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Point of No Return

by [Skye Rutherford](#)

(with creative input by co-conspirator and friend, Sandy Williams)

Forward

_"Wonderful girl! Either I'm gonna kill her or I'm beginning to like her!" _

The latter part of that statement had confused Han Solo more than he would ever be willing to admit. The princess was certainly a firebrand and he did like her spirit; she obviously preferred confrontations that were straight up, no hidden punches. And she had no problem looking anyone in the eye when she had something to say. But did she have to say so much? Couldn't she just--shut up?

No one, but no one, had ever infuriated him as much as her.

In the little time since they'd been thrown into one another's company he'd been shot at, dumped into a garbage compactor, ordered around like he was a lowly vassal, had his best friend -- and his ship -- insulted and now he was outrunning a squadron of Imperial tie-fighters and a battle station with more firepower than anything the galaxy had ever seen to date. All because of her!

Was it so much, he asked himself, to get his debt to Jabba paid off and get on with his life? His mind was plagued with unanswerable questions. Why did that old man have to come into the very cantina I'd been at? Did someone hang a flashing sign over my head that said, "For Hire: sucker"? My luck can't be this bad--can it?

What was supposed to be a highly profitable 'milk-run' from Tatooine to Alderann had become a waking nightmare that he hadn't bargained for, much less wanted

any part of and more than likely he wouldn't get paid anywhere near the trouble it was all worth. The old man had mentioned 'no Imperial entanglements' and Han had been willing to oblige. But this? This was more than 'entanglement'; it was suicide! And he hadn't minded telling everyone that either! Whatever the old man was involved with, Han decided, wasn't his fight and it certainly wasn't his fault!

On top of it all, he'd let himself get talked into helping Luke on a rescue mission, a fact that irked him to no end. Getting involved in someone else's matters, he heatedly reminded himself, never paid off! _ If I ever do something this stupid again, Chewie can kick my rangy ass from the Outer Rim to the Core and back out to the Uncharted Territories. I should have made the price for this trip twice what I asked for. Payment up front and in full!_

Suddenly his ship lurched and rocked as a bolt of enemy fire struck; from the opposite side of the firewall he heard an all too familiar, all too irritating voice complain that his co-pilot couldn't steer a hover bus through a school zone.

"Rescue a princess," Han muttered in an imitation of Luke's voice. "'She's rich' the kid said. 'More than you can imagine.' Well, my imagination needs an overhaul! No reward is worth this!"

Squirming his way between two overlapping ducts, the Corellian grunted and wiped the sweat from his eyes and forehead. "You're a lunatic, Solo," he admonished himself out loud. "How do I get mixed up in these things?"

Nothing had gone as he'd planned from the moment he'd met Kenobi and Luke. He had an uncomfortable sense that fate was taking him to a point of no return. He didn't like it. Not a bit. "Have I said I have a very bad feeling about this?"

Chapter 1: "We do not have much of a choice."

"I found it!" Han Solo's voice echoed throughout the YT-1300 Corellian light stock freighter. Holding a tiny device in the palm of his right hand, a wry grin betrayed a show of mercenary triumph as he tossed his prize into the air, watched it tumble end over end, its brushed silver casing reflected in the gleam of his eyes. Catching it deftly, Solo closed his hand into a fist. "Tried to hide a tracking device on you, huh, sweetheart?" he said to his ship. "Well, we'll see about that, won't we?" He reached for the mobile headset that lay about his neck and positioned it correctly. Speaking into the tiny mic, he contacted his co-pilot and gave specific instructions.

The Wookiee confirmed the orders and began to execute them without question or hesitation. Long ago he had learned to trust Solo's ideas, no matter how insane they seemed.

"Where was it?" Came Luke's voice from the upper gun turret.

"In the environmental system. How's it goin' up there, kid?"

"A couple of 'em are hot on our tail. They're not gonna be easy to shake."

Solo gave a short laugh. "More fun all around. Can you handle it up there okay? I'm gonna try to add some spice to this game."

"I got it."

Han smiled. He liked Luke. The kid was good in a fight and he wasn't a bad shot. Maybe he'd want to sign on with him and Chewie when all this was over? Mentally, Solo made a note to bring that up--later.

As the smuggler jogged down the curving corridor toward the weapons bay, his 'royal' passenger nearly collided with him as the ship banked hard to port; Chewie was trying to shake the remaining tie fighters off their tail. The princess found herself thrown against the Corellian's chest.

