chewie's next answer upset Solo even more.*

*"Drop him off somewhere? Chewie?!" He gestured at the floor. "We've got a hold full of spice!" His mouth clamped shut suddenly, as the boy's eyes widened at the mention of spice. "Damn," Han mumbled, glancing at the airlock. He rose from his seat and crouched on the floor next to Chewbacca, at eye level with the child. "Hi," he said quietly.*

*"Hi," the boy replied, through his thumb.*

*"What's your name?"*

*"Derry."*

*Han felt foolish. He had never been good with children, and yet for some reason, they always took to him. "How old are you, Derry?"*

*"Four."*

*Han frowned and then looked resigned. He glanced up at Chewbacca. "Where's the nearest space port?" He hoped Jabba believed his excuse for the late delivery.*

*"That little boy was my son," the major finished, as he rose from his seat and crossed the office to a small bar.*

"I was only too glad to do my bit." Han accepted the drink the Imperial offered. He sipped at it cautiously, before downing half of it.

"Anyone else might have pushed a stowaway out the airlock."

Han finished his drink before answering, "I'm not anyone else."

The major laughed, "Indeed, not."

The door to the office behind Han slid open, and Chewbacca entered, carrying a small boy. The child still wore a uniform, but he was taller and older. He turned to Han, disarming the smuggler with a beaming grin. The Wookiee placed Derry on the floor and he ran the few meters to Han, wrapping his arms around Solo's neck.

"Uh—hi, kid."

The Imperial smiled at Han's embarrassment. "You'll both stay for dinner?"

Chewbacca nodded furiously.

Derry squeezed Han's neck more. "Please," he pleaded.

Han shrugged. "I guess that's decided; we'd be delighted, Major."

\* \* \*

"Remember," Narra emphasized the word for his attentive audience, "we won't be alone up there. This is a munitions plant and a governor we're going after. Minoan is heavily defended at the best of times; but for Amand's visit, security will be even tighter. We're only sixty fighters against well, I wouldn't like to estimate how many TIEs. What is important is that we made as much noise and cause as much damage as we can, to take their attention from the ground squad. Remember, Governor Amand is the main target."

He paused and grinned. "We're there as the percussion."

There was tight laughter from the assembled pilots in the briefing room.

"Okay," he continued, "get to your fighters, and we'll have another run-through."

Groans were his answer, as the pilots reluctantly pulled themselves from their seats.

"Hey," Narra shouted, in good humour, "like I said before, I want you to practice this attack in your dreams!"

There were several calls of "We already do!" in response. The commander smiled; things were progressing well.

"Commander?"

He looked up to see Wedge fighting his way in through the door, as the pilots exited. He frowned in annoyance. "Why weren't you at the briefing, Lieutenant?"

"I was aiding General Dodonna, sir," Wedge explained hastily. "He would like to see you, sir. He says it's important. "

"Something wrong?"

Wedge shrugged. "I don't know."

Narra looked to the now-empty room. "Okay, Antilles; you take them up and put them through their paces. I'll be there when I can."

Wedge grinned widely, his dark eyes sparkling. "Yes? Sir!" The commander strode from the room. "Commander Antilles," Wedge whispered. "I like it!" He ran to join his comrades.

\* \* \*

Dodonna waited until his staff were seated and silent before he stood and explained why he had summoned them. His face was grave and his voice terse when he spoke. "We've intercepted an Imperial transmission coming from Ahana." He stared at the princess. "They know there's to be an attack."

"How?" Leia's voice was an incredulous gasp.

"An informer?" Rieekan's face was pale. Like Leia, he supported the theory that Ahana had fallen because of a traitor to the cause.

Narra simply shook his head sorrowfully, thinking that all his pilots' hard work had been in vain.

"No," Dodonna answered Rieekan, "not an informer—a computer."

"The Ahana data banks?" Nara asked.

Dodonna nodded.

"But R2 wiped them!" Leia protested, anger at this new set-back beginning to assert itself. "They were clear!"

"You told me yourself there was damaged, Leia," Jan spoke softly, trying to pacify her. "Obviously, you weren't able to clear everything."

"I should have blown the damned thing up!" She was venomous. "That's it, then—the attack is off."

"Not so fast," the elderly general was laughing, "none of you let me finish." He caught all of their gazes. "I was going to add that, although the Empire knows there is to be an attack, they don't know when and, more importantly, they don't know where." He let the information sink in, and was relieved to see smiles curling his audience's lips. He continued, "Security for any event in the next few weeks will be even tighter than we've planned for, so I know we are short of men, but it's my proposition that we..."

"Pick a decoy," Narra pounced on his superior's idea.

Rieekan nodded rapidly, liking the proposal. "We attack a separate Imperial site, a few hours before hand, let them think that's the big attack, and then launch for Minoan."

"We can afford one squad from the Minoan assault, and one of the reserve squads." Narra was counting his men. "If it's a small site that we hit, that is."

Dodonna shrugged slightly. "That's what we're here to decide. The site has to be big enough for the Imperials to notice, yet small enough for two squads to handle."

"Irlam," a quiet female voice interrupted.

The three men turned their attention to the princess.

"Irlam," she repeated, emphasizing her suggestion.

"Your Highness," Jan spoke softly, picking his words carefully, "we all know what Irlam means to you, but —"

"No, wait, General," Narra broke in. "Lieutenant Antilles was on the mission to that planet. His report stated that there were several Imperial settlements, including one huge installation; a lot of personnel, a lot of hardware—"

"Then we avoid it," stated Rieekan.

"—But no pursuit." Finished Narra. "There were no destroyers."

"You're sure?" Jan was still sceptical.

"Not one fighter pursued them."

Leia's eyes sparkled brightly; hope, touching on the border of excitement, flared within her. "Jan, please? Irlam."

Dodonna looked to Rieekan and Narra; both men nodded. "I think it's too early to decide. But we should make preparations and we'll need new Intel on Irlam, he said. He turned to Nara. "Commander, if you can select squads then, and I'll trust you to find someone to command them. We all have much to do if we have two attacks to pull off."

The meeting was adjourned. Narra quickly left the room, suddenly remembering that Wedge was in temporary command of the Minoan practice. Rieekan quickly followed him, leaving Dodonna and Leia alone.

Leia broke the silence that had fallen over the chamber. "I know what you're thinking, Jan." Dodonna didn't answer. "You think I'm obsessed with the idea of Luke being alive."

The general sat next to her, hesitantly putting his arm around her shoulders. "Leia," he said quietly, softly, "why insist on punishing yourself? I had hoped you had decided to let the dead stay dead."

She turned her head to look at him, noticing how tired his eyes had become, how grey his hair was, how his skin had cracked and wrinkled, and how much he cared about the young princess next to him. In that moment, he looked like her grandfather father. "If we hit Irlam it would be my chance to find out the truth; perhaps Luke's chance to return to us."

"And if he doesn't?"

Leia closed her eyes; saw Luke lying dead in the grass by the remnants of his X-Wing; saw Luke bound against a wall and an interrogation droid hovering close by; saw Luke running toward his rescue party a smile of relief lighting his features. She sighed; troubled, wondering which one of her thoughts was the truth. Wondering what had really happened to her young friend.

"Leia?" Dodonna prompted.

"If he doesn't," she replied, softly, sadly, "then I'll accept he's gone."

\* \* \*



Han relaxed back in his chair, letting his hand stray to his full stomach, while he accepted a fourth glass of wine from his host. He sipped at its sweetness and smiled at Denny, who was playing with Chewbacca on the floor of the dining room. He turned back to the major and made a toasting gesture before sipping again from his glass.

"That was quite a meal, Major."

"I'm pleased you enjoyed it, Captain. Having an inheritance means that I can afford the best cooks on Hasthaal."

"We may visit more often," Han laughed; then he grew serious. "Thanks again for saving my ass from prison."

The major smiled and, for the first time, Han did not squirm at the sight of a grinning Imperial. He liked this man. "As I said, Captain, it's my way of thanking you for saving Denny's life."

"I hope we don't get you into trouble."

"You haven't, and you won't. I'm in command of this sector."

Although he didn't know it, Han's face showed plain relief.

The major continued, "If I had wanted to arrest you, I wouldn't have given you dinner first. You may be a Rebel, but —"

"Ah," Han interrupted, sitting up straight despite the load in his stomach, "perhaps you could set the record straight on that. See, Chewie and me are independent businessmen. We work for whoever pays the highest—and at the moment, the Rebs give me what I need."

The major laughed lightly, without malice. "But you did rescue the Princess Leia from the Death Star."

Han's face went blank, pale; Chewbacca paused in his game.

"Lord Vader's report on that incident was rather detailed," the Imperial explained.

Ran relaxed again. "Oh, yeah; I got paid for that. But it was a mistake anyway."

The major raised his eyebrows. "A mistake?"

"We were headed for Alderaan, but the Death Star got in the way."

Again, there was delighted laughter. "You're quite a character, Captain."

Han scoffed. "So I've been told." He rose from his chair, walking to work off the heavy meal. He stepped over Chewbacca's legs as he admired the room and its rich, dark wooden panelling. "It's quite a place you have here."

"My family is nobility." The man sounded almost embarrassed. "Like I said, I have an inheritance."

Han was impressed. "Nobility, huh? What made you join the Imps?"

"It was the fashion at the time. You could say that I was caught up in a fad."

Han nodded absently as he spotted more holocubes on a side cabinet. One, a group picture, caught his eye. It was an Academy graduation, showing young men decked out in new Imperial dress uniforms. He picked it up and turned to his host. "Friends?"

The major joined him, then chuckled at the holo, which had obviously set off memories. "My graduating class. It's been a while since I've seen any of them." He began to point them out, telling Han their names and where they were now. "That's Jud; he's a commandernow on some Star Destroyer. Both Marc and Jon died on the Death Star."

Han looked pained, almost guilty, but the major didn't notice; he was too wrapped up in the past.

"That's me, of course. This is Collan; he landed a snappy job with Intelligence, L'jon; now where is he?"

The Imperial's voice faded from Han's ears as his concentration stayed fixed on the previous classmate. Collan had a familiar face, one Han was sure he had seen many times—only it was older now, thinner, having lost its youthful chubbiness; and his hair was greying, and his voice was soft and a little hoarse.

*"I was the last one aboard, Captain Solo. Luke panicked under the flares; he was an easy target. I'm sorry, sir; he just didn't have a chance."*

Han knew who Collan was. A member of the squad that was decimated on Irlam; the last one aboard the shuttle before it left. The quiet sergeant everyone liked, who melted out of mind once he was out of sight, who no one really paid much attention to. The perfect Imperial plant.

"Is there something wrong, Captain?"

Han wiped the heavy frown he wore from his face and smiled. "Indigestion, I think. I ate too much." The major returned to his commentary, but Han had lost all interest. He wanted to get back to Leia—he wanted to warn her.

