

# RESURRECTION





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Dedicated to all the fans who have kept the Star Wars Universe dynamic and vibrant over the past 27 years. And to those among them who, in yearning for something more substantial in the legendary characters, inspired us all to dream.

*Skyp  
Rutherford*



*Seven  
Kennard*

# RESURRECTION

Who we are is unimportant; that we investigate truth, is.

When History becomes Myth, it is our responsibility, and that of other members of our Order, to separate Reality from Legend. The long history of our galaxy is overflowing with mythological figures who at one time were ordinary individuals whose dreams exceeded their grasp. By their heroic efforts in extraordinary circumstances, they reached heights few of us are ever privileged to attain. Their names became synonymous with Greatness. The passage of years altered that greatness into the mystique of Legend, and the changing generations evolved that legend into the inexplicable divinity of Myth.

It has been almost five hundred years since the Great Rebellion brought down the Galactic Empire through the concerted efforts of the Rebel Alliance. The succeeding thirty years witnessed the establishment of the New Republic, the Remnant Challenges, the rise of the New Jedi Order, and the birth of the Great Galactic Alliance. Unfortunately, most historical documentation from those times has become twisted and obscured, while many records were lost, hidden, or destroyed in those monumental events which shook the very foundations of our galaxy. Only the persistent efforts of a few determined souls resurrected and salvaged what was left. From those few fragmentary documents, our Order was able to locate other missing historical data, and continue its lifelong pursuit of Historical Truth.

We do not delude ourselves that History is an objective study. We realize that, by its very nature, it is always subjective, and those who set it down continually color events with their own interpretations. Historians arbitrarily select which events should be remembered over others that should be forever relegated to innumerable lost archives. More often than not, history reflects the fortunes of those who attempt to change the way others think and perceive their universe. Much is dependent on the ruling

houses of the time, or on the political beliefs of the victors in war. Our primary objective -- the very reason our Order was created -- is to slice through the fictitious façade of resultant mythologies, uncover the basic architecture beneath, and resurrect the discarded foundations of our forgotten past. We seek to connect personally with the living thoughts of the very participants whom subjective historians have transformed into virtual gods -- those figures whose extraordinary lives have become more fiction than fact. . Every day we dedicate our very existence to finding the truths behind their legends.

Among the legendary figures whose true histories we seek are those who are best known: Princess Leia Organa of Alderaan, who helped transform an erratic rebellion into a victorious new Republic; Han Solo, the Corellian smuggler who made the Rebellion part of his life when all reason told him their efforts were hopeless; the Clone Wars' hero, Anakin Skywalker, and the Galactic Empire's most infamous hero, Darth Vader, who actually appear to have been two aspects of the same man; the last Old Republic Jedi Master, Obi-Wan Kenobi, who, through his association with Skywalker, came to be credited with forever altering the history of the Jedi Knights and the future of the galaxy; and the heroic Jedi Warrior, Luke Skywalker, hero of the Rebellion, and first of the New Jedi Legacy, whose own personal losses and eventual isolation and mysterious disappearance has long been the subject of much debate over the past four hundred years. These lives form the crux of our investigations herein. Many more of our Order research other individuals from this same period in our history. Heroes too numerous to mention here, suffice it to say, they are legion.

As we move forward in our research, we are humbled every day by the certain knowledge that monumental events themselves do not a history make. Instead, history is marked by small events, and by those individuals who, for reasons we can never fully know, choose to place their own lives second to the lives of others, and dare to realize a dream few of us shall ever comprehend. To those individuals and their memorable legacy, we dedicate these Archives.



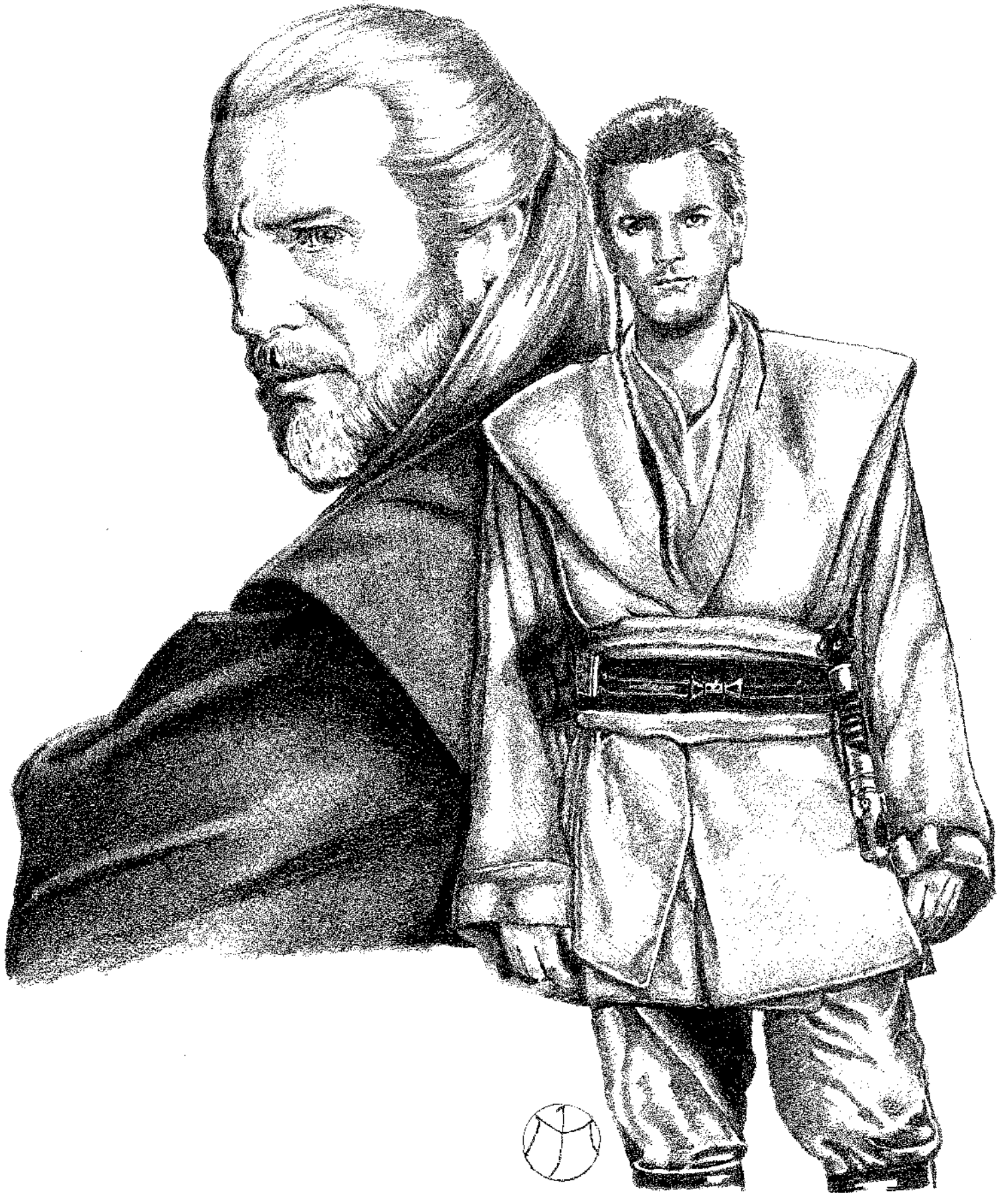
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*I would never accuse Qui-Gon Jinn of being unscrupulous. He simply possessed an agenda, did what he felt was necessary to implement it, and accepted no compromise. And to question or contradict him, once he had made up his mind, was to invite the wrath of the whirlwind. Most never risked it. I was not one of them.*

--- From the Tatooine Journals of Obi-Wan Kenobi

## FROM A CERTAIN POINT OF VIEW



Standing on the latticed balcony of his darkened quarters, seventeen stories below the great Jedi Council Chamber, a deeply troubled figure stared solemnly at the frenetic landscape of Coruscant's capital city and wished he were anywhere else but where he was at that very moment. High overhead, the ever-crowded traffic lanes rapidly crisscrossed the golden twilight sky, teeming with a million pulsating points of light, each representative of the nameless life speeding from one place to the next, light blindly following light, like so many herd animals, void of a genuine identity between them. No one dared stop the flow or question why one must perform such a numbing ritual above this world of unending stone towers and temple mounts. It had always been so here; and so it probably always would be.

Ever since he could remember, Obi-wan Kenobi had not much cared for the city that had for centuries been the seat of government and the beating heart of the Great Republic. True, it was his home, but he had always secretly yearned for something far beyond the marble and metal that surrounded him. A patch of green, like the lush, water-filled landscapes of Alderaan he had seen once on a vid-disc, was more to his liking. There *were* many gardens and parks established for free use by Coruscant's populace, but he'd never visited them; it was not permitted to Jedi in training. He and others like him had spent much of their early years sheltered from the curious, prying eyes of the outside world. He'd later visited many vibrantly green worlds, but he could choose to live on none of them. His life had always been pre-ordained, meticulously laid out for him from the very beginning. He was a Jedi Master's chosen Padawan, in the final stage of his training to become a Jedi Knight. For all his life there had been nothing but the Jedi Order and the Jedi Code of Ritual, Conduct, and Honour. It was a life for which he had been carefully nurtured and groomed, a life that was now irrevocably ingrained in the very fabric of his being. It was a life he never really questioned. Until this night.

Wracked by confusing doubts and conflicting impulses, his mind raced. He had come out onto the balcony because, within the celibate confines of his sparsely furnished two-room

apartment, the atmosphere had suddenly become too stifling. His padawan quarters were an oppressive reminder of the world he had begun to doubt.

Qui-Gon Jinn's behavior before the Great Council still disturbed Kenobi. He knew his Jedi Master to be headstrong and opinionated, as well as somewhat rebellious when it came to the rigid traditions of the Jedi Order. But the open defiance Jinn had displayed earlier that afternoon, toward the ruling members of the Jedi Council, was alarming. To question Master Yoda and Mace Windu without justification was unthinkable. Why was this man who had trained him in the disciplines and secrets of the Force so blindly insistent on this Tatooine slave-boy's connection with the fabled prophecy of the "Chosen One"? There really was no direct association between this child and the Force, with the exception of a high midichlorian count and a clever mind. It would take more than that to ensure a prophecy's "truth and fulfillment."

Then there was the issue of Anakin Skywalker's victory in the Pod Race on Tatooine---the first race this headstrong boy had ever won---not to mention the first race he'd ever finished. According to Anakin himself, his owner had entered him into a number of contests over the past several months. But the young slave had always lost, usually losing control of his craft or breaking down midway through the course. He had never once crossed the finish line. Now, as much as he feared to admit it, Obi-Wan felt in his heart that Anakin had received help to win his last race --- help from a very powerful source knowledgeable in the ways of the Force. That realization gnawed at the fabric of everything Kenobi had come to believe; it tore at his very soul, overwhelming him with profound sadness.

He had wanted to say something to Qui-Gon the very moment he discerned the truth; he could have spoken out. But he held back, not wanting to believe what his senses and his own feelings told him. The great Jedi Master had intentionally sought to deceive not only his own Padawan, but the Jedi Council itself, all for the sake of an unknown, untested child, from a barren, insignificant planet at the farthest edge of the galaxy. Each day he allowed to pass by without questioning his Master, simply made it more difficult to say anything at all. Obi-Wan shook his head and stared into the crowded skies above.

*"Why did you do it?"* The words were filled with deep frustration and disappointment. He knew the question was spoken more to himself. His only response was the endless drone of Coruscant's bustling traffic.

Obi-Wan knew what he *should* do. But betrayal for the right reasons, even to the great Jedi Council, was not within his nature. He had been loyal to Qui-Gon for twelve years. The Jedi Master was not merely his teacher; he was his friend. He was also the father he never had.

*How does one confront one's own father?*

He knew what he *must* do, but he was filled with increasing dread. Tension flowed through every nerve, every muscle, every sinew, every vein and artery. Unknown fear crept across his soul.

*How do I question what he has done and may yet do? What he will do?*

Kenobi's heart pounded in his chest, the sound becoming louder in his ears with each passing second. Pain began to seep into his bones. He felt as if he were falling, as if he would suddenly break. Inhaling sharply, he attempted finally to control the turmoil growing inside him.



He closed his eyes, faced the dark and called upon every ounce of strength he possessed to stop the mounting fear, destroy the vision forming within his mind. He eased himself into the Force and let it carry him above the din of his own heartbeat, out and out, out beyond sight, beyond sound and touch, beyond caring. He hung, suspended; only the mind remained, unfettered and incorporeal.

Time stood still. Hours could have gone by and Obi-Wan would never have known their passage.

Exhaling, the young Jedi slowly opened his eyes. His renewed vision no longer beheld the crowded skies of Coruscant; it was turned within. His senses were clear. Free of fears, he no longer felt the claustrophobia of his suffocating dread. His thoughts focused, he acknowledged one solitary resolve. Qui-Gon must be confronted. Obi-Wan would not rest until the matter was settled once and for all.

Returning to his darkened room, the young Jedi quickly pulled on his over-tunic, and wrapped its sash around his waist. He reached down for his utility belt and light saber, then changed his mind. He wouldn't need them tonight. Throwing his brown robes over one arm, Obi-Wan turned toward the small room's entrance panel, slid back the door, and slipped quietly into the dimly lighted corridor beyond.

A few minutes later, Kenobi found himself in front of his Jedi Master's quarters, unable to move, the earlier feeling of dread seeping back into his thoughts. Try as he might, he could not reach out to touch the intercom. The palms of his hands felt clammy, damp with sweat. Clenching his fists, he closed his eyes, focused his mind. Willing himself to move, he reopened his eyes, and almost collided with Qui-Gon Jinn towering before him at the open entrance.

Startled, Obi-Wan stepped back; scrambling to conceal his obvious embarrassment. He was not entirely successful. How was it he had not heard the sound of the sliding door panel? And how long had his Master been standing there, watching him? Kenobi's earlier determination was suddenly shaken. This was going to be much harder than he imagined.

Obi-Wan," Jinn greeted his apprentice with a slight bow of his head, eyes twinkling, his expression one of mild amusement. Attired in a dark maroon caftan, the long hair loose about his shoulders, he had apparently been relaxing. When the younger man did not immediately respond, he continued. "I was wondering when you were going to pay me a visit. Having second thoughts out here, were you?"

*Of course he would know I was coming.* How could Kenobi expect otherwise? Not much escaped his teacher's perceptive nature.

"Good evening, Master. I'm sorry to disturb you, but I---"

"If you were disturbing me, I would never have come to the door."

"I was just----" Obi-Wan shifted uneasily; the remainder of his thoughts refused to form words.

"Gathering your courage?" the older man offered, without derision. He sensed his padawan was still troubled by the day's events; he knew their brief discussion, following the

Council session earlier in the afternoon, could certainly not have been enough to satisfy the young man's obvious concerns.

"May I come in?" Kenobi finally managed, somewhat hesitantly. "I need to speak with you. It's important."

"Ah. Well then, I suppose I need to listen." Qui-Gon moved to one side of the entrance and gestured towards the open doorway. "Therefore, don't let's stand on ceremony. Please, go in."

Concealing his growing discomfort with a slight smile, Kenobi passed through the wide opening and entered the sparsely furnished living area. The room was awash in the golden glow of candlelight and the airy aroma of some mild incense he did not recognize. Whenever Jinn was in residence on Coruscant, which these days was not often, he always preferred the illumination of candles and sconce lanterns to artificial lighting. The large number of burning tapers told him his master had been meditating.

"I'm sorry, I've disturbed your meditations." Kenobi apologized.

"No at all." He responded, taking the Jedi robe from his padawan's arm as he passed. He smoothed the folds and placed it on a stand near the entrance. "I had just finished. Please, sit."

Qui-Gon owned few possessions. The furnishings in this section of his living quarters were simple. Everything he owned once belonged to, or was borrowed from, other Jedi --- two over-stuffed reclining chairs, three knee-high tables filled with candles, and a large thick-cushioned divan. The walls were mostly bare, save for scattered sections of ornate wooden shelving used to house more candles and several sconce lanterns. A large ceremonial mask of unknown origin adorned the wall at the far end of the room. Obi-Wan found himself staring at it, as he always did whenever he visited this room. Although contorted like some horrendous nightmare vision, the mask often had a calming effect on the viewer. Tonight, however, it did not.

"I'd rather stand," he said, nervously shifting his gaze off the mask and looking down the long hall leading to the sleeping quarters. He knew young Skywalker was staying with Jinn and he was suddenly curious about the boy's whereabouts.

"Anakin is asleep," Jinn volunteered, watching the younger man's restlessness, and following the direction of his gaze. "He was exhausted, so I sent him off to bed early. He won't disturb us, but to make you feel more at ease, I'll give us more privacy." He drew the partition panel across the hall opening, "Better? Now will you sit?"

"I think it would be best if I remain standing."

"This must be serious. As you wish. At least have a drink with me." He moved toward a wall recess, opened a side panel and removed a decanter of expensive Corellian wine, holding it up for Obi-Wan to see. The blood red liquid was almost gone. Jinn did love his Corellian wine, one of the few luxuries he permitted himself.

"Thank you, no." Kenobi needed to remain clear-headed, but, with each passing second, he felt his resolve slipping further away and his task becoming less possible to realize.

"Are you sure? You look as if you could use a stiff drink right now. No utility belt and no light saber? You must have been in quite a hurry. Let's hope the Council doesn't decide to stage one of their emergency protocol drills." When Obi-Wan did not immediately respond to the attempted humor, he added, "I have some Calamaran ale you might prefer."

"I'd rather not." Obi-Wan said, his voice flat, without acknowledging his master's evident sarcasm. Calamaran ale and Qui-Gon's apprentice were never a good mix. The nauseating libation invariably had a devastating effect on his stomach.

"This *is* serious then. Well, I'll definitely need a drink." Pouring the blood red Corellian liquid into a silver goblet, he replaced the decanter into the wall recess and walked to one side of the room. "I really wish you'd sit down, but it's your choice," Qui-Gon remarked, finding a comfortable spot on the divan, and settled into it. He swallowed some of the red wine, and studied his apprentice over the goblet rim.

"What's troubling you, Obi-Wan?"

"I have concerns, Master." Kenobi wanted to choose his words carefully; he did not want to rush anything. He was far too uncertain of himself at this point.

"Concerns?"

"Doubts, actually."

"*Doubts?*" Qui-Gon was puzzled, but only for a second. Then he smiled broadly. "*Are you worried about the Jedi Trials?* Is that it? Obi-Wan, I already told you, you will be fine. I have every confidence you will pass with flying colors. You *are* ready, despite the Council's hesitation at my recommendation this afternoon. What do they know? The trials require three attributes: a cool head, a logical mind, and superior ability, all of which you possess, in triplicate. Besides, you've proven yourself worthy to become a Jedi Knight of the highest rank a hundred times over. I would not lie to you about this. You know that."

"It's not about the Trials, Master." Kenobi countered. The man was not making this any easier.

"No? What then?"

"It's about the boy." Obi-Wan almost ran the words together when he spoke.

"Anakin?" asked Jinn, warily. "What about him?"

Kenobi could feel the older man's defenses rising. Qui-Gon could be a formidable opponent in an argument. He did not desire that, but if it came, he was willing to face it. "It's about his training. It's not your abilities, I doubt, but--"

"*But* you still don't believe I should train him, do you?"

"That's not what I meant. Master, this is very difficult for me."





"Why difficult? Because you have doubts, or because you are afraid to voice them?" Qui-Gon set his drink on the nearby table. "Let me make it easier for you. I know you stand with the Council on this issue, Obi-Wan, but you also know when my mind is made up, nothing and no one can change it. The boy will be trained as a Jedi and I shall train him, no matter what you or the members of the Council say. This subject is not open for discussion. It is no longer a matter that concerns you."

"But it does concern me. It is my place to question. I am your apprentice."

"Not much longer." Qui-Gon controlled the anger growing within him, rose to his full height, and, looking down into Kenobi's wide blue eyes, reprimanded him. "Jealousy does not become you, Obi-Wan. If you're feeling abandoned because I've decided to choose another padawan and send you off on your own, you must deal with it. Resign yourself. You always knew this day would come, that there would be a time of parting between us. I hope we shall still remain friends. But you have to move on now, and so must I."

Grabbing the empty goblet from the table, Jinn strode past his apprentice, to the wall-recessed liquor cabinet. Obi-Wan quickly followed, and attempted to rectify what he realized was a huge misunderstanding on the older man's part.

"I understand that, and I know my future lies along a different path from yours. I was not very clear earlier and I'm sorry that what I said was misinterpreted." He watched Qui-Gon pour another drink, this time filling the goblet to its rim. "I accept your decision. I just think you're putting far too much faith in this one boy, and too much responsibility on him. He is only nine years old. He does not know the world as you do; he has no experience, no reference points from which to begin. I mean no disrespect, Master, but how can you be certain he will magically become this 'Chosen One' you so fervently believe in?"

"His training will take time, I know that. But I feel in my soul that Anakin *is* the 'Chosen One.' *You* examined his vital stats. Midichlorian counts do not lie. No other Jedi has such high levels."

"You cannot rely on feeling and statistics alone. And what guarantee do you have the prophecy is completely reliable? It has been floating around the Jedi Order for thousands of years. What if it's all just a myth?"

"Oh, Obi-Wan, don't let the Council hear you say that." Qui-Gon laughed. "It's blasphemy, you know."

"Is it not also blasphemy for you to believe without proof that this boy is who *you* say he is? You know nothing about him."

"I know all I need to know. *He* is the one who will bring balance to the Force. I have my proof."

"This is not like you, Master. You always question everything. How can you simply accept that this boy as the fulfillment of legend? How can you believe in this prophecy so much that you are willing to sacrifice everything for it? The way you did on Tatooine."

"What are you implying?"

"What really happened with the Pod race?"

"You know very well what happened. Anakin won."

"How did he win, Qui-Gon? " It was the first time in months Kenobi had called his master by name. " When we were returning to Coruscant, the boy told me he'd never won a race in his life, never even finished one, until *this* race. He said you knew about this. Yet you risked the Queen's ship, her life---all of our lives---to back an unknown child with little or no experience---with a wager that should have failed."

"But it did not fail, did it? The boy won." Jinn emphasized each of his last three words, defiance apparent in his voice. Then he turned to walk away. But Kenobi stopped him.

"*He won because you helped him win.*" Finally, Obi-Wan had given voice to the words he'd wanted to say all evening. Having said them, he found himself simultaneously triumphant and sad.

Qui-Gon slowly turned around to face his apprentice, but he offered no response to the accusation. Instead, an expression of calm and relief began to settle upon his features. And there was acceptance, too. The two men's eyes locked, and Obi-Wan spoke again, his steady voice resolute.

"I watched the vid-cast on board the ship. Throughout the entire race I felt something was wrong. I sensed a disturbance, minor instability, in the Force. I had my suspicions, but it wasn't until later I was certain. You manipulated the Force to insure that Anakin would face as few opponents and obstacles as possible. In the end, he won because you helped to eliminate the competition. When his pod racer stalled, it was your use of the Force that suddenly brought the engines back on line. It was you who knocked Sebulba out of the race at the end. Everything that happened was your doing, not any Force skills Anakin possessed."

"What would you have had me do, Obi-Wan?" Jinn asked quietly, sinking down onto the recliner. "I knew Anakin was special, gifted, latently Force-sensitive. But he had no training or discipline in the use of the Force. He has been unaware of his potential all his life. I simply gave him the chance he deserved. Besides, his performance out on that endurance field showed me he possesses ability instincts. He was determined to win and, the entire time, he remained completely focused. He never gave up, staying the course and steering his ship like it was an extension of his being. Above all, he was never afraid. Not once. He is more open to new experiences than anyone I have ever met, including you, and you were extremely open when you came to me. That proves he is worthy to be trained as a Jedi."