Without thinking, he reacted, catching her about the waist. Together, they swayed like drunken dancers, bouncing off one padded bulkhead and then the other as the freighter swooped from side to side. Once the ship eased into a more level path, both sighed in relief. Still holding one another, their faces were mere centimeters apart. Seal brown eyes held those of gold-flecked hazel, revealing something between outward embarrassment and inner surprise.

"Let me go," Leia breathed, her mouth set in a grim line.

Her face was a study of smooth porcelain; there was that particular quality of girlish innocence melding into womanhood. The pudginess of her cheeks and chin were being claimed by smoother, more graceful angles. Despite everything her recent ordeal as an Imperial prisoner showed -- the grey smudges of grime, fatigue, and pain -- she was beautiful. For one of the few times in his twenty odd years, Han found himself feeling uncertain and a bit nervous; it rocked him off balance worse than the pitching ship had. Through some fog that suddenly took over his brain, he barely heard her repeated, anxious request.

"Huh?" He cleared his throat a little and shook off the effect she'd had on him. "Oh. Yeah. Sure." He wondered what in hell he'd been thinking? Without another word he let go of her and strode to the weapons bay, shaking off the image of her face, the weight and feel of her slight form pressed against him. With every step he took away from her, he reaffirmed that he had, indeed, been mentally insane to let Luke talk him into helping rescue her.

Smoothing the disarray of dark cinnamon tresses that had whipped over her face, Leia gathered her composure. Being unceremoniously thrown into the Corellian pilot's arms had been an unforeseen, awkward moment. He'd had an

uncertain reaction on her, one she was too tired and too afraid to think about. She banished those thoughts away as she did her fatigue and bolted after him, curious to know what he was going to do with the tracking device. She was nearly breathless as she caught up to him. "Destroy that thing."

Concentrating on the task he had in mind, the Corellian did not look at her. As he retrieved a decoy the size of a smashball, he remarked evenly, "Giving me orders on my own ship is not the height of upper-crust etiquette, Your Royalness. Or didn't they teach you that smugglers and pirates are people too? "

The princess nodded sharply at the tracking device. "Just get rid of the thing. Quickly!"

Snatching a multitool, he quickly went to work on removing a small panel from the decoy's nose. "I don't know why I'm thinking I need a decoy to attach this little gem to when you'd do just as well."

Before she could volley a remark back at him, he added, "On second thought, with all the hot air your mouth enjoys generating, I ought to keep you around." He looked up from a tangle of exposed wires and shrugged. "There's plenty of backwater worlds that have serious problems with power generators. I could make a fortune with you! Whaddya say, Your Worship? Get out of politics and get to know the real people in the galaxy. Do something really useful with all that energy you have." He winked and smiled widely -- very widely -- knowing it would really insult her. "If things work out, I may even cut you in for a part of the profits."

Leia was vehement. "If things work out, we might just get through all this without you getting us killed in the process."

Continuing to work on the decoy, he shook his head. "The thanks I get for trying to be a nice guy. Well, sorry. It could've been a sweet deal. Guess I'll have to substitute you for one of the decoys after all." He glanced conspiratorially and hollered to Luke. "Hey kid, c'mon down here! I got an idea. Your princess is going to take this little gadget I found and lead the Imps to chase her while we get away."

In the turret, Luke rolled his eyes and grimaced. This was no time for kidding around and if anyone asked, he was already tired of hearing Han and the princess' verbal jousting matches. "Han," he yelled back, "Would you just get rid of that thing?"

"I'm tryin' to, kid!"

Chewbacca roared over the comm line and Han grinned. "No," he answered. "I don't want you to tear anyone's arms off. We may need 'em as fodder before this

is all over. But don't blow the idea off. I could change my mind." He glared at the source of his irritation. "Which," he added, eyes narrowed, "is entirely possible."

As the minutes ticked by he was getting more and more angry with himself for ever agreeing to Luke's idea about breaking this woman -- if he could call her that -- out of a detention cell. He must be losing his mind, he told himself. He was sick of her domineering attitude and would like to have just locked her in one of the cargo holds. She had insisted on helping to look for the tracking device and Han had argued against it; he didn't want her snooping around where she didn't belong. * But,* his co-pilot had reasoned at the time, * We do not exactly have much of a choice if we're to get safely away from the tie fighters that now follow us--not to mention that thing called the Death Star that is tracking us.*

"Choice?" Han had exclaimed to his giant friend. "We haven't had one damned 'choice' in anything involving this charter since we accepted it!"