## XX.

Captain Piett stood outside the Dark Lord of the Sith's personal quarters waiting nervously until the call to enter was given. He swallowed, cleared his throat and scratched his top lip while he rocked on his heels with impatience. He tapped his fingers rhythmically on the data pad he was holding wondering what was so important about the information that it couldn't be passed to Vader via the com channels. He glanced briefly at the contents again frowning as he read the details; what was so important about a captured Rebel, they were ten a credit these days.

He sighed, glanced up and down the gleaming corridor at the personnel passing; his anxiety and irritation growing with each passing moment. It would appear that the Dark Lord enjoyed these little mind games with his staff, enjoyed the fear and trepidation that perpetuated around him.

The door slid open before him, sending a twist of terror shivering through him, but he squared his shoulders and entered to find Vader standing in front of his hyperbaric chamber.

"What is it, Captain?" Vader rumbled, his voice seeming to resonate the air around him.

"A report from a Captain in the Medical Corps stationed on Irlam, My Lord," Piett informed him quickly. "He believes a Rebel they have in custody there may be Luke Skywalker." it may have been Piett's imagination but he was sure Vader's breathing had quicken for just a second.

"And his basis for this belief?"

"He states that he grew up with Skywalker on Tatooine."

"Did he?" Vader sounded thoughtful, the helmet tilted slightly as though the Dark Lord was considering the ceiling.

Piett remained silent waiting for his Lord to announce his verdict on the med-corps captain's claim. He didn't have long to wait.

Vader turned to the com screen and it flickered to life bringing the bridge and Admiral Ozzel into sharp focus. "Admiral," Vader wasted no time with pleasantries. "Set a course for the Irlam system."

"At once, My Lord," Ozzel acquiesced, sharply bowing his head, then he turned to relay Vader's command

The screen went blank and Vader turned back to Piett. "You are dismissed, Captain."

"Yes, My Lord," Piett performed the same per functionary bow as Ozzel and sharply turned on his heel relieved that his encounter with the Sith Lord had been mercifully brief.

The huge Super Star Destroyer slowly, majestically, turned in the depths of space. It hung for a long instant then, in the flickering of an eyelid; it was gone, swallowed by the swiftness that was hyperspace.

\* \* \*

Within his private quarters Colonel Dassu relaxed in his recliner and sipped at his drink. He unbuttoned his restricting jacket, and let his middle-aged spread breathe. He yawned and rubbed the sleep from his eyes tired from his day even although he didn't feel as though he had achieved very much as he had been confined for much of the day to his office while concentrating on his administrative tasks.

He had visited the cellblock only once to check on his rebel prisoner and had been aggrieved to find him sleeping peacefully, his wrist wounds dressed and a fluid feed still attached to his arm. He had immediately ordered that the boy be woken and had smiled at the startled look and fearful cry that had followed the blaring lights and noise. The youth had pulled himself into a corner and shivered, staring expectantly at the door.

Dassu had turned to his two technicians and barked; "He may not be questioned for several hours, that doesn't mean he sleeps for all of them!"

The colonel took another sip at the sharp whiskey, feeling it sear his throat. The boy was an enigma. On one hand he seemed a callow youth; too young and too innocent to be in the position he was. However, he was proving most difficult to break; the mind altering and pain-inducing drugs he had been fed had almost killed him rather than broken his mental shields. There was something sustaining him and Dassu knew he had to find that something and remove it.

He sat his glass to the side and picked up the latest communiqué and read it quickly. He smiled at the news of the capture of another Rebel outpost; even if it was a small one like Ahana, it was nevertheless a victory for the Empire. It was a pity that Leia Organa had once more slipped from the Empire's grasp and the news that the Alliance was planning a high profile attack did not please him. It was disturbing that there was virtually nothing known about it.

*Leia Organa?*

Dassu frowned and rose from the recliner, crossing the room to his desk. He quickly powered up his personal computer and called up the star charts. There was Ahana where Leia Organa had hidden, and there - with less than a days hyperspace travel between them - was Irlam.

Dassu keyed his com. "Sergeant Thaler? Meet me at the detention block and have that medic join us. Tell Jared and Kasden to prepare; we're going back to the boy."

He terminated the call before Thaler could answer and lifted his glass once more, downing the rest of the spirit in one swallow and then buttoned his jacket.

The boy was about to get another rude awakening.

\* \* \*

*The forest was cool, green and peaceful. He drew in a long breath, allowing the scents please his olfactory sense. He walked on slowly, his feet sinking into the mossy ground and cracking dry twigs that littered the floor. The sun's light and warmth broke through the branches of the trees, shattering into millions of glittering pieces, which rained upon him. A small tree-myre scampered out from the undergrowth and skipped in his path, chattering as it ran. He laughed at its comical face.*

*Overhead, a burning X-wing exploded.*

*He pulled the girl closer to him, turning her chin toward him; they kissed lightly. They parted, and he brushed her hair back from her face. She smiled.*

*"Why don't you tell them, Ryder?"*

*A large black cloud passed over the sun, plunging the forest into near-night. A coolness shivered through him, and once more he could smell the rotting stench of death. He frowned at her question. "I can't," he answered.*

*"Oh." She turned from him and giggled. The sun pushed through the gloom, and the forest was warmed, the air fresh. She grabbed his hand and ran, pulling him through the trees, laughing.*

*"Where are we going?" he asked happily.*

*"You'll see," she sang.*

*They ran through a clearing, ignoring the Rebel transport that was revving up for take-off. The sergeant waved to him, and closed the hatch. Imperials spilled into the area, as they disappeared back into the woods. At last she slowed, and*

*together they walked back to the house, both marvelling at the twin suns as they set behind the dunes.*

*Entering the house, they passed the kitchen and threw quick greetings to the woman who worked there.*

*"Hi, Mom."*

*"Hi, Aunt Beru."*

*A shadow was cast over them; his happiness faded. He glanced fearfully at the girl; but for her, nothing had changed. A figure emerged from the shadow. As he shrank back from the man, trying to pull her with him, he backed into his aunt.*

*"Hi, Dad," the girl said gaily. "I've brought him back."*

*An awful understanding grew within him as the three closed in, as their eyes studied him, as their hands reached for him, as his uncle spoke.*

*"Lieutenant, you have information we need.*

*\* \* \**

Something was squeezing his upper arm, something was shaking him and with a start he opened his eyes and immediately shrank back from the large guard's impatient face, his body tensing with sudden apprehension. He relaxed briefly as the guard moved back and stood with his partner at the cell door; but his muscles clenched once again as Dassu stepped into his field of vision with the droid just behind him. Instinctively, he drew his legs up, folded his arms around his body - making himself as small a target as possible.

Dassu silently studied Luke. He noted the pale, sick face, the dried blood around his nostrils, the large frightened eyes surrounded by tired shadows, and the small tremors of his body. His fingernails were rough, jagged, due to agitated chewing; the skin around the nails was ragged, bloodied, dug out, a result of nervous picking. The colonel wrinkled his nose at the stale, acrid stench of terror. The boy now stank like the scum he was.

The colonel cleared his throat and came straight to the point. He was tired of the resistance and he was determined that this time the boy would yield whatever information he held. "I have no need to repeat my request; I am sure your memory is as clear as mine."

Luke's cheek twitched; one eye blinked in a reflex action. The silence that followed amplified the tension within the confines of the cell. Solid consternation blocked the back of Luke's throat, making him want to gag. He hung his head.

Dassu bent slightly, trying to catch Luke's eyes. Quietly, simply, kindly, he said, "Then you remember the droid?"

Violent tremors shook Luke's body; he'd lost control. He nodded; he remembered the droid, remembered the drugs that hurt him, confused him, remembered a familiar voice and he remembered... Tank? He looked at the dressings on his wrists, the rehydrate pack on his arm; there had been a medic and he had looked like Tank. But that was impossible. Tank couldn't be here. Tank was...

"Lieutenant?" Dassu called seeing Luke's attention wander and he wondered momentarily about the youth's emotional and mental state; not that it mattered. The colonel smiled compassionately and continued, "You don't want the droid again do you? It has other rather unique skills that we haven't tried yet, perhaps one of those would loosen your tongue?"

Luke shook his head, unable to stifle a moan of fear. No, he didn't want the droid again. He didn't want any more drugs in his body to confuse him, to muddle his mind, to burn in his veins.

Dassu waved the droid back. "But we have decided against the droid, for now."

Luke didn't glance up or show signs of relief. He struggled to swallow. He didn't know how he could do this. He didn't know how he was supposed to resist anymore; how much more pain he was expected to endure. He just wanted this to end, to be finished.

"You have a strong mind for one so young." There was a hint of true admiration in Dassu's voice. He nodded to the guards.

Luke didn't resist the hands that reached for him, or struggle as they pulled him to his feet. Thaler produced a pair of binders, the second guard tore the dressings and the fluid pack from his arms and Luke's hands were firmly fastened behind his back.

Dassu sat on the bunk; watching and speaking as a corded durasteel line fell from the ceiling, as Luke's binders were attached to it and as he was drawn off his feet; his whole weight pulling on his shoulders and wrists. The Rebel groaned, biting back a cry of agony. "Harsh physical violence should not be necessary, but I'm afraid you leave us no alternative. You will tell us what we want to know—eventually."

The guards drew their batons.

\* \* \*

In the observation chamber, Byron flinched at the heavy thuds and piercing cries that echoed in the confined space. He glanced behind him at the medic Dassu requested be present. Bower was pale, sick.

"Luke," Tank whispered to himself.

\* \* \*

Luke hung helplessly, unable to protect himself from the beating. His breathing came in short hitches, and gasps punctuated with tight cries. His twisted shoulder joints were in excruciating agony; pulled by his weight. His battered limbs stiffened, his flesh bruised and split. His body jerked with each strike, the movement sending spasms of pain through his shoulders. A baton struck a glancing blow across his temple; colours danced briefly, blood dripped into his eyes and he almost passed out.

Groggily he heard Dassu question; "What was that?"

He was hit across the thighs, the buttocks and the legs.

"Wait! Dassu barked.

There was a sob of relief from Luke as the battering ceased.

Dassu stood and leaned into Luke, their faces inches apart. "What was that you said?"

Slowly, Luke shook his head; everything was fuzzy, everything was pain. He didn't remember saying anything.

You said a name," Dassu told him, lying, watching Luke's reaction closely. "You said Ahana."

Confusion shook Luke. "No, I... No... Ahana..." He sobbed, he couldn't have said anything. He couldn't have - but how else could they know, if not from him.

"Yes, Ahana," Dassu agreed readily. "Is that your base of operations?"

"No," Luke forced out. He was sick, dizzy. His thoughts in disarray, his head pounding from the blow. He couldn't have said anything.

Dassu paused, pursing his lips; then he nodded angrily and stepped back. Thaler's baton fell once more, and the staccato flogging resumed.



\* \* \*

Tank turned from the observation screen, unable to watch.

*"Tank—don't leave me!"*

\* \* \*

"No more, please—" Pain loaded the quiet words, barely audible over the grunts of the labouring guards.

"Help yourself, Lieutenant," Dassu told him. "Tell us about Ahana."

