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One Night on Bespin Part 2

by [Leela Starsky](#)

As she walked between Solo and Calrissian towards the dining room, Leia tried to quell her feeling of unrest. Han was probably right. She probably *was* worrying unnecessarily. But the fact of the matter was that, despite the droid's penchant for pissing people off, Threepio had never quite managed to get himself blasted to bits before. Solo and Chewie, and possibly even Luke, would probably claim that to be a miracle in itself but, nevertheless, it disturbed her. Particularly since it had happened *here* and with no obvious provocation.

Leia wished she'd had more time to quiz Chewie about it further, but she was not about to discuss it in front of Calrissian.

There was some small talk between them about the acceptability of their accommodations and dinner the night before, but Leia wanted to know more about Cloud City and how it managed to avoid Imperial interest.

Calrissian seemed more than happy to prattle on about the positive aspects of his city and, as he led them into a section that was part of the administration complex, he explained, "So you see, since we're a small operation, we don't fall into the...uh...jurisdiction of the Empire."

Leia sensed a chink in his armour and pounced. "So you're part of the mining guild then?"

"No," he admitted, and Leia sensed a definite evasiveness from him. "Our operation is small enough not to be noticed... which is advantageous for

everybody since our customers are anxious to avoid attracting attention to themselves.”

Isn't everyone? Leia thought facetiously, but held her tongue.

They turned into a long, wide hallway, off which were several pairs of massive doors. Calrissian showing off for Han's benefit Leia supposed, but found herself disturbed by the inappropriateness of such a display of prosperity. They were going for *breakfast* for goodness sake!

As they approached one of the massive doors Chewbacca sniffed the air in alarm and growled at his partner.

Ignoring him, Solo asked, “Aren't you afraid the Empire's gonna find out about this little operation and shut you down?”

“That's always been a danger,” Calrissian agreed. “It looms like a shadow over everything we've built here. But things have developed that will ensure security.” He paused with his hand on the panel that opened the doors. “I've just made a deal that will keep the Empire out of here forever.”

Leia looked at him. She was aghast that someone with his apparent business acumen would even consider making such a preposterous claim. Then the doors opened and it became painfully apparent just what Calrissian's ‘deal’ must have entailed.

At the far end of the long dining room, at the head of an elegantly set table, sat the Dark Lord of the Sith himself.

The Wookiee roared and Leia's flee reflex kicked in as Vader got to his feet. She jerked her hand off Solo's arm but he gripped her wrist protectively with his left hand in the same heartbeat as his right hand cleared his blaster from its holster and fired off two blasts. Both hit the Dark Lord, yet somehow exploded harmlessly against his upraised palm, then an unseen force ripped the blaster out of Solo's hand and swept it across the room and into Vader's.

The shock of losing his blaster so dramatically caused Solo to drop Leia's hand, and he watched with dread and disbelief as the Dark Lord calmly placed the blaster on the table.

“We would be honoured if you would join us,” Vader said.

Stepping out of an anteroom to stand beside the Dark Lord was Boba Fett, the bounty hunter from Ord Mantell, while in the hallway behind them a squad of stormtroopers had moved into place.

Solo threw his meanest look at Calrissian who responded, "I had no choice. They arrived right before you did. I'm sorry."

Solo traded a heartfelt look with Leia. They were both aware of the momentous calamity that had so suddenly overtaken them and knew there was no escape. Not this time.

He took her hand and glared at the administrator again. "I'm sorry too," he said, then he and Leia stepped into the dining room.

Surprisingly enough, Vader chose not to bandy words with them, instructing Calrissian to remove them immediately to a prison cell. Even more surprising, they got to *share* a cell. Solo had sarcastically surmised that this was because anyone who had seen or heard anything of the Imperials arrival in the city had been summarily imprisoned, leaving the detention centre uncharacteristically full.

Calrissian had simply scowled at him and left. Solo suspected his *friend* was feeling guilty. He *looked* like he was feeling guilty. *And so he damn well should!*

Then the door had shut and the full impact of their predicament hit him. Lando had sold them out. Into Imperial incarceration, undoubtedly followed by torture to force them to reveal what information they knew about the Rebellion. And, then ultimately, execution. For a moment Solo wondered what he could do to piss Vader off enough so that the Dark Lord would jump them straight to the third step. Then he looked at Leia and decided he wanted a chance to kill Lando first. Solo didn't care what happened to himself, but what Lando had brought upon Leia... He couldn't even begin to imagine what Vader would do to her.

The princess's dignified demeanour had vanished with the closure of the cell door. To say she looked terrified was an understatement. She was hugging herself in a vain attempt to hold herself together, and Solo went straight to her and wrapped his arms around her. The truth was he needed to hold her as much as she needed to be held, but he also knew this was bringing back all too vivid memories of her Death Star incarceration.

For a moment Leia resisted him. But just for a moment. Then she burrowed into his embrace, trembling helplessly. Solo held her tightly, unable to think of anything he could say that would make her feel better. He couldn't say that everything would be fine, that they'd escape somehow, because it wasn't going

to happen. Not now. So he simply held her and said nothing, and shared an understanding look with Chewbacca.

Leia pushed away from him, suddenly angry. “Some *friend*,” she snapped.

Solo initially thought she was talking about *him*. Then he realised she meant Calrissian. And that she was trying to control her emotions the best way she knew how; by getting angry.

“I *knew* we couldn’t trust him,” she said.

“You were right,” Solo conceded sadly.

Leia touched a small panel on the wall and a hard, metal bunk slid out. Hugging herself once more, she sat on the edge of it. Solo moved over and sat next to her, putting an arm around her shoulders.

“I can’t do this, Han,” she said in a very small voice. “Not again...”

“Don’t think about it.”

“But I know what to expect this time,” she argued. “I know what he’ll do...”

“Don’t think about it.”

“Stop saying ‘don’t think about it!’” she yelled, pulling away from him and starting to pace. “How can I *not* think about it?”

Answering her literally, Solo said, “By thinking about something else.”

Leia glared at him. “And what do you suggest?”

“I can think of one or two things,” he said in a low voice as he approached her. “Last night for example.”

Leia glanced awkwardly at Chewbacca who was watching them carefully, then shook her head emphatically. “If I think about that I’ll...” She put her hand to her mouth suddenly to hide the trembling of her lip, then took a deep breath and finished quietly, “I’ll cry.”

Solo swept her into his embrace again and held her close. “No you won’t,” he said, softly touching his lips to the top of her head. “You’re strong, Leia. Stronger than all of us.”

Leia shook her head against his chest. “No.”

"Yes," he insisted. "You are."

She stayed in his embrace a little longer, then gently disengaged. Returning to the metal bunk, she pulled her flimsy cloak tighter against the chill in the cell and sat on the edge again. Solo sat beside her and wondered how long they would be left to wait. The waiting was an integral part of the torture, he knew, and although it was definitely easier to endure than physical pain, in its own way the mental pain could be just as agonising.

Solo became aware that Leia's trembling had turned into very definite shivering. The cell was surprisingly cold and her dress was only a fine material, hardly designed to keep out the cold, so Solo removed his jacket and put it around her shoulders.

"But you'll get cold," she protested.

"Not as quickly as you will," he assured her.

[Would have helped if we'd got to have breakfast,] Chewbacca warbled quietly and Solo felt Leia shudder at the prospect of sharing a meal with Vader. Solo looked at his partner with mild disgust.

"Good one, Chewie," he muttered. "Things can't be too bad if you're still thinking about your stomach."

Chewbacca made a rude hand gesture at him and Solo threw one straight back, then the door opened suddenly and they all jumped.

An Imperial officer and a stormtrooper entered carrying the box of Threepio parts and dumped it on the floor. On top of it all was the princess' snowsuit and boots. The officer pointed at it and said, "The administrator sent the lady's clothes." Then he sneered and added, "Seems he wants the *new* ones back."

Lando, you lousy son-of-a-sith, Solo thought.

Chewbacca roared threateningly at the Imperials and the stormtrooper's blaster immediately covered him.

"No, please," the officer begged as he unholstered his own weapon and pointed it at the Wookiee, his voice full of ridicule and disdain. "Allow me. It really would make my day, you know."

Solo pulled the Wookiee into line with a fierce look. He was trying to figure out how he could wrestle the blaster from the officer without getting shot by the stormtrooper. Not that they were likely to get very far even if they did manage to

overpower both Imperials and escape from their cell. Still, it was more hope than he'd had a moment ago so it was better than nothing.

Neither Imperial had moved and it quickly became obvious to Solo that they would remain there until the princess had changed her clothes. Leia must have come to the same conclusion because she abruptly shed her cloak and the burgundy slippers.

Solo couldn't see the trooper's eyes, but the way the officer was looking at the princess while she removed the long pants she'd been wearing under the dress made his blood boil. He stepped into the officer's line of sight, ostensibly to pick up the snowsuit and hand it to Leia, but really to block the man's view of her.

"Get out of the way, you rebel scum!" the officer snapped, waving his blaster threateningly at Solo's head.

Solo scowled at him then turned to give Leia her suit. He was still in the Imperial's line of sight but, with his back to the officer, could no longer see the man's impotent threats.

The officer took a step sideways to clear his view as Leia, planning to at least remain half dressed at all times, started to put her feet into her suit.

But the officer shook his head. "No, no, no," he said. "No cheating."

The eyes Leia turned on him were colder than Hoth and Solo half expected to see the man freeze on the spot. But instead the officer took a step closer to the princess, openly leering.

"Been watching you all night, *sweetheart*," he said, then added nastily, "We *all* have."

A surge of adrenaline rushed through Solo as comprehension rapidly sank in, swiftly followed by revulsion and blind fury at the violation that had been visited on them. They'd been *bugged*. Despite his scan of the apartment, somehow the Imperials had managed to 'bug' it.

"Best porno I've seen in *years*," the Imperial taunted.

Leia seemed to recover from the revelation quicker than Solo and replied, "Then it's nothing you haven't already seen."

The Imperial took a step closer. "Maybe I need to teach you the difference between a smuggler and a real man, Princess. Bet you'd love to know what an Imperial cock tastes like."

Solo's sense of reason vanished and he slammed his fist into the Imperial's face. The officer lurched backwards with blood pouring from his nose and Solo felt a flare of satisfaction to see that he had broken the man's nose. He swung a follow-up punch at the officer's stomach but was foiled from connecting by Chewbacca who grabbed the Imperial by the collar of his jacket and dragged him out of the Corellian's path. The stormtrooper, who had briefly taken his aim off the Wookiee when Solo hit the officer, assumed the Wookiee was running amok and promptly fired a stun blast at him. Chewbacca collapsed in a heap.

Solo was gathering himself for another swing as the officer disentangled himself from the Wookiee and the stormtrooper hastily switched his aim to Solo. The Imperial officer, having caught the edge of the stun blast, had to struggle to stay on his feet but managed to glare at the Corellian.

Caught between a desire to deck the little prick and the need to stay 'un-stunned' for the sake of the princess, Solo fought to keep his rage under control and couldn't believe it when Leia seemed to taunt the Imperial by removing her dress.

"I don't know," she said, now in only her underwear. She took a step closer to the Imperial and asked, "Do you think it'd be worth your life?"