"But what you did was wrong." Obi-Wan insisted, moving closer. He wanted to understand why this man he so admired and respected would jeopardize the trust of an entire Order. "He may have a high midichlorian count, and possess some rudimentary Force-sensitivity, but he doesn't know how to use either. By helping him win the race, you've given him a false sense of accomplishment. You placed an unrealistic expectation on a child who has no clue what lies ahead. He's going to think he's invincible. In one so young, that is very dangerous, Master."

"No, you're mistaken, Obi-Wan. A boy who was a slave now has a purpose and his own sense of being and self-worth. I have given Anakin confidence in himself. It's a good beginning. It will serve him well during our long years of training."



"Does Master Yoda suspect you of interfering in the Pod race?"

"I don't believe so. Distance sometimes has its advantages, where the Force is concerned. But, if he does, he hasn't spoken of it. I don't think he will. In his own way, he believes as fervently in this prophecy as I do." Jinn smiled at the younger man. "I should have known you would sense the vibrations in the Force. You were in close proximity; one would have had to be unconscious to miss them. But you have always been extremely perceptive. It's why you are destined to be a great Jedi, one day, Obi-Wan. I am as proud of you as any parent could be. You are my one triumph. And now Anakin will be another. You watch. He will surprise us all one day. And he *will* bring balance to the Force. I promise you."

"How can you be sure balance will come out of all this?" Obi-Wan finally sat down in the other recliner. "You risked lives and manipulated the Force against all tenets of the Order. You knowingly deceived the Council. You lied to me. You broke a trust. What if what you have done has a negative effect on the future?"

"I do not believe that." Jinn said emphatically. "But the Jedi Order could do with a good shaking up. Those members in the Council who sit in their ivory temple have become complacent and stagnant. They no longer appreciate the full potential of the Living Force as you or I. Change is inevitable, however it may come. We must change with it or perish."

When Kenobi offered no immediate response, Qui-Gon continued.

"Do not judge me too harshly, Obi-Wan, until you have faced a similar circumstance. One day you may find you must bend the truth to protect someone or defend something in which you strongly believe. Passion is a part of living, whether it exists as an aspect of love or of belief. You passionately believe in the Force. You are equally passionate about the Order. One is alive, always in motion, ever changing, surrounding and binding all existence. The other is not. It is merely the creation of a few sentient beings, full of yearnings, dreams, and flaws. Therefore *it* will always be flawed. Remember that."

Qui-Gon Jinn rose from his chair and stretched. "And now you must go. I am weary and you have all the answers you came to seek. There is nothing left to know. Nothing left I can teach you. You must take what you have learned and decide what it is you will do with this knowledge, now and in the future awaiting you as a knight of the Order."

The Jedi Master walked with Kenobi to the entryway, one hand on his shoulder. Handing his apprentice his Jedi robe, he said, "Try not to leave your light saber behind next time. You never know when you might have need of it."

"I didn't need it tonight."

"No. Not tonight."

"I don't envy you this dilemma, Obi-Wan." The older man said as he slid back the door panel and watched the younger man move slowly out into the corridor. "I'm sorry you must face it alone. Trust can be a hard road, can't it? Whichever way you choose to go in this, whether to the Council or into your own heart, I shall understand and accept. There will be no blame. Either way, Anakin will still be my padawan. And you will still become the Jedi Knight you were born to be. That is my truth, for what it is worth."

Obi-Wan nodded. "Good night, Qui-Gon."

"Rest well. We still have much to face together in the coming days." Leaving Kenobi with his thoughts, Qui-Gon Jinn began to slide the panel closed, then added, "Good night, my young Jedi. The Force will be with you."

Kenobi walked a few steps along the corridor, then leaned his full weight against the outer wall, his legs suddenly weak. Bracing himself against the cool, mosaic surface, he found the lack of turmoil within him surprising. He was calm, even content. *Strange*. Long before he'd left his Jedi Master's quarters, he knew he would not go to the Council. No one need know how Anakin Skywalker really came to be Qui-Gon Jinn's new padawan. It would be the one great secret the master and former apprentice would share forever and take with them to the grave. *Whether* the prophecy of the 'Chosen One' was true or not, Kenobi would not interfere with the divergent paths lying ahead for them all. It was out of his hands now anyway. *What will be, will be, Master.*

Slipping his robe around him against a sudden chill, Obi-Wan Kenobi faced the darkened corridor ahead, visualized the path before him, and stepped forward to welcome his own future.



*To become a Jedi Knight means not only to assume the mantles of guardian and warrior, but to immerse oneself forever in a Way of Life rooted in centuries old traditions of the deepest commitment, discipline and self-sacrifice. . . . The individual must at all times strive to be a devout servant of the Order, a living reflection of its philosophy, and forever One with the Force.*

— from *Lessons of the Masters*, Jedi Archives, Volume 3

## TO KNOW MY ENEMY

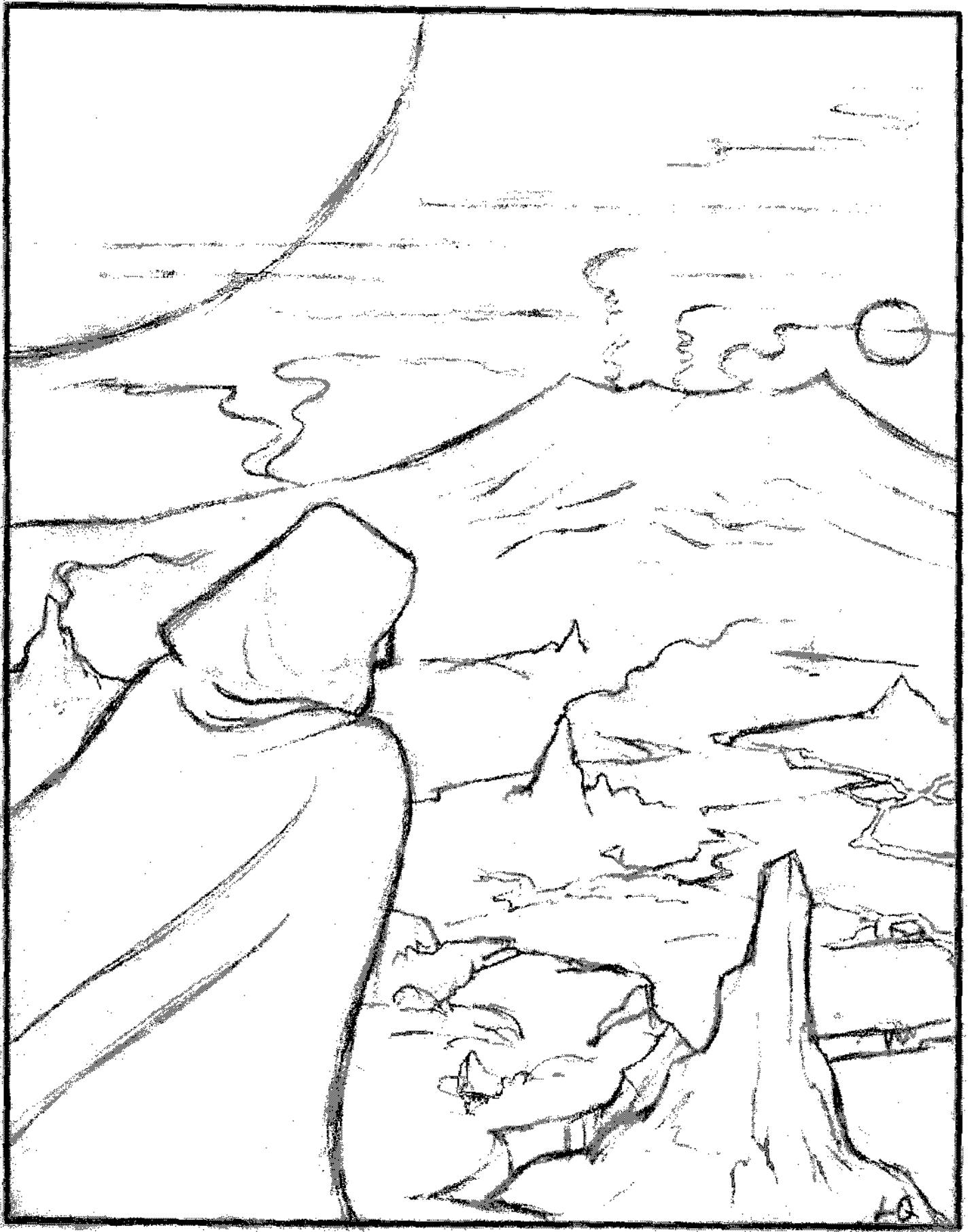
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*To those who feared to explore its mysteries, the solitary dark companion orbiting the Yrcon binary system was a haunted place. An inhospitable planet of nightmarish landscapes, oceans of flame, and disembodied spirits, Aerebus Prime was believed to be a place where Evil itself resided. But to the Order of Jedi Knights, this was a world to be embraced and nurtured, contemplated and revered. Sparse in indigenous life forms, the planet was nonetheless vibrant and alive, strong with the power of the Force.*

*For a thousand generations, Jedi Masters had brought apprentices to this planet, for endurance and selective training. The largely desolate and harsh landscape proved a most formidable challenge to eager, youthful padawans, serving to weed out those who could not learn to master either its mysteries or their own. But, over the years, the world of Aerebus Prime came to be used less and less as a training ground until, for reasons long forgotten, it was altogether abandoned. Occasionally, a lone Jedi Master might bring a novice learner to this place, but only out of necessity, never by choice. If the apprentice was unruly, there was nowhere in the galaxy better suited to test the ability of one who thought he was invincible. And, in no recorded case, did any depart this remote, mysterious world unchanged by the ordeal.*

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Head bowed, the lithe, hooded figure moved swiftly along the jagged volcanic rock formations that comprised much of Aerebus' remote southern region. High overhead, the planet's yellow binary suns, Yreon Major and Yreon Minor, hung mercilessly in the cloudless vermillion sky, casting a sickly glow over the stark landscape. The rarified air beat down blistering, hot, and dry.

The solitary figure paused, lifted his head and briefly assessed the terrain around him. He had been running for some time, but his breathing was measured and his heartbeat slow. Oblivious to the searing heat, he scanned the distant horizon, intense blue eyes absorbing the entire panorama before him. He could see the region's only active volcano, a half-sunken caldera rising from the rock face little more than a half mile off to his right. Steam rose from its depths and gases escaped intermittently in tiny puffs of smoke along the length of the basalt formation. Crouching down, he narrowed his eyes. For a second, every muscle tightened; he seemed almost to be listening for something. Then, drawing the long, brown cloak closer into his body, he continued on his journey, altering his course in the direction of the volcano. His footing was confident and sure as he leapt effortlessly from one outcropping to the next, crossing in two moves a twenty-five foot expanse between two razor sharp ledges and scaling a sheer wall of rock without once breaking his stride.

Just below the volcano, he halted suddenly, a slight smile flickering across his face. He had felt a presence for some time, despite all valiant efforts by the other to remain concealed and undetected.

The assault came swiftly. He expected it would. The hum of the charged light saber shattered the midday air. But before his attacker cleared the short span of rock that separated one man from the other, Obi-Wan Kenobi changed directions, leaving his assailant to bring his weapon down into empty space. The Jedi dodged sideways, and in one unified move, flipped backwards, discarded his cloak and invoked his own weapon hanging at his side. Landing deftly on his feet beside the other man, he brought his own ignited light saber down toward his opponent. However, the assailant quickly recovered, twisted away and returned to the offensive, bearing down on Kenobi with renewed, single-minded conviction.

For several minutes, sparks flew as the light sabers clashed, with neither combatant gaining the upper hand. Then Kenobi, seasoned in centuries-old battle techniques perfected and honed over years of grueling apprenticeship study and discipline, cut short the engagement. In a single unified series of maneuvers, slicing across, down and up, he handily relieved the younger man of his weapon. With the discharged light saber soaring harmlessly off into the rocks, the Jedi somersaulted over his now unarmed opponent, and, kicking out and down with one foot, upended him.

Anakin Skywalker landed very hard on his backside and emitted a painful cry. Frustrated and embarrassed, he looked up in surprised disbelief at the man who had just put an end to what he had been certain was a well-executed plan of attack.

"What did I do wrong this time, Master?" The boy was quite out of breath, unbalanced, and very annoyed, a fact that did not escape the older man's notice.

Obi-Wan extended his hand and helped the boy to his feet. "Everything, my young Padawan. Less is more. You complicate matters too much. You try so hard to conceal yourself, and in the process only succeed in revealing your hiding place. The Force is not

something to be conquered or manipulated. You only have to reach out with your feelings, let it pass into and through you. Surrender yourself. The Force embraces the serene."

"Why can't I get it right, just once?" Frustration edged the young voice, as he dusted himself off and readjusted his tunic.

"You will, Anakin, you will," Obi-Wan encouraged, cheerfully, ignoring a twinge of unease. Barely sixteen, young Skywalker's abilities and potential far out-stripped those of his teacher at the same age. The boy's exuberance and voracious appetite for learning was limitless, but he had yet to master self-discipline and conquer his own arrogance. Kenobi found it increasingly more and more difficult to harness his apprentice's growing impatience during their training sessions. Anakin had just spent three long days alone in the wastelands, a survival exercise few padawans mastered their first time out. Save for some minor sunburn on his face, and scratches on his hands, the boy seemed to have come through his ordeal unscathed. While Anakin had not reached the spiritual level expected of apprentices in his age group, nevertheless, a swell of pride rose inside Kenobi; the boy rarely failed to impress him, even when he made mistakes.

The older man reached up and placed one hand on the boy's shoulder. Anakin was already several inches taller than his teacher and still growing. "Practice is everything. Repetition. Discipline. Patience. Above all, you must learn patience. Besides, look what you have already achieved here. You've been completely on your own for three days, you've met every survival challenge I've thrown at you, and, except for a few scrapes and bruises, you're hardly the worse for wear. The survival trials are not simple."

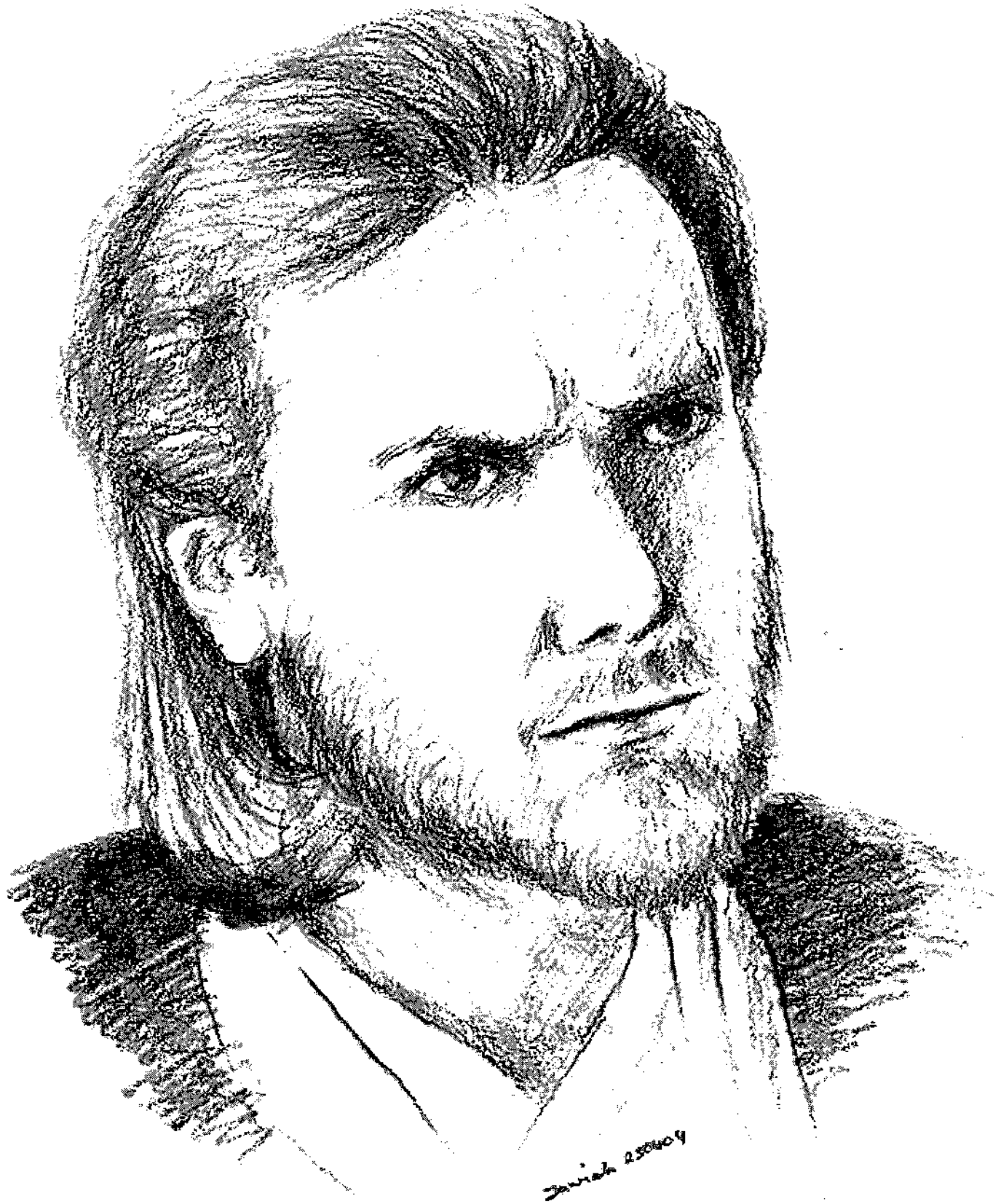
No one knew that more than Kenobi, who had once risked everything in a similar ordeal, and mastered not only the trials, but himself as well. He had discovered his center. He wanted more than any thing for Anakin to find his. A month had been spent acclimating themselves to the planet's harsh terrain and rarefied atmosphere. Despite the years since his last visit, Kenobi readjusted quite easily to his surroundings. It took the boy slightly longer; but he impressed his master with a complete embrace of the surroundings and eager willingness to face the challenges before him. Obi-Wan recognized in Anakin a hunger that could not be satisfied, perhaps part of the reckless abandon of youth. He'd once possessed it, too.

"You should feel a sense of accomplishment," he added proudly.

Anakin ignored his Master's praise. For him, the survival test was not particularly challenging or relevant. "I try to be patient, Master. I meditate, I reach out, make myself mindful of my surroundings and of myself within the Force---I do everything you have taught me to do; I do everything *you* do, and nothing helps. We do the combat exercise over again and again, and I still fail." The boy hung his head and nervously tried to bury one booted toe into the sandy rock.

"And we shall do it again and again, until you do not fail." Kenobi urged, his tone becoming serious. "Come, let us not dwell on this one incident. It is ended---already a part of the past. You cannot bring it back again. The past is immutable, lost forever. You must learn from your mistakes, Anakin. Regrets and self-recrimination are a waste of a Jedi's energy and block your ability to use the Force. You must make yourself look forward from this point."

"I don't know how. I don't know what to do."



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If the young Skywalker's defeated attitude concerned the older man, he did not show it. He simply turned away to retrieve his cloak and off-handedly added. "There is one thing you can do and do it quickly."

The boy's face brightened. "What is that, Master?"

"You can retrieve your light saber."

Anakin seemed disappointed. Obi-Wan ignored this and continued. "Not every piece of instruction is enlightenment, young Padawan. But, in this case, I *will* tell you that it is very near one of the volcanic fissures and about to fall in. If you lose this one, I shall not make you another. Go now---quickly."

Alarmed, Anakin looked around for his weapon, but could not locate the spot to which Kenobi had so deftly propelled it. He attempted three times to will the weapon to him, but the efforts proved fruitless. Something was preventing contact---was it something in himself? He tried to control his breathing, reaching out mentally to touch the light saber---still without results. Anger began to rise within him.

Again, Obi-Wan concealed the apprehension he felt at his young apprentice's frustration. It was not the first time Anakin had turned a simple task into self-conflict. "Calm yourself. Clear your thoughts of all outside distractions. Reach out. See it. Touch it and enfold it with your mind."

"It's easy for you, you've been doing this for years. I get---things get blocked. I can't always see what you see."

"That is because you *expect* failure at every turn." Kenobi's words were delivered quietly, but edged with a blunt severity. "Perhaps we should put aside the weapons for a while and work on building your discipline, confidence, and self-control."

"No, Master. I'll try harder. I promise. Don't take the light saber. It helps me with my discipline and confidence."

"But not your self-control." Kenobi's voice rose slightly, but his thoughts remained his own. *Will you never learn to listen?* "Anakin," he continued, "you cannot expect to hide behind a light saber every time things don't go your way. That is not the relationship to have with the living Force. Your light saber is merely a tool, an extension of a Jedi's power, not it's source. Now concentrate."

Anakin clenched his fists, but did as he was told. Reaching out with his feelings in one last determined effort, he finally located the missing light saber and, within seconds, drew it easily into his outstretched hand. Betrayed by embarrassment, he looked sheepishly across the rock expanse at the older man.

Obi-Wan shook his head. "How hard was that?" He chided, sarcastically. "It took you---what?---all of 10 seconds in this last attempt? But how long did it take you to reach that point? Five minutes? Ten? In a real battle with a real enemy who wishes to spill your blood, you will not have the luxury of time."

He slowly crossed the distance between them and placed both hands firmly on the boy's shoulders. Looking deeply into his eyes, he continued. "Anakin, you must make a conscious

effort to overcome this frustration and anger I sense growing inside of you. You are learning more and more each day, and whether you realize it or not, your skills are advancing and improving with amazing speed. But becoming one with the Force is attained only by those who possess the strength and willingness to embrace it fully and without fear. Without anger. Remember that. Self-discipline, self-restraint, and, above all, economy of movement and thought."

Anakin nodded in silent understanding. He was still somewhat annoyed with himself, but he wanted very much to please his mentor.

After a moment, the Jedi Master dropped his hands to his sides and, turning from his apprentice, leapt sideways onto another outcropping of rocks several yards away. "Now let us see what this day has taught you. Come with me," he called, as he proceeded to effortlessly scale the side of the volcano.