"Please..."

"Is Ahana your base of operations?"

Thaler's baton struck Luke's left elbow in the same instant as his defeat. He'd taken enough, suffered enough, and finally his resolve had been broken. His will to fight on shattered much like the bone in his arm. He had already told them; he had betrayed his friends. What did anything matter now?

"Yes...."

Everything suddenly stopped. The battering ceased and the guards moved back. Allowing Dassu to step close to Luke once more. He placed his lips close to Luke's ear and whispered. "I'm going to check this out, boy, and if you are lying you will suffer the consequences."

He turned on his heel and strode from the cell, followed by Thaler and his partner leaving Luke alone and still suspended, awkwardly from the ceiling.

Tank met them in the hall. "Sir, I'd like permission to check his injuries."

"Denied," Dassu turned his back on him.

"Sir! If he has..."

"I am not leaving him for long, Captain, just enough for him to think that he has betrayed his friends and then I shall finish this. "

Panic traced a cold line down Tank's spine. He knew he should tell the Colonel about Vader; knew he should tell him that Luke was needed alive; but something stopped him. "You already know about Ahana?"

Dassu smirked. "It fell to us several weeks ago, but the boy may know more. Now that we have succeeded in damaging his spirit I'm sure he'll easily capitulate."

Tank suppressed his revulsion and fury at the callous words. "Sir, I..."

"If you are concerned, medic, then you may stay. However, you enter his cell only if his condition becomes fatal. Understand."

"Yes, sir," Tank conceded, quietly. He stepped back allowed the Colonel and guards to pass. Troubled, he turned and entered the observation room to wait with Jared and Kasden. He avoided looking into the view screen, avoided looking at Luke's despair. But he could not shut out the sounds; the quiet groans of agony, the sobs that wracked a broken body.

\* \* \*

Tamara lay on her bed, listening to her parents' muffled conversation, as her own mind played and replayed Brett's innocent words, and her parents' words—words she hadn't been meant to hear. Confusion added to her frustration, robbing her of sleep; she turned on her side, burying her head under the pillow, trying to silence the voices in her head and to release the pressure in her chest.

*"...And it may save him from execution."*

Why had her mother sounded so sad at the same thought that lifted Tamara's heart and gave her hope?

*"...And it may save him from execution."*

Tamara threw back the covers and rose from the bed. Quickly, she padded over to her window and stared at the stars.

*"It's where I belong."*

At the echo of Luke's words the girl reached for her clothes and quickly dressed, her sudden decision galvanising her actions.

Alex and Mhari were asleep when their daughter slipped from the house.

\* \* \*

There was no sense of time. There was only pain. It beat in his brain, throbbing mercilessly behind his eyes. It pulled and stretched his shoulders, bunched his

muscles. It made drawing breath difficult forcing him to pant shallowly. Sweat ran from his brow, mingling with blood before dripping to the floor. His body shuddered, the tremors purling over his nerves endings, igniting them, searing them, making him gasp and cry.

There was no thought but one; he'd failed. He hadn't been strong enough and he'd failed. The Imperial Colonel would come back with more questions, and if he didn't answer the pain would go on until he did. And Luke didn't believe he could keep his wits about him long enough to resist. Not now, not any more. Not when he had already given them Ahana.

He didn't hear the cell door open once more; wasn't aware of there being anyone with him until Dassu spoke in his ear once more.

"Ahana has fallen, and the Princess Leia is dead."

"No...." The denial was quiet, pitiful; grief stricken and Dassu smiled in response. "Leia..."

"It was a small outpost, hardly worth our notice if it hadn't been for the renegade princess. The Empire is grateful to you for your co-operation, Lieutenant."

Luke choked back his anguish, a spark of anger flaming within at the taunt. "Go to hell." Then he howled, his back arching, as the control device embedded in his neck pulsed in response to his impudence. Dark blood trickled from his nose as his head fell forward.

\* \* \*

"Did you have to do that?" Tank burst as Kasden lifted his hand away from the console. "Can't you see he's in enough pain?"

The intercom on the console in the observation chamber took Kasden's attention from the Medic's caustic words. It buzzed loudly for attention. Impatiently, he opened the channel.

"Yes?"

"We have picked up a local farm girl; she's asking to see Colonel Dassu."

"Ask what she wants," Jared ordered quickly, monitoring the prisoner's unsteady bio-signs.

Kasden relayed the question.

"She says it's about the Rebel."

Tank looked back into the cell, at Luke hanging, pain wracked and helpless. Then he glanced at Jared. "Tell them I'm coming up for her."

"Yes. Sir."

Tank quickly left the room, relieved to be away from Luke's pain and curious about the girl.

\* \* \*

"But we have a few more questions for you, Lieutenant," Dassu continued, he walked around Luke as he spoke, hands clasped behind his back. "Since Ahana was so small, it begs the question as to where the rest of your Alliance is. Where the main base is?"

"No... Leia..." It didn't matter now, nothing mattered now. "Leia..." The agony of her death seemed more real than his physical pains. His chest was clogged, his throat closed and a whirlwind tore through his mind. Leia was dead.

"Lieutenant?" Dassu repeated. "You main base?"

"There's... no main... base..." Luke felt his mouth moving, heard a tired voice whisper. "Just lots of small—units."

"Name them."

Luke shook his head, the movement making him nauseous. "I can't."

Thaler took hold of Luke's fractured left arm and pulled sharply down. He shrieked as bone grated on bone. A hand took a handful of his hair drawing his head up to face Dassu and he glared at the Imperial through tear blurred eyes. "Only the higher...ranks know more... I don't. Narra... he will; not me—not me."

Both guards raised their truncheons.

\* \* \*

Jared jumped quickly for the com, shouting into it. It no longer mattered if the prisoner knew he was being monitored. "Colonel—it's the truth; he doesn't know!" He watched the guards look to Dassu with expressions of disappointment, and he watched with relief as Dassu took his word.

\* \* \*

The colonel leaned back against the blood-splattered cell wall and studied Luke carefully. The boy was his, now; if he knew what Dassu asked, then there would

be no holding back. The smile once more curved his lips, and he spoke again, softly and friendly. "I only have a few more questions for you, and we can end this. We'll let you down and you can rest. You'd like that wouldn't you?"

Luke nodded, loosely.

\* \* \*

Jared turned around as the door to the observation chamber opened, and Tank re-entered. The captain looked flushed and nervous. Before the door closed, Byron spotted a young girl in the corridor outside, her arms folded protectively across her bosom.

"What's going on?" he asked, puzzled by the girl's presence and Bower's agitation.

Tank ignored his question as he stared at the screen. "What's happening?"

Kasden turned to him. "He's finished," he smiled.

Jared was sure Tank reddened in anger at the remark, meant in humour during a humourless situation.

\* \* \*

Dassu let his last words penetrate before he continued. "You came from Ahana. Before she died the Princess was kind enough to tell us about the attack the Alliance had planned. We'd like you to verify what she told us."

The attack? The Minoan assault that Leia was so enthusiastic about; the assault that was to have made him Lieutenant Commander; the assault that was designed to bring others into the Rebellion. Leia had told them? They had done this to Leia and she had told them? Leia... He wept.

Dassu watched this reaction in puzzlement. Apart from the weeping, the prisoner appeared quiet, almost calm. "Lieutenant?"

Luke lifted his head and lightened the burden on his shoulders. It was a combination of elements that brought this final moment to a head. It wasn't just Dassu's torture, although a person can only take so much deprivation, humiliation and pain before they gave up the fight, no matter how strong they may have been to begin with. No, this moment occurred because all that Luke had considered important, all that Luke had struggled to protect was already lost. He had never thought that betrayal could give such relief.

"Minoan," the word was hoarse, scrapping through a throat torn from screaming, dry with dehydration. "During the Armand visit..." He swallowed, choked, gasped. "Three flight squads will attack... the munitions plant, causing a... a diversion, while the assault team will land... assassinate Amand."

"At what time is this attack planned for?"

"Twenty-one-hundred hours... Local time."

"Landing co-ordinates for the assault team?"

"I don't know..."

The baton struck him sharply across the back. He yelled, crying out quickly; "I'm a pilot... I don't know... about six kilometres... outside the spaceport... I don't know... for sure.."

It was done. There was silence, a brief pause. There was brief ratchet sound and Luke dropped heavily to the floor grating.

Dassu looked at Thaler. "Kill him," he said.

Before either Jared or Kasden could stop him, Tank had crossed the chamber to the wall com and punched on it."

"Wait!" he shouted.

Jared thought he could detect a note of panic in the medic's voice, but the technician couldn't be sure.

Without glancing back, Tank rushed from the room.

Luke closed his eyes as he heard the guard draw his sidearm and steeled himself for the laser bolt he knew would kill him. It was all over. The pain would end. He would be at peace. He would be with Leia. It was then he heard the frantic shout. He opened his eyes and glanced up in fearful confusion. He recognised the voice.

Thaler paused, his gun still pointing at the prisoner's head. His finger twitched eager to pull the trigger. He looked to his superior. Dassu's expression was one of pure displeasure.

Tank hurried into the room. The colonel was on his feet; "What do you think you are doing, medic?"

"Don't you realise who he is?" Bower asked breathlessly, gesturing at Luke, who was staring at him in wide-eyed disbelief.

Dassu was tired. "Does it really matter?"

Even with hands bound, Luke managed to reach out to Bower, pleading, "Tank? Tank... please! Don't!"

Luke's words were a mistake; they sparked Dassu's unending curiosity. "Enlighten us, Captain."

"Tank, no... please!"

Thaler raised his arm, preparing to strike Luke with the butt of his gun. But Tank stepped in.

"No!" He crossed the room and knelt beside Luke, pulling the young Rebel into his arms, caring and betraying at the same time. Looking up at Dassu, he said, "He's Luke Skywalker. "

At first the colonel showed no recognition of the name. Then, slowly, understanding trickled into his blue eyes. "The pilot Lord Vader is anxious to find."

Luke moaned, whispered in horror, "Vader?" But only Tank heard, shocked that so much fear, abhorrence and helplessness could be conveyed in one word. And he realised that by saving Luke's life, he was also condemning him.

"How do you know his identity?" Dassu was asking.

"I..." Bower started.

"I told him," came a whispered female voice.

Dassu turned in surprise to see the young Lasjow girl standing at the door. He stepped aside and gestured for her to enter, and giving her an excellent view of Luke. Her gasp of dismay at the pitiful sight brought a smile to his lips. "And how did you come by this knowledge?"

Tamara gnawed her lower lip, fighting the tears that were welling up, threatening to spill over in a deluge. She tried not to look at Luke, tried not to see the disbelief in his eyes, tried not to see the hurt; but something pushed her, forced her, compelled her to stare at him, as she answered Dassu's question. "He told me."

Dassu tuned to Tank. "Have you informed Lord Vader?"

"Yes, sir, I..."