The spectre of Vader suddenly loomed large in everyone's mind and the officer backed off, wiping ineffectually at his bloodied and broken nose. Leia pulled on her snowsuit and zipped it shut. She then handed the Imperial the clothes she had borrowed from Calrissian and smiled grimly as the Imperial proceeded to bleed all over them. With any luck, Solo hoped, the sight of the blood on the clothes would make Calrissian feel even worse.

The Imperial and the stormtrooper left without another word.

Leia looked at Solo and he shook his head. "I'm sorry," he murmured. He bent to check Chewbacca and Leia helped him straighten the Wookiee's limbs into a more comfortable position. Solo couldn't believe the inadequacy of the word, but it was the only thing he could think of to say. Sorry that his scanner hadn't picked up the surveillance devices. Sorry that the Imperials had been watching them make love, probably since they arrived yesterday. Sorry that the *Falcon's* hyperdrive had died and that he'd had to bring them here. Sorry that Vader could protect her from the threat of rape better than *he* could...

Solo sat on the edge of the hard bunk and wiped a hand across his face. "I'm so sorry," he repeated.

Leia picked up his jacket from where it had fallen on the floor and put it over his shoulders as she sat beside him.

"It's not your fault," she said, and Solo couldn't help wincing at his own well used line. "At least I don't feel as cold," she added softly.

Solo looked at her and wondered how things had turned from him comforting her to her comforting him.

"He'll want to take us to Coruscant, Han."

Vader. "He'll want to take *you* to Coruscant," Solo corrected, pulling his jacket on again. "I got the distinct feeling I'm headed straight to Jabba."

The look of worry on Leia's face increased dramatically. She opened her mouth to say something but was interrupted as the door opened again. This time it was no social visit; this time there were two officers and a squad of stormtroopers. This time they meant business.

They were led to a room at the end of the cell bay and both instantly recognised the scan grid set up there. Pain by nerve induction. The sort of pain that felt like you were being flayed or burned alive without doing actual physical damage.

Leia regarded it with blatant terror while Solo thought that if he had to watch them torture Leia with it, he didn't know what he would do. Then Vader stepped into the room, closely followed by Boba Fett.

"Put him on the grid," Vader said matter-of-factly, "and take the princess to the observation room."

Solo winced. So it was him they were going to torture and they were going to make Leia *watch*.

Just like Alderaan.

He looked at Leia and found her looking at him with outright despair. *Oh, Sweetheart...* "You can do this," he assured her as they dragged him towards the grid. She was shaking her head. "You can do this," he said, and she was led from the room.

Well, at least he couldn't tell them anything useful about the Rebellion...

As stormtroopers strapped him to the upright platform, Solo stared at the glowing panel in front of him and swallowed the sudden bile that rose in his throat. *You can do this!* he told himself. *It's only pain...*

Vader was staring at him. *Sadistic son-of-a-bitch*, Solo thought. He wanted to glare back at the Dark Lord, but the glow from the panel was increasing with the hum of power being fed to it as one of the officers adjusted the settings. Maybe he could work up enough saliva to spit at the Sith bastard before it started. Solo felt his scalp prickle as he broke out in a sweat.

The platform started to tilt forward and Solo's breathing became a rapid pant in anticipation of the pain. Vader moved closer and touched the panel, activating the scanner which rapidly mapped Solo's nervous system. Almost immediately, the grid started firing bursts of electricity at him.

Solo was aware of Vader leaning in close, watching him, and part of him was waiting for the Sith Lord to start asking questions. But very soon the bursts from the grid left him unaware of anything but searing pain. Solo knew he was screaming, but was helpless to stop it.

Calrissian found himself waiting outside the interrogation room with Boba Fett. A situation which struck him as more than a little bizarre. He heard Solo start screaming on the other side of the door and his mouth formed a hard line. The volume of the screams increased dramatically a moment later when the door opened and Vader stepped out.

"Lord Vader-" Calrissian started, but Vader ignored him completely, turning instead to the bounty hunter.

"You may take Captain Solo to Jabba the Hutt after I have Skywalker," he said.

Calrissian was shocked to realise that Vader was not in Cloud City for Solo and his princess at all, but in their usefulness as bait for some other poor fool. Immediately he wondered if he might not be able to salvage the situation, for Chewie and the princess at least.

"He's no good to me dead," Fett replied sourly

"He will not be permanently damaged," Vader said, heading for the elevator.

Following him, Calrissian asked urgently, "Lord Vader, what about Leia and the Wookiee?"

"They must never again leave this city," was the succinct reply.

"That was never a condition of our agreement!" Calrissian snapped. "Nor was giving Han to this bounty hunter!"

Suddenly Calrissian found himself with Vader's full attention and felt himself quail a little.

"Perhaps you think you're being treated unfairly?" the Dark Lord suggested facetiously.

"No," Calrissian replied tightly.

"Good," Vader said, stepping into the elevator. "It would be unfortunate if I had to leave a garrison here."

The elevator door closed and Calrissian's fists clenched in frustration.

"This deal is getting worse all the time," he growled.

The black uniformed officers manning the observation room all looked up as the princess was brought in, and it only took Leia a moment to realise where she was. Spy central. These were the officers who had been watching her since she arrived on Cloud City. Watching every intimate moment she had shared with Han. The thought was too crippling to contemplate, so she pushed it aside to deal with later.

Instead, she ignored the officers and focussed on the screens in front of them. On one screen she could see the Millennium Falcon and, on another, the cell she had been in minutes before. Chewbacca, it seemed, had recovered from the stun blast and was suffering a form of aural torture. She couldn't hear it, the Imperials had obviously turned it down for their own comfort, but the Wookiee was vainly trying to cover his ears in an attempt to escape.

Why? she wondered. It was purely malicious on the Imperials part. For them, she guessed, that was reason enough.

On the other screens she could see Han. See him from every angle imaginable. Screaming on the scan grid. She could hear him too. Although low, they had left the sound on and Leia felt like her heart was being ripped from her chest. Vader was beside Han, watching him, then abruptly he turned and left. No questions. Nothing. That confused her. If Vader wasn't going to ask the questions, who was? Nobody apparently as they all seemed content to leave him screaming.

Leia moved closer to one of the screens, ignoring the officers around her. She could feel their lascivious intentions towards her and ignoring them was the simplest way to deal with it. Instead she pressed her hand against the screen in an attempt to be as close to Han as she could. To be with him in spirit if not body. Willed her strength to him while struggling to stop the tears of fear and frustration from rolling down her cheeks. Her fear that he would die on the grid was a real one. While the scan grid caused no direct physical damage, heart failure was very common result. And the fact that they weren't asking him any questions suggested to Leia that they were using the grid as a sadistic form of execution.

Then she realised; they weren't asking him questions because they knew he couldn't tell them anything that they probably didn't already know. But *she* could. It was Alderaan all over again.

On the screen, Solo screamed afresh then turned his head sharply to one side in an attempt to protect his eyes, and Leia pressed her hand hard against her mouth to stop herself from sobbing. The flashing and sparking from the scan grid, the grimace on Han's face. In a surreal way it reminded Leia of how he had looked last night, while they were making love during the thunderstorm. And she was appalled with herself for thinking like that. But another part of her wanted to cherish the thought, to focus on her love for Han rather than her fear for his life.

The door to the observation room opened and Vader stepped in. Leia glared briefly at him over her shoulder then turned back to watching Solo. Felt the Dark Lord take up position at her back. A moment later the Corellian passed out but no attempt was made to remove him from the grid. They were going to wait for him to regain consciousness then start again.



"Why are you doing this?" Leia asked coldly, her voice barely audible despite the fact that Solo had stopped screaming.

"Leave us," Vader ordered the officers, and the room cleared in a matter of seconds. Now the only sounds in the room were the soft noises of the computers.

"Do you know, Princess, that on a small, insignificant planet in the Corporate Sector, there is a race who boil their own kind alive just so they can meditate to the sound of their screams."

Leia regarded the Sith Lord with pure revulsion then asked him sarcastically, "Friends of yours, are they?"

"I have studied them."

"Is that what this is?" she demanded, her anger flaring despite her attempts to keep it under control. "Some sick sort of meditation?"

"No, this is a test."

"A *test*?" Leia shook her head. "Of *what*? His ability to withstand pain?"

"No, Princess. I am testing *you*."

For the first time since Vader had entered the room, Leia actually turned and faced him.

"*What?*"

"You can stop it," Vader said.

"What?" Tarkin's voice was ringing in her ears: *Perhaps you would prefer another target? A military target? Then name the system!*

"You can stop his pain."

"How?" Leia demanded. "By betraying everything we've fought and suffered for?"

"This is not about the Rebellion."

"Then what *is* it about, *Lord Vader*?" Leia's anger towards the Dark Lord had far outweighed her fear of him. "*What*?" she demanded.

"Anger and hatred are powerful tools, Leia Organa," the Dark Lord replied cryptically. "Look where they have got me."

For one bizarre moment, Leia got the distinct impression that Vader was warning her. Warning her not to take the path he had taken. Outraged, she demanded, "What the hell does that mean?"

"It means you can turn the grid off. Using your anger and the Force."

"The *Force*?" Leia was so incensed she wanted to hit him and laugh all at the same time. "If I could use the Force to turn things off, Vader, I'd be starting with *your* respirator!"

Leia got the distinct impression that Vader was amused.

"You are using the Force all the time, Leia Organa," he said. "Albeit in a simplistic and untrained manner. You used it a little while ago when you projected an image of me into the mind of the officer who was threatening to rape you."

Leia frowned. "If he thought of you, that was his own doing, not mine."

"I suspected you of being Force sensitive on the Death Star. Last night you confirmed it."

Leia felt a tingle of dread travel up her spine. It was one thing to have nameless Imperial officers watching her make love to Han, but to know Vader had been watching...

"How?" she asked, dreading the answer.

"I think you know the answer."

So he *had* been watching. And now he was getting some sort of perverse enjoyment out of telling her he'd been watching. Leia focussed her embarrassment into outrage and hissed, "Is that how you get your kicks now? By watching others?"

"I was not watching you, Princess," the Dark Lord said calmly. "As a Force sensitive, I could not help but feel your Force bonding with Captain Solo."

Force bonding? Leia wondered then, with a shock remembered the feeling of 'oneness' she and Han had shared during the storm. From Solo's reaction to it on the *Falcon*, Leia realised it was something he had never experienced before, but it had never occurred to her that it was something unusual or abnormal. She'd assumed it was because they loved each other. But, thinking about it rationally, Leia realised what a ridiculous assumption that was. Neither she nor Han were telepathic; why would sex suddenly give them that ability?

She found herself unable to look at the Dark Lord and observed resentfully, "It has a name?"

"It has a name. And is a powerful skill. One the Jedi reserved for bonding rituals only. To use it on a non Jedi without a prior bonding was a punishable offence."

"Why?" she wanted to know, but her voice was almost a whisper.

"Because it can be used as a form of coercion."

Coercion? Leia felt a tightness around her heart and focussed on her unconscious lover. Had she *forced* Han somehow? Were the things he'd said and done professing his love for her somehow less valid now? She felt a renewed flare of anger towards Vader because he was making her question the validity of, not just her own feelings, but Solo's as well.