Chewbacca had thrown his captain a glare and smirked, * We accepted? You were the one --* Han had promptly reminded him just who had talked to that old man in the first place? "Next time you see some old geezer dressed in robes and packing a light saber, don't say a word to 'em! Not one word! Just-- steer a wide course away, huh?"

He hadn't stuck around to hear Chewie's reminder on how much they'd needed the money, on how few opportunities they'd had to make as much as Kenobi offered ever since they'd lost their standing in the smuggler ranks following the doomed, and highly unprofitable, attack on Ylesia with Bria Tharen. * Have you forgotten that?* the Wookiee had snorted at Han's retreating back.

* Have you forgotten how many credits we owe to Jabba? Do you really want a death mark on you?*

No matter how much Han wanted to forget about all that, his friend was right. What choice had they had? Better to get well away from danger, get that mouthy, bossy Alderannian princess and her equally obnoxious droids to their destination, quickly collect his pay and high tail it back to Tatooine as fast as the Falcon could get him there. Which, as far as Han Solo was concerned, could not be fast enough!

"I've known Imperial governors less annoying than you," the source of his irritation was telling him. "You're in a class by yourself, Solo."

"I know. I am," he smiled wickedly.

Her eyes flared and the color rose in her face, but he paid her no further attention as he completed his task and closed up the decoy.

Having taken care of the remaining tie fighters, Luke had clambered from the upper turret just after Han had loaded the decoy into its launch tube and returned to the cockpit. He met the princess as she stepped from the weapons bay. "Thanks to Chewie's flying and the Falcon's speed," he happily told her, "We ought to be clear for now."

"How did you ever hook up with these two anyway?" Leia asked as she shouldered her way past Luke, heading after the smuggler. "The man's a lunatic! She didn't wait for him to answer.

Skywalker merely stood frozen for a moment. The little R2 droid rolled up to him and made a series of blurping noises. "Well, it's not my fault," Luke defended.

In the cockpit, the princess grasped the high back of the pilot's seat. Leaning forward she glared at Solo. "I hope you know what you're doing!" It wasn't a question. And she got no reply.

Undaunted, she continued to demand that he tell her exactly what his hair-brained plan consisted of. She didn't trust it, no matter what it was. "I don't understand --" she began.

"I altered our course," Solo completed. "Now stay outta my way or hustle your haughty backside out of here!" Before she could ask anything further, he explained, "The longer that Death Star follows us, the farther away they are from your rebel base. We'll deploy the decoy and--"

"They aren't going to mistake a decoy for this hunk of junk!"

Solo sighed, using everything in his power to not strangle her right then and there. His expression turned dangerous. He turned toward her, clearly menacing. "_Never, ever_ insult my ship, sister. I've killed people for less."

"Han's buying time, Your Highness," Luke quickly cut in as he stepped into the compartment. "It's the best chance your base will have before the Imperials figure out they've been led on a wild chase."

"At least someone appreciates me," said Solo. "_Now if that princess would just keep her mouth shut things might get easier!_"

Leia couldn't deny it was the best they could do. But she had seen, and knew, enough of Darth Vader's talents to realize that the Corellian's ploy would not work for as long as he was planning. The Sith Lord had talents, ways of dealing with things that were beyond what anyone could conceive--or wanted to. She shook her head and said as much. "You're betting an awfully big hand if you think they'll buy that trick for very long. Vader will know--"

"They'll buy it," Han finished. "At least long enough for me 'n Chewie to get you to Yavin Four. I figure you're people there'll have enough time to evacuate before that battle station shows up. Luke already said it; time's all we have on our side. I'm tryin' to buy us all I can. It'll work." But, he had to agree with the princess about one thing: the Imps weren't stupid. He knew that as well as she did. Maybe even better in some respects. Sooner or later they'd realize they'd been rooked.

Maybe her rebels would be lucky enough to avoid a conflict. If not, well, he'd never been one to stick around for funerals.

Solo continued with the controls and without looking at Chewie said, "Ready the launch tube." It took only a second for the Wookiee to do so and confirm the action. Seconds ticked away as the two smugglers stayed intent on their instruments. Chewie gave a short grunt that Han responded to. "I see it. "

Ahead, in the Falcon's path was a huge dust cloud; the effect on scanners aboard the Imperial vessels would enable the freighter to virtually disappear for several seconds. Once inside the thick of it, Han gave Chewie the order to launch the decoy and he reset their course for the secret base. With luck they would be there in less than three standard days.