"Very well," Dassu's mouth turned down with displeasure. "You have my permission give him the minimal medical treatment necessary to keep him coherent for Lord Vader's arrival. See to it that the girl is taken home. This no longer concerns her." The colonel turned on his heels and left the cell, gesturing for the guards to do the same.

Tank watched him leave. He sighed heavily, knowing Dassu would be taking all the credit for Luke's capture – and if he was honest with himself then the colonel was welcome to it. He certainly didn't deserve to benefit from his actions to date. With heavy remorse he lifted Luke from the floor and gently placed Luke on the bunk. He studied the boy's wounds, wincing at the strangely distorted arm, the gash on Luke's head and the bloody contusions marking his torso.

"Why?" A quiet, rasping voice asked.

Tank looked away, unable to meet Luke's eyes. He saw Tamara standing behind him, weeping. He went to her, leading her from the cell. She had done what she had come for; there was no reason for her to remain. She fought against him, tried to cross to Luke.

"Why?" Luke demanded, more loudly, his rough voice touching on hysteria. "You... you were my friends!"

Bower paused at the door, his hand still holding the resisting girl, pulling her away. He turned to the younger man.

"You have no friends here, Luke."

## XXI.

Leia hugged the startled but pleased Solo as he stepped from the Falcon. He gently returned the embrace, then grinned as Leia lightly blushed. He turned to Chewbacca, laughing. "We should be away more often, if this is the return reception we receive!"

"Don't you dare, Han Solo," the princess scolded in good humor, as they turned from the ship toward Raymar's buildings. "Where have you two been, anyway?"

Han's mood darkened immediately, his face clouding. "Is there somewhere we could talk—private-like?"

Leia nodded, her previous light-heartedness falling. "Why?"



"Get the generals, too," Han continued, ignoring her question. "You've got a problem."

Deeply concerned, Leia led Han and Chewbacca to the small conference room.

\* \* \*

The storage facility was empty of personnel. The lights were dimmed, keeping the vast room in quiet twilight. The short crackles and clicks of an open com channel were the only sounds which broke the steady silence. The squad sergeant sat on a packing crate hidden from the doorway by a large pile of other storage containers and packaging. On his lap sat a remote sub-space com his fingers quickly and lightly punching in codes and commands. Once satisfied that his transmission would be lost in the general chatter of communications on the Rebel base, and that his words would be suitably scrambled and encoded, he began to speak as his eyes darted furtively to the surrounding shadows. Now he knew the full plans of the operation the Rebels were planning he could relay them to his superiors.

"Record this as a Priority One transmission; actuating code delta three nine nine..."

"Aw, to hell with this!" Grumbled a second voice close by.

The sergeant never saw the laser bolt; he only felt it sear his hand as the com was torn from his grasp; the connection broken. The lights suddenly glared brightly and he turned, blinking, then focused on an angry Han Solo standing by another set of packing crates and holding a blaster on him.

"What are you doing?" Solo's whisper was low and dangerous.

"Solo? I was..." he stuttered, panicked.

"It was a rhetorical question." If the situation hadn't been so serious, Han might have enjoyed himself. "I know damned fine what you were doing."

The sergeant seemed to get a grip on himself. His question was nervous, but not stunted. "What are you going to do?"

Han grinned humourlessly. "What does the Empire do with spies?"

The Imperial agent paled. "We can work this out!"

Han gestured with his gun. "Get up and get against the wall."

"Look, Solo, let's talk! Don't get hasty." His eyes never left Han's gun, as he moved slowly to the wall. He talked rapidly. "I'm a high ranking Imperial Agent — I can get you amnesty!"

The spacer's lip curled a half-smile, and his voice held a hint of pleasure as he answered, "What makes you think I want it?"

The Imperial rapidly changed his tactics, appealing to Han's other side, the side the Corellian would deny was there: his concern for others. "I'm valuable to you." The man's voice was smooth now, patronising. "If you kill me, you'll never know what happened to Sky walker."

Han's eyes narrowed, his temper flaring. His gun hand rose, swinging in the same movement, knocking the sergeant to the floor. Roughly, he grabbed the false Rebel's uniform, dragging the man to his feet and throwing him against the wall. "What about Luke?" he growled, his face just inches from the sergeant's.

"He's alive!" the Imperial blurted, panicked now, wondering if he should have kept his mouth closed. "At least he was when I saw him last."

"He wasn't shot?"

"Yes — but it wouldn't have killed him."

"And you left him to be leeches?" Han's calm manner did nothing to hide his trembling fury. "I ought to kill you right now!"

"Han!" Leia stepped into the room, feeling that Han had heard what he needed. It was also what she had needed. Dodonna and two uniformed guards followed her. "I think the sergeant has much to tell us. His death won't bring Luke back to us."

"Yeah," Han breathed heavily, as he let the man go, "but it'd make me feel a whole lot better."

"Captain." Dodonna clapped his hand on Solo's shoulder, guiding the smuggler away from the Imperial. "Would it make you feel better if you could bring Luke home?"

Han glanced to Leia, and unspoken question which needed no explanation. She nodded. "Irlam is to be our decoy to cover for Minoan. We need someone to lead the attack."

Han watched the Imperial as he was led away, and his hand wiped the sweat from his upper lip. "I'll do it."

## XXII.

The tiny dining room was in silence; a heavy pall of sorrow hung over the table. The quiet was broken only by the scraping of a knife on a plate, and by the clink of a glass being laid on the table's smooth surface. Someone coughed to clear their throat. It was like a meal with a table of strangers rather than a family. There was no laughter, no bickering about who got the larger portions, no swapping stories from a day of hard work. There was only quiet awkwardness.

Tamara played with her food, shifting the pile of vegetables from one side of her plate to the other. Not one morsel of food had passed her lips. Occasionally, she would glance at the empty seat opposite hers, but her face would crumple with grief, and her eyes would shift back to her plate. Abruptly, she pushed the plate away and stood, running from the room.

Mhari glanced at Alex, who only shook his head sadly, never raising his eyes from his meal. Brett watched his mother rise from her chair, ready to follow his sister.

"Mhari," Alex's voice stopped her, "leave her, let her work through this herself. We can't..."

"I have to, Alex." Mhari's voice was even, determined, leaving no room for debate. She had to know what Tamara had done when she had disappeared two nights before. They had been frantic with worry and had searched for her in the woods and had called on neighbours. Alex had gone into town and trawled among the shops and searched the park. That evening she had been delivered back to them by Imperial troopers and they understood where she had gone and why and, from her demeanour, they knew what she had seen. Mhari needed to ease her daughter's pain.

"Why?" The farmer wasn't arguing; his voice held a depth of pain only his wife understood. "Why tell her now."

"The children have to know. They have to know, because one day they will be the adults." Her hand lay gently on Brett's hair, smoothing it with love. He stared up at her with large eyes, not understanding his parents' words. "It's time for truth."

As she left the room, a large tear grew at the side of her husband's eye.

\* \* \*

His head swam, swirled with stomach-sickening speed. Pain seeped from his every pore, from every part of his body. It was a gaping maw, engulfing, swallowing him. It burnt, throbbed, ached, pierced. He shivered, the movement

convulsing his taut muscles; beads of sweat wept tears from his brow. Fear tormented him, nibbled him; terror tricked him; fright crawled along his skin, spread over his being — all living creatures, from which there was no escape.

*"Help me, Obi-wan Kenobi; you're my only hope."*

Leia? But she was dead now, wasn't she? Ahana was gone—and so was Leia.

*"What would happen?"*

Tamara? Why had she come? Why did she tell? Why had she betrayed him?

Why had he betrayed Leia?

*"I'm a pilot, damn it! I don't know anything about ground force tactics!"*

The beginning of all of this. Why wouldn't it end?

*"Hey, Luke! You coming to the canyon? Biggs'n me are racing!"*

Tank.

*"You have no friends here, Luke."*

Tank, help me.

"Tank?"

"He's Luke Skywalker."

Vader would come. Vader was coming.

Coming for him.

*"Vader betrayed and murdered your father."*

Ben?

"Ben?"

*"Stretch out with your feelings."*

"Ben—please."

*"Luke, trust me."*

I did. I do.

*"You have to see it, Luke, and suffer it to understand."*

Leia—I'm sorry.

"Leia."

*"Not betrayal, Luke; survival."*

"Ben?"

*"Luke, trust me."*

Silence.

Sleep.

Tank brought, the empty syringe away from Luke's arm; the sedative he had administered taking effect almost immediately, temporarily relieving Luke from his mind's own torture. The medic had no idea what Luke was mumbling about, had no idea who ' Ben" was – although there had been an old Ben Kenobi who lived way out past the Dune Sea. But it couldn't be him; could it? And how had Luke come to be here? How had Luke broken away from Owen Lars stifling control and joined the Rebellion? What had made Luke so important to the higher echelons of the Empire?

Tank sighed with frustration, with remorse; it was doubtful he would receive the answer to these questions and he wondered what Biggs would have made of it all. Knowing Darklighter he'd be wading in here trying to pull his young friend out of trouble again.

But there was no Biggs here. This wasn't Tosche Station and Luke hadn't annoyed Fixer with some tall tale. This was a prison in an Imperial Garrison and there was no friend here to bail Luke out.

*There's you...*

Tank shook his head, denying his thoughts. He was a servant of the Empire; he was loyal and dedicated to his Emperor. Luke was a rebel, a terrorist and was now his enemy. He could do nothing to help him now.

Troubled he lifted he lifted his med-scanner and passed it briefly over Luke's head, taking note of the contusion and the blood, looking for damage more deadly than the concussion he already knew Skywalker was suffering from. He

scanned Luke's shoulders, his broken arm and the mottled bruising that marked the rest of his body.

"What the hell are you doing here, Luke?"

Luke stirred and mumbled incoherently.

"Yeah, that's what I thought you'd say, Wormie," he whispered with a smile.

\* \* \*

The evening was clear, peaceful, quiet. The trees rustled softly with a light breeze. Insects chirped and danced on the wind. Tamara stood by the empty nerf enclosure, and Mhari was reminded of the Rebel's last evening with them, when she had seen the two of them together. Quietly, she walked to her daughter's side, her arm encircling the girl's trembling shoulder. Together they looked over the rippling grass, toward the darkness of the woods and the Imperial installation beyond.

"Tamara?" She questioned softly.

"Leave me alone, Mom," she whispered. "I want to be alone."

Mhari stayed, knowing her daughter, knowing Tamara needed comfort, knowing whatever she had seen, and done, at the Imperial base was something she had to talk about. She stayed silent allowing Tamara to open up in her own time, at her own pace.

"You should have seen him, Mom." Tamara leaned further toward her mother, and in turn Mhari embraced her. "You should have seen what they've done to him." Thin tears lined her cheeks. "He was all - bloody, broken, and..." Her voice cracked, not strong enough to continue. Mhari held her tightly, giving her courage.

"Why did I do it? Why?"

"What did you do?" Mhari was careful not to put an accusation in her voice; she held it level, calm.

Tamara's head jerked up; she stared at her mother looking for disapproval in Mhari's features then her gaze faltered and fell when she found only concern and compassion. "I told them who he was." Her voice was scarcely audible.