Then she wondered why she was giving Vader any credence at all. This was the Dark Lord of the Sith, the Master of Deceit. The idea of him thinking she had Force potential would be laughable if it wasn't so frightening. Had been just as laughable when Luke had suggested the same thing to her on Hoth.

Was that why the accusation scared her so much? Because Luke had suggested it too?

There was no denying that Solo's recovery after almost being killed during the cave-in on Hoth was nothing short of miraculous. But Luke believed Leia had used the Force to heal the Corellian. Said he had *felt* it. As Vader claimed to have *felt* her last night. A wave of nausea washed over Leia and she put a hand on the console in front of her to steady herself. Could they both be right?

The princess shook her head, taking refuge in denial. "It's impossible," she told Vader without taking her eyes off Solo. "I was never tested. There were no Jedi in my family."

"Your mother had some Force talent," he replied quietly. "Not enough to be trained as a Jedi, but enough to learn some of the simpler tasks. Enough to put a protective block on your fledgling abilities."

That revelation shocked Leia more than the suggestion that she was Force sensitive herself. She looked at the Dark Lord with a mixture of dismay and loathing as her mother's death made sudden and horrible sense. It had happened well after the initial Jedi Purge but, as an unclassified Force sensitive, that would not have been surprising. It had taken the Emperor and his Sith puppet *years* to rid the Galaxy of its former protectors. It also made sense that the information would have been kept from her daughter. Kept from her to keep her safe.

For a moment Leia wondered if even her father had known then asked flatly, "Did *you* kill her?"

"No," he replied.

"*Liar*," Leia snapped. Even if Vader had not killed her mother himself, he had been the force behind it.

She heard the scan grid hum to life and hastily looked back at the screen. Solo had regained consciousness although he looked far from 'with it'. His head was hanging limply and she could see strings of spittle falling from his mouth to the grid below. Then the grid started firing at him again and Solo howled.

Leia struggled not to sob and, without taking her eyes off the screen, begged, "Please stop this."

Vader reached across and activated a command which pulled Solo's vital statistics up on the screen. They all pointed towards him being severely traumatised.

Flatly, Leia diagnosed, "You're killing him."

The door to the observation room opened suddenly and the black uniformed officer, Rosonger entered.

"My apologies, Lord Vader," he said hurriedly, "but you wanted me to inform you the minute the facility you required was found."

"Thankyou, Commander," Vader said and headed for the door. "Take the princess back to her cell. I will speak with the administrator."

"Yes, my Lord."

“What about Han?” Leia demanded.

Vader considered for a moment then said to Rosonger, “Have the pilot taken back to the cell as well.”

“Yes, Lord Vader.”

Calrissian was hurrying along one of the lower corridors in his city, his aide, Lobot, jogging beside him to keep up with the taller man’s longer strides. Calrissian was furious.

“The carbon freeze,” he growled through clenched teeth, “is for freezing *gas*, not *mass*. How the hell did they find out about it?”

“They’ve had access to all our records since they got here,” Lobot replied, despite being aware that Calrissian already knew the answer. “We just didn’t think they’d be stupid enough to consider it.”

Calrissian shook his head in frustration then slowed as they approached the outside of the carbon-freezing chamber. He wasn’t about to show the Imperials how upset he was.

The stormtroopers guarding the entrance seemed to ignore him as he entered the chamber, and he took a moment to locate Vader through the clouds of vapour in the room.

The Dark Lord was standing beside the carbon-freezing platform itself, studying the controls. Beside him were two officers who were obviously explaining the unit’s viability. Fools seeking only to further their careers by ingratiating themselves to the Sith Lord and telling him what he wanted to hear.

Calrissian was determined to set them all straight and said as he approached, “Lord Vader, I don’t know what you’ve been told, but this facility is used for the freezing and transport of gases-”

“This facility is crude,” Vader admitted. “But it should be adequate to freeze Skywalker for his journey to the Emperor.”

They were interrupted as another officer rushed up. “Lord Vader,” he said urgently. “There is a ship approaching. X-wing class.”

“Good,” Vader rumbled. “Monitor Skywalker and allow him to land.” The officer bowed sharply and hurried out of the chamber. Vader turned to one of the other officers. “See to it that he finds his way here.”

“Yes, my Lord,” the officer barked and hurried out of the chamber as well.

Calrissian couldn’t believe the level of stupidity going on. Had *any* of them listened to him? He knew Vader wasn’t stupid and sought to reason with him.

“Lord Vader,” he said, trying to sound reasonable rather than frustrated, “we only use this facility for carbon freezing gases. If you put him in there, it might kill him.”

“I do not want the Emperor’s prize damaged,” Vader agreed, and Calrissian almost breathed a sigh of relief. Then Vader added, “We will test it. On Captain Solo.”

Calrissian stared at the Dark Lord in shock. Numbly stepped to one side as the remaining Imperial officer started barking orders to prepare the unit for operation. The small Ugnaught workers who usually ran the facility started rushing in all directions. Calrissian looked helplessly at his aide who indicated the entrance to the chamber with his eyes. Calrissian nodded and followed him out.

“Medic,” Lobot said quietly, as soon as they were out of earshot. “It’s his only chance.”

“Organise it,” Calrissian said. “I’m going to see Han.”

“Don’t tell them.”

Calrissian nodded, agreeing reluctantly. He didn’t doubt that if any of the prisoners knew what was coming they’d happily die trying to escape. It occurred to him that Solo’s death would remove a big complication from his life, but he immediately dismissed the notion and honestly hoped that the medics would be able to give the Corellian something that would increase his chances of surviving the carbonite procedure.

When the barrage of hellish wailing they were torturing him with had finally stopped, Chewbacca had tried to distract himself from the pain in his ears and his concern about Solo and the princess by attempting to put Threepio back together. A lot was explained the moment the droid’s vocoder came back on line.

The droid, it seemed, had stumbled across stormtroopers just after they'd landed on Cloud City and had been promptly blasted to bits by them.

Chewbacca's ears were still ringing from the aural torture of moments ago, making Threepio's voice even more unbearable than usual. So when the droid pointed out, with ungrateful affront, that the Wookiee's attempts at reconstruction had had him put the droid's head on *backwards*, Chewbacca had exercised his authority and turned the droid off.

The door to the cell slid opened suddenly and two stormtroopers threw Solo into the room. They backed out and the door slid shut again. Barking his concern, Chewbacca hurriedly put Threepio back in the box and rushed to pick his friend up off the floor, alarmed when Solo grunted in pain as he did.

Solo stammered, "I feel terrible."

Gently, Chewbacca laid the Corellian on the hard bunk and wondered what sort of torture Vader had inflicted on his friend. The man was trembling and had broken out in a cold sweat. Shock. The man's body was in shock.

[Why are they doing this?] he asked, not really expecting his friend to answer.

"They had me howling on the scan grid," Solo murmured, "and they never even asked me any questions."

Chewbacca had never seen a scan grid, but he knew what they could do, and wanted to tear the cell apart in outraged response.

The cell door slid open again and Leia was thrown in. She looked even more harrowed than Solo, if that was possible. Not physically, mentally, going by the haunted look in her eyes, and Chewbacca suspected that Vader had forced her to watch Solo's torture. It was a suspicion that was confirmed when she hurried over to Han and stopped herself from hugging him at the last minute. Settled for kneeling beside the bunk and, ever so gently, stroking his head.

"Han," she whispered.

Solo found the strength to look at her.

"Whatever happens, Leia-

"*Shh!*" she said, unwilling to let him finish.

"I love you," he said. "You know that don't you?"

"I know," she assured him, then gently kissed him on the lips.

"Always have, always will," he murmured, unable to keep the evidence of his suffering out of his voice.

"Han, we don't-

The opening of the cell door interrupted her and Chewbacca roared at Calrissian as he entered the cell, flanked by two Cloud City guards.

"Lando," Leia told the prostrate Solo and he promptly struggled to sit up.

"Get out of here Lando," Solo growled.

"Shut up and listen!" Calrissian snapped. "Vader has agreed to turn Leia and Chewie over to me."

Chewbacca looked sharply at Solo who looked anything but impressed with that arrangement.

"Over to *you*?" the Corellian snapped.

"They'll have to stay here," Calrissian continued, "but at least they'll be safe."

"What about Han?" Leia demanded, voicing Chewbacca's question before he could.

There was a small pause before the administrator admitted, "Vader's giving him to the bounty hunter."

Leia shook her head at the administrator and told him sourly, "Vader wants us *all* dead."

"He doesn't want you at all," Calrissian insisted. "He's after someone called Skywalker."

"*Luke*?" Solo said. Until now, Leia had been helping him to sit up, but alarm gave the Corellian the strength to sit forward.

"Lord Vader's set a trap for him," Calrissian continued.

"And *we're* the bait," Leia gasped.

Despite the vehemence in her words, Chewbacca could hear her dread.

"Well, he's on his way," Calrissian admitted.

"Perfect," Solo snapped viscously. "You fixed us all pretty good, didn't you? My *friend*."

Tapping on reserves none of them had expected, Solo launched himself at the administrator and punched him squarely in the jaw. Calrissian staggered backwards and the guards sought to control Solo by hitting him with the butts of their blaster rifles. Leia tried to put herself between Solo and the guards, but one of them collected Solo across the jaw and knocked him to the floor. Growling savagely, Chewbacca leapt to defend his friend and both guards turned their rifles on him.

Calrissian held up a hand to stop them firing. "I've done all I can," he told the prisoners, resettling his cloak on his shoulders. "I'm sorry I couldn't do better, but I have my own problems."

"Yeah," Solo agreed sarcastically, wincing as Leia tried to help him sit up. "You're a real hero."

The door to the cell opened and a medic stepped in. He frowned at the tableau of chaos in front of him then matter-of-factly moved over to Solo. Calrissian looked across at Lobot, who was waiting by the door, and got the faintest of nods.

"What's that?" Leia demanded as the medic squatted down beside Solo and aimed a hypodermic infuser at the Corellian's neck.

"Pain killer," he replied and discharged its contents into Solo's neck. He then removed the cylinder charge and replaced it with another one. "This one is a mild relaxant," he said, and discharged that into Solo's neck as well. "Your nervous system has been extremely traumatised-"

"No!" Solo said sarcastically. "You think?" Unsolicited medical attention was something the Corellian was far from fond of, but he was too weak to fight the man off.

The medic changed the cylinder again and once more discharged it against Solo's neck. This time Solo reacted by shuddering and passing out.

"What have you done?" Leia demanded.

The medic got to his feet. "Hopefully saved his life," he said and hurried from the cell.

Calrissian hastily ushered the guards out, gave the prisoners one more glance, then shut the door.

Leia shared a resentful look with the Wookiee then muttered, "Chewie, help me get him onto the bunk."

But the Wookiee didn't even get the chance to pick Solo up before the cell door opened again, and this time there were Imperial officers and stormtroopers on the other side. Chewbacca growled threateningly at them as he and Leia put themselves between the troopers and the still unconscious Solo, but the Imperials moved into the cell nonetheless.

"Where's that medic?" one of the black clad officers asked, looking back over his shoulder towards his troops.

An Imperial medic shouldered his way through the press of stormtroopers and Leia and Chewie regarded him with alarm.