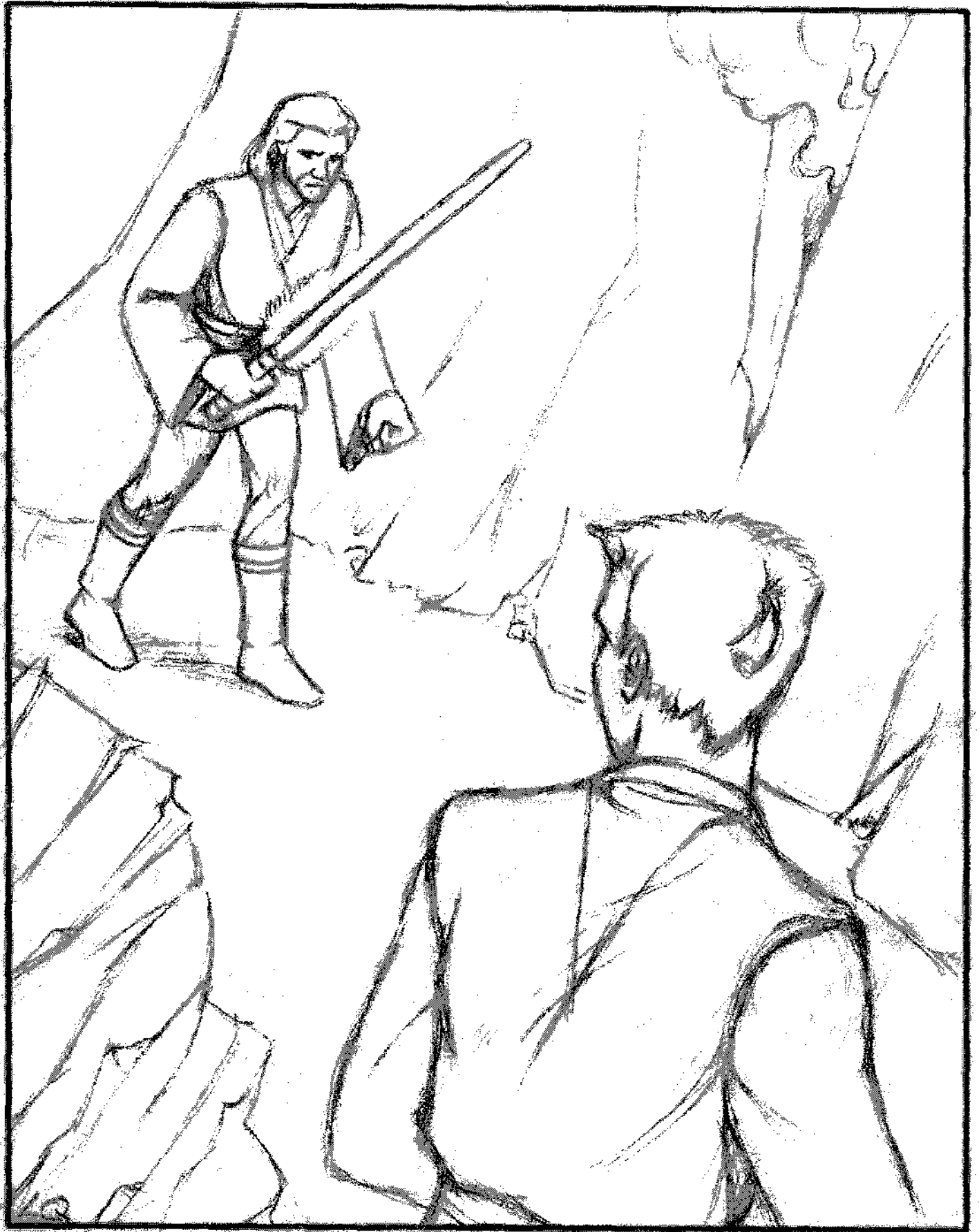
Young Skywalker watched the figure recede above him. Stifling a response, he hooked the light saber onto his belt and obediently followed his teacher. He couldn't explain to Obi-Wan that almost everything he was being taught came too easily to him now. In fact, he was becoming rather bored with the entire training process. And while he still made mistakes, he desperately wanted to engage in *real* life-threatening situations, against *real* adversaries. He felt he was ready for these challenges, no matter what Master Kenobi might think. Skill and resourcefulness were everything. The mental discipline would come soon enough. He wondered how much longer he would endure this game-playing before exposing the truth to this man upon whom he had come to depend for so much.

*I'll show you.* His mind raced, as he scrambled after his mentor. *You'll be sorry for doubting me. I'll show you.* The words repeated themselves inside his head as Skywalker increased the speed of his ascent. Except for those times when he suddenly became impatient or bored, Anakin had loved his Jedi training more than life itself. But things were different now. He was older and growing tired of this endless puerile training. He wanted to move on to another level. He was ready. However, well-meaning, Obi-Wan's dictums were becoming obstacles. That created frequent tension between them.

For the past seven years, Anakin had lived and breathed the life of a Jedi apprentice. He had grown to respect and even love the man who had taken him under his wing and guided him through the demands and complexities of life in the world of the Jedi Knights. It had not been easy--for either of them. Anakin had known from the beginning that Obi-Wan had grave doubts about his becoming a Jedi. But the promise Kenobi had made to his own Jedi Master, Qui-Gon Jinn, to assume sole responsibility for the boy and teach him the ways of the Force, seemed to have overcome those misgivings. If the Jedi Master was in any way disappointed with him, Anakin could not sense it. Even when he attempted to enter Kenobi's thoughts, the man never allowed him to complete the journey, gently diverting him and turning him out of his mind. Then, as a reprimand for the mental invasion, he would send Anakin off to face much harder obstacles in the physical world. If anything, Obi-Wan was forever encouraging the boy to explore and confront challenges no ordinary apprentice might be expected to face, even allowing him to study and practice techniques no padawan had ever been permitted to learn at his age.

The two climbers had vertically traversed a distance of about one hundred yards before Anakin finally caught up with Kenobi. It was another fifty feet before the Jedi Master stopped his ascent and climbed onto a narrow, twelve foot ledge near a wide fissure in the side of the





volcano. Gases rose ominously from the opening, but he felt they were not in any significant danger; hot steam was not likely to cause much more than mild discomfort at this distance. And he knew that despite today's disappointing set-back, Anakin was eager to redeem himself; his skill and unusually quick reflexes should help him avoid any pitfalls. Obi-Wan turned toward the boy, and spoke using the stern, dispassionate voice of Master to Padawan.

"We shall try something different, I think---this time without the advantage of concealment. Simple. One-on-one, open combat. But I warn you, I shall hold nothing back and I expect you to hold nothing back either. Prepare yourself."

Puzzled by the flatness in the voice, Skywalker nevertheless quickly assessed the uneven ground around them and the rock wall rising claustrophobically beside them. He momentarily eyed the steaming fissure to his right, dismissing the heat brushing against his skin. The Master hadn't selected a confinement exercise in months. *Why now? Why here? So little room to maneuver.*

Suddenly, pride coursed through him and his confidence swelled; he faced Kenobi, his momentary concern swelling to eager excitement. *It's just another test. A test and I'm ready. I can face any challenge you give me. I can do this and I can win. I'll show you what I can do.*

With an almost indiscernible swiftness, Anakin reached for the light saber at his side. But Obi-Wan was already moving toward him, his own weapon drawn, blue flame brilliant against the afternoon sky. And he was laughing. "Come, my young apprentice. *Come show me what you can do.*"

Surprised to hear his own unspoken words thrown back at him in such a seemingly derisive manner, the boy was quite unprepared for this first assault. *No holds barred.* He dodged his Master's onslaught and found himself struggling to disengage his own weapon from its clasp. Pivoting on one unstable foot, Anakin, dropped and rolled toward the other man, bringing his weapon out and up toward Obi-Wan's descending saber. Energy fields locked and the two men launched into all out combat.

After several frustrating minutes on the defensive, Anakin managed to break away from the engagement, but in the process, his light saber slipped from his grasp. Scrambling to retrieve it, he found himself instead facing the tip of Kenobi's blue saber. The man had moved so swiftly, the boy found himself quite unprepared.

"Careless. Careless and sloppy." Obi Wan's words were a stern reminder that his apprentice still had much to learn. The Jedi drew the discarded light saber into his free hand and released it at Anakin's feet. He then backed away to give the boy room to maneuver, disengaging his own saber.

"Well?" The tone of Kenobi's voice seemed to unsettle Skywalker, as the Jedi knew it would. Shaking his head, Obi Wan turned and walked away, scaling the rock face to the top of the volcanic opening another twenty feet above the fissure. From there, as he removed his cloak, he added quietly, but just loud enough for his apprentice to hear, "You're next opponent will not be as patient."

The annoying calm behind the timbre of Kenobi's words during training sessions had often been irritating to Anakin, but never more so than now. The boy had every intention of proving to this man that he was as proficient and capable in combat as any Jedi Master. He simply needed time to decide what move to make next. Slowly bringing the fallen saber into

one hand, he quickly followed his Master to the top of the volcanic cone. Obi Wan was still moving away, his back to the boy, as if he hadn't a care in the world.

Smiling, with a wave of his free hand, Anakin propelled a large nearby rock toward his Master's retreating back. Kenobi wheeled back toward him, deftly halting the projectile in mid flight and sending it crashing into the hard ground, shattering it into a hundred harmless shards. Another rock came hurling at him, this time from behind, and again he brought it down.

"Is it to be rocks now, young Padawan?" Obi wan asked.

Anakin shrugged off his cloak. "You once told me that in a one-on-one battle, anything can become a weapon."

"This is a light saber exercise."

"Well, I'm *exercising* my options." Anakin replied, caustically.

"You may regret those options." Kenobi's words bordered on threatening, but Skywalker ignored them.

"I don't think so, Master. You said initiative was important to a Jedi Knight."

"You are not a Jedi yet."

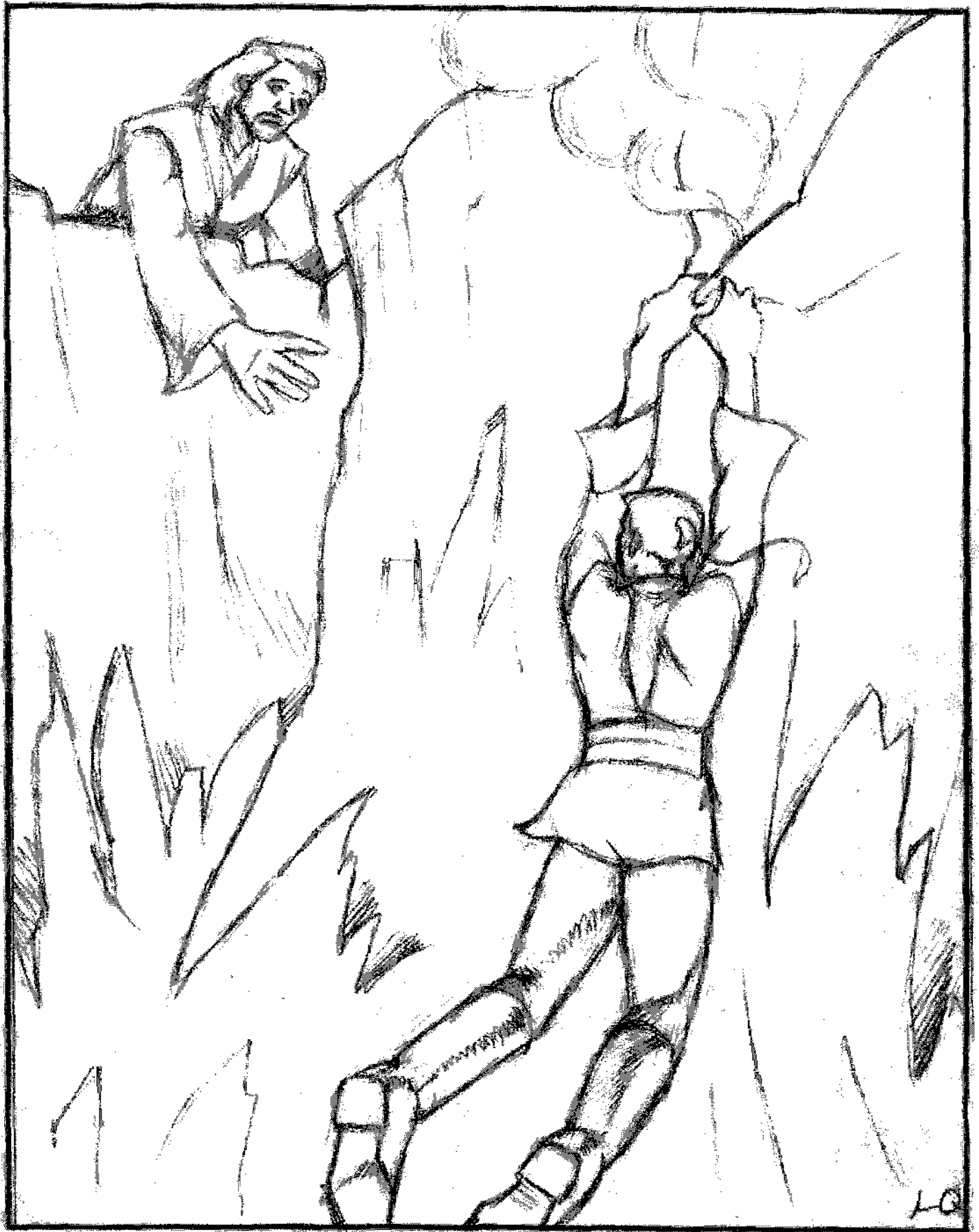
Anakin frowned, his thoughts becoming clouded. He levitated one more rock, while simultaneously igniting his saber, and flew through the hot air, landing just behind Kenobi's left. The bright green blade missed his mentor by inches, as the older man dropped to one knee to avoid the third rock. It flew beyond its intended mark, falling to the ground beyond them both. Bringing his weapon up with tremendous force, Kenobi caught the edge of Skywalker's blade and propelled his young opponent backward to the very edge of the steaming volcano.

Anakin stumbled, searing heat singed his face and hair, and anger ignited within him. He twisted away from the jagged ledge, swinging wildly at Kenobi's descending blue blade. As he did so, his own blade caught Obi Wan's left shoulder, shearing through the tunic to sear the exposed skin beneath. A barely audible cry escaped the Jedi, but Kenobi swiftly recovered, pushing the pain from his thoughts. He twisted away, turning his back for only a second. It was then that Anakin saw his chance. The boy moved forward, light saber swinging downwards toward the retreating Jedi, an expression of triumphant joy spreading across his features. A burst of laughter escaped his lips, to be replaced by a gasp of horror as the ledge beneath him gave way. Gripped with fear, Skywalker plummeted backward over the jagged edge of the fissure, his light saber slipping from his grasp to precede him into the abyss.

Obi Wan Kenobi felt the boy's fear before he heard the boy's fall. Then he was assaulted by the screams.

"Obi-wan!! *Please!!!! Help!!*

Kenobi scrambled to the edge of the precipice over which Anakin had fallen and reached out as far as he could toward the boy, now dangling precariously from a small rock spur some ten feet below him. Another twenty feet beyond, red-black molten lava churned and boiled perilously.



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"Anakin, listen to me. It's going to be all right," he reassured. *"Trust me."*

"I can't hold on---my hands are on fire!!"

From his vantage point, Obi-wan could barely see the fissure directly above Anakin's rock spur. Then he saw the steam burst forth. The boy cried out in agony as his blistering fingers were assaulted by the searing heat. Kenobi worked quickly. Centering himself, he reached out through the Force to draw Anakin to him. His mind slid through the pain and the screaming, only to be blocked, then hurled backward.

*What was it?---an energy surge?---* resistance borne of this planet's violent upheavals? He'd never encountered anything like this before. Ignoring the dizzying sensation of fear rising in his mind, Obi-Wan crawled back to the edge of the abyss and made a second attempt to reach the boy with the Force. All of his efforts proved futile; whatever stood between them was not going to let him pass. If he was going to save Skywalker, Kenobi knew he had to gain control of the boy's mind.

"Anakin, look at Me." The boy was not listening. His entire body was a writhing mass of tension, pain and terror, his breathing ragged and uncontrolled. The exertions of the combat had already depleted both of their abilities to counter the planet's rarefied atmosphere. The volcanic gases only made it worse. Short of breath himself, Obi-wan shook off the dark barrier preventing his use of the Force, mustered all of his remaining strength and shouted, **"ANAKIN! LOOK AT ME!!"**

Coughing uncontrollably, and clawing wildly to maintain his hold on the rock spur, the boy finally struggled to look up. Frightened, pleading gray eyes locked on blue. Obi-wan sought to gain control of Anakin's fears and calms him. But what he found behind those pain-filled eyes sent shivers coursing down the length of his spine and made him genuinely fearful for the first time in his life. Beyond the panicked dilation of the pupils, something dark, ugly and forbidding looked back at him from deep within the boy's soul. Something *not* Anakin. In that instant, Kenobi's thoughts raced back down the years to the day Anakin had been brought before the Jedi Council on Coruscant and Qui-Gon had been denied his request to train the then nine-year old. Even Obi-wan had warned his Master that the boy was dangerous. After all these years, he still wondered what had made him say that. How could he have known? Suddenly his mind flooded with images---places and people he had never seen before swirled wildly around him---events and faces surrounded by confusion, annihilation, and death. The strident sound of clashing light sabers consumed the edges of his visions. A jumbled mass of shadowed twisting movement. And in the center of it all stood an imposing dark figure, breathing...breathing...breathing...terrifying breathing...something that was no longer human.

*Something not Anakin.*

The dark image possessed him until it had overwhelmed and consumed all other visions. Fear sliced through his being. He shuddered. He had never run from danger. Now it was everything he could do to keep himself from doing just that.

**\* THIS DOESN'T HAPPEN YET!!!! \***

The voice that screamed against the horrific vision was his own---a voice that also echoed words once spoken by Master Yoda. *Clouded is this boy's future. Unclear.*

## **SOMETHING NOT ANAKIN**

It was then that Obi-wan realized that he was being offered a chance to determine the future, a choice between life and death. But whose? The choice would be as binding as any promise he had ever made to Qui-Gon Jinn. And the repercussions would be just as irrevocable. What ever he did in the next few minutes would forever change his life, the boy's life, and everything and everyone they knew or would ever know. He realized that as certainly as he realized he would one day have to come to terms with the consequences of that choice.

The boy's desperate cries wrenched Kenobi back into the present. He shook off the horrific images and struggled to master his own haunting fear. Crawling completely over the side of the cliff, he hooked his boots into a crevice in the rock wall and hung upside down along the vertical face of the steaming rock. He stretched out as far as he could toward Anakin, all the while trying to calm the boy's increasing panic and control his own.

"You can hold on, Anakin. You can do it. Just reach up with one hand toward mine."

"No," the boy sobbed, desperately choking back blinding tears, "I can't. I'll fall."

"No you won't. I'll catch you. I promise. *Let go one hand.* I'm here, Anakin. I won't let you fall. *Trust me.*"

He utilized every mind trick he could think of, but it was very difficult to break through the boy's impregnable wall of fear. He sought to use the power of the boy's own will to live to help draw Anakin away from his desperation and growing despair. But it became clear with each passing second that the boy was losing his hold not only on the rock spur, but on consciousness as well. Obi-wan could see the boy's hands were severely scorched, only fleetingly noticed that the rising heat and steam was rapidly searing his own skin.

*Control. I must gain control.*

*No.....CALM.....find the serene....surrender....*

*"Embrace the Living Force."* Qui-Gon's words came back to him.

In that moment, Kenobi realized that it was his own fear of the unknown that was preventing him from rescuing Anakin. Summoning everything he had ever learned, Obi-wan pushed all visions of the future from his mind, clearing a path for the inevitable union with the Force. If need be, he was prepared to give his life to save the boy. But that would not be asked of him this day. Without knowing why, he knew that it was not for *this* boy that he would make the ultimate sacrifice.

Stillness engulfed him, his outstretched arms extending downward as far as possible toward the helpless figure below. All color faded from his features as his will, his thoughts, and every ounce of energy he possessed slid into the boy's mind.

**// ANAKIN. THERE IS NO TIME LEFT. YOU MUST TRUST ME AS YOU HAVE NEVER TRUSTED ANYONE BEFORE IN YOUR LIFE. GIVE ME YOUR HAND. NOW! //**

The boy's eyes had glazed over; consciousness was slipping away. But slowly, one hand began to move, releasing its hold on the rock. Grimacing against the unbearable pain,



Anakin reached upward toward the only family he had known since leaving his mother alone on Tatooine seven years before.

"I...trust you." The sounds, weak and shaking, were all the words Obi-wan needed to hear. He closed his eyes and sent a final request into the boy's thoughts.

*//NOW, ANAKIN, LET GO THE OTHER HAND!//*

Within seconds, Kenobi held the boy safely in his arms on the basalt above, nearly thirty feet back from the edge of the cliff. His breathing was shallow and ragged, his heart racing. He felt numb. Sweat streamed down his face. His tunic was soaking wet. The enormous expense of energy had exhausted them both, but at least Anakin had mercifully lost consciousness just as the older man had taken both the boy's raw hands and lifted him to safety. Obi-Wan felt as though every muscle and cell in his body had exploded and collapsed. There was no single spot that was free of pain; spasms coursed the length of his torso. He was certain Anakin would be extremely sore when he finally awoke, but at least asleep he was spared the harsh physical after-shocks that now wracked Kenobi's body.

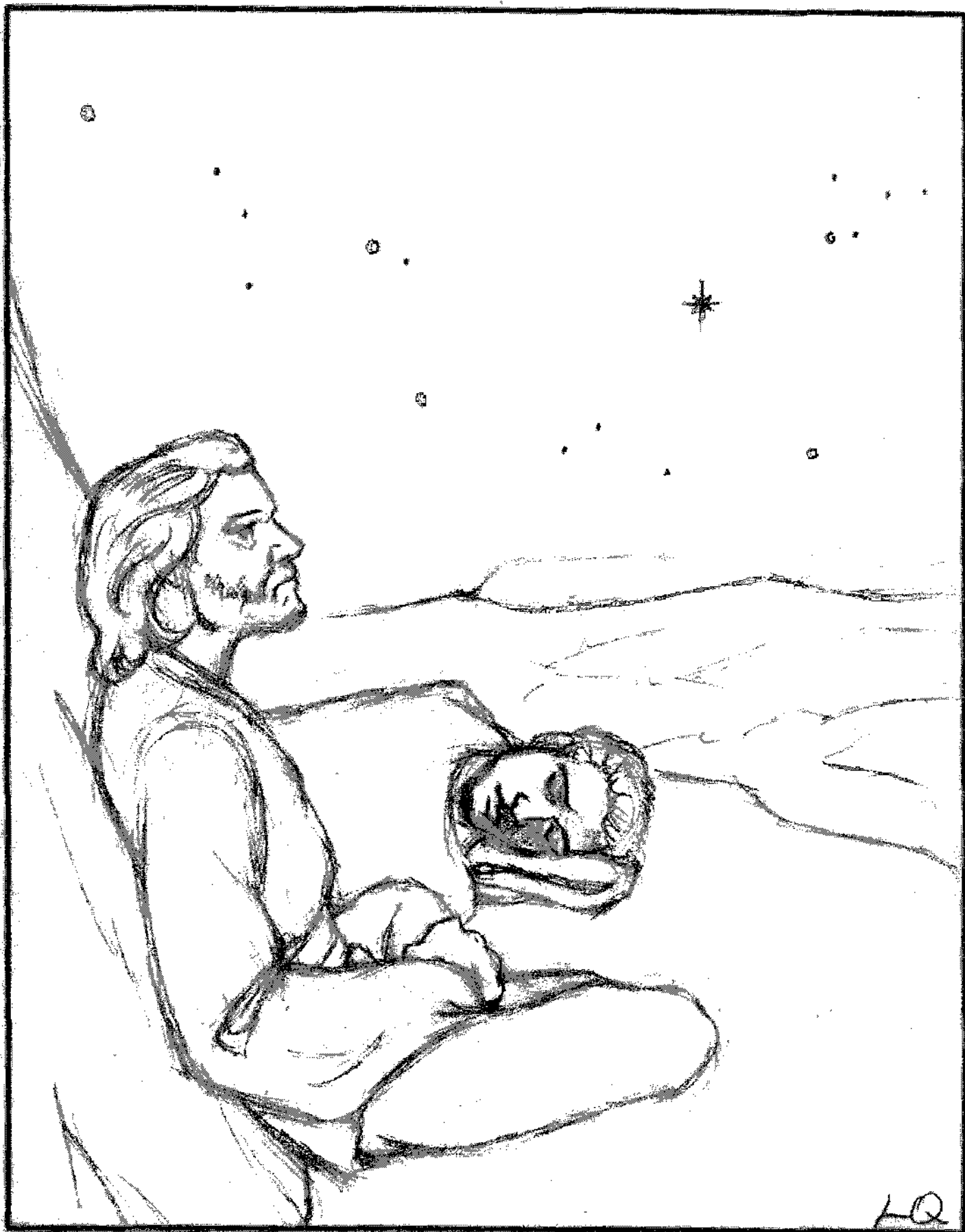
For several hours, Obi-wan sat without moving, holding the boy, while his own body made the long re-adjustment to the real world around him. He watched the progress of the twin suns across the sky and realized he and Anakin would be forced to spend the night on this rock cliff. It was sundown before he finally sensed the feeling and strength returning to his arms and legs. He stood up slowly, and carried Anakin to the shelter of a small outcrop of rock and basalt nearby, gently laying him down upon the blackened surface. Then, quite unsteadily, he moved off to retrieve both of their cloaks. The night would most certainly be cold, but at least they were high enough above the desert floor to be safe from the nightly passage of roving indigenous predators.