Mhari nodded, now understanding what had happened. "You overheard your father and me, didn't you?"

"You said if the Empire knew him, it would save him. They were going to kill him, I heard the order given and a medic there told them what I said. They said some Lord was anxious to find him," her voice caught, tears flowed freely. "I was only trying to help him! But I made it worse." Her lip trembled. "He looked at me and... and I felt like I had..." She began to sob.

Mhari held her daughter's head to her shoulder, her hand lightly stroking the girl's red curls, giving comfort with her touch. She knew none of this would have happened if she and Alex had been honest with their eldest, especially after learning Ryder's true identity. But, like fools, they had chosen to continue like normal and ignore the coming future, to pretend nothing had changed. Of course, she knew inside that the majority of the blame had to rest with the Empire; after all, they were the ones who suppressed the truth, or bent it to suit their own gains. However, like most people, she blamed herself. She nibbled at her lower lip, a characteristic Tamara had picked up from her. She was unsure of what she had to say, but sure that Tamara had to know the truth; not only to understand the consequences of her actions, but also for her peace of mind. Mhari drew in a long breath, the action the physical result of drawing in strength, and hesitantly spoke.

"Tamara, I know you feel as though you've —" She groped for a better word, but failed. "Well, as though you've betrayed Ryder..." She corrected herself, "Luke... but you have to know something about him. It's something we should have told you when we realised who... what he may be." She shrugged lightly. "And for all we know, it's something we should have told him, too."

Tamara glanced up, her grief temporarily forgotten, as her curiosity gripped her. She sniffed and wiped her eyes with the back of her sleeve. "Mom?"

"You're too young to remember the rise of the Empire. But those of my generation do," She held Tamara's hand. "Do you remember when Luke was ill, he spoke of the Jedi Knights?"

Tamara nodded.

"Well, the Jedi Knights protected the galaxy in the days before the Empire. They were special. They had a—well, there's no other word for it—a power, which they called the 'Force.' They used it to protect, heal and, if there was cause enough, to fight." She paused, gathering her thoughts, not letting her memories rush her. "During the clone wars many of them were killed and when the Emperor came to power, there was a purge and the remaining Jedi were destroyed."

"Mom, what's this?" Tamara was confused by the history lesson — which was so different from the one she had been taught at school.

"Hush, let me finish." Mhari placed her finger on Tamara's lips. She stared out across the empty field as she spoke, knowing that what she was saying was tantamount to treason in the eyes of the Empire. "The Emperor clamped down on the galaxy, and it's been the same since. No one is to know the Jedi ever existed; their memory is to be erased from the universe."

Tamara let her mother pause once more, although inside she was bursting with questions.

"I should have recognised Luke," Mhari sighed heavily. "But time dulls memory."

"I don't understand," Tamara finally spoke, not grasping her mother's meaning. "How could you have known Luke?" Suddenly the older woman seemed a stranger, and it scared her. "What has all of this to do with Luke?"

Mhari looked to her daughter, and realised she had almost been talking to herself. "I fled to Irlam after my father was executed by the Empire. He was a historian at Coruscant University, specialising in the Old Republic. He just knew too much and was only one of thousands of academics killed, many more were imprisoned." Her eyes grew teary as she remembered the gentle, soft-spoken academic. "I grew up surrounded by the great people of our galaxy's history: the senators, the inventors, the warriors, and the peacemakers. They were in all the books, all the holotapes, my father collected."

The confusion remained in Tamara's eyes. Mhari brushed a lock of hair back from her daughter's face.

"The Jedi," she continued explaining, "have always played a large part in our history, and so I know of a great number of them; their exploits, their victories, and their losses. I know their names, their faces..." Again, there was hesitation. "Tamara, the night before his arrest, Luke told you his name; 'Skywalker'. I recognised it immediately. There was one Jedi that my father had a special interest in. A very young Jedi Knight, by the name of Anakin Skywalker. My father spoke of him often and, after he and his Jedi Master saved the Senator Palpatine's life I became rather fascinated with him myself. I even saw him a few times on Coruscant walking out of the Jedi Temple. He had such a swagger about him!" Mhari smiled ruefully as she remembered her crush. "I was about the same age as you at the time. I never did find out what happened to him after the Clone Wars ended. I suppose he must have been killed, too," her voice became sad, heavy with memories.

"When Luke told you his name it suddenly struck me how like that young Jedi he was. The hair, the eyes and that striking dimple in his chin and the Skywalker name. I don't really know if he is related to Anakin Skywalker, of course, " she conceded. "The Jedi weren't supposed to have relationships, but I'm sure some must have."



Tamara listened intently to her mother, intrigued by her story. But she still felt unsatisfied, and she still felt as if she'd committed a terrible wrong in returning to the installation. "Why have you told me this?"

"So you have hope," Mhari told her firmly. "Luke may not look it, but he's strong. If he is Jedi then the Force is with him and that power alone may be enough to support him through what's been happening. It's going to be difficult for him, but you've already said there is someone in the Empire interested in him. That alone may keep him alive."

Tamara smiled, wistfully, remembering back to the day of Luke's arrest, the river and to their game. "He is Jedi, Mom, I think I saw him using the power he has; though he didn't tell me what he had done. He joked about using a "little Force" when I tried to teach him how to skip stones on the river."

Mhari allowed herself to chuckle, the tension of the last few minutes lessening, if not disappearing. She lifted Tamara's chin; bringing her face up, she studied the young girl's features, realising her child had become a woman without her noticing the growth. "Tamara what you did probably saved Luke's life. He'll come to understand that, I'm sure."

Tamara slid her arms around her mother once more, and the two women held one another. Although she was not entirely convinced, Tamara had to admit she felt did feel a little comforted by her mother's story and reassurances. "Thank you," she whispered.

\* \* \*

"Luke Skywalker," Byron Jared shook his head, still incredulous. He was sitting in the observation chamber, staring at Luke, who lay sleeping on the bunk. The sedatives Tank had given him hours ago were still doing their job. "To think that kid destroyed the Death Star..."

"He did what?!" Tank asked by his side. His voice was sharp with surprise at Jared's announcement.

"I thought you knew," Jared said, with smile.

Tank slowly shook his head while looking at Luke as though he was only just seeing him. "The offences listed for him only mentioned 'destruction of Imperial Property,' it didn't go into specifics."

"He must be one hell of a pilot," Jared stated with some admiration to his voice.

"He is." There was an almost wistful expression on Tank's face.

Byron glanced over, intrigued. "So, you did know him before the girl told you who he was?" There was no malice in the question, no condemnation. They were alone, and so they could be truthful.

Tank nodded, a tiny smile curling his lip. "You were right. We grew up together on Tatooine. But Luke—he was the odd one out among us—a bit of a nerf."

*"What the hell do you think you were doing, Skywalker?" The question was shouted loudly. Fixer was intentionally trying to embarrass Luke in front of everyone. Deak smirked, nudging Windy, who rolled his eyes in his "typical Wormie" expression.*

*"I—" Luke tried to answer, his feet shifting uncomfortably in the sandy floor of the garage, his eyes watching the patterns they made.*

*"I—" Fixer mocked, enjoying himself.*

*"I was only looking at it, Fix; I never meant any harm."*

*Fixer's eyes narrowed in anger, "You broke the damned thing, Wormie." He sneered the last word, indicating the damaged instrument. "How am I meant to repair the Teaguean's droid now, huh?"*

*He stepped closer to Luke, using his height to unnerve the younger boy.*

*"Leave him alone, Fixer."*

*Fixer turned to face the speaker. "Keep outta this, Darklighter. This is between me and Wormie."*

*"I don't think that's the name that's on his birth register." Biggs' voice was low, dangerous, a warning in itself.*

*"Wanna make something of it?" Fixer was finding the situation rapidly turning on him, but he had a reputation to keep.*

*Tank smiled, entering the room after Biggs. He put his arm protectively around Luke's shoulder. "If you're willing, Fix, I am."*

*The other youths in the room exchanged nervous glances.*

*Fixer sullenly eyed Luke, not wanting to fight with either of the boy's friends. "Just as long as you pay for the damage, Skywalker."*

*"He will," Biggs said on Luke's behalf, knowing the boy would have answered with something that would only have further fired the mechanic. "If you realise that accidents happen..." He glanced at Luke, grinning. "...And that certain people are more susceptible than others. "*

*Luke smiled sheepishly, as Tank chuckled loudly.*

"The kid was always a bit of a mystery to most of us. Only Biggs seemed to really understand him," Tank remembered, as he spoke with Jared. "They were close, despite the age difference." He laughed quietly. "Used to call themselves the 'two shooting stars.'" He shook his head, staring into the cell as Luke moaned. "How he came to be with the Rebellion isn't listed, but something must have happened at home to bring him here."

"You were friends, and yet you sold him out." Byron couldn't understand that.

His words drew Tank from the reverie he had been sinking into. A frown dropped his brow. Annoyed, he tried to explain himself. "I'm an Imperial and he's a Rebel—a traitor to the Emperor. A terrorist! It was my sworn duty. Wouldn't you have done the same?"

The reply was quiet, barely audible. "No."

"So, what are you? Forgiving and pious?" Bower didn't mean to sound contemptuous, but he did.

Jared's anger flared with an uncharacteristic temper lapse. "No, I'm a guy who's stuck somewhere he hates, doing something he hates. A guy who keeps his mouth shut about having a brother in the Allia—" He stopped himself quickly, his jaw clamping closed; but it was too late.

Tank didn't know who was the more surprised at the revealing slip, himself or Jared.

"What they say is true," Byron explained, in a more subdued tone. "I let a Rebel escape: my younger brother. I couldn't arrest him to see him treated like Sky walker has been." His eyes seemed to plead with Tank to believe him. "He is my family. My friend." He finished pointedly.

Bower couldn't keep the eye contact; he couldn't think of anything to say. He glanced into the cell, watching Luke sleep.

Byron followed his gaze. "I saw you during his interrogation. You were concerned for him."

The medic laughed derisively. "Of course I was. If he died, I'd be stuck here. Fat lot of good it did anyway; Dassu's going to get all the credit."

"You're lying, Tank," Byron argued gently. "You were concerned for him, not yourself."

Tank couldn't look at the technician, couldn't argue with him anymore. He shook his head in silent denial, his eyes wandering back to Luke. The boy was awake and staring directly at the view screen; it was almost eye-to-eye contact, and it shook the medic.

"It's okay," Jared told him, "he can't see you."

Bower would have sworn otherwise.

### **XXIII.**

Han Solo smiled grimly as he listened to the steady, welcome throb of the Falcon's engines. He threw a quick glance out of the cockpit window at the X-wings and Y-wings that surrounded his freighter. He liked the irony of the situation: he was in command of two Rebel squadrons. He laughed silently at the thought. He looked to Chewbacca, who growled encouragement and his hope that the mission would succeed; not only in diverting the Empire's attention from Minoan, but also that they would return with another passenger.