"Out of the way!" the black-clad officer told them, then snapped at the medic, "Revive him."

Leia immediately tried to cover Solo's body protectively with her own, but was dragged out of the way by a stormtrooper. The medic pressed a hypo to Solo's throat and there was a distinctive hiss as it discharged.

Solo jerked into wakefulness and tried to sit up as the medic ran a scanner over him. He felt sure that this wasn't the medic who had been working on him a minute ago, but was too bamboozled to say anything. When had the Imperials come in?

Seemingly satisfied with the results, the medic nodded to the black-clad officers and left the room.

"Get his jacket off and put the binders on him," the officer snapped.

Solo couldn't help wincing with pain as he was unceremoniously dragged to his feet and his jacket yanked off. The hand he had hit Lando with was hurting abominably and he suspected he might have broken something. He looked at Leia for some sort indication as to what was going on, but she was looking terrified. Not that any of the Imperials would have been able to tell; her face was almost expressionless. But Han Solo had spent the last three years learning to read the princess of Alderaan and knew her expressions intimately.

The binders they put on his wrists told him that something serious was about to happen; particularly when Chewie and Leia weren't similarly bound. But Solo knew he was in real trouble when they produced the heavy-duty arm binders, strapping them around his back from biceps to biceps. Whatever the Imperials had planned for him, they were making sure there was no way he could fight.

They were led out of the cell, leaving the box of silent droid parts behind.

Leia got the distinct feeling that Solo had been given a death sentence. Why else would they bind him so thoroughly? Unless Vader had something bizarre planned for herself or Chewbacca and wanted to make sure Solo couldn't interfere. But that didn't make sense. Not after what she had learned from the Sith Lord during Solo's torture.

She felt sick as they were led out of the cell, and it increased exponentially as they walked towards an unknown fate. Solo was in front of her, flanked by two stormtroopers, and Chewbacca was behind, also flanked by troopers.

Looking at Solo's back Leia felt the need to hold him and to be held by him. She could tell he was still in pain, despite the supposed pain-killer Calrissian's medic had given him, and wanted desperately to take away his suffering anyway she could. She succeeded in touching him when they had to take a lift to another level of the city. Solo's eyes met hers, full of regret and profound sadness, and Leia wanted to weep.

The room they were led into was multi-tiered and circular. There was a hub of activity around a pit that was at the centre of the level below them. A group of small, hog-like creatures that belonged to a race Leia couldn't identify were lowering what looked like a large slab of metal into the central pit, and it looked like it had something to do with the refining or containment of tibanna gas. The whole room was filled with steam or gas of some sort and the floor was glowing a fiery red.

As she followed her entourage down the stairs to the level below, Leia felt like she was walking into the Mon Calamarian version of Hell.

Boba Fett was waiting for them at the bottom of the stairs. He looked at Solo then turned and walked towards Vader who was standing to one side of the central pit.

Calrissian was standing on the opposite side of the pit from Vader, and Solo's flanking guards didn't stop the Corellian from approaching him. The administrator did not look at his friend.

"What's going on?" Solo asked, then added sarcastically, "*buddy*."

"You're being put into carbon-freeze," Calrissian responded cautiously under his breath.

Leia looked fearfully at Solo, then they heard Fett's processed voice complaining to Vader, "What if he doesn't survive? He's worth a lot to me."

Vader dismissed the hunter's concerns with a wave of his hand. "The Empire will compensate you if he dies."

Leia's eyes met Solo's, the horror in them swiftly giving way to despair. A whisper of a smile touched Solo's mouth and eyes as he sought to reassure her, but he could not hide the fear and regret evident in his expression.

"Put him in," she heard Vader say, and felt a sense of unreality descend over her, not unlike what she had felt when Alderaan was about to be destroyed. But, as the stormtroopers stepped towards Solo, Chewbacca went berserk, roaring and screaming abuse in Shri-Wook as he attacked the nearest troopers.

"Chewie!" Solo yelled as two stormtroopers were flung from the platform.
"*Chewie!*"

Fett and the remaining stormtroopers all took aim, but Vader held up his hand to halt their fire. The Wookiee roared furiously at the Imperials seeking to subdue him and Solo yelled again, "Chewie, *stop!* Listen to me! This won't help me!"

Leia looked across at the Dark Lord, found him watching her and moved a step closer to Chewbacca. She suddenly found herself wondering what Vader had in mind for her and decided she felt safer near the chaos of the Wookiee.

"The Princess," she heard Solo tell Chewbacca and turned her attention back to the Wookiee who subdued rapidly. "You have to take care of her for me," Solo continued and Leia found herself looking into the sadly resigned eyes of the Wookiee. "You hear me?" Solo wanted to know. "Huh?"

Chewbacca nodded, but it was apparent to everyone that he was far from happy. The stormtroopers had seized on his moment of subjugation and were hastily putting binders on his wrists. This time the Wookiee did not fight.

Leia looked at Solo and thought her heart would break. There was so much she wanted to say to him, *needed* to tell him, and there was no time to tell him anything.

He kissed her with fierce desperation and she returned it in kind, clinging to his bound arms until the stormtroopers tore them apart, dragging Solo onto the platform that had risen in the centre of the pit. And still their eyes remained locked, tethered by the lifeline that bound their souls.

Leia wanted to weep; wanted to rage, wanted to wrap her arms around Han and tell him how much she loved him. That she would always love him. Uncaring of her audience, Leia suddenly took a step closer to him, her face a picture of disbelief and anguish, and told him desperately, "I love you."

Solo smiled softly, and in his eyes she saw every kiss they'd shared since leaving Hoth. Every word, every caress, every intimacy was there, glimmering in his unwavering gaze.

"I know," he assured her simply. Words they had given each other so often in the last three weeks, they were a vow in themselves.

She was aware of the stormtroopers removing the binders on Solo's wrists then stepping away from him, leaving him standing alone on the platform, but refused to take her eyes off his. Held them as the platform started to descend and he was all but taken from view. Behind her, the Wookiee gripped her shoulder and howled. She hadn't sensed Chewbacca step up behind her, but he was there now, offering comfort through his touch, and Leia clung to him.

A blast of gas shot upward from the pit. Gas so cold it sucked the air from her lungs and made her face ache. Leia turned and buried her face in Chewbacca's fur, felt his manacled arms go round her like a shield.

The strongly acrid smell of molten carbonite and frenzied activity of the hogmen made her look again. What appeared to be a giant claw was descending into the pit. The small hogmen were busily adjusting controls on the platform while the claw seemed to tighten on something in the pit, accompanied by the screaming and cracking of hardening metal. Then, with a whine, it started to withdraw, and the platform Solo had been standing on rose, revealing to Leia the full horror of what had happened.

Embedded in a carbonite slab was Solo. His hands were up, as though trying to defend himself and the grimace on his face screamed nothing but pain. Leia felt a sob bubble up from deep in her chest and, clinging tightly to the Wookiee, held her breath to stop it from bursting.

Two of the hogmen tested the carbonite with their hands and, satisfied that it was hard enough, pushed the upright slab over onto its back. It hit the platform with a resounding *smack* and Leia flinched like she'd been struck.

Calrissian moved around to kneel beside the slab and it was then that she noticed the controls and flickering display lights in its side.

"Well, Calrissian?" Vader growled. "Did he survive?"

Leia watched as the administrator adjusted some of the controls, unable to breathe until she heard his answer.

"Yes, he's alive," Calrissian finally responded. "And in perfect hibernation."

Leia closed her eyes as the wave of relief that washed over her threatened to reduce her to tears. She heard Vader tell Fett, "He's all yours, bounty hunter," and opened her eyes to look at the slab once more.

Han...

Vader turned to the officer nearby and said, "Reset the chamber for Skywalker."

Leia looked at him then, suddenly understanding. This was what he planned to do to Luke... Her eyes strayed back to the slab and she frowned. How powerful did he think Luke was?

One of the black-clad officers approached down the stairs and Vader turned to look at him.

"Skywalker has just landed, my Lord."

"Good," Vader said, and Leia shared a worried glance with Chewbacca. "See to it that he finds his way in here."

Calrissian moved around to Leia, but she was staring at the slab of metal that had been Han. The hogmen were attaching repulsors to it. Calrissian tried to take her arm but Leia jerked it out of his grasp and Chewbacca growled threateningly at him.

"Calrissian," Vader said suddenly. "Take the princess and the Wookiee to my ship."

Calrissian regarded the Dark Lord with affront. "You said they'd be left in the city under my supervision!" he protested.

"I am altering the deal," Vader said darkly. "Pray I don't alter it any further."

Leia felt a tingling at the back of her brain and looked at Calrissian in time to see him rubbing his throat warily. She looked at Vader and knew instinctively that he had used the Force to tighten the man's throat briefly. Just enough to warn him. Vader regarded her for a moment and Leia wondered if he realised that she had felt him. Then the Dark Lord swept up the stairs and out of the chamber.

Once again Leia found herself part of a procession through Cloud City's corridors, but this time there was no Han. Instead, Chewbacca was walking in front of her, flanked by stormtroopers, and in front of him were Calrissian and an Imperial officer. There were two more stormtroopers behind her, but Leia could not have cared less. All she could think about was Han.

She knew she should be worrying about where she was going, about what Vader had planned for her and, more importantly, what he had planned for Luke, but none of that seemed to matter any more. The fact that Luke had apparently arrived in the city worried her, but not enough to take her mind off what had just happened to Han.

She suspected that Fett would present him to the Hutt in the carbonite; a trouble free cargo. But what the Hutt might do to a freshly defrosted and helpless Solo didn't bare thinking about. And the sort of state Solo would be in when he was set free was anybody's guess.

Leia was so engrossed in her own thoughts that when the accompanying stormtroopers started firing down an adjacent corridor at someone, she found herself wondering what the hell was going on.

Whoever it was they were firing back, and Leia found herself being grabbed and dragged out of the line of fire by the Imperial officer.

Chewbacca, it seemed, had been much more attentive, and howled a warning down the adjacent corridor, [It's a trap! Go back, it's a trap!]

Luke.

Knowing Luke would not have understood the Wookiee, Leia shrieked, "Luke! It's a trap!"

She thought she saw a flicker of movement in the adjacent corridor and hung on to the hatchway as the officer tried to drag her through.

"Luke, don't!" she yelled. "It's a trap!"

Then she was pulled through and the hatch was shut.

Luke...

They had not gone much further, when armed Cloud City guards suddenly surrounded them and Leia watched in amazement as Lando proceeded to disarm the Imperials. He handed Leia two blasters and said quietly to the aide, Lobot, who had brought the guards, "Well done. Hold them in the security tower and keep it *quiet*. Move."

As Lobot and the guards moved away with the Imperials, Calrissian set about removing the binders from Chewbacca's wrists.

"What do you think you're doing?" Leia demanded.

"Getting you out of here," Calrissian replied.

The binders finally came away and, roaring, Chewbacca immediately started strangling the administrator, forcing him to his knees. He was swearing a blue streak, but the only part that Leia properly understood was, [You traitorous fuck!]

She shook her head at Calrissian, totally unsympathetic to the man's strangled gasps. "Do you think that after what you did to Han we're going to trust you?"

"I had no choice..." Calrissian croaked, tugging vainly at the Wookiee's hands.