As he moved back toward his padawan, Kenobi activated his voice remote, and ordered R4 to bring their ship around. It would take hours before the two-man craft reached their location, but the extra provisions on board were vital to their survival.

Then, folding Anakin's cloak into a pillow, he placed it beneath the boy's head. Skywalker moaned once, but did not regain consciousness. Settling down cross-legged beside him, Kenobi swallowed hard against the pain coursing through his joints. He stiffly removed his utility belt, as well as that of the boy's and detached both medikits. Carefully, he applied the antibiotic bacta spray and synth-flesh to Anakin's burns. When finished, he threw his own cloak over the unconscious form.

Obi-Wan knew his apprentice would sleep through the night, maybe even into a good portion of the next day. At this point, it was difficult to say how long Anakin's body would take to recover from his ordeal. The facial wounds would heal without scarring, but his hands would be a different matter. The damage to them was quite severe; synth-flesh could only be a temporary measure, useful only until he could transport the boy to the nearest Med-Corps outpost.

Shifting himself to lean against the basalt outcropping beside his padawan, the Jedi used what remained of their medications to dress his own wounds. Until that moment, he had not realized his injuries were so extensive. His blistered hands throbbed, but he knew they would heal far more quickly than the scorching injury to his shoulder.



Ignoring the waves of pain still flowing over him, Obi-wan Kenobi was determined to keep vigil through the long night. Hunger gnawed at him, but he refused to leave his apprentice's side for even a second. He was possessed of a new purpose and it took all of his concentration to assess the turn of events that had brought them both to this moment in time. Kenobi was still determined to make certain that Anakin Skywalker was thoroughly trained in the more complex Jedi arts. Qui-Gon had said he was "*The Chosen One.*" Very well, the boy would now need to learn to protect himself from the uncertain future that loomed ominously on the horizon. Perhaps Obi-Wan had a foreboding glimpse of that future, or perhaps it had all been a fear-induced hallucination. But he refused to risk any of it to chance. Despite a nagging apprehension tugging at his heart, from now on, wherever Anakin would go, Obi-Wan was determined to follow. Who knew where the road ahead might lead?

"Whatever path we travel, we will travel it together, my young friend."

He paused, resting his gaze upon the sleeping form beside him. Eerily silhouetted by the orange glow of the volcano beyond, Anakin's features were free of pain, serene, innocent. Kenobi's were not.

"Clouded the future may be, Master Yoda," he conceded, peering into the shadows of the dark night enfolding them. "But I've been given a chance to make things right and set what is to come upon a different course." Burying the last shred of doubt beneath his resolve, he added, "Upon my soul and word as a Jedi, I intend to do just that."

Wearily, he tilted his head back and searched the canopy of twinkling stars above him. It would be another hour before Aerebus's blood red moon began to make its ascent into the night sky and diminish the lights of heaven.

Suddenly Obi-Wan Kenobi felt utterly and completely alone.



*"I didn't know who Obi-Wan Kenobi really was until I understood his sacrifice. The only time we met, he chose not to tell me who I was, even though he knew."*

--- Han Solo, from the Galactic Alliance Archives

# NOTHING BY CHANCE

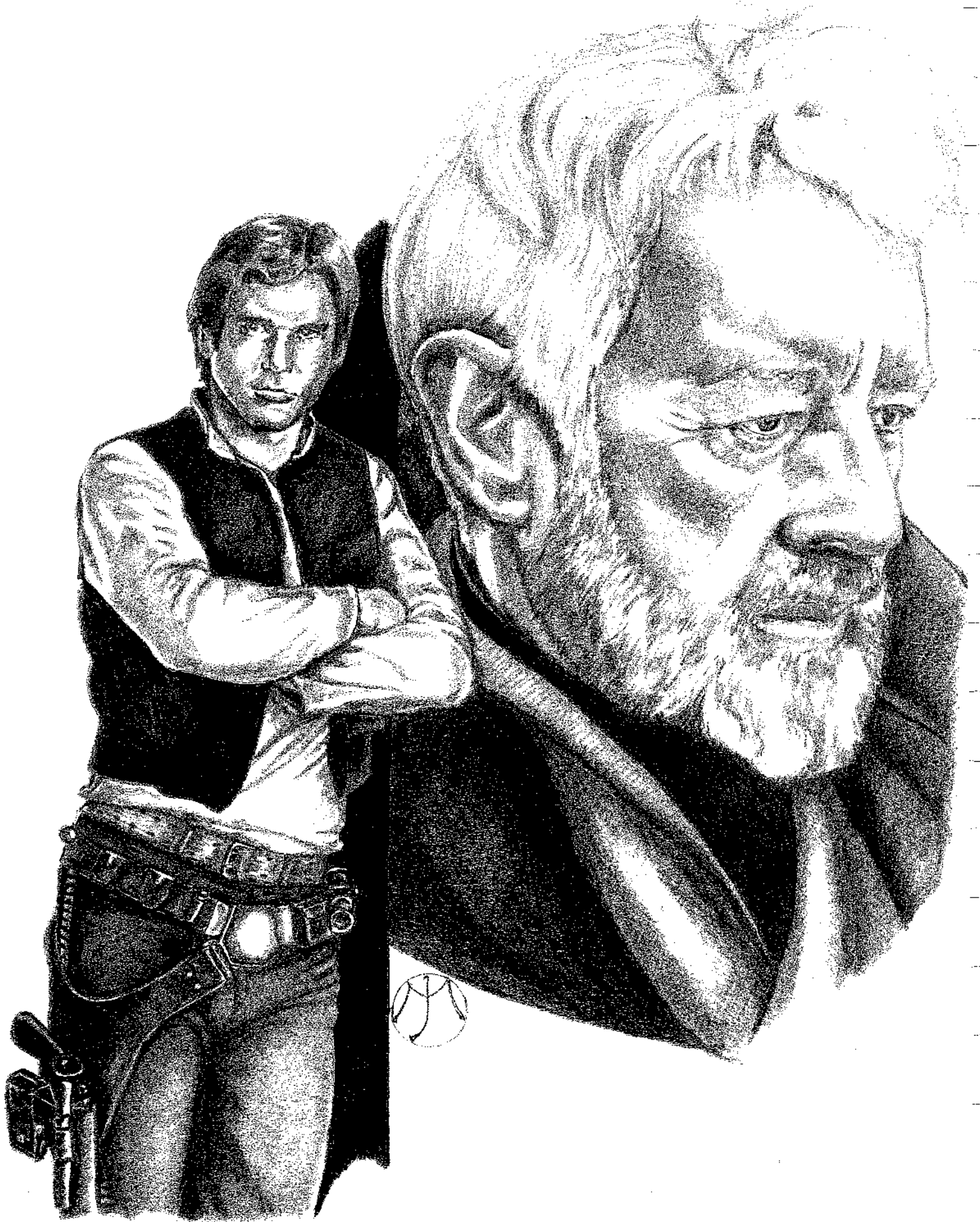


Less than a day out of Tatooine, the Millennium Falcon held her course to Alderaan, steadily cruising at top light speed through the silent blackness of hyperspace. By standard ship's time, it was well past midnight and everything on board the battered freighter appeared quiet. Bunked in their quarters, her passengers presumably were asleep. In the cockpit, one of her two crewmembers sat watch, his keen Wookiee senses monitoring the instrument panel for signs of possible pursuit. Fortunately, there had been none since they'd made the jump to light speed. Chewbacca yawned once, stretched, and leaned back in his co-pilot's seat, weary from the day's events. In less than two hours, the Falcon's owner was due to take a turn on watch; somewhere, in another part of the ship, he should be asleep. In fact, he was not.

Restlessly tossing and turning in his bunk, Han Solo squeezed his eyes closed in another attempt to shut out the questions and images which had plagued him all night. Finally, unable to force sleep, he sat bolt upright in his bunk, muscles taut, struggling to make sense of his current situation. How and why had he allowed himself to take on board two mysterious strangers and endanger the welfare of his own ship? Granted the money was good, better than he could have dreamed, but he knew he had been reckless to take on this charter. Long ago, Han learned that to judge anything by appearances alone often led to deadly consequences; yet, without hesitation, he'd allowed these particular passengers on board. Twenty-eight years of a hard life had taught him it didn't matter on what side of the law one walked, the galaxy was a dangerous place. There were only two things he trusted without question: his instincts and abilities and those of his partner. To make room for more was foolhardy...and, on occasion, regrettable.

Cursing aloud, Han threw off the thermal coverlet, swung his legs over the edge of his bunk, and ran one hand through his sweat-soaked hair.

*"Sithspit!* What in hell am I doing? No charter is worth this aggravation. I'm regretting this job already."



It was useless trying to sleep now. *May as well get some kaffe.* He wanted to shake the conflict from his brain so he could relieve Chewie with a clear head. He rose quickly, threw on his trousers, shirt and vest, strapped on the blaster holster, checked the weapon's charge counter, and left his quarters. Striding down the corridor, he partially tucked the wrinkled shirt into his pants, all the while mumbling curses.

Even before he entered the forward lounge, Solo knew it was not empty. Unfazed, he stepped through the hatch opening. A solitary lamp dimly illuminated the area. As he approached the galley counter, he noticed the strangers' R2 droid resting half in shadow against the far bulkhead. The little barrel-shaped unit was obviously powered down and Solo fervently hoped that its annoying companion, C3PO, was in a similar state somewhere far out of sight. *Droids! Why did they have to have droids with 'em!* He shook his head and turned to the counter, filling a mug with brewed kaffe kept hot in a thermal unit. Sipping the steaming liquid, he did not turn around when he laconically addressed the darkness behind him.

"I'd always heard it isn't considered good form to ignore your host. Besides, concealment looks suspicious, and just might get you killed."

Ben Kenobi was not surprised that his presence in the dark had been detected. He could easily have cloaked himself but knew it would have been an insult to the man standing before him. The captain of the Millennium Falcon was not one to be crossed or even challenged. "Your senses," he observed, "are quite remarkable."

The Corellian turned to face the unseen figure in the shadows, his gaze a steady reflection of his voice. "Keeps me alive."

"Yes. I imagine it does."

Solo was uncomfortable with the tone of Kenobi's voice, at once noncommittal and all-knowing. It was haunting, too—enough to keep Han Solo on guard. From the outset, something about the man made him wary, and it wasn't just the memory of watching him wield that lightsaber in the cantina. The Empire's propagandists had long ago said the Jedi knights were extinct. Apparently, they were mistaken, he thought to himself, wryly. Still, this Wiley old fox obviously knew more than he'd ever let on, a fact that earned Han's respect and admiration but also raised the hairs on the back of his neck.

"You sound as if you know what you're talking about."

The older man shrugged casually. "In my day," he said, "I had my share of unpredictable adventures."

Once more the image of how expertly the old man had used that lightsaber crossed Han's mind. "And adversaries?"

"That too," he admitted, then added, "regrettably."

The Falcon's owner nodded in the direction of the other's voice, understanding the kinds of experiences that often led to such regrets. For a brief moment, he wondered if Kenobi would impart any further details but wasn't surprised when none came. Perhaps here was something the two of them held in common—the selfish tenacity to keep memories private.



After a brief pause Kenobi rose, moved out of the shadows and entered the galley, stopping only a few feet away from the Solo. Gesturing toward the kaffe thermos, he asked, "May I?"

The pilot stepped aside and waved him on. "You're paying for it." His tone was nonchalant, but at the same time he moved his hand close to his blaster.

Pouring the steaming brew, Kenobi remarked, "You can relax, Captain Solo. You are in no danger, I assure you."

Solo's response was swift, "I'll relax when you and that barely-out-of-diapers kid are off my ship and we're paid in full for your transport."

"Luke and I are no danger to you; nor are the droids. You needn't worry."

Solo found the words oddly persuasive, but his innate skepticism would not permit easy acceptance. Some of the Jedi myths came back to him---telekinesis, mind reading and thought manipulation. He doubted their veracity, but kept his guard up nonetheless.

"You don't bother me," Solo lied, calmly. "What worries me are the Imperials."

"They should not concern you either. Only reaching our destination safely matters now."

"Uh-huh." Solo was sarcastic. "Everything on my ship concerns me, old man. I run a tight operation here, high profile only when it serves my purpose, well below the radar when necessary, which is becoming more frequent these days. But when the Imperials get involved, that's sends red flags. Things can start to get messy. And I don't like messy."

"Your concern for your ship is admirable. But with a customized hyperdrive system twice the normal size for this model freighter, I can't see you becoming too concerned over pursuit by Imperial warships. This vessel would easily outrun them all. I couldn't help noticing some other modifications. Did you make them yourself?"

"Yeah." Han's eyes narrowed. *Does this wizard miss anything?*

Kenobi was obviously changing the subject, but Solo was curious now. He had become suspicious of the old man's odd behavior from the moment he and the boy first came on board. Without asking directions, the Jedi headed straight to the cockpit. He also walked the decks and passageways with more than a little familiarity. This stranger, whom everyone in Mos Eisley claimed was just a "crazy old man," was clearly not as deranged as local legend would have it. There was more than a little method to his "madness."

"I commend you, Captain," the old man continued. "The YT-1300's were always reliable but they did have their limitations. Their engines were never as large or streamlined as these, nor were they ever this quiet. The modification is brilliantly executed, far beyond the original design capabilities."

Han ignored the compliment, responding instead with a question, "You know this model of freighter?"

"I've flown one before...a very long time ago. A good friend owned one like this."

"Not one like this, old man." The smuggler smirked. "The Falcon's one of a kind."

"No," the Jedi conceded, affably. "Not *exactly* like this." Kaffe in hand, Kenobi walked to the curved divan and sat down. He eyed the Corellian pilot as if he'd known him all his life. Certain memories loomed out of a dark past, but they were not open for discussion here. Perhaps future events would make it possible, perhaps not. Only time would tell.

"You've obviously made changes to suit your needs," he added, sipping the hot liquid.

"My *modifications* have helped keep me and my partner alive, old man." Han countered.

"I can see that. You've added a top-of-the-line sensor dish, with long-range circuitry, which gives you the advantage of surprise in an unexpected pursuit. You've installed two very sophisticated military-grade quasi-laser cannons above and below. That's logical, considering your line of business. But such weaponry could get you fined, not only by the Trade Federation, but arrested by the Imperials as well, if either of them ever decided to inspect the extent of your internal schematics. Still, the workmanship is flawless. The lasers concealed at the stern are not yet up to peak performance, but I'm certain you and your co-pilot are already working on a solution to that problem. Also, reinforcing the inner hull is not something one would imagine on a freighter this old."

"I imagined it." Han responded emphatically. "And all of a sudden you know a helluva lot about my ship, old man."

"I'm a quick study. I've spent a lifetime observing my surroundings. You might say it's my peculiar talent."

"It's a very annoying one that might just get you killed one day."

"Perhaps. But not today." Kenobi took another sip, and changed the subject. "This is very good kaffe. Your own brew?"

"My co-pilot's. One of *his* peculiar talents."

"Not yours?"

"My peculiar talents are peculiarly my own, thank you, and not open for discussion."

Han moved to the acceleration chair, and nestled into the familiar cushion. Stretching his long legs out before him, he crossed them at the ankles. Although he took his eyes off the older man, his relaxed appearance belied the fact that he had not let his guard down for a second. *What were you doing here in the dark, old man? Hiding? From what?* Kenobi was not an enemy per se, but his 'desire' to avoid any '*Imperial entanglements*' had already endangered Solo, Chewie and the Falcon. While the Corellian generally made it a rule to let others deal with their own problems, threatening circumstances had a tendency to make him suspicious and wary. They could jeopardize his livelihood. This man obviously had secrets he wasn't telling and that made the smuggler very uncomfortable. *I've got a bad feeling about this.*

"You're wondering," Kenobi ventured softly, "what I was doing sitting here in the dark?"

Though shaken by the matter-of-fact response to his unspoken thoughts, Solo expertly concealed his surprise. "It *had* crossed my mind," he responded coolly.

Kenobi chuckled without smiling. "I assure you, Captain Solo, I wasn't hiding."

"So what then? Couldn't sleep?"

"Something like that."

"Afraid my partner might sneak into your cabin and tear you apart during the night?"

Obi Wan responded quickly to the sardonic humor. "Your Wookiee friend is no threat to me. He lives by a code older and far more honorable than either yours or mine."

The Corellian set his kaffe aside. Leaning forward, he rested his elbows on the edge of the table. *Just what code do you live by, I wonder?* Solo's eyes narrowed as he studied the other man's face, deciding that now was the time for answers to issues that had bothered him since the moment they blasted their way out of Mos Eisley spaceport.

"You're not from Tatooine," he stated flatly. "You're no farmer and you sure as hell aren't a trader or a smuggler. You used that antiquated weapon of yours like you were born to it."

"I'm pleased you were paying attention, Captain. Your perceptions obviously serve you well."

Han nodded with a wry grin. "In my line of work, they're the only insurance next to a good blaster." This man's elusiveness was becoming annoying. "Time for some answers old man. What's your crime?"

"I thought we agreed there would be no questions asked."

"Well," Solo sniggered, "that was before me and my partner damn near got our asses blasted getting you and farm boy off planet. I figure you owe me. *What's your crime?*"

Kenobi's reply was calmly measured. "You're a smuggler with a price on your head, and you ask me *that?*"

Ignoring the remark, Han continued his interrogation. "Tatooine's been swarming with Imperial forces for days, looking for someone or something. Now, I keep asking myself, why would storm troopers be after a wet-behind-the-ears kid and an old desert hermit that everyone thinks is nuts? Unless----" His hooded gaze deliberately rested on the R2 unit. Since coming aboard, Kenobi had never let the little droid out of his sight. Suddenly things began to click into place.

"It's the droids, isn't it?" Solo's tone remained accusatory. "Or one of them, at least. What's so special about these particular droids?"

"The less you know, Captain," Kenobi quietly warned, "the safer you and your co-pilot will be."



Stabbing a finger against the surface of the table, Han pressed the issue. "I really hate to point out the obvious here, but it's already become unsafe to be around you."

"Then allow me to reassure you, your sacrifice and silence in this matter will be well rewarded." The older man's voice was firm, the words pointed.

"Well, that's the thing, isn't it? Chewie and I can handle the '*silence*.' It's the '*sacrifice*' part that has us worried."

"Then let me put it to you another way. You'll simply have to trust me."

The finality of the response did not phase Han Solo. The younger man nearly burst into laughter at the absurdity of the old man's audacity. "You're asking a helluva lot. I don't even know you. And I'm damn certain I don't want to. But---," he caught himself, remembering the debt he still owed Jabba, and the considerable monetary advantages he and Chewie stood to gain from this particular charter. "What choice do I have?"

"There are always choices." Obi Wan offered, spreading his hands. "Here, you and I have something in common. We make it a point to always keep our end of a bargain once it has been made, whatever the risk. I promise you, the remainder of your fee *will* be paid when we safely reach Alderaan."

"I'm counting on it."

"I'll wager that to cheat you out of your due would be very costly indeed."

Solo laughed sardonically, his eyes glinting in a fashion that would set most other people on edge. It obviously had no effect on the old man. "You wouldn't lose that bet," he responded, taking a long drink of kaffe. For the first time, Han saw a smile cross the other man's features, yet the expression that followed was unreadable.

"You should be very proud of this ship." Kenobi remarked, changing the subject back to the Falcon. "She obviously means a great deal to you and has served you well."

"She's saved our butts more than once, I can tell you that."

"Do you know her history?"

"I won her in a game of sabacc. Fair and square," he added when he saw the look of doubt cross the other man's face. "She wasn't much to look at when she came to me. Broken down, scored, rusted and neglected for years, but I could see there was fire left in her. Beyond the guy I won her from, I know nothing about her previous owners."

"Freighters of this type were an elite commodity once, designed specifically to serve a few independent commercial operations, working outside the auspices of the ruling Trade Guild. When those independents collapsed, so too did the usefulness of the YT-1300s. Many were scraped, traded, sold for parts, or shipped off to the Rim Worlds."

Han's curiosity was peaked. "You get around, old man. Why Alderaan? You know the Imperials won't ignore what happened on Tatooine."

"I don't expect they will. But if we can get to Alderaan without any further incidents and *no more questions asked*," warned the Jedi, "you and your partner can return to your normal activities in relative safety."

"These days, old man, none of us are safe. In case you hadn't heard, there's a rebellion messing things up for the rest of us all over the galaxy. It's getting so that even a self-respecting smuggler isn't safe anymore. If it's not the self-righteous Imperials, it's the self-righteous rebels. On board my ship, you play by *my* rules. The safety of my ship and her crew are my first concern. Any more *entanglements* and we may just have to forge a new contract. Our survival takes precedence over your little charter."

"I would ask and expect no less of you."

"Good. Just so long as we understand each other."

"More than you know, Captain," Kenobi responded, almost under his breath.

Han Solo stared long and hard at the older man. *You're a strange one, alright. Crazy, they'd said. Yeah, crazy like a Xantrellian cave rat.*

For several minutes, the two men sat quietly, drinking their kaffe. The only sound was the soft vibrating hum of the Falcon's hyperdrive engines. Kenobi was first to break the silence that had fallen between them. When he spoke, his voice was calm, introspective.

"I knew a man once, years ago, who sacrificed everything he had to recover something he'd lost. It was very precious to him, so he felt justified in doing whatever was necessary to find it. The problem was, what he'd lost was also of great value to others, powerful men determined to keep it from him at any cost."

"Stalemate. The odds were against him from the start then."

"He always defied the odds."

"Then I'd say he was a fool."

"*Would you? You* defied the odds the moment you accepted our charter. The Empire may not look favorably on this. Some might even say this makes *you* a fool."

"Ask me if I care. I don't work for the Empire. And the cargo I transport is my concern." Solo said, defensively. "Go on, what happened to this fool of yours?"

"The man spent years searching for this missing item, at first with the aid of friends, but later completely alone."

"They weren't very good friends then. He was probably better off without them."

"Perhaps. But those friends tried very hard to help...for as long as they were able." Kenobi's gaze drifted beyond Solo's, beyond the ship itself. "It was just that they---there were other commitments, unforeseen responsibilities." His voice faded. "It was a perilous time."



"Isn't it always? Any excuse." Han's eyed the old Jedi suspiciously. *Why do I get the feeling there's more to this little parable than you're telling me, old man?* "So, did this man ever find what he lost?"

"Not yet." The words were almost a whisper. "But I have every confidence one day he will. Or, what he lost will somehow find its way back to him."

The man certainly enjoyed speaking in riddles. It was irritating. Solo shrugged and observed, "Considering the powers keeping them apart all these years, there's not much chance of that now, is there?"

"I have learned, Captain, that in this life, nothing happens by chance. We must all carve our own destinies, or others will do it for us."

"Well, old man, on that point we completely agree."

"Imagine that," the older man commented absently. "Common ground." Smiling for the second time that night, he added wearily. "It's a start." The blue of Kenobi's eyes deepened. Han had the feeling he was looking right through him. For a second, he glimpsed something in the man's penetrating gaze. *Was it pain?* Whatever it was, it conveyed a sense of emptiness and unspeakable loss. Then, just as quickly, it vanished.