Leia entered the cockpit. "Are we ready?" she asked, seating herself behind Han in the navigator's chair.

Han nodded. "As we'll ever be."

The princess watched her pilot closely, admiring the determination and calmness of the man, admiring the dexterity of his fingers on the controls of the ship, and the way she responded to his touch. Leia pulled the seat belt across her lap as she sent her prayers to any god who would listen and answer.

"Millennium Falcon," the control room's commander hailed Solo, "you are cleared for take-off. May the Force be with you."

Han grunted noncommittally, a pained expression crossing his face, and replied curtly, "Thanks."

Leia smiled to herself as the ship lifted from the ground. If anything was guaranteed to make Han uncomfortable, it was that saying.

\* \* \*

Luke coughed, the spasm wrenching his body, the pain cutting through his fatigue and bringing him to full consciousness. He prised open his gritty, gummy eyes and closed them again against the glare of the cell lights. He was lying on his right side on the hard metal slab that passed as a sleeping platform, his left arm strapped up and throbbing incessantly. He shivered and drew his knees up, trying to shield himself from the chill of the air and grimaced, cried, as his battered limbs and muscles protested the movement.

This was impossible. This was an impossible situation. An appalling nightmare from which there was no waking, no escape.

And Vader was coming.

Tank had told them who he was. Tamara had told them who he was. The Colonel who talked so gently and hurt him so badly had said Vader was anxious to find him. Because of who he was.

Vader.

Why would Vader be so interested in him?

The Death Star. Because of the Death Star.

*"Vader betrayed and murdered your father."*

Father.

Vader had killed his father. Would Vader now kill him? What would the Dark Lord do? Kill him here? Take him from here first? Torture him some more. Hurt him worse? Luke groaned, shuddered, the blood rushing in his pounding head. He retched, gagged dryly as panic caused nausea to wash through him.

His father had been a Jedi. He had wanted to become a Jedi, just like his father. This wouldn't be happening to him if he were a Jedi. He would be able to call upon the Force and...

The Force!

*"All it needed was a little Force."*

A little hope rose from his despair as his boast to Tamara by the river bank returned to him; he had moved the stone with the Force. He had...

The door suddenly sliced open. Luke started back in sudden terror, trying to sit up, trying to pull himself tight into the corner of the bunk.

Vader!?

Two guards stepped down. The same ones who had bound him and beat him. His body trembled, shook violently as they neared him. They had batons swinging from their belts, blasters holstered on their thighs.

*The Force. The stone.*

Luke drew himself up, grappled to find a hold on the feeling Ben said was the Force. He cast out his right hand and pictured the blaster from the nearest guard rising from his holster and flying into his hand.

"What the hell?"

Luke opened his eyes at the surprised exclamation and saw the gun fall to the floor. Without thinking, and using all of his desperation, he threw himself forward and off the bunk. He barely heard the cry of, "Kasden!" as his hand curled around the gun's handgrip. He raised it, pointed it at himself and fell back as fire raced from the back of his neck along his nervous system, suns burst in his head. He screamed, shrieked at the intensity of the blast, as he lost all control over his body. Fresh blood flooded from his nose and he gagged as it ran to the back of his throat.

The pain abruptly stopped as he was grabbed and hauled upwards. He could hear gasping, moaning, a voice quietly pleading...

"Please... please..."

His back hit the wall and his arms were taken, spread wide and fixed in restraints above his head. His fractured left elbow grated, the pain excruciating, and he cried out again, choking on the blood from his nose. A gloved hand took his chin, forced his head back, thudding it off the wall. Everything was surreal, pain-filled and slow. Hazy he opened his eyes and saw an angry face inches from his own.

"You're lucky Vader's coming, or I'd beat you within an inch of your life, you piece of shit!"

Luke swallowed blood, drew in a heaving breath. "Thought you'd done that already."

The guard stepped back and viciously backhanded Luke across the face. As the youth slumped in the restraints he leaned forward, smiling. "We'll see if you're as cocky when Vader gets here."

Luke barely heard him, he closed his eyes welcoming the darkness as it raced toward him. Then there was a sting from his arm, coolness moving swiftly through his veins spreading through his body reaching his mind and clearing the darkness out as full awareness flooded in. He grunted in pain, heaved in a gasping breath of horror.

The guard waved a hypo before his face and grinned at Luke's suffering. "He wants you awake."

Laughing, the guards turned their backs to him and left him alone once more.

\* \* \*

Jared turned from the view screen and muted the sounds of the youth's pain. He had been surprised by Skywalker's attempt at suicide, had hesitated to act when he had gone for the guards blaster, had left it to Kasden to activate the control unit and he had been sickened by the guards brutality.

He wiped his face with a trembling hand. Once Vader arrived and took the boy, this would be over and perhaps Dassu would allow him to request a transfer; for he knew he couldn't do this duty anymore.

\* \* \*

Morning. The rising sun pushed away the darkness of the night, the growing heat chased away the chill. A light rain during the night had cleansed the air in readiness for the newborn day. Bright birds took to the sky, testing the air currents; small animals left their dens and bathed in the dewy grass. The noises of the day began: songs, squawks, grunts and moans as the forest fully woke. The river gurgled in its winding path, the smooth surface broken only by jutting rocks, jumping fish and a tossed stone.

Tamara smiled at the short plop and the rippling circles in the water as they grew in size, then faded back to a glossy finish.

*"All it needed was a little Force."*

Now she understood his joke, and she smiled to herself. She threw back her arms and tilted her head, letting the sun's warmth brush her face.

*"You were my friends."*

Her smile paled at the memory of the last words she had heard him say, at the desperation and anguish in his voice. She sank to the grass, staring at her reflection in the water. Grey eyes studied grey eyes. She tossed in another pebble, disrupting her image, and lay back, stretching out on the green lawn to look at the blue of the sky, the blue of his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Luke," she said aloud, wishing he could hear and understand.

\* \* \*

The small Rebel force eased out of hyperspace. Han stared out at the unfamiliar small planet, looking for signs of trouble. He checked his co-ordinates and smiled; there was no sign of Imperials, and the Navi-computer had dropped them in the right place. He glanced out the side window, making sure the fighter squads were still with him. He threw the thumbs-up sign to the nearest ship, and the young pilot responded in kind.

Leia checked her chrono. "They'll be leaving for Minoan now. We don't have much time, so let's make it count."

Han nodded, and opened the channel to his squads as Chewbacca pushed the throttle gently open, bringing the freighter up to attack speed. "We all here?" he asked quickly, not wanting to go through the palaver of the call signs.

"Yes sir!" The reply was from an eager young lieutenant, embarking on his first mission.

Han smiled at the "sir," and at the impatience and nervousness in the boyish voice; it reminded him of his own first space battle. "Keep on this channel," he told them all. "Our target is the biggest installation; that's our only worry." He glanced back at Leia. "Keep your eyes open for a secluded landing area. Keep scanning the com channels in case Luke tries to contact us. Okay, let's do it!"

Breaking through the cloud cover, the ships banked apart, each targeting a different area and bringing their guns to life.

\* \* \*

The first hits woke the Imperials from the lull they had been working in since the Irlam base had first been established. An attack was something that had not been considered likely in this region of the galaxy. But sometimes the unlikely happens. The slowest to react were the first to fall to the accurate Rebel shots.

\* \* \*



Dassu was thrown across his office as an explosion rumbled outside, blowing in his window. He lay stunned behind a chair; then drew his wits about him and gingerly picked himself up from the floor. Wiping a hand over his face he was dismayed to find thin cuts trickling blood down his cheeks. He turned to the ruined wall, looking for the cause of the blast, and was surprised and horrified to see several out-dated X- and Y-wing fighters circling his garrison.

"Rebels!" he breathed; then he turned and sprinted from the door, as the entire room disintegrated by a second blast.

\* \* \*

The noise of distant explosions drew Tamara to her feet. She stared at the sky, which shone with the orange of a raging fire. Tiny ships dotted the area, rising and falling with fierce regularity. She screamed loudly and threw herself to the grass as a larger ship flew overhead, scraping the tips of the trees. It turned sharply and followed the other ships' paths, seeming eager to rejoin the fight. She stood, trembling with fright, watching it climb in the sky. She took one step back, two steps, then turned and ran toward home.

\* \* \*

"Easy; take it easy." Bower fought to calm the panic of a young injured soldier as he pulled him from the burning building. He set the youth down and crouched beside him. Quickly, he ripped away what was left of the dark uniform, exposing a horrifically burnt chest. He paused, staring at the fatal wound, then glancing at the hazel eyes. With impotent sadness, he took the boy's hand and watched those eyes dim with death. Reaching up, he closed the lids, shutting off the blank horror that seemed frozen in the irises.

An explosion shook the ground and he looked up at the fighters as they strafed the area, destroying more structures, cutting down more lives. Around him, chaos reigned, as defenceless Imperials ran for shelter, as the screams of the injured and dying echoed in his mind.

"Medic! Medic!" The cry seemed to echo from all directions. Someone took up a sentry cannon and started shooting back at the Rebel attackers. There were reports from trooper rifles and handguns.

"Bower! Hey, Bower! Over here!" another medic called out to him. Tank ignored him. Drawing himself to his feet he dropped his medical equipment and ran toward the detention centre.

\* \* \*

Just beyond the Irlam system another ship emerged from the chaos of hyperspace. It slowed in its approach, settling into a steady orbit around the small planet. There was a stillness, the vast ship seeming to hang possessively over one area. Then, beneath the geometric behemoth, a docking bay door drew back, spilling out the familiar form of TIE fighters.

\* \* \*

Kasden and Jared were almost jolted from their chairs by a new tremor, that ran through the detention centre; an alarm klaxoned loudly. The console in front of them crackled and spat threateningly. They both glanced at the ceiling, expecting it to collapse.

"What the hell's going on up there?" Kasden voiced the mutual question and the mutual fear.

The door began to slide open, only to stick tight as its controls gave out. There was a muffled curse, and ten fingers gripped its side, pushing. "Hey, Byron, give me a hand," Tank grumbled angrily, his voice also holding an edge of urgency.

Jared assisted, puzzled by the medic's appearance, when he had not been called for. The lights flickered wildly as they forced the door open widely enough for Tank to squeeze through. They paused, waiting for the pure darkness to fall; but then the power kicked back in and the light grew stronger. It was then that both Kasden and Jared noticed the blaster the medic had pointed at them.

"Bower?" the elder technician began to ask; then he slumped silently over the arm of his chair. Tank was beside him in an instant, laying down the weapon with which he'd stunned him. He started to strip the uniform jacket from the unconscious man.

He turned to his surprised friend. "Don't worry, he'll be fine." He lifted the gun and tucked it into his belt.

"What are you doing?" Jared demanded—although he had a fair idea.

Tank glanced in at Luke, his face darkening when he saw the youth pinned to the wall. Skywalker was shuddering and crying out as each new explosion from above rocked his cell. "I need your help," Tank said, ignoring Byron's question.