"Oh, we understand, don't we Chewie?" Leia snapped sarcastically. "He had *no choice*."

"I'm just trying to help..."

Outraged, Leia hissed, "We don't *need* any of your help!"

"Haaaa-" Calrissian croaked.

"What?" Leia said, but made no attempt to call Chewbacca off. The way she felt at the moment, watching the Wookiee strangle the life out of Han's *friend* could be the one bright spot in what had become a very dark day.

"Haaaan," Calrissian gasped. "There's still a chance to save... Han... at the east... platform..."

Feeling a surge of hope, Leia looked at Chewbacca and said sharply, "Chewie."

Chewbacca dropped the administrator and hurried down the corridor after the princess.

It quickly became apparent to both of them that they would need Calrissian's cooperation to *find* the east platform. And with a shared look of irritation, they waited for the administrator to catch up.

"This way," he growled as he ran past them.

Leia's irritation was growing exponentially as they hurried from one corridor to the next. She was trying to calculate how much time Fett had already had, and it was not comforting. If the bounty hunter was still in the city at all, it would be only just.

She heard a familiar whistle behind them and, pausing to look, she recognised Luke's Artoo unit. She looked for Luke in the vain hope that he had managed to find them somehow, but he was not with the droid.

Chewbacca roared at the droid to keep up and they finally reached the east platform. Calrissian got the hatch open just in time for them to watch the bounty hunter's ship take off.

Take off and fly away with all her hope.

Leia could have wept. *Would* have wept if they hadn't suddenly come under fire from stormtroopers. She and Chewie took cover on either side of the hatch and Calrissian bunched up beside her.

"I'll get you to the *Falcon*," he told her, then ducked back inside as she succeeded in shooting the trooper who had them pinned down.

Chewbacca fired a couple more shots then followed Calrissian, Leia hot on his heels.

More corridors and Leia was ready to scream, but these ones were populated, which hampered their ability to fire on their pursuers. Unfortunately, the reverse was not true and Leia felt a renewed flare of rage as two innocent bystanders were felled by the Imperials' fire.

Finally they reached the entrance to the platform holding the Falcon and Calrissian hurriedly punched in the code to open it. Nothing happened and he scowled.

“Security codes have been changed,” he muttered.

Leia looked at Chewbacca, hoping for a miracle. Fix it, her eyes told him. Fix it so it works. Chewbacca looked down at Artoo Detoo who had managed to keep up with them all this way.

[Plug in!] he ordered the droid. [Order the city computer to open it!]

Artoo plugged into the terminal and Leia gritted her teeth, waiting impatiently. It wouldn't take the Imperials long to figure out they'd probably head straight for the *Falcon*.

Calrissian took the opportunity to use a code that hadn't been changed and activated the city-wide announcement system.

“Attention!” he said, speaking into it, and Leia heard his voice echo through the city. “This is Lando Calrissian. The Empire has taken control of the city. I advise everyone to leave before more Imperial troops arrive.”

The chaos was immediate. People started rushing in all directions. And while she knew Calrissian had made the announcement for his people's sake, Leia couldn't help seeing the advantage in not being the only ones running.

Artoo whistled triumphantly and a moment later the door opened. And, with impeccable timing, the stormtroopers arrived.

The *Falcon* was sitting at the end of the platform, bathed golden and red in the light of the sunset, and looked like the most welcoming thing Leia had ever seen. If they could just get to it. The stormtroopers had them pinned down, just inside the hatch.

Abruptly, Artoo Detoo started venting smoke. A thick cloud that obscured the troopers view of the entrance. Without needing to be told, Leia, Chewie and Calrissian bolted for the ship, Artoo Detoo close behind.

Chewbacca hurtled up the ramp and Leia followed him straight to the cockpit. She slid into the pilot's seat, rushing to help the Wookiee get the engines on-line. She was dimly aware of hearing the ramp close and was not surprised when Calrissian entered the cockpit a moment later. It wasn't like the troopers would have let him live after the *Falcon* had lifted off. They had no choice but to take him with them. Leia could only hope that Calrissian would be as uncomfortable with the arrangement as they were.

For a moment she found herself wondering what was happening to Luke; wondered if he'd been caught, and felt a wave of overwhelming guilt that they were abandoning him. If they left now there was a chance they would catch up

with Fett before he went to hyperspace, but could she abandon Luke to the same fate as Solo?

Leia faltered for a moment and Chewbacca barked irritably at her. Forcing herself to stop thinking, Leia let her reflexes cut in and silently thanked Solo for taking the time to teach her how to fly the *Falcon*.

As the *Falcon* rose from the platform, it occurred to Leia to wonder how much of the ship Calrissian's people had managed to fix.

Without taking her eyes off the vista of spires now moving past the ship as she piloted it away from the city, Leia asked, "Chewie. The hyperdrive?"

[Is fixed,] the Wookiee replied, busily trying to locate the bounty hunter's ship on the scanners.

Two TIE fighters fell out of the clouds in front of them, spitting green fire, and Leia rolled the ship sharply, spiralling underneath the fighters before they had time to adjust their vectors. One of the green bolts splashed harmlessly against the *Falcon's* shields and Leia spared a second to take in the ship's shield status, relieved to find it at optimum.

Ignoring the fighters, Leia concentrated on getting as much speed from the *Falcon* as possible, hoping she could simply outrun them. The last thing she wanted to do was waste time in a firefight.

"Chewie, I need a vector," she snapped.

[There's no sign of him,] Chewbacca growled irritably. [Two Star Destroyers and Vader's ship in geosync with Cloud City, but no sign of Fett.]

"Could he be hyper already?" she asked, unable to disguise the edge of panic in her voice.

Chewbacca shook his head and Calrissian argued, "He wouldn't have had to dodge the Imps; there is a chance he's gone hyper." Chewbacca turned and growled viscously at their unwelcome passenger. Calrissian held his hands up, defensive and submissive all at once. "But you know where he's going!" he protested. "Solo's a hot cargo; Fett is *not* going to mess around and risk having to battle it out with some other bounty hunter. He's going to take him straight to Tatooine."

Leia and Chewie shared a look while outside the ship the atmosphere thinned to vacuum and the ship's speed increased dramatically as a result.

[What about Skywalker?] Chewbacca asked quietly and Leia winced. She had no idea what they could do to help Luke. How had he even *known* where they were? How had he got to Cloud City only hours after their own arrival?

Leia shook her head. "If we go back we'll be caught." *And then how will we save Han?* Leia gasped mentally, astounded at her own selfishness. She grimaced and said, "We don't even know where he is..." The justification sounded pathetic even to her own ears. They all knew where Luke was most likely to be. In the carbon-freezing chamber. The thought of Luke frozen into a block of metal like Solo almost paralysed her. He had come to Cloud City to save her and now she was abandoning him. But what good would she be to Luke if the *Falcon* was captured?

"Tatooine or Nal Hutta?" Leia asked Calrissian without looking at him.

"Tatooine, without a doubt," he replied. "Jabba isn't very fond of Nal Hutta. Too much family competition."

Leia looked at Chewie and made up her mind. "Tatooine it is," she said. She turned to program the navicomp and an insistent beeping alerted them to an approaching ship.

"TIE fighters," Calrissian said, reading the scanner. "A whole flock of them."

"Damn!" Leia growled, then snapped, "Chewie, take evasive action until I can get these coordinates set."

"Want me in the turret?" Calrissian offered.

"I want to outrun them if we can," Leia muttered, hurriedly punching coordinates into the navicomp. "Not waste energy in a-"

Leia.

Leia froze. The voice in her head was as clear as a bell and the pain in it was unmistakable.

Leia, hear me!

"Luke," she whispered. So much pain, so much desperation in his plea. She could *feel* him, could feel his pain. Had he been put in carbonite?

Leia.

Leia could almost see him in her mind's eye, hanging on for dear life. Hanging from something fragile *under* Cloud City. Frightened by this new turn of events, Leia turned to look at Chewie and found herself the wary scrutiny of both Chewbacca and Calrissian.

"We've got to go back," she told the Wookiee.

Calrissian and the Wookiee both said, "*What?*"

"I know where Luke is," Leia told Chewbacca.

"But what about those fighters?" Calrissian protested.

Leia knew she didn't have time to explain. Wasn't sure she *could* explain.

"Chewie, just do it," she said, and her eyes begged him, *Trust me*.

"But what about Vader?" Calrissian demanded and Chewbacca roared at him, reminding the administrator that he would rather follow the princess into the Emperor's palace than take advice from a traitorous former friend.

"All right, all right, all right," Calrissian soothed, but gripped the armrests of his seat as the *Falcon* banked and flew straight at the oncoming TIE fighters.

The *Falcon* barrelled through the formation, trading red blasts for green.

"Shields down to eighty percent," Calrissian reported.

Then they were back in the atmosphere, the TIE fighters hot on their tail. Leia had surrendered the flying to Chewie so she could concentrate on the strange sensation that was her awareness of Luke.

"Under," she told the Wookiee as they approached the city. "Under the city."

The airspace around Cloud City was swarming with starships of every description. Sentients abandoning their homes.

Weaving their way through the traffic, which helped to hamper the TIE fighters, Chewbacca brought the Falcon around under the city and Calrissian pointed and voiced with surprise, "Look, someone's up there."

Leia could just make him out. Hanging from what looked like a weather vane. As she watched, a piece of the vane broke off and Luke almost fell.

"It's Luke," she said with certainty, refusing to let herself panic. "Chewie, slow down. Slow down and we'll get under him." As the Wookiee complied, Leia jerked her thumb at the port side of the ship. "Lando open the top hatch."

Calrissian hurried out of the cockpit and Leia leaned forward, watching as the gap between Luke and the ship closed. "Okay, easy, Chewie," she said. Then he was out of sight from the cockpit. "Lando?"

Calrissian hastily buckled a safety harness around his hips and rode the platform up through the top hatch. Locking the safety line to the ship, he fought the urge to duck as the *Falcon* came dangerously close to the underside of the city. He knew it was actually much further away than it seemed, but he also knew that it would only take the *Falcon* a second to close that distance and effectively squash him. The man Chewbacca and the princess had identified as Luke Skywalker was hanging from an electronic weather sensor and Calrissian frowned, wondering how the hell the man had got there.

The wind was fierce, forcing the Cloud City administrator to stay low as he struggled out onto the hull lest he be swept off. He winced as the weather vane suddenly broke under Skywalker's weight and he fell the distance to the hull. Despite the fact that they seemed horribly close to the underside of the city, Skywalker had just fallen at least ten metres.

Calrissian staggered across the hull to him and had just managed to successfully connect him to his own safety harness when TIE fighter fire exploded around the ship. The *Falcon* was gathering speed again, moving away from the city, and Calrissian flattened himself against the hull as it banked sharply to avoid a collision with a civilian ship.

He looked at Skywalker as he waited for the *Falcon* to level out. The man was covered in abrasions and looked barely conscious.

The minute the *Falcon* seemed stable enough, Calrissian got a firm grip on him and started dragging him towards the hatch. Thankfully Skywalker was conscious enough to help and Calrissian encouraged, "Come on, kid."

Skywalker mumbled something that sounded like "Han?" and Calrissian felt a wave of guilt and regret wash over him. Here was someone else who would condemn him for his betrayal of Solo.