As if remembering something he'd forgotten, Obi Wan rose suddenly. "I must be more exhausted than I thought," he said absently. "I think I'll turn in now." He returned his empty mug to the galley, placing it in the sanitizer unit. "Thank you for the kaffe."

"Sure." Solo watched as the old man moved slowly toward the hatchway. "Any time."

Placing one hand against the bulkhead, Kenobi paused for a moment, became very still. He seemed to be considering options. When he finally spoke, he turned halfway round to face Solo, his voice warm, barely above a whisper.

"You remind me of that friend I mentioned earlier, the one with the ship. He, too, often found it difficult to trust anyone. Even me."

Kenobi looked away and faced the dimly lit corridor beyond, remembering another such corridor, in another place and another time. But this passage before him held less mystery, less uncertainty; in that, he was comforted. He added, almost to himself, "Solo...it's a fitting name." Then he was gone.

Han exhaled, the escaping air dying in a soft whistle. He realized only then that he had been holding his breath. Staring at the empty hatchway, he felt a disturbing mixture of relief and discomfort wash over him.

*That old wizard gives me the creeps.*

Unsettling, too, was the fact that, as much as Solo was convinced he had nothing personally to fear from Kenobi or his young companion, everything about these two passengers was far from normal. The mysterious circumstances surrounding their arrival at the cantina in Mos Eisley, at the same time as the Falcon's crew, were suspicious to say the least. And the fact that Chewie told him the old man had asked for the Corellian by name made things worse.

The realization that this enigmatic stranger might know more about *him* than the mere dictates of reputation revealed, or Kenobi seemed willing to admit, sent a sharp, cold shiver down the Han Solo's spine.

*There are no coincidences. Even I know that.*

The Falcon's captain shook his head, determined to banish any misgivings about their current situation. They couldn't change course now. He just didn't need the aggravation; there was too much to be done before they reached Alderaan. Rising from his chair, he reminded himself to tell Chewie this was the last time they'd be taking on any live cargo, especially live cargo that talked back. It was just too damned unnerving, not to mention dangerous.

"No charter is worth this," he growled, irritably, downing the last of his kaffe. "I'll be glad when it's over and I can get Jabba his money." As he moved toward the sanitizer, his gaze fell again upon the silent R2 unit resting in the corner. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled and something akin to dread crept back into his thoughts. This time he spoke aloud.

"You give me the creeps, too, you useless bucket of fabricated circuits."

Suppressing the urge to toss the little droid out an airlock, he quickly deposited his mug into the sanitizer. He couldn't wait until these mobile mechanisms and their owners were off his ship and out of his life forever. For Han Solo, the Falcon couldn't reach her destination soon enough, despite the fact that Alderaan still seemed very far away.

*Damn! Get a grip, Solo. It's just another job. We don't have to live with 'em. They'll be gone soon enough.*

He cursed himself for wasting so much valuable energy on what was little more than a minor inconvenience, an insignificant event in his and Chewie's lives. Exiting the lounge, the Corellian hurried toward the cockpit to relieve his co-pilot. He cheerfully welcomed his turn on watch, depending on it now to take his mind off the disturbing conversation with Kenobi. Yes, the nagging anxiety *would* be controlled. And, in just a few days, everything *would* return to normal.



*"These bothersome, insurrectionists are ten cannon fodder. They will be obliterated from all galactic memory. The Rebellion will be little more than a footnote in the annals of our greatest victories. Rest assured, gentleman, the empire will prevail."*

--- Grand Moff Tarkin, in a message to his Imperial Fleet Commanders

## **POINT OF NO RETURN**

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

"Why does she have to say so much?" Han Solo grouched. "Can't she just...shut up?"

The princess was certainly a firebrand and he *did* like her kind of spirit; she obviously preferred confrontations that were straight up, no hidden punches. He respected that. And, he had to admit, she had no problem looking anyone in the eye when she had something to say. But did she have to say so *much*? No one had ever infuriated him as much as she. 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 to pay off his debt to Jabba and to 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, *Sucker for Hire*? My luck can't be this bad...can it?"

What was supposed to be a highly profitable 'milk-run' from Tatooine to Alderaan had become a suicide mission, 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 downright serious stuff. And whatever Kenobi was involved with, well, it wasn't Han Solo's fight and it certainly wasn't Han Solo's fault! On top of it all, Han cursed himself, he'd let himself get talked into helping Luke rescue the princess --- 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," he muttered, "Chewie can kick my rangy ass. 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," he muttered in an imitation of Luke's voice. "She's rich," he sneered, "More than you can imagine." He blew out his breath. "Well, my imagination needs a helluva an overhaul! Shit! No reward is worth this!" The Corellian grunted as he squirmed his way between two overlapping ducts. He wiped the salty sweat that was already burning his eyes. "You're a lunatic, Solo. Straight up, certifiably insane." He shook his head. "How do I get mixed up in these things?"

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

## **CHAPTER I**

*"We do not have much of a choice."*

"I found it!" Han Solo's voice echoed throughout the freighter. Holding a tiny device in the palm of his hand, a wry grin betrayed a show of mercenary triumph as he tossed his prize high into the air, watched it tumble end over end, its brushed silver casing reflected in the gleam of his eyes. Catching it deftly, he 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 around 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 maniacal they seemed.

"Where was it?" Came Luke's voice from the dorsal 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 short laugh. "More fun all around. Can you handle it up there okay?"

"Yeah. I got it."

"Good. Stay sharp, Luke. I'm gonna try to add some spice to this game."

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

He heard the quad lasers begin firing from the turret. "Show time." As he 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 stumbled like drunken dancers, bouncing off one padded bulkhead only to be hurled against the other as the freighter swooped from side to side. Once the ship eased into a more level path the smuggler and the princess sighed in unison. With their faces mere centimeters apart, their eyes involuntarily met, confessing something between embarrassment and surprise.

"Let me go," Leia struggled; trying desperately to not show how nervous Solo was making her feel.

Her face was smooth porcelain. There was a peculiar 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 showed --- the disarrayed hair, the smudges of grime on her clothing, the growing fatigue, and the pain she obviously held at bay --- 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. He barely heard her repeated, anxious request. "Huh?" He cleared his throat and shook her off. "Oh. Yeah. Sure." He wondered what in hell he'd been thinking? Without a word, he strode to the weapons bay, not quite able to shirk off the image of her face, the taste of her breath against his lips, nor the memory of how her slight form felt 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 her hair away from 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 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, Han 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."

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

Snatching a multi-tool, he went to work on removing a small panel from the decoy's nose. "Ya know, I wanted to lock you up in one of the cargo holds, but I've been thinking, there's plenty of backwater worlds that have serious problems with power generators. With all the hot air that keeps comin' outta your mouth, well, it's an unending energy supply. I could make a fortune with that." Before she could volley a remark back at him, he glanced conspiratorially over his shoulder and hollered to Luke. "Hey kid, c'mon down here. I got great idea. Could make you a rich man." He glanced back at the princess and added, "If things work out, I may even cut *you* in for a part of the profits too." Upper lip curling into a churlish smile, he winked at her, knowing how much it would insult her.

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

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 the verbal jousting matches between Han and the princess. "Han," he yelled back, "would you just get rid of that thing?"

"I'm tryin' to, kid. I'm tryin' to."

Chewbacca roared over the comm line and Han grinned. "No," he answered nonchalantly. "I don't want you to tear anyone's arms off. We may need 'em as cannon fodder before this is all over. But don't blow that thought off." He glared at the source of his irritation. "I could change my mind."

As the minutes ticked by, he was getting more and more sick of her domineering attitude; the thought of locking her in one of the cargo holds was becoming more and more pleasing too. 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.

\* Let her help,\* 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.\*

"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 Kenobi in the first place. "Next time you see some old geezer dressed in robes and packin' a light saber, don't say a word to 'em! Not one damned word!"

He hadn't stuck around to hear Chewie's reminders 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 ignore --- or forget --- about such things, his friend was right. What choice did they have? His unfinished business with Jabba was a noose around their necks. Once the Rebels paid him for getting that mouthy, bossy Alderaanian princess and those equally obnoxious droids to their hidden base, Han planned on high tailing it back to Tatooine as fast as *Millennium Falcon* could take him there. Which, even with his ship's legendary speed, wouldn't be fast enough to suit him.

"I've known Imperial governors less annoying than you," the princess was currently pointing out to him. "You're in a class by yourself, Solo."





"I am," he boasted. He gave her a once over and added, "Wanna find out just how classy I can be?"

She glared at him but he paid her no attention as he completed his task and closed up the decoy.

Meanwhile, Luke clambered down the turret ladder 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?" She shouldered her way past Luke, heading for the cockpit. "The man's a lunatic!" She didn't wait for Luke to answer.

Skywalker merely stood there for a moment, his mouth set in a grim line. 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 glowered at Solo. "I hope you know what you're doing!" It wasn't a question. And she got no replay. That didn't stop her though and she continued to demand that he tell her exactly what his hair-brained idea consisted of. She didn't trust it, no matter what it was. "I don't understand ---" she began heatedly, then stopped, realizing her present tone would get her nowhere with Solo. She changed tactics, gathered every scrap of decorum she possessed, and asked calmly, "What are you doing?"

Solo's eyes widened and he looked at Chewie. "Was that politeness I just heard?"

Leia closed her eyes and began to repeat her question. "Please. What are---?"

"Please? Didya hear that, Chewie?"

The Wookiee cocked his head from side to side. "I am not certain. Can it really be true?"

Han winked and then craned his neck in order to look back at the princess. "Please ...what?" he prodded in a sugar-coated tone.

Lips pressed tightly together, the princess was doing all she could to maintain control. *I swear if he doesn't stop this...this asinine behavior, I'll shoot him with his own blaster!* "Please, Solo," she repeated very clearly, "tell me what you're doing?"

"It's *Captain* Solo. This is my ship." He pointed at himself. "I'm the boss here." Then he pointed to her. "You're the *passenger*." Then, looking at his partner, he said, "Geeze, you'd think a little respect was too much to ask for."

"*Captain* Solo," Leia corrected, "would you please tell me what it is you're doing to do to get us out of this mess?"

Han smiled in satisfaction and swiveled his chair back to his control panel. "I altered our course. 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 base. We'll deploy the decoy and--"

Decorum completely forgotten, Leia unleashed her anger. "How stupid do you think they are? They aren't going to mistake a decoy for *this* hunk of junk!"

Using everything in his power to not strangle her right then and there, his expression turned dangerous as he swung back around and rose from his seat. " *Never, ever* insult my ship. I've killed people for less."

Seeing how mad the smuggler really was, Luke quickly cut in. " Han's buying time, Your Highness. It's the best chance your base will have before the Imperial's figure out they've been led on a wild womp rat chase."

" At least someone appreciates me," Solo muttered as he took his position again. *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 confirmed. "At least long enough for me 'n Chewie to get you to Yavin Four. I figure your 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, lady. It'll work." But, he had to agree with the princess about one thing: the Imperials *weren't* stupid. He admitted he knew nothing about this Darth Vader guy, but he did know Tarkin's reputation. Ruthless and cunning, he would stop at nothing to find the Rebels. Destroying Alderaan had been proof enough of that. Sooner or later Tarkin would realize he'd been rooked. Maybe, Han figured, if time allowed, the Rebels would be lucky enough to avoid a conflict. If not, well, Han Solo had never been one to stick around for funerals.

The smuggler's concentration was entirely on his instrument panel now and without looking at Chewie, he said, "Ready the launch tube." Seconds ticked away and finally Chewie gave a short grunt that Han responded to. " Yeah. 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 minutes. Once inside the thick of it, Han gave Chewie the order to launch the decoy and he reset their course for Yavin IV. With luck they would be there in less than seventy-two standard hours.

Leia gazed sternly and steadily at the Corellian pilot. " I just hope your ship is really as fast as your ego is overblown. Tarkin and Vader are not fools. They'll use everything at their disposal to find us and then find the base too. A lot of lives are in the balance if you're wrong...*Captain Solo.*"

Rising, he stepped from his station to face her. His eyes bore into her like shards of cold, gray flint. He leaned forward, stabbing a gloved finger at his chest for emphasis. His voice was a low, measured rumble. "Chewie and I are doing everything we can to get you to your base, so don't preach to us about lives being risked, Your Holiness!"

"My *title*, for your information," Leia remarked coldly, shaking off the feeling his glare and tone was having on her, "Is 'Senator'. Use it."

"And mine," he reminded with equal frigidity, "is 'Captain'. You keep forgetting it." While her spitfire attitude was a quality to respect, if not feel drawn to, 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. "Furthermore, just to put my two credits in here, I'll remind everyone I wasn't hired to get involved with an Imperial battle station."

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. "For what your two credits are worth, I hadn't planned on being held as a prisoner."

Luke stepped between them again. This time there was something defiant in his stance and this time he wasn't to be ignored or shoved aside. "Ben mentioned the risk of trouble with the Imperials when you accepted the job, Han. It's too bad things have turned out this way but they have."

\* What an understatement! \* Chewie exclaimed.

"You can say that again, Pal."

Luke blew out his breath. "There's nothing we could have done differently."

"Yeah there is, kid," Han countered. "I could've left you people back there and been on my way with no trouble following me. But did I? No. And here you all are with the only chance of getting to safety you've got! I don't need anyone, especially *her* telling--"

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

Chewbacca piped in that he thought that was an excellent idea just as Han shouted, "Fine! I can arrange that!"

"Han, take it easy," Luke injected in an attempt to get the argument under control. "No one knew we would run into--" His words died in vain as Leia whirled on Han. Voices fought over one another. The volume quickly escalated from irritating to unbearable.

"You're the most--"

"---- can only imagine how *glad* ----"

\* NOW? Can I tear her arms--\*

" --- *egotistical, maniacal* excuse for a ---"

\* ---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 plea was never heard.

" Egotistical? *Egotistical?* Let me remind you, that my 'overblown ego' as you called it, saved your tight little a---"

" 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 the ship 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. "Maybe the Captain really would have liked it if I gone back to my cell!"

"Well," Solo huffed caustically, " 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 common folk." He shifted his weight 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 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, C-3PO shouted, "Oh no! Master Luke, we can't---"

All attention shot to the golden droid. " **Shut up!**"

" Han! You can't do that!"

"Can't I? The lady wants off my ship, I'm happy to oblige. That old man said nothing about gettin' into all this!"

"General Kenobi." Leia corrected.

\* I don't believe this! \*

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

"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. The cockpit fell deathly silent. "But," he said solemnly, "I guess everyone's forgotten *that*." He looked at each of them in turn. 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 Obi Wan Kenobi bravely falling before Darth Vader, all settled tightly in Luke's memory, causing an icy, choking feeling in his chest. All he wanted right now was to be somewhere quiet.

C3PO broke the silence. "Master Luke, if my services are not required, I will retire to the lounge."

"I'll join you." Disgusted, Luke turned on his heel and left.

Chewbacca promptly excused himself, muttering something about making certain the quad lasers were re-charged.

Too bone-weary to argue and too embarrassed at her own insensitivity, 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 checking various instruments. After a moment he said, "If things go right we should be clear of any Imperial ships for the rest of the trip. You'll get to that base safely."

"You said it would take about three days?"

"Yeah."

Leia nodded. The awkward silence was too much. Finally, she cleared her throat a little and said, "Since I'm going to be onboard for awhile, is it possible that I could have somewhere to rest and get cleaned up?"

Solo twisted in his seat and noticed, really for the first time, 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 had to admire her strength. "There's an extra cabin next to the one Luke's using. It's got a connecting sonic fresher and stuff. Nobody'll bother you."

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

The cabin was the one Kenobi had used. Han turned to her. "No." He began to rise. "I'll show you the way---"

She ducked her chin toward her chest. "Thank you, Captain, but I'm sure I can find it easily enough." She nearly bumped into Chewbacca as he re-entered the cockpit.

He stepped aside, giving a subdued little hoot as she passed. Chewie glanced at his partner. \*You gave her the Jedi's cabin? \*

Like everyone on board, Han was filthy, edgy, and tired. Fingers pressed at the bridge of his nose, he shut his eyes for a moment. "Yeah, well, what was I supposed to do? Say, 'Oh, let me offer you MY cabin, Your Highness? Huh?'"

Chewie understood Solo's lack of patience and made nothing of it. \*Well,\* he said lightly, "It would have been the chivalrous thing to do... considering you like her.\*

Mouth dropping open, the Corellian's hands fell to his sides. For a moment he was actually speechless. "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 should bow over backward and kiss my ass too next time I see her."

Letting his friend ramble on, the Wookiee tilted his head to one side. Humans, he had come to realize over the years, certainly had some strange ideas about body language.

## **CHAPTER 2**

*"Nothing comes without a price."*

Luke glanced in the general direction of the cockpit; it was--- blissfully---quiet. His fingers closed about the lightsaber, and he sat forward on the curved acceleration couch. In the silence of the lounge, he recalled that last, unforgettable image of Ben lowering his saber, allowing Vader a clear and fatal strike. It was hard to believe his friend, his mentor, was gone. Tears welled and threatened to spill from his eyes and in an attempt to keep them at bay, he drew a deep breath, sat back and wearily leaned his head against the rolled padding.

Beside the game table, the little R2 droid made a soft, sad noise. Luke looked at him briefly, a small smile haunting the corners of his mouth. "Thank you Artoo." The droid burred a question and Luke answered, "Yes. I'll be fine."

"Are you sure?" came a voice, ragged with exhaustion, yet so full of caring that Luke felt his throat constrict from the sadness in his soul. Gathering his composure, he looked up at the

princess as she crossed the room. He started to rise but she waved off the gesture. Luke's heart skipped a beat as she sat beside him; he couldn't help but marvel at her. She seemed unaware of her own discomfort, her only concern being his welfare. Held captive by her presence, he hadn't heard as she spoke again.

"Luke?" She placed one palm on his upper arm to draw his attention and he flinched. "I didn't mean to startle you. I'm sorry if I'm intruding."

"Oh, no. It's okay." He took a deep breath, let it out evenly. "I was just sitting here...thinking."

"About Obi Wan." Leia knew what must be going through his mind. She knew too, that his life, like hers, had been forever changed by the events that had brought him to this moment. Strange, she thought, how connected to him she felt.

Luke glanced at the deck. "I really shouldn't have yelled at everyone."

"On the contrary," Leia countered solemnly, apologetically, "you had every right to." Memories of Alderaan, of the ordeal she'd been through, filled her thoughts and heart. But she refused to let it overwhelm her. "Nothing comes without a price."

Luke gazed off at nothing in particular. "No, I guess not."

"I don't know that your friend," Leia contemplated aloud, "would understand that in terms other than credits."

"Don't mind Han."

"I don't intend to," Leia responded wryly.

Luke smiled and gave a slight shake of his head. "He's just not a believer in causes."

"As he so eagerly admits."

Luke couldn't help but defend the Corellian. True, Solo was sarcastic, egotistical and brash. But he did have a certain humor and bravado that Luke found easy to like. And he was clearly a brilliant pilot...even if he did brag on his skills. Above all, Luke knew he could trust Han. "He's really not so bad."

The princess stifled a smile. "Your optimism is a credit to you, but I can't say I exactly agree with you about him."

Luke fondled the light saber again. "Ben said you should never judge things by appearances alone. I believe him." He looked up from the weapon and shifted, sat back into the comfort of the couch. "If Han was just a callous pirate or mercenary," he pointed out, "he really *would've* left us on the Death Star. But he didn't."

Dropping her gaze to her hands, Leia agreed. "No. He didn't. I have to admit, he *is* a good pilot ... if a bit maniacal."





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"No argument there." They both laughed softly. Luke couldn't help noticing how her brown eyes lit with a little sparkle. What were her eyes, her face like, he wondered, when she smiled fully, openly? When she was truly happy instead of so tired or sad?

Her voice suddenly broke his musing. "How long had you known General Kenobi?"

"Not long really." Over the next few minutes, he told her about the circumstances under which his entire life had taken a turn. "It all seems like it was just this morning..."

She nodded in simple, complete understanding. "What will you do now?"

Luke shrugged and looked askance. "I'm not sure. I have no where to go. I guess training to be a Jedi is out of the question."

"And attending the Imperial Flight Academy isn't an option either." Carefully, Leia leaned forward, palms resting on the curve of the seat cushion. Glancing sideways at Luke she said, "You could still train to be a pilot anyway."

He looked at her, eyes wide in anticipation. "You mean join the rebellion?" He didn't wait for a response. "But I don't really know much about flying fighters---"

"You didn't know anything about rescuing princesses either."

The previous feeling that had weighted Luke's heart lifted. "I'll bet Han could teach me some stuff. If I asked---"

Princess Leia looked dubious. "I wonder if that's safe."

There was another moment of soft, shared laughter. Finally, Luke grew quiet, introspective. After a moment he said, "I hope I won't disappoint you."

"You won't." A moment later she rose to leave. "Captain Solo said there was an extra cabin I could use..."

"Oh. Sure. I'll show you where it is. I hope it'll be okay for you. It's probably nothing liked what you're used to." As an afterthought he remembered his manners and added, "Your Highness."

"Don't worry," she assured him as they stepped into the passageway, "After spending time in an Imperial detention cell, I'm sure I'll be *very* comfortable." Almost as an afterthought, she added, "It's going to take a few days to get to the base. I'd like it if you would call me Leia."

Luke stepped aside so she could go ahead of him. "Leia," he breathed in utter infatuation.

## CHAPTER 3

*"You should never judge things by their appearances alone."*

Heart pounding, Leia awoke to the sound of her own voice as she stifled a scream. Bringing her hands to her face, she drew a series of deep, shaky breaths in an effort to calm herself. It helped, if only marginally. Anxiously, she hoped she had not awakened anyone. Head aching, she squeezed her eyes shut. The memory of Alderaan, blasted into oblivion, repeated again and again like a continuous loop on a holo-vid. Unbidden, the tears she had held at bay ever since that awful moment, traced a course along both cheeks and pooled at the corners of her mouth. Quickly, she steeled herself --- just as she had done in the cold confinement of the detention cell --- and wiped her tears away with the back of one hand. Now, as then, Leia would not allow the reality of the nightmare she'd witnessed and endured to defeat her. As was her nature, her training, the Alderaanian princess and senator would utilize everything to her advantage, including memories, to fuel her strength of purpose. Should others lose sight of it, lose faith in it, she would not. Whatever the sacrifice---and such would no doubt be heavy ---Palpatine and his empire *would* fall. And when it did, when the celebration of victory became a triumphant tide, Leia would allow herself time to grieve.

A shiver coursed through her and she drew the thermal blanket up to her shoulders. Resting her forehead in the palm of one hand she wished the throbbing, incessant headache would disappear. It set her nerves on edge and made her nauseous. With a sigh, she swept the hair away from her face and over her shoulder. Sleep was obviously beyond her at the moment and as she looked at the chronometer built into the wall beside the bunk, she groaned and her shoulders slumped. 0200 hours. Any hope of going back to sleep was nearly impossible.

Again she shivered and decided to venture to the galley. Perhaps if she could fix something hot to drink she could relax.

Dressed in a borrowed black T-shirt that reached to her knees, she kept the blanket about her and swung her legs over the side of the bunk. Instantly regretting the movement, slow as it had been, Leia bit back a cry against the sharp cramps that wracked her back and ribs. Forcing herself to breathe steadily, she gingerly eased herself off the bunk...but only by very slow degrees. Her legs trembled as she stood, threatening to give way as one halting step forward was followed by another. Every bone, every muscle, every nerve ending rebelled with each action, no matter how insignificant, as she crossed to the hatchway. Once in the dimly lit passageway, she braced herself with one hand on the curved, padded bulkhead. The journey to the lounge area seemed endless as she could only proceed in small, tenuous, painful steps.