"What about, Thaler and the guards?"

Tank looked pained. "Thaler's dead."

Jared hesitated. He had let one Rebel escape; could he now help someone else do the same? He looked at the sleeping form of his partner, then watched his friend disappear through the doorway, carrying the Kasden's jacket.

*"Don't talk shit; you want them to get their hands on me?"*

His brother's words, said in panic and the look of horror on Luke's face when Vader's name was mentioned, forced Byron's hand. He reached for his desk drawer and lifted out a small blaster.

"Jared!" Tank's voice called from the cell. "Let him down."

He was committing treason, he was becoming a Rebel himself and quite likely this one act would kill him. "Shit..." he breathed as he punched the control that released Luke's binders.

\* \* \*

"Your Highness!" the young lieutenant shouted over the com. "I have something on my scanners—it looks like—" The words disintegrated into a sharp, panicked cry; then static. The small X-wing broke up in a brief conflagration. The source of its destruction flew over the freighter, its guns spitting as it went. The Falcon shook under the barrage.

"Where'd they come from?" Han yelled from the gun turret under his ship's belly. "You said there were no TIEs!"

"There weren't!" Leia told him, watching a vicious battle seethe in the sky above the Imperial base. She felt the situation slip away from them. More TIE fighters broke through the clouds, heading for the hopelessly out-numbered Rebels. Chewbacca banked the ship, fighting to avoid the laser shots that came their way. He nudged Leia, bringing her attention to the scanners. A huge, chillingly familiar shape lay outlined on the screen.

"Han!" she shouted desperately. "We can't stay here!" She closed her eyes, trying not to hear another death cry. "We have a Star Destroyer above us!"

"I bet I know who it is, too." Han swivelled in his chair, bringing his guns to life, as he remembered Dodonna's words about Vader being after Luke. The presence of the ship made him even more determined to find his young friend. "I'm not leaving without the kid!" He grinned as he scored another hit.

"There're too many—we don't stand a chance!" Leia was torn between her obligation to the young men in the fighters, and her personal feelings toward the young man who quite likely lay in an Imperial cell below.

"I'm not leaving Luke to Vader!" Han practically growled the sentence, and switched off the com, ending any arguments Leia might have.

Leia glanced at Chewie, knowing the Wookiee would follow Han's example.

\* \* \*

Luke stared at the ceiling of his cell in apprehension as another shock wave spasmed through the building, jerking his bruised body. He squeezed his eyes shut at the ripple of pain that came as a result. He could only guess at what was happening above him; but whatever it was, he didn't like it much. The door of his cell opened and, in suspicious surprise, he watched Tank quickly step down and shout.

"Jared! Let him down."

The binders snapped open and Luke dropped, but was caught by his friend before he could hit the floor. Bower gently laid him down and knelt beside him. "Why did they do this?" he demanded, as Jared ran in to join them. "They know his arm is broken."

Jared didn't answer at once, knowing neither Bower nor the Rebel would appreciate the news. It was only when Tank turned to him that he answered.

"Lord Vader ordered it," he said flatly, watching Luke's eyes flash to Tank in a silent plea.

"That Sith Lord doesn't waste much time, does he?" Tank helped Luke sit up, quickly checking him over; noticing the fresh nosebleed and new swelling and bruising on his face. "He's due today?" he asked Jared, who at last seemed to be relaxing a little.

Byron nodded; he hadn't liked the news, either.

"Then we don't have much time." He turned to Luke. "We're going to need your help, Luke. Do you think you can walk?"

At first, Luke couldn't comprehend Tank's words. He felt air blow pleasantly from the open door, felt more tremors ripple through the building, heard the rumble of explosions. When he saw Tank begin to unfold an Imperial uniform, he began to understand. "I can try," he answered hoarsely, feeling hope glimmer. It was a new sensation, one that brought a smile to his face.

Jared watched the smile—the first he had seen from the Rebel—and again he was painfully aware of how much Skywalker reminded him of his brother. Perhaps he and Sam would be reunited in the Alliance somewhere.

Tank held up the uniform jacket. It was several sizes too big for Luke. "Welcome to the Empire, my friend." It was meant in humour, to relieve tension; but the irony of the statement was lost to none of them.

\* \* \*

Tamara pulled Brett from the middle of the yard, where he stood applauding the light show above them. Hot air from the exploding X-Wing blew their hair as they ran toward the house; but to Tamara, the wind was the last breath of the man who had just died. She closed the door behind them and lay on the floor next to their parents.

"They don't stand a chance," Alex mumbled as he pulled his family close to him.

\* \* \*

"Have you found somewhere for us to land yet?" Han's voice crackled over the com. Obviously, he had thought better of the silent communicator.

"No." Leia shook her head as she replied. "We can't land in this; we'd be too vulnerable." She was relieved when Chewbacca nodded his agreement.

There was no reply from the Corellian, and Leia knew he was feeling the same desperation as she was. They were running out of time; they had come so close, only to lose. Sooner, rather than later, they would have to call a retreat. She could almost feel the expectation, the want, the need of her fellow Rebels. They had done what they had come for; why stay and be slaughtered?

"Luke," she whispered, beginning to hate herself.

\* \* \*

With Luke's arms slung across their shoulders, the two Imperials slowly made their way into the open courtyard, every step jolting Luke, bringing tight gasps of pain. They paused, crouching low in a doorway, as a damaged TIE dropped from the sky, crashing in the open area a few hundred meters away from them.

"Your friends sure know how to put on a show!" commented Jared, as he brushed dust and specks of masonry from his shoulders.

Tank lifted Luke once more. "Come on; we can't sit around here."

Skirting the burning wreckage and evading the running, panicked soldiers, they carried Luke toward ignored landspeeders. The vehicles were parked near the

shuttle landing area, which was now pock-marked by laser bursts. They had obviously been intended for ferrying the coming Sith Lord to the detention centre. Tank almost bodily threw Luke into the first one, taking little notice of his light squeal of protest. Now was not the time for care.

Jared held back as Tank began to climb in. Bower noticed the other's hesitation. "What are you waiting for?"

Byron pushed away his doubts, his years of training and indoctrination and climbed in behind his friend. "Nothing," he mumbled. "Just get us out of here!"

\* \* \*

Dassu held onto the side of the turbo lift as it rocked to the side. The door slammed open and he stumbled out into the detention centre. The floor was littered with debris, the reception console sparked and crackled loudly. Thaler lay on his back staring with dead eyes at the ceiling. His chest had been torn open by a single laser burst.

The Colonel moved on, almost running along the dark corridor to the Rebel's cell. The door lay open, the cell empty. He stepped into the observation room and found Kasden sitting in his chair rubbing his head.

"What happened?" He barked.

"The medic and Jared..." the man started.

"Dammit! Get on the com and contact Captain Donat. Tell him to organise some troopers for a search."

\* \* \*

For now the road was silent, empty of all other traffic; but still Tank kept the throttle open, wanting to keep the distance between themselves and the Imperials as wide as possible, in case they had been followed. Beside him, Luke was quiet, his face serene, his eyes staring at the forest greenery as if he'd never seen it before.

"You okay?" Tank asked, for the want of something to say as another X-Wing swooped above them followed by two Imperial fighters.

Luke nodded carefully. "Yes."

Tank shifted his gaze to the road, his movements belonging to one who feels guilt. "I'm sorry, Luke," he said uneasily, not accustomed to apologising.

Luke tentatively rubbed the wounds around his wrists. "It was your job." His words were choked, not with his present emotions, but with his past memories. He didn't know quite how to react to his sudden freedom. It wasn't something he had expected, and therefore he had no chance to assimilate it.

"What were you doing here, Luke?" Tank suddenly burst out. "Why aren't you back home?"

Luke knew the reason for the questions; he'd put Tank into a situation he didn't want to be in. Instead of being the quiet, anonymous medic he had once been, he was now thrust into the role of a fanatic Rebel. "I don't have a home there anymore."

The answer was soft, sad, and it drew Tank's attention away from himself and back to Luke. Skywalker didn't look at him.

"They killed my aunt and uncle. I wasn't really given any choice but to join the Alliance." He hesitated, biting the inside of his cheek. "They killed Biggs, too."

Tank felt his heart sink, heavy grief caught his throat. "I'm sorry," He apologised again, realising that this boy was no longer the Luke he had known. That Luke had been a teenager, untouched by the evil of war, surviving on an innocence and a naivete everyone else mistook for simpleness. This Luke was not much older in years, but tens of years older in experience. He knew what it was like to suffer at the hands of others; it was a trial that had ruined many a man. Tank prayed that there was some innocence left in Luke; that Dassu had been unable to strip him of the quality that seemed the foundation of his personality. He also prayed that Luke was strong.

"Look out!" Jared called from behind them, ducking down as a large freighter roared overhead, but turned before its shadow could catch it. It followed the path of the road before them, firing red bursts of light toward them from its belly guns. Luke cried out in surprise, and Tank's reflexes were pushed to their limits as he fought to keep the speeder under control and on the road. The ground beside them churned as laser bolts pounded into it.

"Don't your friends know the good guys when they see them?" Bower shouted through gritted teeth.

Luke laughed. Tank stared at him in astonishment, but Luke ignored him, his spirits soaring at the sight of the Millennium Falcon. "It's Han!" he croaked happily.

Tank's moment of distraction proved decisive; the next burst drove them off the road and into the trees.

\* \* \*

"That stopped them!" Han yelled from the turret.

Leia bounced in Han's chair, as the Falcon took another hit from behind. Her hands gripped its sides, her knuckles turning white. Both she and the Wookiee winced away from the window as Han scored another hit; but she knew there were plenty more TIEs to take the destroyed one's place.

"Han, we have to leave!"

Silence was her reply.

\* \* \*

There was a brief moment of stunned stillness. Then Tank groaned, his hand going to his painfully jerked neck. He looked toward Luke, but found a heavily leafed branch blocking his view. He lifted it from between them, and was relieved to find Luke smiling at him. He couldn't help grinning back as he climbed from the wrecked vehicle.

"Jared?" he questioned looking into the back. Byron pulled himself up from the back seat. "I'm fine..." He grasped Tanks offered hand and scrambled out.

"Remind me to tell that numbskull what I think of his shooting!" Tank grumbled. "Give me a hand with him, Jared."

They lifted Luke from the speeder and setting him on unsteady feet.

Jared sighed wearily and glanced around. "I guess we walk from here."

\* \* \*

Dassu wiped the blood from his face as he watched the dying battle above. He knew that soon, as the air cleared, Vader would arrive. He had to get Skywalker back, or face the consequences. He turned to the captain behind him. "Are your men ready?"

"Yes, sir!"

His eyes focused on the still-burning TIE wreckage in the courtyard; "You'll find him at the farm where we picked him up before. Have Lord Vader's shuttle redirected there, too."

"Of course, sir."



Dassu smiled. All was not lost yet.

\* \* \*

Tank's legs were shaking with the added exertion of half-carrying Luke when they reached the gate arch of the nearest farm. The sight of his goal gave him an added spurt of energy, which seemed to extend to Jared as well. They heaved Luke higher.