A TIE fighter roared overhead, so close Calrissian could see its pilot, and the resulting adrenaline surge got him to the hatch. He dragged Skywalker onto the platform and activated its decent as he clambered on himself, holding Luke upright as they moved down the narrow tunnel through the hull.

He could hear Leia demanding to know his progress over the comm and replied wearily, "I got him. Let's go."

He hung on to Luke as the ship dipped suddenly, throwing them both against the bulkhead, and could feel him shivering with cold and shock. Grabbing a blanket from the bunk over the acceleration couch, Calrissian put it around Skywalker's shoulders and helped him towards the cockpit.

Leia met them in the hatchway and Calrissian heard the young man whimper, "Oh, Leia," as he relinquished him into her arms.

She led him away and Calrissian took her place in the pilot's seat.

"All right, Chewie," he said. "Let's go."

Leia led Luke back to the bunkroom and helped him onto the medbunk. She could tell from a glance that the young man had been severely beaten. By what, she could only guess. His clothing was torn, and he was covered in abrasions. Nothing that had caused any great blood loss fortunately, although, she reminded herself, she had no idea what state his insides were in.

The ship, under heavy fire from the pursuing TIE fighters, pitched suddenly and Luke cried out as Leia fell against him. It was a helpless, reactive cry of pain and Leia hurriedly found her feet, deciding that he might well have some broken bones.

Untangling the blanket from his right arm, the one she had fallen against, she started to check it, and was horrified to discover his hand was missing. It had been cut off just above his wrist. Cut off and the stump cauterised.

Leia gasped and covered her mouth with her hand. "Luke!" It was more a sob than a word and her eyes filled with tears.

He murmured her name in a strangled response, and for the first time she looked at his eyes. And saw total desolation.

She looked back at the stump where his hand had once been and felt suddenly certain that she was looking at a lightsabre wound. *Vader*. Vader had cut Luke's hand off.

First Han, now Luke...

Leia arrested a train of thought she knew would leave her sobbing in a corner somewhere. Luke was in agony and she needed to deal with that *now*. Activating the data-centre of the medbunk, she put in a vocal request pertaining to amputation, and received directions on pain relief and bandaging.

Loading a hypodermic infuser with the recommended medication and silently blessing Han for keeping the medbunk properly stocked, she shot it into Luke's neck, then considered for a moment and gave him a second dose. If it knocked him out, that would probably be a good thing.

The ship bucked again, making her stagger, and she could faintly hear Chewbacca and Calrissian yelling at each other.

Irritation flared in her and she vowed that as soon as she got Luke settled she would go out there and knock their heads together.

The amputation wound was oozing a small amount of blood and fluid and the medbunk data was telling her she would have to set up a drain before bandaging. Leia searched the drawers, found the equipment it was telling her to use, and set about attaching it to Luke's arm.

He winced as she moved the arm to cut his jacket sleeve away, but Leia suspected that was a reaction to pain from yet to be seen bruising rather than the amputation. Plus she still hadn't checked him for broken ribs.

With the clutter of his sleeve removed, she could see his arm clearly. The wound itself looked clean, but his arm was filthy. Encrusted with dirt and what looked like dried slime. Looking at his clothes, Leia could see they were much the same, and couldn't help wondering where Luke had been.

She flushed the wound with sterile water, holding it tightly and apologising as Luke flinched and gasped. The skin at the sight was burned and blackened, and Leia could clearly see one of his forearm bones. According to the medbunk, if she was going to leave it suitable for a prosthetic attachment, she would have to make sure the wound itself did not heal, yet had to keep the tissue from necrotising and becoming infected.

She wrapped a cast around his forearm and strapped a small pump to it. A recirculating system of tubes had the stump of his arm in a medicated saline solution that was replaced every ten minutes.

Leia clung to the bulkhead over the medbunk as the ship rolled suddenly and felt a surge of anger that they weren't in hyperspace already. With Luke out of immediate danger, she decided to go and give the two idiots in the cockpit a piece of her mind.

"I'll be back," she assured him, and kissed him briefly on the lips. Then she stalked toward the cockpit.

As she was passing through the main hold, she noticed a box beside the acceleration couch. A box she had last seen in their cell on Cloud City. Beside it, Artoo Detoo was painstakingly putting See Threepio back together.

Visions of Han flooded through her and Leia hurried to the cockpit to stop herself from thinking about him.

“Why aren’t we in hyperspace?” she demanded, then hastily stepped aside as the Wookiee surged past her.

[No hyperdrive!] he spat and vanished into the main hold.

Leia turned a withering gaze on Calrissian who protested from the pilot’s seat, “They told me they fixed it! It’s not my fault!”

Leia moved into the copilot’s seat to check the ship’s status, and wondered sourly whether Calrissian was the one who had taught Han that phrase. There was a Star Destroyer to starboard and Vader’s Super Star Destroyer was moving from port to cut them off. The *Falcon*’s shields were down to twenty-five percent, they had no hyperdrive, and that Super Star Destroyer would have a tractor beam on them in minutes. Leia wiped a hand across her face and wondered what else she could do.

Watching his son choose certain death had not been an easy thing for Darth Vader. He really had expected the boy to come with him. Nevertheless, a small nudge with the Force had made certain the boy didn’t splatter himself against the city walls and now he was safely on board the *Millennium Falcon*.

Standing on the bridge of his flagship, Vader turned from his study of the speck of light that was the fleeing Corellian freighter as Admiral Piett approached.

“They’ll be in range of our tractor beam in moments, my lord,” the Admiral reported.

“Did your men deactivate the hyperdrive on the *Millennium Falcon*?” Vader asked.

“Yes, my lord.”

“Good. Prepare the boarding party and set your weapons for stun.”

"Yes, my lord."

As Piett moved away, Vader turned back to his study of the battle going on outside the viewport. Reached out with the Force to touch his son.

Luke.

The boy's response was unguarded and immediate.

Father.

Vader felt a swelling of pride that the young man's heart knew the truth even if his head continued to deny it.

Son, he communicated gently, come with me.

He could feel the boy's distress, his mental and physical pain, his overwhelming feeling of betrayal. And, with the skill of a Sith Lord, Vader focussed the boy's thoughts on the betrayal. Felt the boy's desperate plea, *Ben... why didn't you tell me?*

In the main hold of the Millennium Falcon, beside the acceleration couch, Artoo Detoo had managed to attach See Threepio's head and arms and was working on attaching a leg. The golden droid looked over at the displaced decking when, struggling in the hyperdrive pit, Chewbacca roared his frustration at the hyperdrive, unable to fathom why it wasn't working.

"Noisy brute," Threepio muttered. "Why don't we just go to light-speed?"

Artoo Detoo whistled a succinct answer and Threepio looked back at his friend, surprised. "We can't?" Threepio looked back at the cursing Wookiee as Artoo whistled some more, then regarded the smaller droid disdainfully. "How would you know the hyperdrive is deactivated?" he demanded. Artoo dutifully replied and Threepio repeated with disbelief, "The city's central computer told you? Artoo Detoo," he scolded, "you know better than to trust a strange computer!"

In retaliation, the astro droid deliberately soured a connection in the golden droid's leg.

"Ouch!" Threepio protested, then snapped, "Pay attention to what you're doing!"

Luke was aware of Leia frowning at him as he entered the cockpit, but sensed she didn't have the time to chastise or berate him for leaving the medbunk. The pain-killer she had given him had made the pain from his arm almost bearable and, with Vader so close, Luke had found himself unable to stay in the bunk. But the pain-killer had done nothing to stop the aching fear in his heart. Fear that next time he met the Dark Lord, he would *not* be able to fight.

The *Falcon* was running alongside the Super Star Destroyer in an attempt to lessen the attack from the pursuing TIE fighters. Staring out at the huge bulk of the Destroyer, Luke murmured, "It's Vader."

The dark-skinned man who had helped him into the *Falcon* was out of the pilot seat, trying to reprogram the hyperdrive. He helped Luke into the communications chair and they all ducked as the communications console sparked spectacularly and died. The man traded looks with the princess then yelled down the cockpit access, "*Chewie!*"

Luke wanted to ask them where Han was but didn't think he could cope with the answer. He could *feel* Vader. Could *feel* his presence. Thick, dark, *cloying*. So close...

Soon the Imperials would have a tractor lock on the Falcon and Yoda's prophecy would come true. Everything he and his friends had fought and suffered for would be for nothing. The Rebellion would be extinguished. All because *he* had refused to listen to not one, but *two* Jedi Masters, and rushed off too soon.

Luke.

The deep voice caressed his consciousness and Luke closed his eyes.

Luke, it is your destiny.

Luke winced and begged his old master, "Ben, why didn't you tell me?"

See Threepio was furious. Artoo Detoo had abandoned him with assurances that he could correct the fault with the hyperdrive and, convinced the astro droid was delusional, Threepio yelled at him, "Artoo come back here at once! You haven't finished with me yet!" He waved his unattached leg to accentuate his point. "You don't know how to fix the hyperdrive," he insisted. "Chewbacca can do it! I'm standing here in pieces and you're having delusions of grandeur!"

In the pit, Chewbacca had resorted to hitting the hyperdrive with the hydrospanner while Artoo extended an arm into the engineering station and turned a connection back on. Abruptly the hyperdrive control panel lit up and the *Falcon* lurched, throwing the well-intentioned droid into the pit on top of the Wookiee.

In the cockpit, Leia was thrown back into her seat while Calrissian was thrown to the floor, and Luke watched in hopeful disbelief as the *Falcon* leapt into hyperspace.

Vader could feel Admiral Piett's terror and disbelief as their quarry abruptly vanished into hyperspace. But Vader was not concerned. He knew where they would go.

"Admiral," he said calmly. "Set your course for Tatooine."

"Yes, my lord."

Secure in hyperspace, their destination set, Leia took a moment to compose herself, then looked at Luke. This was when she knew she would have trouble; when she had time to think. Time to mull over all that had just happened. Time to think about what had happened to Han.

She licked her lip and looked at Calrissian who had picked himself up off the floor and was checking their coordinates.

"Luke, this is Lando," she said stiffly, and Calrissian turned to smile over his shoulder at Luke. Leia felt suddenly and irrationally infuriated by the man's pleasant smile, and added stonily, "He's a friend of Han's."

Luke looked at Calrissian and said, "Thankyou, Lando. You saved my life."

Calrissian said nothing and Leia refused to look at him. Choosing instead to study Luke, looking for answers which would explain not just his condition, but why he had come to Cloud City at all. How could he have known they were there?

Luke's eyes caught hers and he asked softly, "Where's Han?"

Leia leapt out of her seat, moving to assuage the tears that threatened. "I have to get you back to the medbunk," she snapped bossily, and took his arm to lead him away.

Luke put his hand over hers and insisted, "Leia?"

Leia couldn't meet his eyes.

"Is he dead?" Luke asked.

Leia found herself unable to answer him but Calrissian quickly replied, "No."

"A bounty hunter has him," Leia said evasively, then insisted, "Come on, back to the medbunk."

Luke let her lead him from the cockpit and Leia suspected he had sensed the tension between herself and Calrissian.

"What happened?" she asked him as they turned into the main hold.