At last she reached her destination. For a brief moment, she almost wished someone else would have been there, to take her mind off her own situation. She thought about Luke and recalled the tone of his voice, lost and hollow and the distant expression in his clear, light-blue eyes as he'd told her his history. Not surprisingly, her heart went out to him once more. And once more her own aches and pains were insignificant. In a sense, Luke's home had been obliterated in a fashion very much as hers. His world of a loving, caring aunt and uncle, a noble, courageous mentor, was totally lost to him and Leia completely understood his feelings. In a strange way, she was as glad for his company as she was sympathetic for his circumstances.

He was easy to talk to and by far the only person onboard with whom she felt she could relate. Honest, compassionate and innocent, he was thoroughly likable. And unquestionably trustworthy. Unlike Captain Solo. Suddenly Leia grimaced, a reaction that had nothing to do with her physical discomfort.

"If you're looking for Luke," said a voice behind her, "he's up in the cockpit."

Taken completely by surprise, Leia whirled round, the blanket about her shoulders falling to the deck plates; the fast movement proved too much and she lost her balance, sinking rapidly to the floor.

Galvanized by her collapse, Solo shot forward, catching her before she reached the ground. But still she faltered, only gaining control after she clutched his waist.

She tensed at his touch and he attempted, in his way, to put her fears aside. "Hey, now," he remarked lightly, "if I'd known you were going to fall for me like *this*—" She struggled to free herself. He loosened his grip but did not let go entirely. "Lighten up, sweetheart," his voice caressed. "Nothing's ever as bad as it could be." He felt her tremble and the paleness of her skin; the tiny beads of sweat on her brow didn't escape him.

She tried to ignore the sympathy in his voice and turned to collect the blanket lying behind her. The awkwardness and pain of her movement must have shown more than she'd known. Her breath hissed between her teeth as her legs wobbled. Suddenly, Han's strong hands were steadying her again.

"The Imperials didn't give you any slack."

She said nothing, only tried to compose herself.

His nearness and surprising compassion were too much for her. "Please let go of me. I...I can manage for myself." She said the words more tersely than she'd really intended, suddenly wanting to be away from his tender gaze and protective hold. His hazel eyes looked straight into her soul, immediately understanding too much. She tried to pull free of his firm grasp. "Leave me alone, Captain. I'm quite capable of taking care of myself."

Even in the dim light, he could see the set of the princess' jaw and had a pretty good idea of the treatment she had received at the hands of the Imperials. She might be as irritating as hell, but she was no quitter, no lightweight when it came to standing up for her convictions. This lady was definitely a force to be reckoned with, a rare combination of inner strength and spirit that would never surrender, never lose hope. She would rather die first.

Still taken completely off guard by the look on his face, the tone in his voice, Leia now sensed something different in the smuggler's tone. She was instantly reminded of Luke's words: "*Ben said you should never judge things by appearances alone.*" There was more to this man. Buried beneath this hard exterior, beyond the smug egotism and bravado, lay conscience and conviction. Measure for measure, his strength of will and tenacity matched her own. She was reminded of his words, that without him they would never have made good their escape. Indeed, he could have easily just surrendered all of them to Tarkin and received a healthy sum of credits for "loyalty served to the Empire". But he hadn't done so and as infuriating as he was, Captain Han Solo, Corellian smuggler, was also worthy of respect. And trust. For all his swaggering overconfidence, acid sarcasm, and seemingly uncaring attitude, this was not only a

strong and wily individual; this was a man with a conscience. Even if he *did* hide it. She wondered how and why he had become a smuggler. Something about him told her it was out of necessity rather than choice.

For a fleeting, nervous moment, each held the other's gaze. Hers revealed curiosity. His revealed respect. It was disconcerting. Confusing.

And then the connection suddenly broke --- much to their relief ---- as Luke stepped into the compartment.

The awkwardness of the moment was bewildering. In a fluid motion Han bent, hooked the forgotten blanket on his right index finger and then offered it to the princess. Once again, his sardonic brashness surfaced. "Lose something, Your Highness?"

The slap that cracked hard on his face stung...as he knew it would.

Luke folded his arms across his chest, an expression of satisfaction with the princess's action clearly written on his features.

For her part, Leia snagged the blanket from the Corellian and disappeared into the corridor.

Solo watched her, still nursing the smarting flesh on his face. "You were right, kid. A princess and a guy like me..." He shook his head and entered the corridor, striding deliberately toward the cockpit.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### *"Fortune and glory."*

For Luke Skywalker, the next days were filled with hours upon hours of everything the *Falcon's* data banks could supply on spacecraft and piloting. Han allowed him to stand watch and even take the controls from time to time. He not only practiced his aim in the turret guns but the forward lasers as well, all under Solo's tutelage. Between this and sleeping, he listened to Han talk about places in the galaxy: where to go for fun, where and who to stay clear of and where to make money. This last, of course, was much to the chagrin of the princess. But since Luke seemed to be enjoying having something to learn and concentrate on, she kept her opinions private. For the most part.

On one occasion, after Solo had finally ordered Luke to get some rest, Leia sought out the captain as he was preparing something to eat in the ship's galley.

"That caffe smells good," she remarked, a pleasant smile forming on her lips. "Mind if I have some?"

"Help yourself." *Hell, you would anyway.* A vague notion of uncertainty played across her delicate features so quickly that most people would never have noticed it. But Han had a talent for just such things; he had lived by noticing the subtle things as well as the

demonstrative...and did not take either of them lightly. He had to wonder if she'd heard his last thought. Clearly, she wasn't here to just socialize. She had a reason for coming.

The princess poured the steaming liquid into a mug and commented lightly on the flavor. "It's strong."

Absently he rubbed the point on his face she had slapped two nights ago. "Yeah."

Leia repressed a rising chuckle and ducked her chin so he could not see the blush coloring her cheeks. For all his irritating ways, Solo had a natural knack for making light of a situation. She suspected it was his way of showing grace under pressure, something Leia understood and respected. After what she'd been through at the hands of Moff Tarkin and Darth Vader, she was grateful for the smile the smuggler's humor elicited from her. "I'm sorry if I hit you too hard," she remarked with quiet sincerity.

"I probably deserved it."

She raised an eyebrow. "Probably?" He laughed lightly; a sound that she was hard put to ignore because she liked it, just as much as she liked his smile. *Time to change the subject...quickly.* Reaching for another mug, she filled it and held it out to him.

"So," he began as he took the offering, "did you just want to apologize for nearly taking my face off...or is there something else you wanted to know about?" He suspected the real reason she had come to talk to him. "Luke for instance?" His suspicion proved right and he noticed the set of her expression and the way her fingers slightly tightened around the mug. There was growing concern in the depths of her eyes. "You're worried about him."

Her gaze didn't waver as she answered. "Yes."

"Worried," Han offered with complete confidence, "that I'm a bad influence, that I'm teaching him all the wrong things." She started to agree but wasn't given the chance. "He's gotta learn how things are in the real world. Could you do that?"

Her eyes turned hard. "I'm not trying to."

"But," he analyzed in an easy tone and an equally knowing smile, "if you were, you'd do a better job than a simple, low-life smuggler with no high class bearing or fancy titles."

"That's uncalled for." Why was he being this way? She hadn't come here to spar with him. How could he be so...nice one minute and so aggravating the next? In all her life, she had never met anyone who could make her feel so completely vexed. Or so comfortably secure. He was a challenge and a mystery all at once and she hated that it threw her off balance. Would she ever understand this man? Time would only tell. *Careful Leia. You and Luke are cargo. Plain and simple. Once he's dropped you at your destination, he'll be gone.* That thought made her surprisingly sad; clearly Solo was a gifted pilot and a natural leader who could offer so much to the Rebel forces. Perhaps, once they reached Yavin IV, he could be persuaded to stay on. Surely a steady income running supplies for the Rebels would appeal to him? He would not be the only person out side of the law they employed. There were many professional privateers running supplies and weapons, many were just unfortunate men, women and Others who had lost everything to Imperial taxes and confiscation. What would Solo have to lose? She'd even see that he got an officers rank if it would help.

He was chuckling, clearly amused at himself for causing her anger to surface. "Maybe it is 'uncalled for'," he told her, "but what could you teach Luke that would keep him alive? How to wipe his mouth properly at high tea on a sunny afternoon? How to move around the dance floor at a formal ball and use the silverware correctly at a dinner party without embarrassing himself? Luke isn't cut out for that. He wants to be a flier and he wants to see the galaxy. He also wants to join up with your precious freedom fighters. No amount of royal, upper crust etiquette is going to save his skin, Princess. The more I can teach him 'till we get to your base, the better chance he has of staying alive. If I'm lucky, I can convince him to come with me and Chewie. With us, he's got a chance to live longer."

"He won't go with you." She smiled with total assurance. "Luke needs purpose, something to believe in. What the Rebel Alliance is fighting for *is* that something."

The smuggler gazed into his hot coffee. "That 'something' is what'll get him killed." His gaze held hers over the rim of the mug.

"I don't want him to get killed."

Solo casually turned from her and set the mug down on the counter. "Then leave 'im alone. Stop filling his head with ridiculous notions of triumph and honor." Turning back to her he added quietly, "Let him live."

"I want him to do whatever he thinks is right for him."

"By getting his guts spilled in a bloodbath, or going out in a blaze during a dog-fight? And for what? For your cause? You ever see what death in battle looks like, Princess? It's bloody. It's the gore from someone's guts or brains splattered all over you. It's a taste you never quite get rid of and the stench stays with you forever. You puke your stomach up and wish you'd never been born. Don't you think Luke ought to have a chance at something else?"

"And what kind of life would you have him live? Yours? Most smugglers and pirates die young. The old ones *think* they're lucky but in the end they die in a brothel, penniless and remembered by no one."

His mouth lifted into the familiar, lopsided grin that was as disarming as it was lethal. "Most of the time my life's not so bad."

Leia read the fleeting, barely discernable flicker of something in his eyes. Anger? Or loss? Being astute as she was at reading beyond surfaces, she detected that both were definitely present. Surprisingly, she hurt for him. Concealing her own inner thoughts, she raised an eyebrow quizzically. "Not so bad. *Really?* Until you run into bounty hunters, cartel king pins or Imperial customs police. What happens when one day you aren't as wily or as fast as someone else? I could go on but then I don't have to. You know more about your kind of life than I do and more than Luke ever should."

"At least I'm honest about it. What is he gonna find with your war? Fortune and glory? Luke doesn't---

"Need fortune or glory," she completed. "You're right about that. But the war against the Empire is already here. Sooner or later Luke and everyone else, including you, will be



caught up in it. You aren't so nearsighted you don't already know that. Why else would you *really* be teaching him skills he'll need to stay alive?"

"Maybe if he's smart enough he won't join up with either of us."

She nodded and smiled wistfully. " Maybe. I will say this, Solo; you obviously care what happens to him. I had wondered if you had it in you, what with your financial priorities taking up the better part of your attention."

His features turned hard, eyes hooded. " What's that to you?"

" Nothing. Except that Luke is beginning to look to you as a friend, an older brother---"

Han pointed to his chest. "Me?" He had to stifle a laugh. " You better open your eyes sweetheart. That kid's got a crush on you that's as big as the Perlemian Trade Route is long."

The princess' eyes widened, not only in disbelief at Solo's accusation but at the faint, almost unnoticeable scent of something burning. " What are you talking about?"

Rolling his eyes, Solo shook his head. " A big part of him is doing all of this, the training, the leaning, just for you. Do you know what it's like for a kid his age to have a first love?" *Is something burning or is it just her self righteous attitude?*

" How would you know?" *I could swear I smell something burning. Must be his inflated ego!*

Again there was the barest trace of a memory that darkened the Corellian's expression. But too late. Leia had already read it, making her even more curious about this man. It was undiscovered territory as much as it was private. Still, she would not intrude. Instead, she kept to the subject at hand.

" Luke respects you, he likes you. But chances are, you'll take off and leave him, all for the sake of a quick credit."

Solo shifted slightly, uneasy with how close the princess was hitting the mark. " He can come with me or not. If not, well, I have places to get to, business to take care of. Luke'll understand. It's not like he's got an obligation to me or anyone else. Besides, if this trip had gone as planned, he, Kenobi and the droids would've parted company with Chewie and me days ago. We'd have never seen each other again anyway."

" But things didn't go as planned, did they?" His comment, intended or not, brought to mind the destruction of her home world and the memory stung deeply, blurred her vision. She tightened her hand on her mug.

Han felt like a jerk for having reminded her of what happened to Alderaan. " Look," he began uncomfortably, " I'm sor---"

And then Luke was there. " What's going on? Or do either of you really care that whatever is in that oven is burning?"

Solo whirled to look at the oven; dark fumes were rolling from it. Quickly turning the controls off, he opened the door and coughed as the scent of charred trailadon steak assaulted the air. Hitting the vent to cycle the smoke into the filters, he sneered at the giggling princess. "This is *your* fault."

"Really?" she asked in a tone dripping with innocence. "And here I was, convinced that you could handle anything."

Solo glared dangerously at her.

Not knowing exactly what had taken place, Luke asked, "Did I come in at a bad time?"

Leia's "No" was simultaneously rejoined by Han's "Yes."

## **CHAPTER 5**

### ***"Don't go there, Chewie."***

Chewbacca's blue eyes shifted, settling on his partner's sharp features. He read the expression others would never notice and knew the Corellian's doubts. He quickly glanced back to his instrument panel as Han caught his gaze.

Fast reflexes and gut feelings had paid off more times than Han could count. He hated it when Chewbacca became so obtrusively silent. It meant only one thing: the Wookiee was pissed off with him. Clearly, he disagreed with Han's decision to refuse helping out in the coming battle with the Death Star, and also for refusing to accept a steady job hauling supplies for the Rebel Alliance once they got Jabba paid off. Worse, Han knew, Chewbacca would eventually go into one of his philosophical lectures. *No big surprise*, Han thought as he brought the freighter's engines on line.

Swiveling to face the nav-computer, he confirmed the coordinates he had entered minutes ago. "We're ready for take off," he remarked. "Let her idle. As soon as we get our payment loaded we can get outta here long before that Death Star comes cruisin' in. When Tarkin turns this place into mulch, I don't want us to be around." At Chewie's vague nod of acknowledgement, Han breathed a silent sigh. "I figure," he began in a light tone, leaning back in his seat, "we can sell off our reward on one of the major trade routes. Those metals oughta bring a nice little bundle of cash into our pockets even after we get outta hock with Jabba. This trip," he added as he pulled on a pair of well-worn leather gloves, "cost us more than it was worth." Cautiously, he stole a sidelong glance at his partner, knowing his attempt at changing Chewie's mood had failed miserably.

Rising, Han stepped behind his seat and reached up to flip a set of toggles in the overhead. Tiny tell-tales blinked red and yellow. "You know," he continued, determined to lighten his co-pilot's apprehension about leaving, "we could even drop by Kashyyyk. You haven't been home in awhile. Might be nice to stop by for a few days. Visit the family. I'll bet Malla wouldn't complain. Whaddya say?"

A low grumble preceded Chewbacca's response. \* I would not dare to show myself there at this point. Not after abandoning Luke and these others to the mercy of the Star of Death. I cannot believe you suggest I visit my family in such disgrace. \*

Solo exhaled a loud sigh, hands gripping the back of his pilot's seat as he leaned over slightly. "Not dare to --- Oh, c'mon, Chewie! No one on Kashyyyk even knows about what we've done here. You get too serious about 'disgrace' and 'honor'."

Chewbacca slowly turned in his oversized chair, leveling a piercing gaze at his partner. \* We've done **nothing** here, Han! We should. That is my point! We **could** do something if you were not so reluctant to ---\*

"To what?" Han exploded. With a cutting hand gesture he added, "This trip is business as usual. Pure and simple."

\* Is it so simple to turn your back on something you could be a part of? \* Chewbacca snorted, rolled his eyes and crossed his sinewy arms across his massive chest. \* When will you ever wake up? When are you ever going to let yourself be a part of something bigger than your own ego?\*

Leaning forward, Han pointed a finger at Chewie. "It wasn't *simple* when I got kicked out of something I worked my tail off to get into!" He immediately regretted his words; what he'd done for Chewie, what he'd risked everything for, he'd have done again without question. He had no issues about saving Chewie's life. And the truth was he hadn't really belonged in the Imperial Navy anyway. Once his commission was up, he would undoubtedly have left. The anger went out of his voice.

"Look, we delivered our passengers and we're collecting what was owed us. Nothin' more. These Rebels have guts and they have some pretty good pilots. They'll come out alright." The Corellian straightened and shifted his weight. He was tired of arguing about this. "As far as I'm concerned, we did our part. Okay," he conceded stiffly, "so getting to Alderaan wasn't exactly as anyone planned, but no one figured on getting taken aboard some secret Imperial battle station... much less rescuing a princess." He grimaced as Chewbacca continued to stare at him. "To top it off, old Kenobi had to buy the farm. So much for the remainder of the payment *he* promised."

\* We were paid. And besides, it was an honor to be able to rescue the princess—\*

Solo's eyes widened. "She called you a walking carpet!" he adamantly reminded. "You wanted to pull her arms out of their sockets! What's with you?"

Chewbacca ignored the Corellian's outburst. \* As for Kenobi, \* he pointedly remarked, \* I believe the Jedi knew he would not be leaving with us. It was his destiny. As much as it was ours to have come here. \*

"Oh, no you don't," Han drawled. "Don't you dare start gettin' all philosophical now. Next thing I know, you'll be preachin' to me like that old wizard did to Luke. A lot of good it's gonna do the kid. He'll get himself fried out there before he even sees a target to shoot at! These people haven't got a chance in hell of comin' outta this alive."

\* You just told me they would! What's with *you* all of a sudden? \* Before Han could retaliate, Chewbacca said, \* These 'people', including Luke, would have a better chance at surviving if *you* were to help out. You have knowledge, experience many of them lack. They would follow you because of it. They would even trust you. All the things you wanted to gain for yourself in the Imperial Navy could be accomplished here. \*

"Don't go there Chewie," Han threatened in a low tone. "I'm not cut out for that kind of life. It's all the same, just different uniforms."

Chewie's expression did not waver, letting Han know that he still believed they should stay...if for no other reason than for Luke. He had helped them fight off the Imperial Tie fighters and had done well. They owed him.

Solo's hands lifted as his mouth hung open. "I don't believe this!" He exclaimed as he ran a hand through his tousled hair. "You're always protecting me because of a life debt and now you want me to go out there and get killed?"

\* Why not? \* Chewbacca countered lightly, baiting him. \* Even those who boast of being the best pilots acknowledge that you are even better. This is a chance to prove it. And do something meaningful at the same time. \*

"Meaningful," Han snorted. The expression on his face turned mercenary. "I tried that course setting years ago, pal. In case you've forgotten, I'm not lookin' for a repeat performance."

\* That you will admit to. \* Before the Corellian could reply, his friend calmly, but firmly, stated, \* After that job on Ylesia, when Bria Tharen made the other smugglers believe you'd sold them out, your standing in their ranks was lost. \*

The memory of that disastrous adventure brought a scowl to Solo's face. "I tried to explain what really happened on Ylesia! It's not my fault they wouldn't listen."

\* What Bria did that day was unfair to all of us. You especially. But what was done was done, Han, and for reasons we will never fully know. Unfortunately, the distrust that incident caused has cost us many of the jobs we would otherwise have easily gotten. How many contracts have we lost because word has spread that Han Solo will sell you out and keep your share of the credits? How long are you willing to bet that the Hutts will continue to pay top credits to us? And that, \* he reminded, \* may not last much longer, knowing Jabba's temper. The Rebels have offered us a job running supplies for them. Take it! They will pay well for our efforts. They care not what grudges your old friends have concerning Ylesia. Your past is not important here. \* Chewbacca's expression softened as Han obviously was caught in the bad memories brought up about Ylesia. \* It is time for change, Han. Time for you to look to your own future. And whether you like or not, that time has come.\* The Wookiee paused and then added, \* Furthermore, you know as well as I, you could never turn your back on young Luke.\*

Solo looked askance. "He's a good kid...but he's a dreamer."

\* He is young. No doubt at his age, you dreamed too. \*

Han's hazel eyes became dark, brooding, dangerous. "Where did those dreams get me, huh?" He shook his head. "It's never worth it. All you get for your trouble is chewed up

and spat out. I'm tired of risking my neck and loosing everything I have for someone else's ideals."

Chewbacca cocked his head slightly, eyes seeming to look right into Solo's soul. \* It was worth the risk when you saved my life.\* He noticed one corner of the human's mouth twitch. Chewie was making headway. \* Why, on the trip here, \* he continued smoothly, \* did you take the time to teach Luke some of your skills as a pilot? Why did you spend endless hours with him in programmed tactics on your flight simulator? Why?\*

Han shrugged. "He needed to take his mind off Kenobi. I gave him something else to do, that's all. Besides, he's hell bent on climbing into a ship he doesn't know the first thing about. He wouldn't have known the nose end of an X Wing from the tail if I hadn't taught him something."

\*The boy's eyes glimmered with admiration and respect for you. I saw you return that when he learned what you had to teach him in so little time. He trusts you as he did the Jedi Master. Your problem, my friend, is that you want everyone to believe you have no ethics when in fact the opposite is so easy for anyone with a conscience to see.\* Chewie leaned back. \* Luke knows it. And Obi Wan did as well. So does the princess, though you make it very difficult.\*

"The less mentioned of *her*, the better!" Han shifted his weight, stared at the deck plates.

\* Why did we not leave here days ago, Han? Why did you attend that briefing on the battle plans against the Death Star? \*

"Maybe I was just curious." Turning abruptly to break Chewbacca's intent gaze, Han took a step towards the cockpit hatchway. "Maybe I had nothin' better to do."

Swiveling back to his navigation panel, Chewbacca set about his work. "Maybe you found it."

"Fine!" Han snapped bitterly, whirling about to glare at his partner. "You want to follow some idealistic bantha crap, go right ahead. Stay here!" Han stepped through the hatch, boot heels sounding hard against the deck plates. Han grimaced; the trouble with having a Wookiee partner was that they could be too perceptive at times.

The *Falcon's* cockpit allowed Chewbacca a perfect place to view the hanger bay. He watched as Han strode down the freighter's ramp and made his way to the deck officer's station. Chewbacca smiled.

## **CHAPTER 6**

*"Take care of yourself, Han."*

Nearly half an hour later, Han Solo was---finally--- stacking the crates of his payment onto an anti-grav servedor, his temper no better than before. If anything, he was in a worse mood. His cargo had to be brought over from the supply bunker. Another delay. Added to that,



the fighter squadrons had priority clearance to take off. Han had scowled as the deck officer had shrugged and told him, "Sorry, Captain. Orders. Your ship will have to wait until all our battle craft have cleared the planet's surface."

To top off Han's foul mood, Luke's angry statement whirled around in his mind like an unending distress signal. "*Take care of yourself, Han. I guess that's what you're best at, isn't it.*" Jaws clenched, he silently cursed himself for even letting the kid's words effect him. *Get over it, buddy,* he told himself bitterly. *You know what'll happen if you stick around. Give a damn about these people and their ever lovin' cause an' you'll regret it. Same as always. Another kick in the teeth or a knife in the back. Not anymore. Not to me.*

A low grumble from the other end of the servedor caused him to look up. "What are you lookin' at?" he asked Chewie. "I know what I'm doin'."

A soft sigh escaped the Wookiee and his head bowed toward his chest. *Yes. You always know what you're doing, Han. And as always, you do the right thing...even though it always costs you.*

The hanger bay opened and as the squadrons taxied out, Han Solo watched. The wind from the engines ruffled his light-brown hair as he silently ran a familiar routine in his mind; it hadn't been that many years ago when he'd been a squadron pilot. Without actually seeing them, he knew that each pilot glanced at monitors, checked gauges, waved a salute to fellow flyers and gave a thumbs - up to the ground crew. One by one the crafts engaged full thrusters. Solo listened to that high - pitched whine followed by the rumble of power. He knew the anticipation, thrill and excitement that the pilots would no doubt be experiencing, knew also that feeling of focus; mind totally on the task at hand. Compartmentalization it was called. And rightly so.