"I just hope your ship is really as fast as your overblown ego, fly-boy," Leia remarked tersely. Tarkin and Vader were no fools and would suffer no fools gladly. They would use everything at their disposal to find the Millennium Falcon and then find the rebel base too. "A lot of lives are in the balance if you're wrong."

Han Solo's eyes bored into her like shards of flint. He leaned toward her, pointing a gloved finger at his chest. His voice was a low, measured rumble. "In case you've forgotten, Chewie and I have risked everything we have for you. This isn't our fight, Your Holiness!"

His choice of words to convey her title was pressing on her last nerve. "My title, for your information is 'Senator' or 'Princess'. Use them."

Solo climbed from his seat to tower over her, "And mine," he reminded with an equal tone of glacial frigidity, "is 'Captain'. Use that!" While her spitfire attitude was a quality to respect, if not feel drawn to for some crazy reason, her incessant ordering was definitely unraveling the very last dregs of his patience. How in the Seven Hells had he gotten himself into this? He couldn't wait to get her off his ship, collect his money and be rid of her for good. _I must be a lunatic to have gone along with any of this._

The fact that Han knew she would be just as glad to see the last of him almost made him laugh. Almost. His features, set in a hard scowl, combined with a

deadly tone of voice, gave Luke cause to step slightly in front of the princess. Han shouldered him aside.

"And furthermore, just to put my two, very hard earned credits in here, I'd like to remind everyone I wasn't hired to get involved with the Imperial Navy or any rebels either!"

Brown eyes flashed at him. Leia's voice was cold and there was a ragged edge to it that, as much as she tried to hide it, hinted at the abuse she had withstood for the last several days. "You think I planned on being held as a prisoner? Besides, I wouldn't have hired you to rescue me if you were the last person in the galaxy!"

Luke stepped between them again. There was something defiant in his stance and this time he wasn't ignored or put aside. "Ben mentioned the risk of trouble with the Imperial's when you accepted the job, Han. No one figured things would have turned out this bad but they did. There's nothing we could have done differently."

Solo was incredulous. "Yeah there is, kid. I could've left you, your droids and her back there. But did I? No. And here you all are, on my ship with the only chance of getting to safety you've got! I don't need anyone, especially her telling me --"

"If this is the only chance we've got," Leia spat out, "then you're right; you should have left me back in my cell. Turn this excuse for a ship around! I'd rather take my chances with the Imperials than a moron like you!"

Chewbacca, also pushed beyond his own limits of patience, piped in that he thought that was an excellent idea just as Han shouted, "Fine! I can arrange that!"

"Han," Luke began in an attempt to get the eruption of argument under control. "Take it easy. No one knew we would run into--" His words died in vain as voices fought over one another. The volume quickly escalated to become unbearable.

"You're the most--"

-- can only imagine how glad --"

* NOW? Can I tear her arms--*

-- egotistical, maniacal excuse --"

* --called me a walking carpet! *

-- for a human being I've ever -- "

"-- to drop your sassy backside off at Yavin Four!"

"Will you three stop it!" But Luke's words went unheard.

"Egotistical? Let me remind you, that ego saved your--"

"If you had any brains at all--"

"Han!" Luke pleaded at the top of his voice, afraid that the princess and the smuggler would come to outright blows. "Your Highness!"

* I'm turning around. Now! *

"People are putting their lives at stake for--"

"Your 'cause', _missy_, is none of my con--"

* Prepare to--*

"That's obvious! I'm sorry I've wasted your precious time, _Captain!_"

* The problem with her is the noise!*

"Chewie," Luke reprimanded hotly, "She's a princess!"

"Thank you!" Leia barked at Luke and just as quickly threw her glare back to Solo. Her voice dropped to a measured, icy tone and if asked, Luke would have told her it raised the hairs on his neck. "Maybe _Captain_ Solo really would've liked it if I had gone back to my cell!"

"Well, at last! We agree on something. There's a light at the end of this black hole after all! I'd celebrate but then you're obviously too good to party with the peasantry." He shifted his weight to one hip and looked her over. "Too bad, honey. A few stiff shots of Corellian whiskey and maybe, just maybe, you'd loosen your sphincter and act like a _real_ person!" His hooded expression fixed on the princess, he added flatly, "Chewie, do as she said. Turn the ship about."