"Vader," he replied, and no more needed to be said. That one word was all the description Leia needed or could cope with at the moment.

Chewbacca was clambering out of the hyperdrive pit as they passed and barked a query after Luke's health. Leia assured the Wookiee that the young man would live, and Luke almost managed a smile.

As they entered the bunkroom, Luke observed, "You understood him."

"Mmm," Leia replied tightly. "Finally found the time to learn. Come on, back on the bunk."

"Need to use the head," Luke murmured and Leia flushed with embarrassment and let him go.

"Sorry," she said, and stepped aside to let him pass. Abruptly she remembered he was minus a hand and asked automatically, "Will you be alright? I mean..." Leia's embarrassment trebled. "Will you need help?"

Luke shook his head and moved out of the bunkroom towards the 'fresher. Suddenly alone, Leia didn't quite know what to do. She looked at the bunk she had been sharing with Han and found herself assaulted by the image of him frozen in carbonite. When only yesterday he had been with her in that bunk. Warm, vibrant, *alive*...

The low-level nausea that had been with her all day rose in intensity and she reacted instinctively by putting a hand over her mouth, then turned back to the medbunk. She still had to check Luke for broken bones as well as treat his abrasions, and determined to keep herself busy by getting ready to do just that. But every part of the bunkroom brought back memories of her time with Han.

She swallowed the bile that rose in her throat and forced herself to look for the med-scanner, opening drawers with hands that were starting to shake. The med-scanner which would tell her how badly Vader had beaten Luke. Beaten Luke then cut off his hand. After needlessly torturing Han and then callously testing a freezing process on him that was likely to kill him. Encasing him in carbonite and-

Leia bolted for the head. She remembered Luke was in there as she reached the hatchway, then doubled back to the galley and vomited into the refuse chute. Having had nothing to eat or drink all day, there was very little in her stomach to bring up, but the spasms continued nonetheless.

When it finally stopped, Leia cycled the chute and closed it, then momentarily leaned her forehead against the cool metal of the overhead cupboard while she waited for her temperature to drop back to normal. The bile had left a foul taste in her mouth, so she poured herself a glass of water, downed it quickly and headed back to the bunkroom.

Luke stared at the bulkhead over him without seeing it. He had slept, but it was far from restful, haunted by the terrible revelation that Vader was his father. Why had Ben lied? Why tell him that Vader had killed his father? And why hadn't Yoda corrected the untruth when he'd apparently *known* his father!

Luke shifted uncomfortably. His arm was hurting again, though not as much as his sides. When she'd inspected him earlier, Leia had found a torn ligament on his left side and two cracked ribs on his right side. The ligament would have to heal itself and, with no bone-knitter on the *Falcon*, until he got to a Medcentre, so would his ribs. Luke had been happy to immobilise his mutilated arm against his cracked ribs, thereby protecting those injuries, and the torn ligament had made sure he only moved for a very good reason.

He and Leia had spoken very little. She had told him very briefly what had happened to Han, and the fact that Han had suffered a fate meant for himself only exacerbated Luke's feeling of guilt.

It was obvious to Luke that Leia was devastated by the loss of the Corellian, but he didn't have the emotional wherewithal to process what that might mean. He was too emotionally shattered himself.

The loss of his hand was probably the most minor of his traumas. The loss of his sense of self and the feeling that he had been lied to all his life was far worse. And it always came back to Ben. *Why* hadn't the old Jedi told him the truth? He found himself replaying the old man's words over and over in his head, as though he might find something, some hint of the truth, but it was always the same.

Kenobi had said that *he* had trained Vader, and that Vader had become evil. Did that mean Vader hadn't always been bad? And if that was the case, when had *Luke* come into the equation? Was he born before or after his father had become the monster he was now? And what about his *mother*?

Luke closed his eyes, remembering the tiny holo Aunt Beru had given him when he was seven. An image of a woman she had told him was his mother. He remembered because his Uncle had caused a scene about it at the time. He had not wanted his nephew to have it, and Luke had never been able to comprehend why. He had treasured that image of his mother all his life, until it was destroyed with his home on that fateful day three years ago. To Luke she became the most beautiful woman in the galaxy, the one by which all other women were measured. And there were times when Leia reminded him so much of the woman in that tiny holo that he suspected that was where his initial infatuation with the princess had come from.

The thought of Vader with the woman in that holo was enough to turn Luke's stomach. Yet he had come from somewhere, hadn't he?

He took a shuddering breath, fighting the pain in his sides to do so, and heard Leia shift on the bunk nearby. A moment later she was hovering over him, looking at the bed's bio results and frowning.

"Leia," he croaked, and she *shushed* him.

“You’re running a temperature,” she said, sounding worried. “I’ll get you a drink.”

Luke wanted to dissuade her, but she was gone before he could gather enough air in his lungs to say anything. He had no idea how he would tell Leia about his parentage. Leia’s experiences with Vader had been nothing but catastrophic. And while he desperately wanted to share the burden, he knew he couldn’t bare the look of horror on her face. The *shame* he was feeling was unparalleled.

A moment later she was back, helping him to sip water from a cup. The water felt good and cool going down and Luke savoured it.

Leia was moving on autopilot. She helped Luke drink, helped him get comfortable, asked him if he wanted something to eat and was aware of his negative answer, but it was almost like watching someone else do it. She was struggling desperately not to let herself think about what had happened to Han, and was instead focussing her thoughts on rescuing him.

They had been in hyperspace for four hours now, and Tatooine was at least another four away. Leia hoped they would be able to catch up with Fett before he got to Jabba, but chances were they would have to face the crime lord himself. And for that they would need money. Lots of it. Calrissian had assured her he could help. Could call in favours, con, scam and gamble enough to hopefully buy Solo back. He assured her he knew Tatooine, and Chewbacca seemed to concur. So, it seemed, keeping Lando with them was advantageous for the present.

Lando himself seemed completely guilt-ridden for what he had done, but Leia’s pain was far too raw for her to feel anything but loathing for him. Once again she had let herself love and, once again, Vader had taken it from her in the most violent way possible. And Lando had helped him.

Lando was in the main hold now, trying to help Chewbacca repair the damage that had been done to the ship during their escape from Bepin. Already there had been two massive system failures, one of which had threatened to yank them out of hyperspace. And because it was Lando’s people who had helped ‘fix’ the ship on Bepin, Leia suspected that, if something else blew, Chewbacca would happily kill the former administrator. She suspected Calrissian knew it too.

Luke developing a temperature was an unforeseen complication. It meant infection was setting in, probably in the amputation wound. Leia added an anti-bacterial,

anti-viral to the saline solution in the cast but was worried that they may have to put off their rescue attempt to get Luke to a proper Medcentre. The only one safe enough was with the Rebel Alliance, and who knew where *they* were? But, as she had told Han en-route to Bespin, Tatooine was one of the safest places nearby for them to make rebel contact and find out the new coordinates for the Rebel Fleet. If they could rescue Han while they were there, so much the better.

There was a loud *bang* from the main hold that reverberated through the ship and Leia covered her face with her hands, knowing full well that something else on the ship had just blown. *Oh, Han...* her thoughts whimpered.

For Chewbacca it was the final straw. He bellowed loudly and stormed to where Calrissian was working. He should have listened to his instincts and never let the bastard work on the *Falcon* at all!

Calrissian had been thrown by the small explosion, his clothes singed and blackened. He was just picking himself up and looked fearfully at Chewbacca as he stormed in.

As Chewbacca took in just which systems the Cloud City administrator had totalled, he gave in to sheer rage.

[Calrissian, you *fuck*!] he roared. [You've killed the shields!]

"I wasn't anywhere near the shields!" Calrissian exclaimed defensively. "How the hell was I supposed to know you lunatics had re-routed communication subsystems through there?!"

[You don't know anything!!] Chewbacca shrieked. [I don't even know why you're here!] He loomed threateningly over the man. [After what you did to Han, we should have left you for Vader!]

"Chewie."

They both turned to look at the princess now standing in the doorway and Chewbacca growled at her. The last thing he needed was *royal* diplomacy! He had stopped himself from having it out with Calrissian since their escape and now that he was in the mood to give his rage full throttle he was not about to stop.

[You of all people should understand!] he snarled at her.

"I do," she agreed quietly. "But killing Lando's not the answer. If it wasn't for him, we'd be Vader's prisoners now."

Chewbacca gawped at her for a full half second, wondering if she hadn't suffered brain damage somewhere during their escape, then roared, [If it wasn't for *him*, Han would still be here!!]

The look in Leia's eyes darkened, emotional self-defence throwing diplomacy out the window. "And if this *stupid* ship's hyperdrive had worked we wouldn't have ended up on Bespin!"

[And if Han hadn't been obsessed with saving *your* ungrateful hide,] the Wookiee snarled maliciously, [he'd be alive now and probably enjoying Jabba's benevolent thanks on Tatooine!]

It was the ultimate accusation; laying full blame for everything on her. Leia stared at him in shock, then struggled to focus on the less hurtful of the two accusations.

"*Benevolent?*" she stammered, even she knew that the Hutt crime lord was anything but benevolent. "Benev-"

Words failed her suddenly, and Lando, now on his feet, saw the young woman's eyes fill with tears and sought helplessly to defuse the situation. "Han isn't dead," he said, carefully.

[He might as well be!] Chewbacca bellowed, turning on him. [What sort of vegetable do you think is going to come out of that slab, if we ever find it?!] Lando backed away as Chewbacca pressed home his point. [Have you even *considered* what the procedure will have done to his brain?]

Calrissian gave the Wookiee a tortured look and Leia finally found her voice, heavy with emotion. "So, what do you suggest?" she challenged, approaching the hostile behemoth. "That we *leave* him?" Her voice cracked. "*Forget* about him?"

[*No!*] he roared at her.

"Write him off like some-" Leia stammered despite the mammoth effort to control her emotions. "Some-" she tried again and failed, turning away from him, ashamed.

"The medic," Calrissian stammered fearfully. "The medic gave him stuff to help him survive-"

Both the Wookiee and the princess stared at him in shock, then Chewbacca growled dangerously, [You *knew*?] He took a step closer to Calrissian. [You *knew* what they were going to do to him and you *let* it happen?]

Calrissian shook his head. "I had no choice! It was Vader's orders! I did the best I could to make sure Han survived!"

There was a moment of deathly silence then the Wookiee roared and lunged at Calrissian who shrieked and leapt out of reach. Leia hastily put herself between them and Chewbacca howled at her to get out of the way.

"We need him to help us rescue Han," she snapped coldly, and Calrissian had no doubts that she would otherwise have let the Wookiee tear him limb from limb.

Chewbacca growled menacingly over the princess' head at him and Calrissian swallowed nervously. Sure, he had known the Wookiee for years, but he had also seen what the hairy giant was capable of, had seen him literally rip opponents apart. It was not a way he fancied dying.

"Without the stuff the medic gave him," Calrissian told the Wookiee sincerely, "Han would not have survived the freezing process at all."

Chewbacca glared at him for a long moment then moved over to the tech station and started ripping into the panel that had just exploded, while the princess stalked away down the ring corridor without looking back. Heading towards the bunkroom, Calrissian supposed.