He wondered, as the last ship took off to join its sisters, how many of those kids had the ability to lock their minds down in that fashion? He'd attended their briefing, looked over the gathering of folks who would be taking their ships up against a colossal enemy with more fire power than any of them had ever seen. The experienced pilots were as easy to spot as the rookies; their relaxed manner and occasional jokes marked them as veterans. The rookies, however, watched like nerf's caught in a land speeder's headlights, so wide-eyed and innocent of what they were up against that Han doubted any of them would live to see a first target, much less a second.

An image of himself, younger, clean cut and lethal in his blue-black flight suit, formed in his mind. A different Han Solo. A naval officer and an ace pilot, he was a citizen of one the biggest systems in the galaxy, proudly sporting the rarely awarded Corellian Bloodstripe. Lieutenant Han Solo had been a young man with hopes, dreams, and goals, who, after years of living with no more respectability than a gutter rat, had managed, through hard work and study, to gain a different reputation. He'd graduated in the top of his class, promoted with remarkable speed from junior grade lieutenant to one with full status, earning himself the respect of even the best pilots in the fleet. He was on the way to having everything in life he'd ever dared to dream of. But fate dealt him a different hand and he'd lost everything.

Shaking the memory off, he loaded the last crate onto the servedor, saw Chewie standing there, watching him intently again. Again, as if knowing his very thoughts, seeing his memories. Again. "What're you waitin' for?" Han asked. "I didn't have you keep the *Falcon's* engines warmed up just to hear 'em!"



Without comment, the Wookiee steered the servedor up the freighter's ramp. It took him and Han only a short time to stow and secure the crates. As Chewie locked the hold, Han turned on his heel and headed for the cockpit. "C'mon," he muttered. "The sooner we get outta here, the better."

## **AFTERWARD**

### *"What about getting back to Tatooine?"*

Minutes dragged as the *Falcon* settled into a coarse heading for Tatooine. The atmosphere in the cockpit was so tight it was almost oppressive as the sound of the battle against the Death Star came over the comm channel.

Patient and composed, Chewbacca waited for his friend to change his mind. As always, he didn't need to gamble that Han would eventually do the right thing; Han had a conscience even if he hated to show it. From time to time the Wookiee's intense blue eyes settled on his friend. Han was stalling, But not for long. It came. A tiny twitch at the corner of the Corellian's mouth. It was all the Wookiee needed to see. Immediately he began re-setting the *Falcon's* course.

"Hell," Han cursed under his breath. "Why do I let myself get into these things?" Chancing a sideways look at Chewbacca, he sighed. "Stupid kid'll get himself fried if I don't go back," he defended.

\* What about getting back to Tatooine? What about paying Jabba off? \*

"That slimy slug'll still be there. We got something else to take care of right now."

*Millennium Falcon* swung easily and gracefully to starboard. She sped toward danger. She cruised into the next chapter of her long life, taking her captain and co-pilot to a point of no return.



*"What were my first thoughts about Han Solo? He was irritating, egotistical, swaggering and selfish. He was also the one of the few people who looked beyond my titles as Princess and Senator, beyond the icon that everyone else saw me as. Han saw only me."*

--- Leia Organa Solo, former Chief of State of the New Republic, Ret.

## Present Company Excepted

### Preface

*The base on Yavin IV was being dismantled. Soon the ancient buildings would stand vacant once more. The call and whispers of voices, whine and roar of aircraft, clicks and whir of equipment, blasts and concussions of weaponry would all be but memories echoing off the stone masonry, drifting into the depths of the surrounding rain forest. From time to time, on very still days or nights, they would surface on the heavy, humid air, the ears and eyes of the jungle bearing silent witness to images and sounds that were somehow trapped in time. Years later, when sentient beings would again inhabit the ancient temples of Yavin IV, some would claim that ghosts resided there.*

*For now, however, aside from the activity of the evacuation process, the Rebels celebrated their first dynamic victory in what was no longer a mere skirmish against the Imperial forces but an all out war.*

### Chapter One: Twilight

Truly, Leia had enjoyed the medal award ceremony, had ridden that same tide of excitement, joy, and elation that everyone else had. She had reveled in the tremendous rise of morale experienced by the entire assembly. However, as the celebration got underway, she found herself as much, if not more so, a figure of attention as Luke and Han. Raised and trained in one of the ruling houses of Alderaan, she had been schooled in deportment from the time she could walk. She withstood the 'celebrity' status the rebels were quickly placing on her, but it was uncomfortable; from the earliest age she had been taught that leaders were the servants of their people. The more she was pulled and prodded from one circle of people to another, the more oppressive, the more suffocating the throne room became. She hadn't had time to recover from everything that she'd been through and the longer she remained at the celebration, the more she needed to get away. He craved solitude, not hero worship. *Is it too much*, she wondered as the walls seemed to close in on her, *to ask for some sliver of privacy*,

*some space to breathe that could be just mine...even if for a short time? Couldn't I have just that?*

The destruction of Alderaan had changed much within her and for her. When the Empire crumbled, and she vowed it would, there would be no home to which she and all the other displaced people of her world could return. When the war was over, she promised herself, she would see to it that a 'new' Alderaan was made possible. It was a purpose, a dream she had. One as strong with conviction as her intent to see Emperor Palpatine's regime devastated --- just as he had allowed her home world to be obliterated. No matter the personal cost, no matter the personal risk --- she would not abandon that purpose for any reason. It was all she had now. It would have to be enough.

Finally, managing to slip away from the crowded room, Leia passed through the stone corridors that linked the chambers previously used for the command center. Here and there she sidestepped equipment that had been packed and secured, ready to be moved to the cargo ships. As always, the rebel bases were constructed as temporary posts, easy to set up and just as easy to break down. It was efficient and necessary. Most of the work had been completed hours ago. Now, aside from a few personnel, labor droids finished the process of moving crated equipment to assigned staging areas in the hangar bays. Everyone else remaining ground side still enjoyed the celebration that had followed the medal ceremony late in the afternoon. By dawn, however, any traces of recent occupancy would have been removed completely or destroyed. The soldiers and pilots who had called this place home would have moved on to another, though no more permanent, location. For as long as they fought the Empire, they were refugees, unable to return home until it was all over.

Coming down the passageway toward her was a communications petty officer. The woman set a crate of equipment down and stood at attention. Her back was against one wall in order to give Leia room to pass. She began to salute but the princess waved the gesture off. Still, the young officer maintained her military bearing; her shoulders were straight, arms pinned to her sides, head high and eyes locked forward on nothing in particular. "Good evening, ma'am." She tried to keep the nervousness from her voice.

Princess Organa was an icon to many of the rebels on Yavin IV. Word had spread quickly about her capture by Darth Vader, that she had been forced to watch as Alderaan was destroyed. Scuttlebutt around the base had it that she'd been brutally tortured, but none had actually heard the princess discuss any details. Anyone who actually knew the whole story was keeping it private; the information was on a 'need to know' basis. Still, it didn't take much to imagine what suffering she'd endured. While the rebel soldiers and pilots were in awe of her, they also had sympathy for her.

"Good evening." Leia replied politely. She continued on but halted instead. "Excuse me." The petty officer turned around to face her. "I understand there's a passageway to the roof?"

"Yes, ma'am, there is. With your permission ma'am..."

Leia gestured for her to continue.

"It's very dark beyond the end of this corridor, Your Highness. The power supply was gutted as soon as we had all the equipment cleared out. Command is operating from General

Dodonna's transport." She paused. "Begging Your Highness' pardon, it's not safe to venture to the roof."

Leia couldn't help but smile a little. "Bringing down an empire isn't safe either."

The petty officer smiled back at her, admiration and respect flickering in her green eyes. "Yes ma'am. If I may, ma'am," she unclipped a small palm light from a utility belt, held it out, and gave directions to the stairway that would lead to the roof. "It's dark as pitch up that way, Your Highness. I'd feel better if you took this with you."

"Thank you. I'll see it's returned to you, Petty Officer..."

"Roslynn Xell, ma'am."

"How long have you been with the Rebel forces?"

"Eighteen months, ma'am," she answered proudly.

"Where's home?"

Xell's gaze faltered a little. "I grew up on Chandrilla, ma'am. My parents had a business there. But I...was born on Alderaan, ma'am."

Leia nodded, extended her right hand and shook Xell's in a show of respect and understanding and hope. *Another face, another name I won't forget in the long war ahead of us...or afterward.* "You're in communications?"

"Yes, ma'am. Cryptology."

Leia's brow lifted in admiration. "Not an easy job. Do you enjoy it?"

"Yes ma'am! Especially when an Imp code gets busted!"

Xell's enthusiastic smile was infectious. "I imagine it is. It's good to have you with us, Officer Xell."

Xell watched as Leia activated the palm light and proceeded onward. "And you, Your Highness. And you."

## Chapter 2: Night

The last door that Leia opened led to a long, wide staircase. The angle was steep and climbing it was something of a small miracle -- it hadn't been that long ago since she'd been tortured on the Death Star. Twice she stopped, letting the cramps ease from her muscles. In the dark her sense of hearing and smell became more acute. From somewhere a loud croaking noise called once, twice, three times, then stopped briefly before repeating itself. Leia held her breath to hear more clearly. She was certain she'd heard an answering bellow, low and throaty from somewhere nearby. A loud screech suddenly broke the air and was accompanied by a chatter of noises; Leia thought she heard a scattering of small feet along the tiles of the roof.

Farther away, the chirping of hundreds of birds grew in a symphony that must have been as large as it sounded.

A slight breeze stirred the stale air of the long passages, brightening not only the darkness of the temple chambers and halls, but her soul as well. She breathed deeply --- the heavy scent of jungle mixed with the smell of fresh rain filled her and each breath invigorated her. She easily straightened to ascend the remaining stairs as fast as possible.

She could make out the twilight as she neared the top; with every step she left behind her the weight of heavy responsibility. The burden of painful loss seemed to lift away from her heart. She burst into the open more like a girl at play, not a princess with the burden of war and the welfare of her remaining people threatening to devour her. She could not remember when she had felt so liberated. Too much suffering and heartache had passed.

Her last step placed her in the center of a breath-taking cloister-like structure. Tall and narrow, five of its archways faced east and five west, providing a stunning view in all directions. Smooth, woody stalks crept up the walls, hugging the columns, their runners clinging tightly as they twisted along the pitted masonry, peeking out of the high arches and blanketing other areas completely. Huge, orange blossoms with deep yellow fringes, some as large as a man's fist, grew from the vines and hung suspended over the delicate, leafy green foliage. Their scent was strongly intoxicating and nearly made Leia dizzy. From here, one gained an entirely different perspective of the surrounding rain forest and sky above.

The immense canopy of the trees continued for as far as the eye could see, a dark green silhouette banked against the last rays of sunlight that reached like fingers to illuminate the clouds on the far horizon. Lit from below, the edges of the wispy, pink clouds were turned to a bright yellow and the tops were haloed in a brilliant gold. On the opposite horizon, a few stars were just becoming visible, the first in what would become a dazzling display of diamond-like stars shining in the velvet background of infinite space.

From several kilometers away, a flock of birds rose from a lake. In a crescendo of rushing wings, their numbers grew from hundreds to thousands as they turned and twisted, a living, undulating, waving pattern that shifted constantly, and not only to feed on the abundance of flying insects but to confuse other winged predators. The strategy made it difficult for any particular bird to fall prey. Lifting and diving over the jungle, they created a spectacular aerial ballet until finally, when darkness placed its blanket of night over the jungle, they would settle into smaller groups, resting in the trees until dawn.

Completely humbled, Leia was utterly captivated. In this moment, with senses inundated and overpowered by the life that surrounded her in every direction, she felt extremely free. For a moment she became the little girl who had brought as many smiles to her father's face as she had consternation to the brows of her three aunts. And in a child's fashion she imagined herself in a bubble that contained nothing but this place, this moment. It was serene, beautiful; it was as though the spectacle that played about her was for her and no other.

" Pretty amazing, aren't they?"

The bubble burst, shattered into a million particles. She swung around, the thick, single braid of her hair whipping over one shoulder. She recognized the voice that had interrupted her cherished privacy. Lips pressed in a thin line, her eyes narrowed. *Of all people, why is he here?*

From the shadows, Han Solo purposefully positioned himself in Leia's line of sight. Yet, he hadn't intended to frighten her. "Sorry if I scared you."

She was still bristling at the fact that she hadn't been alone after all. "It's alright," she said tightly. "I just thought I was alone up here." She forced her shoulders to relax. "I certainly didn't expect to see you here. Don't you like having people falling all over you, raving about your talent as a pilot?"

"Ahh," he verbally waved her off, "too much hand shaking and back slapping." He flashed her a disarming smile. "Even I can only take so much of that."

She raised an eyebrow. He responded by telling her, lightly, that yes, he knew it was hard to believe.

"It meant a great deal, especially to Luke, that you attended the ceremony."

The Corellian hooked his thumbs into his blaster belt. "Yeah, well...like you said, it was good for morale."

She remembered what it had taken just to get him to attend the ceremony. He'd been adamant against it, saying the ones that really deserved to get the medals were the pilots who didn't make it back. They were the real heroes, he had stated. She hadn't denied the point but had emphasized that the medals were a way of honoring those who gave their lives, that what the survivors needed now was something to boost their morale --- something that promised victory even when the odds were stacked against them. The dead would not be dishonored by giving the living hope. They needed hope. They needed heroes. Solo had insisted he wasn't a hero and hadn't done what he did to be one. If they wanted to pin a medal on a hero, he had told her, then let Luke have all the glory. But Leia would not back down and finally, he'd accepted, albeit with the condition that it would be given to him not by a 'princess', but rather by a 'friend'. He had stretched his hand out, a gesture of friendship and respect. She had accepted it, realizing that it was not something he extended often. His hazel eyes were steady, challenging, and the strength of his handshake, as she had expected, conveyed that his loyalty as much as his trust --- once given --- was just as strong. Any betrayal of either would never be forgotten. It was, she had instantly realized, the one thing that could hurt, if not destroy him. Leia Organa would willingly do neither. She'd returned his penetrating gaze. No words were needed. Days ago, she would never have considered this side of him. It was far from the reaction she'd expected from a Corellian smuggler; it was, however, the reaction she had nonetheless received from Han Solo.

For a man who had no inhibitions about bragging about his talents and skills, he was nevertheless, and surprisingly, uncomfortable on the topic of medals, heroes, and all the trappings that went with them. He turned away from her, eyes fixed on the last flock of birds darting about in the twilight. The man didn't seem to have a care in the world. Leia studied him closely, her gaze drawn to the broken red piping running the length of his pants leg, a Corellian Bloodstripe. A rarely given award, there were actually two grades of the stripe, gold and red. Han Solo had both. The red, Leia knew, signified the first, and more rare of the two grades. One had to have not only risked his life but shed his blood in a selfless, honorable act, challenging death against insurmountable odds for the sake of another in order to have received the red stripe. Of those few who ever had, most had been bestowed with it posthumously. Leia had never seen either stripe aside from pictures. In fact, she could not remember knowing

anyone who had. *How did you get that, Han Solo?* Asking him, however, would not necessarily result in any answer. It was just one more curiosity about the man in a list that was continuing to grow.

"So," he asked casually, "what brought you away from all the ceremony and celebrating? I thought princesses liked big gatherings with all the trappings?"

She took a moment before answering. *I used to.* "Sometimes. Sometimes it's not everything it seems to be. This one was different..." Her words hung in the air, a thought, straying off into the growing darkness.

The slight pause was not unnoticed. "But...?" Han ventured quietly.

She looked away from him. "I just needed to get some fresh air." The reply was unintentionally etched with callous indifference.

The Corellian gave a slight grunt of noncommittal agreement. With the crowd in the throne room and so many people wanting so much of her time, she had obviously reached a point where it had become too overwhelming. It was a sign, he knew, that she was still dealing with everything that had happened to her. He could hardly blame her. How did you get over being interrogated and tortured? How did you get over seeing your whole world blown to dust? *Does anyone around here really give a damn about her?* He was quickly coming to the conclusion that they didn't. Not really. In his opinion, if she had been anyone other than who she was, they would have cared less if she'd died in that detention cell. The way he saw it, the rebels looked at her and saw a title and a crown, but they were blind to her. Could anyone really understand what she'd been through? Yes, she needed 'a breath of fresh air'. She certainly did.

He really couldn't say he'd known anyone who'd gone through half of what this woman had and not gone insane. Barely out of her teens, she was truly something special. *You've got grit, lady. More than most people I've known.* She had hosted the ceremony with grace. Her courage, determination, and spirit had shown like a beacon despite the devastation she had witnessed. She wasn't like anyone he'd ever met...or was likely to again. Leia captivated his interest. And something more.

But time would pass before he would ever know what that truly was.

Casually, he strolled to the edge of the roof where a series of crenellations made a decorative, chest-high border. The princess had turned with him, even followed beside him. Leaning his forearms on the ledge, he indicated the view with a slight wave of one hand. "Well, I guess if you need to get away from it all, there are worse places than up here."

"It's beautiful." The words were spoken softly. The dim light hid the wetness that welled in the corners of her eyes, concealed, or so she thought, the very slight tremble at the far edges of her lips.

The tone of her voice, the way she clasped her hands just a little too tightly, the slight lift of her chin and the steadying breath she took were all indications of just how on edge she was. None of it went unnoticed. Instead of looking right at her, Han focused his attention on the horizon, allowing Leia a little space of privacy in order to compose herself. He had the distinct feeling she was aware of his tactic. "Anyone know how old this place is?" Maybe if she could

talk about something, he figured, something that didn't remind her of her home and family, she could unwind a little, get her 'breath of fresh air' like she deserved.

She swallowed the emotions that were threatening her. "Off hand?" she ventured with a little clearing of her throat, "None that I know of." She leaned one shoulder against the top of a neighboring crenellation. "Don't tell me you have an interest in ancient history?"

Turning his head toward her, he smiled. Not the usual lop-sided grin that was obviously a trademark but rather something charming. Open. Warm. It was the kind of smile she could never tire of. Again her eyes strayed to the crimson Bloodstripe. *Who are you, really? Luke was right about what Obi Wan told him. Things are not always what they seem.* Something about this man didn't fit the norm for a smuggler or mercenary -- no matter how good he was at being either. The Bloodstripe was clear proof of that. She wondered if she would ever know more about him.

His smile broadened and he shifted around to fully face her. He was asking her, albeit playfully, if there was something wrong with a guy of his type being interested in a place like this?

"Depends," she began, purposefully playing coy, "on what that 'type of guy', as you put it, wants from a place like this?"

His eyes sparkled with mischief. "Holding out some of that 'reward' on me, Your Highness?"

"No. But maybe you're curious to know if there's a hidden treasure locked away somewhere in a secret vault. Ancient riches just there for the taking. Isn't that what pirates do, hunt for treasure?"

"It's been known to happen."

"How about you? Have you ever gone treasure hunting?"

His expression seemed to change, but it was so subtle that it could just as well have been the growing night casting a shadow across his sharp features. Leia did not think so however; the smile *had* changed, *had* passed from being open to being...guarded. He'd not succeeded in recovering it quickly enough to escape her keen perception. More surprising to her, she sensed, without understanding why or even how, that there were events in his past he did not want to reveal to anyone. Tragedy and loss. Shame and anger. And Leia knew, instantly, that his loyalty and trust *had*, at some point in time, been horribly betrayed.

He seemed to know what she recognized and looked out at the far horizon. "I've been known to go on a quest or two." His answer was a bit too quiet, but he recovered quickly. He flashed a lopsided smile at her, suddenly glib and nonchalant. "Don't pay attention to the holo-vid adventures, Princess. Treasure hunting's a lot like those fancy celebrations of yours. It ain't all it's cracked up to be."

"Is that the voice of experience?" It was a selfish ploy, intended for no other reason than to put some explanation, some glimmer of understanding to those emotions she saw in his eyes moments before.





Looking away again, he drew a breath and his chin dropped a notch toward his chest. Unwelcome images flooded his thoughts. Ghosts he'd deliberately banished to the distant recesses of his mind seized him. The haunting eyes of Bria Tharen stared back at him through the growing black of night.

"Yeah," he replied, his voice just a little too raw to hide the fact that this particular topic was out of bounds. To her. To him. To anyone.

Leia was immediately sorry for prying into his life. *You should have known better.* She swallowed her pride and apologized for having intruded on things that weren't her business.

"Hey," he shrugged offhandedly, "not everything works out the way you plan it."

There was no malice in his statement, no condemnation of her curiosity. Not looking away, she agreed, "No, not always."

It was dark now. The flock of birds had finally settled in the high branches. The sky over Yavin IV was clear; there were no cities or towns to pollute the air and the stars were brilliant.

It had been a long time since Leia had seen the stars in the night sky. She craned her neck back and gazed upward. The lights of faraway worlds sparkled and reflected in her deep brown eyes. It was so peaceful, so devoid of strife, of subjugation and of loss.

Han followed her gaze and as much as he tried to keep her emotions from affecting him, he failed. The sky here would be different than she was used to. Without even thinking, he simply took her hand and lifted it toward the twinkling specks above them.

"There." He gently pointed to what she searched for but would never see again save in memory, dreams, and nightmares. She sobbed. She didn't care that she trembled. She could not keep her tears at bay. No one else had to know...present company excepted.



Зависит от того

*"My father was very intuitive, more so than most Wookiees; he knew more than he told as well, even to his best friend, Han Solo, for some things are simply meant to be kept apart."*

--- Waroo, son of Chewbacca, friend and protector of the Solo family.

## SHADOW DREAM

*Alone. Darkness. No sense of direction. He was drifting, totally weightless in this ...void? Buoyed up by...what? He called out to his friend, his bond-brother. No sound. No barriers. No beginning. No end. Then, a tiny light, a mere pinprick in the inky blackness winked awake. Like an aperture it began expanding. The brilliance of it kept growing, finally forcing him to shield his eyes with one hand. Squinting, he peered at it, his curiosity unfolding; it was moving closer. Changing. Growing a metallic skin. It had texture too, and substance. Suddenly, dreadfully, he recognized the familiar trenches, the towers, the platforms, the batteries. Built for sheer destruction, it carried power -- absolute and unimaginable. And where no sound existed here before, the Star of Death breathed, unnaturally and unexplainably. It's evil was a living thing. Unspeakable. Unstoppable. Try as he did, he could not move from its path; he had no power to do so. The throbbing energy of the weapon built into a hammering crescendo, matching the heightened rhythm of the blood pumping in his veins. The pressure intensified painfully and he arched, throwing his head back, slapping the heels of his huge hands over his ears. He could not bare it -- was certain that in the very next second his brain would explode!*

Had he screamed as he woke? He could not be sure. The blaring claxon Vader had ordered for his particular torture had finally impaired his hearing. His heart pounded as loud as the thunder drums his people played at high ceremonies and he breathed slowly to calm it. Opening his eyes, he winced; the dim light in the cell was like a lance being driven through his head. Fangs bared, he swallowed a groan of pain, squeezed his hands into tight fists and realized that his palms were cold and moist. It did not surprise him, considering the treatment he and his two friends had endured. Even so, that dream had been enough to unsettle anyone. Tenderly massaging his temples, he wondered why he had dreamed of the Death Star? He never had before. He'd had no reason to. But then, in his culture dreams *always* had a reason. This one, with its terrible clarity, clung to him like cobwebs. Uncharacteristically, he shivered, feeling the memory of the images as they were etched on his consciousness. He squeezed his eyes shut and mentally willed the dregs of the nightmare away--he had no time for it, had much more pressing worries now. His head felt like it was splitting, aching worse than it had before he'd fallen asleep...how long ago? He tried to ascertain the length of time since being placed here, since Vader's cruel plan to bait Luke had begun, but to no avail. Craning his neck up and back he rolled his head from side to side, felt the tension pop and crackle. He opened his eyes

again. The subtle light did not bother them now and he let his gaze settle sadly on his companions.