Shocked by that order and believing their doom was sealed for certain, Threepio shouted, "Oh no! Master Luke, we can't--"

All attention shot to the golden droid who stood in the hatchway. "SHUT UP!"

"Han! You can't turn around!"

"Can't I? The lady wants off my ship," he waved with one hand, "I'm happy to oblige. Your old wizard friend said nothing about getting' into all this!"

"_General_ Kenobi," Leia corrected.

* I don't believe this!*

"Ben d--" Luke tried desperately to interject and remind.

"I think you seriously underestimate this situation, mister."

"I 'underestimate' _nothin'_ , lady. Especially what this trip is costing--"

"It cost Ben his life!" Luke yelled and the cockpit fell deathly silent. "But," he continued in a quiet, solemn, older voice, one as foreign to him as his present circumstances, "I guess everyone's forgotten that." He looked at each of them in turn, hardly caring that the seconds seemed to drag like hours. For Luke, their narrow escape, and more importantly, Obi Wan's death, now made him more aware than ever of losses he'd never imagined. Visions of his aunt and uncle, unrecognizable in twisted heaps of charred flesh and bone, of the Jawas that Obi Wan had placed in loving attention onto a funeral pyre, of his friend bravely falling before Darth Vader, all settled tightly in Luke's memory. All he wanted, right now, was to be somewhere quiet. And alone.

The protocol droid broke the silence. "Master Luke, if my services are not required, I will retire to the lounge."

"I'll join you." Luke let his icy glare settle on the others for a moment longer, after which, he simply turned on his heel and left.

Smuggler, princess and Wookiee stared at one another in silence. Finally Chewbacca rose, muttering something about making certain the turret guns were in standing order.

Too bone-weary to argue and too embarrassed at her own oversight, Leia sank into the seat by the nav-com station. "I suppose we deserved that." She got no argument.

Han climbed into his pilot's seat and busied himself with checking various instruments. "If things go right," he said, his voice deflated of the anger that had been there, "we should be clear of any Imperial ships for the rest of the trip. You'll get to that base safely. I promise."

"You said it would take about three days?"

"Yeah."

Leia nodded. The awkward silence filling the compartment was too much, too oppressive to linger in. She cleared her throat a little and said, "Since I'm going to

be on your ship for awhile, Captain, is it possible that I could have somewhere to rest and get cleaned up?"

Solo turned and noticed just how disheveled and tired she appeared. During their escape and subsequent search for the tracking device, she'd ignored her own discomfort, had fought and helped out, albeit in a mouthy, demanding sort of way. Now, the ordeal she'd been through was soon to come crashing down on her. In an odd way, Han felt sympathy for her and again found himself admiring her strength-- even if he couldn't stand her mouth. "There's an extra cabin next to Luke's. It's got a sonic fresher and stuff."

Leia rose a bit stiffly, inwardly grateful that the Corellian was being civil. "I won't be putting anyone out, will I?"

Hazel-gold eyes turned to her. "No." The cabin had been Kenobi's but he didn't want to mention that. He rose, intending to show her the way but she gave a slight hand gesture and he stood still. "Thank you, Captain, but I'm sure I can find it easily enough." Rising to leave, she nearly bumped into Chewbacca as he entered the cockpit. He stepped aside, giving a subdued little hoot as she passed.

Chewie glanced at his partner. * You gave her the extra cabin?""*

Like everyone on board, Han was filthy, edgy, and tired. "What was I supposed to do? Say, 'Oh, let me offer you my cabin, Your Highness? Huh?'"

Chewie understood Solo's lack of impatience and made nothing of it. * Well," he said lightly, "It would have been the chivalrous thing to do-- considering it's larger.* He paused for a breath, wanting just the right impact on his next words. "And considering you like her.*

The Corellian's mouth dropped open. For a moment he was actually speechless. Recovering, he wagged a finger at his friend. "I'll forget you said that." Turning to his control panel he muttered, "Chivalry, my afterburners! What's she expect anyway? A royal carpet rolled out over the boarding ramp? Maybe I oughta bow over backward and kiss my ass too next time I see her. Guess that would make everyone happy."

The Wookiee tilted his head to one side. Humans, he had come to realize over the years, had some strange ideas about body language.

end Chapter One

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