He looked at Chewbacca, wanting to help and, anticipating his offer, the Wookiee hissed, [Stay out of my sight and touch *nothing*.]

Sighing, Calrissian decided to go to the 'fresher and see if he could save his shirt.

The hatchway was open when he got there and the princess was bowed over the head, vomiting. Calrissian felt deeply sorry for the young woman. She obviously loved Solo and was profoundly traumatised by all that had happened. And the accusations Chewbacca had levelled at her wouldn't have helped. He was about to move away when he realised that she had noticed him and felt he couldn't walk away without saying something.

"I know it's not my place," he said awkwardly, "but if there's anything I can do to help...?"

The young woman did not look at him as she replied tersely, "You're right; it's not your place. Shut the door on your way out."

Calrissian nodded and shut the hatch.

He moved on to the bunkroom, wondering how upset Leia and Chewie would be if he wore one of Han's shirts while he waited for the autovalet to clean his.

Leia cycled the lavatory, but remained kneeling in front of it, her head in her hands. She felt completely wretched. Chewbacca's comments had cut her more deeply than he would ever know. And while she knew they were words cast in pain and anger, there was no denying the truth of them. If Solo had not gone back for her on Hoth, chances were he *would* have been on Tatooine now.

The logical part of her mind reminded her that he would still have been without a hyperdrive, but the logical part of her mind was not the part she was listening to. All Leia could think of was what had happened to Han and that it was all her fault.

The exertion of vomiting had made her eyes water, and they were still watering. She blinked her eyes in an attempt to clear them, but the image of the carbonite slab kept coming back to haunt her, and now the tears were starting to flow. She tried to stop them, but could not be bothered wiping them away. Instead she watched, unseeing, as they dripped unmolested into the bowl below.

Leia told herself she should go back to Luke, but she needed to be alone for a moment.

So alone...

Han had opened the door to her emotions and now she couldn't shut it. She started to sob then angrily swallowed it. She would *not* allow herself to wallow in sadness or self-pity; didn't have time to. How could she rescue Han when she was blubbering like some helpless noblewoman?

Leia took a deep breath, got to her feet and mechanically washed her face over the washbasin. Solo was *not* dead, she kept telling herself, just *missing*. They

would find him and unfreeze him and all would be well. She had rescued fellow rebels before; she could do it again.

Avoiding her reflection in the small mirror over the washbasin, Leia turned and faced the hatch. She took a deep breath. The nausea had lessened, but was still there in the background. Leia knew she should probably eat something. Hunger always made her nauseous. But the thought of eating sickened her, and it would not lessen the aching hole in her heart.

Determined to carry on regardless, Leia opened the hatch and stepped out of the 'fresher. She took a step towards the bunkroom, heard Calrissian talking to Luke and her resolution faltered. Her eyes filled with tears and, disgusted with herself and unable to let Calrissian see her being emotional, Leia headed for the solitude of the cockpit.

She felt Chewbacca's eyes on her as she passed through the main hold, but Leia couldn't meet his gaze, afraid of the accusations she would see there. So she carried on to the cockpit and sat in Solo's chair, staring out at the maelstrom that was hyperspace.

I should be preparing, she told herself. Planning what they would do once they reached Tatooine. She found herself remembering how she had felt on the way to Yavin 4, after Luke and Han had rescued her from the Death Star. That awful, all encompassing numbness. But at least she had been able to function through it. The heartfelt pain she was feeling now was crippling.

She sighed and wiped a hand tiredly across her face, then rested her head on one forearm, wondering if she should try to sleep. Just an hour or two of blissful unconsciousness. But Leia suspected it would be anything but restful. No, safer to remain awake than be haunted by dreams she could not control.

The hatch slid open and she looked around sharply to see who it was. Chewbacca stepped into the cockpit and shut the hatch behind him. He was looking decidedly apologetic and Leia looked away. She didn't want to hear it.

[Little Princess,] he said, moving towards her. [I've come to apologise.] He stood awkwardly between the seats and added. [I did not mean what I said...]

Leia shook her head sharply, but still did not look at him. "No, you were right," she said quietly. "If I'd got to the transport in time none of this would have happened. *None* of it." Not Bespin, not the carbonite, not the forty days in his arms... Leia's lower lip started to tremble and she bit it, jammed her hands between her knees and tensed her whole body in an attempt to hold back the tears. *Goddess this pain is unbearable! Why can't I just go numb? Like I did after Alderaan...*

[Princess, I'm sorry,] Chewbacca rumbled softly. [I was lashing out. Lando infuriated me and...]

Leia tensed even further at the mention of Calrissian and a bead of blood blossomed on her lip because she was biting it so hard. Struggling so hard to keep her emotions in check that she was trembling. Gently, Chewbacca touched her shoulder and she flinched away. She licked the blood from her lip and got to her feet.

"I'd better check on Luke."

Chewbacca remained standing between her and the hatch. [Princess,] he murmured, [you are the best thing that ever happened to him.]

Leia wouldn't meet his gaze, but shook her head emphatically.

[You are,] Chewie insisted. [The 40 days before Bespin were the happiest I have seen Han in his life. And the happiest I have seen you, as well.]

A myriad of images from the last four weeks assaulted her and Leia sobbed, despite her efforts not to. All the memories she had been struggling so hard to suppress. She covered her face with one hand and said with a shuddering breath, "Stop it."

Chewbacca shook his head, [It needs to be said.]

"No it doesn't!" she snapped, seeking solace and control in anger. "You were right; I fucked up! We all fucked up! And Han and Luke paid the price!" She glared at him, daring him to dispute her.

Unfazed, Chewie assured her, [He loved you more than life itself and I fully intend to honour his final wish. I will protect you until he returns, or die trying.]

Tears welled up in Leia's eyes and she shook her head. "And have your blood on my hands as well?" Chewbacca embraced her and she tried to pull away. "No, Chewie, please-" But his strength was inexorable compared to hers and she found herself held tightly. "...don't..." she murmured against his sternum. *Please don't. Don't be nice to me; I won't be able to stop myself from crying if you're nice to me. I need to be strong! Need to be strong for Han; need to be strong enough to **find** Han... Need...Han. Goddess, I need him!*

Leia's resolve vanished and she clung to the Wookiee, still trying desperately not to cry. Then Chewbacca sat, cradling her in his arms, and told her gently, [I need to be comforted too.] And Leia wept.

Han's clothes. He was wearing *Han's* clothes. His presumption infuriated her. Left her quaking with an irrational rage that left her unable to be in the same room as him. How dare he? How *dare* he?

After spending an hour talking with Chewbacca, Leia had finally gone back to the bunkroom to check on Luke and found Calrissian sitting on the bunk, chatting to him. The first thing she had noticed was the small stack of food containers and she was about to thank him, both for keeping Luke company as well as feeding him. Then she had noticed his clothes.

Leia knew the earlier explosion in the main hold had damaged Calrissian's clothes but to find him wearing Solo's...

Calrissian must have identified her outrage because he got to his feet and apologised hastily, "It's just until mine come out of the autovalet-"

Leia said nothing. She wanted to slap him then throw him out the airlock. But she simply settled for glaring at him and moving to check Luke.

"He's doing great," Lando offered enthusiastically. "His temperature was up, but it's coming down nicely-"

Leia cut him off icily, "When I want your opinion, Lando, I'll ask for it."

Luke touched her hand and said, "Leia."

Leia paused her examination of the medbunk's evaluation of Luke's current physical status long enough to give him a look that told him she was in no mood for conciliatory lectures. Luke, of course, ignored it.

"Leia, he's on our side."

Leia couldn't help herself. "Well, I'm not on *his*," she snarled.

She turned to storm out but found Chewbacca in the hatchway holding Solo's jacket. Leia frowned, knowing the item had been left in their cell on Cloud City. Then Chewbacca held up his other hand, and in it was Solo's holster and blaster. Simmering with unexpressed ire and distress, Leia was rendered speechless.

[They were in the box with Threepio,] Chewie growled.

Leia and Chewbacca both looked at Calrissian for an explanation.

“My aide, Lobot, probably put them in there when he put the box on the *Falcon*,” he offered penitently. “I asked him to put the droid on board...”

The Wookiee and the princess shared a look, then she took the jacket while Chewbacca secured the blaster and holster in its place at the head of Solo's bunk.

Clutching the jacket, Leia stalked out of the room.

As she headed down the ring corridor towards the cockpit, it occurred to Leia to wonder whether Calrissian had spent any time in the Imperial surveillance room on Cloud City. Had he sat there with Vader and the rest of the surveillance officers, watching while she and Han made love? Suddenly the underwear he had sent to their room made horrible sense. Of course he had.

Leia paused in the hatchway to the cockpit and held the jacket up to her face. It smelled strongly of Han and, closing her eyes, for a fraction of a second she was able to believe he was there beside her. Then reality came crashing back and she had to take a deep breath to stop herself from becoming emotional.

Leia slipped the jacket on. It was big enough on her to fit easily over her snowsuit. She didn't need it for warmth, in fact she would probably be hot in it. But it was a comfort. And at least if *she* was wearing it, Lando wouldn't be able to!

She was moving to sit in Solo's chair when the ship bucked suddenly and she was thrown violently onto the console. Outside the cockpit window, the maelstrom of hyperspace was reverting to starlines and Leia, thinking her fall had caused their reversion, screamed for Chewie while frantically trying to figure out what she had done.

The starlines had settled to stars, but were still spiralling around them unhealthily. Wherever they were, the ship was tumbling. She checked the navicomputer to see where they were, but it was still doing the equations.

Then she saw it roll into view. Vader's Super Star Destroyer. And Chewbacca lunged into the cockpit.

[What happened?] he demanded.

“We've been Interdicted,” she said numbly.

The Falcon's tumble arrested suddenly, making them stagger as the inertial compensators struggled to cope.

[They've got a tractor lock on us,] Chewbacca reported, sliding into his seat. [See if you can find the point of origin and we'll blast it!]

Leia tore her gaze from the massive ship outside, which was getting closer by the second, to frown at the Wookiee. Behind her, Calrissian and Skywalker entered the cockpit.

"That's not a Star Destroyer, Chewie," she argued. "I'm sure they have more than one tractor beam."

[I'm not going down without a fight!] he roared.

Leia shook her head incredulously at him. "You can't fight!" she told him hotly. "You'll tear the ship apart!"

[We got away from them at Bespin!] he argued.

"They didn't have an Interdiction field set up at Bespin!" Leia checked the navicomputer to see if it could tell them where they were and said to nobody in particular, "We're just outside the Tatooine system."

[They knew where we were going,] Chewbacca inferred darkly, and he and Leia both looked accusingly at Calrissian.

Calrissian took a step back and protested, "I didn't know where we were going! How could I have told them?"

"Vader knew you would try to rescue Han," Luke said flatly, and the truth of his statement silenced everybody.

My decision, Leia thought. *Once again, it's all my fault.* She looked across at Luke and saw grim resignation on his face. Vader was doing all this to capture *him*. Luke knew it and Leia suspected he knew why.

Chewbacca was muttering and cursing bitterly as he shut the *Falcon's* drive down and they all stared as the Super Star Destroyer filled the viewport.

"Why?" Leia asked, looking at Luke. "Why does he want you?"

Luke looked sadly at her and said, "He's my father."

end

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