"Not far now, Luke."

Luke glanced up and saw the familiar landscape. Horror chilled him. "No! Tank, no!" He tried to dig his heels in but his bare feet scrapped on the dirt. "Not here!"

"We've no choice, kiddo..."

"This is where I was!" Luke's voice scrapped through his aching throat. "I can't do this to them again, please."

"We need to contact your friends, Luke. This is the nearest place to do it."

"Hey!" Jared shouted above the noise of the battle toward the house. He agreed with Tank. This place was their only hope of getting picked up. "Hey, help us!"

The door opened slowly, suspiciously, and the farmer appeared.

Alex squinted at the two dark uniform-clad figures as they stumbled across his yard carrying a third between them. He couldn't hide or silence his surprise as he recognised the smaller man. "Ryder?" He hurried forward, closely followed by Brett, whom he shooed back into the house. He took Luke from Tank and Jared and carried him into his home, remembering all the while the first time he had done this.

"I'm sorry..." Luke whispered to his uncle.

\* \* \*

The death of yet another Rebel pilot forced Leia's hand. The killing had to end. Determined but broken, she opened the com to Han.

"I'm calling retreat," she told him. "There's nothing for--"

The communicator crackled, whistled, cut her off.

"Han?" started an unfamiliar voice. "Uh, Han— Come on, damn it, whoever you are!"

Leia glanced at Chewbacca, who shrugged his shoulders; he was as perplexed as she was.

"Come on, come on — Han! Do you copy?"

"What's going on?" Solo came up behind the princess, and she vacated his chair for him.

"I'm not sure, but it's you they want."

"Han," the voice continued, sounding more frustrated by the minute, "I've got a friend of yours here."

Han stiffened; worried, suspicious, but strangely tinged with joy.

Leia lay a hand on his shoulder. "Luke?" she asked, barely hiding her hope.

"It may be a trap," Han offered, voicing his usual scepticism.

"Perhaps we should —" The princess broke off as another voice cut in across the airways.

"Millennium Falcon." The speaker sounded tired, shaky, but familiar. "Solo, do you copy? This is 'Farmer.'"

Chewbacca wailed loudly at the call sign Han had given Luke to use as a means of identification in difficult situations. All three in the cockpit knew the boy would not use it if he were being used as bait in a trap.

Han gleefully opened the channel. "Farmer, where are you?"

It was the first speaker who answered. "We're on a farm, a short distance from the main base. Just follow the road and you'll see us."

Chewbacca banked the ship, turning. It was Leia who spotted the road, but she also saw several large vehicles heading in the same direction. It wasn't time to celebrate yet. "Han, look!" She pointed to the Imperial carriers.

"Yeah, I see 'em, Princess." Han was grim. He turned his attention back to the com. "We're on our way, but so are —"

The speaker didn't let him finish before he cut the connection.

The Corellian nervously watched the Imperial fighters around him. "This is going to be close."

\* \* \*

Tank lifted his hand away from the console as he broke off the communication. He gazed at the silent instrument, thinking of Luke, glad the youth was in the other room with the family and hadn't overheard the spacer named Han mention the princess. Tank had no doubts it was the Princess Leia Organa. The senator was alive, and yet Dassu had allowed Luke to believe she was dead, and had allowed his grief to contribute to his breaking. Bower knew, understood, how Luke had believed everything was lost to him; that was why he had betrayed the Alliance. How would he react to the news that the princess was alive? How did the Alliance react to traitors, even when they had disclosed under duress?

Was he doing the right thing after all by bringing Luke back to them?

Bower shook himself, shedding his doubts. He had started this, and he would see it through. He hurried back to Luke, Jared and the family.

\* \* \*

Tamara hugged Luke gently; aware of the pain a tight embrace would bring him. His right arm encircled her shoulder, and she heard his quiet whisper of "Tama." And she knew he had forgiven her. She laid her head against his chest; listening to his heartbeat, she began to weep. His hand lifted her chin upward, his fingers gently brushing the tears away. His tenderness and warmth only served to heighten the girl's guilt. He had been hurt so much, and still he was concerned for her.

"Don't cry, Tama."

Alex tried to ignore the display of emotion between his daughter and his adoptive nephew, afraid of what it might represent for the two. Ryder was Jedi—a dangerous religion, a hazardous cult to belong to in these difficult times—and Tamara loved him. The farmer stared out of the window past the other young man who had helped Ryder, watching an Imperial shuttle cutting through what was left of the battle, heading for the installation. What was going to happen to his family after Ryder was gone? What would happen when the Imperials arrived once more? Alex didn't think he'd ever been more afraid than at this moment.

Brett hugged Luke's legs, oblivious to his elder cousin's discomfort. Mhari pulled him off, telling him not to be so enthusiastic. The older woman took Luke's hand, frowning in discomfort and anger at the ugly, bloodstained cuffs. She looked to his eyes, seeing pain and fear, but also an undercurrent of courage and strength. Luke was a complex mixture of boyhood and manhood, his transition from one to the other taking place too violently and too swiftly. The youth had been thrust into an adult world without the knowledge or maturity of adulthood, but she knew it

was most likely his innocence and his still barely intact faith in others which still held him firm. That and the gift she believed he had inherited from his parentage.

"You'll be all right, Luke," Mhari said softly, lending him whatever encouragement she could.

"Thank you," was all he could say. This family had sacrificed so much for him, and all he could say was an inadequate thank you.

"We have to go, Luke," Tank broke in, as he emerged through the door. "We're going to have company."

Luke tore his eyes away from Mhari. "Han?" he asked eagerly.

Jared, standing by the window, frowned as the shuttle that has passed moments before turned and headed back. "And others." He added to Luke's words.

Fear flooded back into Luke. "Vader?" his voice trembled.

"That's a likely guess."

Tamara tightened her grip on Luke, wanting to never part from him, but knowing that in a few minutes he would be gone from her life. She studied his face, ignoring the bruises, the cuts, seeing only unblemished features, trying desperately to imprint his image into her mind so as not to forget it.

Alex took her arm, speaking to Luke. "You have to leave now." The pain on his daughter's face was vivid and punishing.

Tank took hold of Luke, breaking him away from the girl. Alex laid his hand on her shoulder, restraining her. Mhari slipped her arm around Tamara's waist, feeling her anguish.

Luke twisted his neck, trying to look back, as Tank and Jared carried him away from the family. Tamara stood between her parents, weeping. Brett waved in his own simple way. Luke stared at the girl, wanting to shout to her, wanting to have her with him, and sorry there was no time for goodbyes.

The Falcon swooped over the barn, over them. It pivoted in the sky and lowered itself into the empty nerf field; its hatch opening before the lifters had touched the dirt.

Jared and Tank were helping Luke over the enclosure fence when their pursuers arrived. Stormtroopers spilled from the transporters, heading toward them, the shuttle turned and gently touched down behind the Falcon. They threw Luke over the fence, jumped it themselves and dragged Luke up. Together they ran toward

the ship's beckoning hatch. They had almost reached their goal when the shout came.

"Tamara— no!" It was Alex.

Tank stumbled turning to see the girl break away from her father and run toward them, barely in front of the advancing soldiers.

"Oh, no!" the medic breathed. They ran forward, dragging Luke, who now struggled frantically in their grasp.

"Get Tamara!" Luke cried, fighting them as they pulled him forward.

"You first, Luke!" Tank winced as a laser bolt from behind barely missed his shoulder.

"No!"

Blaster fire from a handgun spat from the open hatch of the ship. With relief, Tank spotted a Corellian spacer in the doorway, giving them covering fire. So that was Han. The smuggler ran to them, his hands grabbing Luke. "Get the girl!" Han told the medic, nodding toward the shuttle hatch as its ramp lowered to the grass.

Tank turned for Tamara, but it was too late. There was a brief burst of light, a look of confusion on her pretty face, and she pitched forward to lie still on the long grass. He hesitated for a second, but Luke's scream of horror galvanised him. He ran to the girl, his medical instinct over-riding his natural instinct to flee.

"Tamara!" Luke's cry seemed to echo around the field. He wriggled in Han and Jared's arms, trying to break loose as they pulled him to the Falcon.

Han had a solid grip on the overly large Imperial uniform that inadequately hid his young friend's wounds. He pulled Luke up the ramp, trying to ignore the fact that his action was causing Luke extra pain.

"Come on, kid!" he pleaded, not used to hysterics. "He's getting her!" He turned to the stranger who was helping him. "We could use an hand in the gun turrets," he suggested.

Jared released his hold on Luke as they finally entered the ship's main corridor. "No problem."

Luke dropped to the floor. "Tamara... Tank!" Then more arms reached for Luke; warm, soft hands smoothed the sweat-wet hair away from his wild eyes.

"You're safe, Luke," Leia told him.

Luke turned his gaze to her, the crazed sparkle in his pupils dimming. He shook his head, seeming to deny the princess's presence. "No!" The whisper betrayed his shock and horror. "No... I...you're dead! I told them... Ahana... and you... died. He said you'd died!" Alarm spread over his features as a terrible realisation swept through him like a chill wind. "I never meant to... I didn't want to... But is was too hard... it was too hard..." His voice was full of despair; he was a child who had done wrong, and was begging in panic to avoid punishment. He moved backward away from her, stopping only when his back hit the bulkhead.

"It's all right, Luke," she soothed quickly, fighting to reassure and calm him. From the moment she had watched the Imperials carry him over the field, she had known what had happened. And now the wounds on his wrists, the contusions on his body, and the heavy guilt in his eyes confirmed her fear. Minoan had failed. Gently she told him, again, "It's all right."

Han turned back to the hatch, looking for the medic, hoping he would succeed—not particularly for the girl's sake, but for Luke's.

Tank knelt beside Tamara and turned her over. She groaned, the sound of pain barely audible over the impatient engine noise of the waiting ship. He glanced up to see the Corellian waving frantically at him to come, and from the corner of his eye he also saw the dark bulk of Darth Vader striding down the ramp of the shuttle followed by more stormtroopers.

Panicked, he looked down at Tamara, knowing she couldn't be moved without the proper medical help. Besides, there was no longer time to lift her and run for the haven the ship offered; the Stormtroopers were almost upon them. He shook his head at Han, gesturing for him to leave, pointing at the sky and the approaching TIE fighters. The spacer looked back into his ship, the sorrow on his face visible even at a distance. He nodded his understanding and saluted the medic. The hatch began to close as the ship slowly left the ground and the top guns opened fire on the approaching TIE fighters.

Bower looked down at the girl's pale face, and brushed a lock of red hair from her forehead. The Falcon veered off, followed by tracers of blaster fire. Tank watched the white tail of the ship's after-burn; it reminded him of something...

*Shooting star*, he suddenly thought. *It's not two, it's one....*

The running footsteps of the Stormtroopers halted around him. He smiled at his new concept, stood and, with a feeling akin to triumph, Tank turned to face his executioners.

**the end...**

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