Against the opposite wall, an unconscious Han Solo lay sprawled on the deck, his head cradled in Leia's lap. Concern evident in her touch, the princess caressed his brow, ran one hand through his hair, down the side of his neck and let it rest along his clavicle. Chewbacca bowed his head slightly, saddened by the image. Saddened too that Fate, after setting these two so obviously on a path together, should allow this to happen.

For a long time he had known Han's feelings for the princess but had not said anything about it. Well...maybe. Once or twice. Over a particularly potent batch of 'jet juice' he and Han had concocted. Han had set him straight, swore on the Falcon that he had no feelings for 'Her Righteous Holiness', that if he *did* have 'intentions', which he vehemently disavowed, they wouldn't be the honorable kind. He'd finished with a solicitous grin and a wink --- and promptly passed out like a wreck. Chewie hadn't believed a word of it; all too often he'd recognized the truth in Han's eyes as well as Leia's. Especially when the two watched each other from a distance. And when they were close, as on the trip to Cloud City, Chewbacca's overly keen senses told him many things. For one, even though he was certain they had not yet mated, they *smelled* right together. If only humans, he often thought, would pay attention to such things they would not waste time ignoring what was, literally, right in front of their noses! Ever since their first meeting, it had been very apparent to Chewbacca what was happening. He recalled how, not so very long ago, everything had finally, and frighteningly, become all too clear for Han. Leia had selflessly saved him from a blaster bolt in the back on Ord Mantell; the shot had grazed across her shoulder blades and although it hadn't been a grave wound, it had effected Han seriously. Shortly after the incident he'd told Chewbacca that he was leaving the Rebels, that he was paying Jabba off once and for all. Chewbacca hadn't needed to ask the Corellian about his plans once that was done...the only question was whether or not Jabba would accept the payment and let Han simply walk away? It was a grim concern neither of them needed to voice to the other. Any real fears Han had were characteristically kept at bay, tightly capped and contained under the surface of his trademark cynicism and bravado.

Chewbacca saw the princess stir slightly. She looked toward him; her strained features conveyed a nurturing warmth despite her own obvious pain. Had she read his thoughts, he wondered for a fleeting moment? Then the contact faltered and she bent her head down, let her gaze travel over Han.

It seemed like days since Calrissian had first told them of the Sith Lord's plan to lure Luke into his cruel trap. Days since they'd all been put through torture at Vader's hands. His apparent, obsessive need to make the absent Skywalker anxious about his friends and heighten the young man's sense of awareness as to their plight had resulted in a second round of brutal treatment. Once more Han had been taken to the scan grid. Once more Leia had been forced to witness his torment and to listen to his screams. Once more Chewbacca had been made to endure the high-pitched, claxon that eventually hindered his hearing and balance. When Han and Leia were reunited with him again, he had been too sick, too dizzy from the damage to his ears to assist as Leia had desperately tried to help Han to his feet, to steer him to the bedstead. However, the smuggler's tenacious grip on consciousness was fast losing ground and his legs had buckled after barely taking two steps. Failing to stay upright, he had collapsed heavily against Leia. Still holding to him, she was thrown off balance and staggered backward against the nearest wall. Han had managed to react, reached out with one arm over her shoulder and somehow miraculously dredged up the strength to brace himself. But the attempt was all too precarious. His body shook from the effort and he began to crumple. Leia gathered him closer,

cushioned their slow decent to the floor as he rasped an apology. She shushed him continually; he was sorry for not seeing her safely to the rendezvous, sorry for bringing them here, sorry for allowing all of them to be used as bait to lure Luke into a death trap. Chewbacca did not hear all of the words Han spoke but knew, from Leia's expression and the tears she forced back, that he had also revealed what he had not told her before, what he needed to say...despite anything the future might hold. Her breath had caught on a stifled sob. She would not, Solo knew, let him see her cry. That's my princess, he'd whispered, sketching a weak, lopsided smile as his eyes closed and he finally lapsed into unconscious. The princess, Chewbacca observed, had never before looked so small, so exhausted, so disheveled. But not broken. Never broken. He'd watched in sympathy as she had tenderly kissed Han's brow, gathered her arms more tightly about him -- as if nothing in the world was or could be more precious to her. To Chewbacca's eyes, the truth of her emotions was very clear. There would be no more denying it. It was clear too that Fate had indeed placed these two people together and nothing, not even death, could separate them now.

Han had not stirred for a long time now, cradled still by the woman he loved. Chewbacca watched as Leia rested one cheek gently against his mussed hair. She rocked, ever so slightly, back and forth. Back...and forth. Back...and...forth. Eventually sleep won over her too but her position never changed.

In total silence Chewbacca kept vigil while the din in his ears gradually subsided. He prayed to his ancestors that somehow he and his friends would escape this nightmarish prison. Finally, he could no longer fight his fatigue and he too succumbed to sleep.

*He stood alone on a precipice. To one side the universe spread infinitely, filled with stars scattered like diamonds on a sea of black velvet. To the other side, the Death Star loomed over a landscape of rubble. As before, it came, ever closer. His heart pounded again like a hammer inside his chest, lungs heaved to draw breath. The ground beneath lurched and pitched. How to escape? Did he step into space, to drift forever? Or did he try to find a way beyond the ruin on the other side? Indecision plagued him when suddenly he was shocked to find a human boy lying face down in front of him. Concern overcame all else. Crouching down, he cocked his head from side to side, inhaling deeply. His hunter's sense of smell was keen and he detected something... familiar?...about the child. Han? Instantly turning the boy over, he carefully cradled him in his arms as if he were born of his own blood, gazed at the face, noted the contours, the hairline, the overall shape of the body. Although there was a resemblance to Han, it was not Han. The boy bore his particular scent...and something else. His mind raced seeking to identify...Leia? He began to wonder...And his attention was shattered as the air around him exploded into fire, clouded over with thick, billowing smoke. He coughed and his lungs burned with the heat. The pressure grew rapidly and threatened to burst him apart. He looked upward, faced the Death Star speeding toward him only to witness as it erupted into a flame-engulfed moon. His nostrils flared and the blue of his eyes deepened with blood lust; anger and rage filled him, pumped through his veins and pounded in his heart. Taut muscles rippled beneath his skin as he clambered to his feet to stand erect. Still holding the boy he looked upward, savagely bellowing his hatred for this instrument of death...*

*He struggled. Clawed. Scrambled. He had to find the surface of consciousness. But the dream possessed an unnatural, colossal strength and it clung to him, mercilessly trying to haul him back to its depths. Breathing in excited gasps, he could sense, could see, the break in the*

*nightmare, could almost, almost, reach out and clutch it. He reached for it as if through a heavy mire, was so close to awakening...the pull against him became even stronger and he cursed the unseen forces of the dream. He prayed to his ancestors to give him the strength he needed to break away and...*

Panting hard, it was moments before he realized where he was. The cell was darker than it had been. Something felt wrong and immediately he looked about, shaking off the loathsome second dream. Leia was seated on the hard surface of the bedstead. Her eyes were red-rimmed, their gaze fixed hard on the cold, cell door. Creases etched furrows of grave worry on her brow. Her jaw was tight, yet her lips trembled ever so slightly. One hand gripped the edge of the hard platform, the other, Han's discarded jacket. Her knuckles were white.

"They took him," was all that she said, not taking her eyes from the door.

It would have been pointless to ask how long Han had been gone. Weary and stiff with pain, he climbed to his feet and moved to sit beside Leia. In the few short years he'd known her, the armor of her spirit had never appeared so fractured by fear, or seemed so pitted with pain. A minute passed, perhaps two and he laid a gentle hand over her shoulder. Saying nothing, she simply leaned against him. Consumed by exhaustion, they remained that way even when the cell doors finally opened.

As usual, two stormtroopers entered, their blast rifles aimed mainly on Chewbacca. Seconds later two more rounded the entryway. Gripping their unconscious, half-naked prisoner by wrists already worn raw from straining against the bindings of the scan grid, they roughly hauled the scorched and bruised body of Han Solo a few feet inside the cell. They dropped him to the cold cell floor like a rag doll.

One trooper kicked him over onto his back. He looks dead.

No loss, the other replied tersely. Just one less piece of trash.

The four stormtroopers barely departed before Chewbacca and Leia reached their friend. The Wookiee dropped to his knees, whimpering, and gathered Han into his immense arms. He began to rise but Leia grasped one hand about his forearm, staying his movement.

Urgently, she bent over Han, one ear pressed to his chest, trembling fingers seeking for a pulse at his throat. "Don't!" She hissed. "Don't you dare!" Anxious moments dragged by and finally she breathed a sigh of relief.

Chewbacca bent his head, softly trilling his thanks to whatever gods had heard their silent prayers. From the corner of his eyes he noticed Leia nod slightly in agreement. Quickly, but carefully, he rose to his feet and carried Han to the bedstead. As he gently placed him on the hard surface, the image of the boy in his dream flashed, unbidden, behind his eyes.

Han shivered noticeably. No comforts had been provided for them; Leia wasted no time shrugging out of the jacket of her snowsuit. She draped it over Han's chest and shoulders then stripped her shirt off, rolled it up and tucked it under his head. The short sleeves of her t-shirt revealed the goose bumps raising on her arms but she ignored them. Sitting alongside Han,

she brushed the tousled, sweat-soaked hair back from his brow and drew her lips across his. With her eyes squeezed tightly shut, her hands gripped his shoulders.

"I'll kill you if you die," she vowed. "I'll kill you..."

She seemed totally unaware as Chewbacca placed Han's discarded jacket around her shoulders.

Giving the princess space, he retreated to stand next to the cell door, anger and hatred for his captors consuming him. How long would this senseless torture continue before Vader decided to kill them all or, worse, sell them into slavery? And where was Luke? It was obvious young Skywalker had not yet reached Cloud City. Would he even come? Chewbacca didn't want to think about what was in store for them next. He only knew he was determined to kill anyone who dared take Han or Leia out of this cell again...or he'd die trying. From Han's weakened condition, he knew his friend would not survive another round of torture. As he stood guard over his friends, he knew he could not afford to fall asleep again. Sleep was the enemy. There was no time for rest now.

Minutes became hours, or so it seemed. Chewbacca finally lowered himself to sit on the cold floor, but his vigilance never waned. As he watched the unopened door his thoughts returned again to the strange dreams he'd had.

Long ago, before he left his homeworld, he'd heard of a Wookiee who had experienced the Shadow Dreams. Her name was Dewlannamapia. The clan's High Shaman, Inlakesh, had explained that Shadow Dreams were messages. Often they revealed many things, the future not being the least of those. Very few Wookiees, Inlakesh told, had one Dream. Fewer still had two. But when a third was sent, it was almost unheard of. These Wookiees were marked, 'gifted', he had said, by the spirits of other Shadow Dreamers. Dewlannamapia, Chewbacca recalled, had been sent three dreams. Her mate, Isshaddik had been exiled from the clan and she had left with him. The two eventually obtained jobs on a smuggling ship, *Trader's Luck*, captained by a human, Garris Shrike. A year later Isshaddik died in a smuggling run on Nar Hekka. Dewlannamapia had never returned home, even though she could have. Instead, her letters had said, she had come in contact with an orphaned Corellian boy who lived aboard Shrike's ship. Dewlannamapia had chosen to remain with him; she had seen him in her Shadow Dream. Eventually, she died saving the life of her human charge.

So some years later, when a young lieutenant in the Imperial Navy saved Chewbacca from a life of slavery, the name of Han Solo was not new to him. He wondered now, had Dewlannamapia's spirit sent him a Shadow Dream?

*Again he stood on the precipice, still holding the boy in his arms. The peaceful star field stretched out on one side of him, the burning moon traveling on its collision course toward him on the other. The ground under his feet erupted and he fell to his knees. Instinctively, protectively, he held the boy closer to his chest. This place was coming apart. Time was running very short. Too short. He looked out at the star field, felt its inviting quiet, saw so many paths between the twinkling specks of light. Many futures lingered there. Thunder broke his attention and he knew, without question, without any reservations at all, that there was really only one choice he could make. He turned his back on the raging moon of fire and instinctively cast the boy into the embrace of the stars. Instantly the boy was gone, a bright, white light flared, momentarily blotting*



*out everything and then the familiar shape of Millennium Falcon passed overhead. Blackness washed over him then. And all was quiet.*

He came awake...peacefully, naturally. It was all clear to him now, the dream, the boy, who he was, where he came from. What his own fate would be... A familiar voice softly called his name and his head lolled casually to one side. Han was still lying on the bedstead, one arm draped over the side. Chewbacca's eyes followed and saw Leia on the floor, back against the wall and knees drawn toward her chest. One hand clasped in Han's, she slept. His gaze fixed on her, the Corellian gently stroked the back of her fingers with a rough thumb.

A wistful smile sketched at one corner of his mouth. "Whatever happens," he said quietly, not taking his eyes from Leia, "don't let Vader hurt her."

Chewbacca's response was ruefully subdued. He understood, absolutely, the implication behind those words but was stubborn to acknowledge it.

"Promise me..." Han urged plaintively, exhaustion pulling at the last of his strength.

Finally, Chewbacca acquiesced sadly and watched as Han's eyes closed.

For a time he thought about many things that had happened in his life. About Dewlannapia's dream and the choices she had made. About his own family and the choices he had made. About how he had met Han. He gazed at his friends. He had come to care for the princess as much as he did Solo --- partly because he genuinely liked her, partly because Han loved her so much. He knew he would never have to fulfill Han's request --- the Shadow Dream had revealed to him another future. It *had* shown him his own death. Exactly when and where it would happen he did not know. But he also understood that before death came, the lives of his two friends would be irrevocably linked with his for years to come, for the Shadow Dream spoke of hope, of the web of events that connected so many parts of a whole. They would all survive this prison of nightmares; they would see the Empire fall. And more. Eventually the strands of the Shadow Dream dissolved into his memory and he smiled as he drifted, serenely, to sleep.

This time, he did not dream.

*"Some beings are more attuned to the Force than others, yet we are, all of us, bound together by it to one degree or another."*

--- Reask Seltan, Jedi Master

# THE HELL WITHIN

On an obscure moon in an equally obscure are of the galaxy, all was quiet in a darkened hangar bay of a hidden Rebel base. Housed there among various other craft rested an old, battle scarred vessel whose history, had it been entirely known, would undoubtedly have proved more entertaining than any produced in action-packed holo-vids. Her appearance was remarkably deceiving and therefore in almost any spaceport she rarely rated even a passing glance from most who saw her. Unknown and unimportant to the general population, she was far more than the light stock freighter of her original, highly maneuverable design. Specific alterations --- made especially over the last decade --- added not only extra military-class armor plating but also speed that could easily outdistance Imperial Star Destroyers and Tie fighters alike. Blast rifles, turret guns and concussion missiles were only a few of the examples of her formidable firepower. The dish adorning her top hull allowed for long range scanning and communication as well as the ability to jam any frequencies trying to locate her. To her enemies she was an opponent not to be taken lightly; to others, she served as transportation, as a means to make a living, and as home. The scars she bore were as bookmarks to the pages of her long life, telling many a tale of high adventure and intrigue the likes of which were usually found only in legends. Anyone who had the ability to do so had but to touch her spirit and hear her stories.

Luke Skywalker, was such a person. The hour was late. It was quiet. With a casual nod he stopped and spoke briefly to a posted sentry. Afterward, he wound his way among the various craft resting within the hanger until he came to *Millennium Falcon*, the pride and joy of a friend who was just as legendary and far more dear. Five motion detector lights automatically illuminated the ship's underbelly as he approached and a wan smile touched his features as he recalled his first adventure on this vessel and every one since. He placed a hand against her metal skin almost as lovingly as her captain would have, Perhaps he did so because, like for the fact that the Corellian smuggler, a man he thought of as a brother, was not here.

"How are you tonight old girl?" In the silence he could almost hear her lonely sigh echoing through the hanger. So many memories, all racing through his mind, pierced his heart. It would not be long now, he reminded --- no, promised --- himself, until things were put right. As Luke placed his left palm against the locking device, the freighter's sophisticated security computer recognized him. The sound of the hydraulic arms of the boarding ramp whirred to life

and then the hatchway to the ship's interior hissed open. More lights immediately lit the entryway, Luke clasped one hand around a strut and easily swung up onto the metal grid surface of the ramp. A soft 'thud' resounded as it connected with the formacrete deck and he strode forward to enter the ship. The absence of the tall, rangy spacer, mouth curled into a lopsided grin, eyes dancing with mischief and blaster holstered low on his right hip, hit him in the pit of his stomach. It wasn't the first time he'd felt that way. But it would, he vowed --- especially for Chewbacca and for Leia --- be the last. It was uncomfortably quiet onboard, and the unaccustomed stillness shrouded him uneasily. The hatch whispered shut behind him.



Leia Organa nodded politely as Mon Mothma's personal aide gave a short bow before leaving the room. As soon as the doorway hissed shut, she looked down at the tea tray that had been placed upon the low table between the curving couch and two comfortable, upholstered arm chairs. Laden with small, delectable finger cakes and sandwiches, there was also freshly brewed floral tea --- one of Leia's favorites. She raised an eyebrow as her gaze traveled over the assortment of refreshments. A shallow, iridescent bowl (hand-blown Agamarian glass, circa fifth dynasty) was half filled with sparkling, amber-colored Chandrillian honey, a very rare, very expensive commodity and something no proper hostess should ever be without when serving tea to guests...especially one hailing from a ruling house. Slices of bright green Ralltirian s'tara fruit were neatly placed on a palm-sized, ornately engraved, silver platter (fashioned by one of the most famous Alderaanian designers; the silver was actually Corellian -- and the best anywhere in the galaxy). A small vase of tiny red flowers, the same variety the tea was brewed from, graced the middle of the tray and upon each small dish was a folded serviette, lightly scented and treated with a moisturizer --- again, something no proper hostess would dare be without. The entire display was beautiful, a reminder of her home --- obliterated from the galaxy's map --- and of times spent with the family that had been destroyed with it. But it also reminded Leia that such things were too extravagant in these times, especially when so many people were getting by with so very little. While she highly respected Mon Mothma, she would have preferred a more forward tactic from her when she set about trying to sway her to change her mind about taking a leave of absence. Looking at her wrist chrono, Leia pursed her lips, ready to mutter one of Han's favorite curses just as the door from another room opened.

"Leia," Mon smiled in greeting and approached with outstretched hands. "It's been such a long time. How are you?"

*Worried. Exhausted. Anxious. Terrified. Thoroughly pissed off.* "I'm well, thank you."

Mon's eyes saw through the veil of her guest's despair. She gave her a maternal embrace. With a graceful movement of one wrist, the older woman gestured toward the deep, cushioned chairs. "Please, sit down."

"You wasted no expense, I see."

"Some things are worth it." She poured tea into one of the fine cups.

Leia watched as the ruby colored liquid swam along the inner sides of the translucent, porcelain cup and swirled in lazy rings towards the center. The last time she'd had Alderaanian red rysufi tea she had been on *Millennium Falcon*. One of the rebel weapons suppliers had



made a trade with Han in exchange for some Corellian spiced brandy. Leia had not even seen rysufi tea since the last time she'd been home on Alderaan. How had Han possibly known? A distant, sad smile haunted her face and reached into her eyes. There'd been no fine porcelain cups on his ship, no slices of citrus or dollops of rare honey, no spongy cream cakes or tarts and no vase of flowers. But Leia had nonetheless been speechless. Thinking he'd made a big mistake, Han had awkwardly mentioned that once they got to Cloud City maybe she could have tea with all the trimmings at some nice place along one of the colonnades. His awkward, unnatural shyness combined with the gift of the tea had made her blush, and brought tears to her eyes. He'd thought he'd made her sad until she'd kissed him lightly on the lips, traced the scar on his chin. A simple, quiet 'thank you' had been all that she could muster for fear of losing her composure altogether. He had given her a nervous smile and left — supposedly to attend to some sudden repair job. Leia had not felt so at ease, or so safe, or even so confused in a very long time. Cloud City had been such a very long, long way away then...

"Leia?" Mon Mothma was leaning forward, one hand resting on hers." Leia?"

Reluctantly, Leia blinked back to the present.

"Are you all right?" the older woman asked, her sincerity clearly heard in her tone.

Leia nodded just a fraction." Forgive me, ma'am. I was just ---- "

"Remembering," Mon sadly suspected. She hadn't gotten as far as she had in life without paying attention to her intuition. She squeezed a sliver of s'tara into her tea and followed with a stirring of honey. "I imagine you have a great deal on your mind right now."

Leia sat forward and held the teacup in one hand. "These days," she remarked quietly as she settled back into her chair, "we all do."

Mon nodded." True enough." She sipped her tea. "At least we're on the way to finally seeing a major shift in the war."

"It's been a long time coming. You worked very hard to get us to this point."

The older stateswoman waved a hand." That credit goes to many people. However, if not for you, I doubt many of our new allies would have had the courage to finally oppose Palpatine and lend us their support. You've accomplished things even I could not. You're a brilliant diplomat, Leia. And an equally brilliant woman."

"A credit that goes to the help of many others, as you said so well yourself."

"You're being modest," Mon said affectionately, "and I'm being serious." She set her tea on the table. As she spoke, she moved to the edge of her seat and leaned toward the princess, her alert eyes watching Leia thoughtfully. "As a member of a ruling house, a member of the senate, and a leader in our cause, you've seen and experienced the worst of Palpatine's regime. People everywhere know that. They listen to you because you believe so honestly in your convictions to see an end to the empire. They believe in you, they sustain themselves on your hope and determination." She saw the objection begin to form on Leia's expression and casually pulled her right hand away from her left to wave off the coming words." When hope fails they have but to see you, to hear your voice and they find the strength to go on. You have

an unfailing spirit, Leia. The Alliance can't afford to lose you." She paused briefly before adding, "I believe that even Captain Solo understood that."

*"The Princess. You have to take care of her."* Leia felt her throat tighten. Her vision blurred and she forced the threat of tears back. But only barely.

"General Reeikan tells me that the loss of Captain Solo is felt by many of our people. What happened at Cloud City was unfortunate."

*"It was horrible." Han shivered noticeably. No comforts had been provided for them; Leia wasted no time shrugging out of the jacket of her snowsuit. She draped it over Han's chest and shoulders then stripped her shirt off, rolled it up and tucked it under his head. The short sleeves of her t-shirt revealed the goose bumps raising on her arms but she ignored them. Sitting alongside Han, she brushed the tousled, sweat-dampened hair back from his brow, drew her lips across his, breathed of him. She squeezed her eyes tightly shut and her hands gripped his shoulders.*

*"I'll kill you if you die," she vowed. "I'll kill you."*

"Yes. I imagine it was."

*No. You can't,* Leia wanted to say, wanted to shout but hung onto her stalwart conviction that she would not outwardly show how deeply the events at Cloud City had effected and hurt her.

Mon cleared her throat a little and remarked, "I dare say that even those who don't approve of hiring smugglers, privateers and the like, admit that his talents, even his personality, will be greatly missed. It's too bad he never joined our ranks officially. I hear he was a natural leader. People with those talents are always needed."

*"We need you."*

*"We need?"*

*"Yes. You're a natural leader--"*

*"We need? What about what you need?"*

The tea was getting cold now and Leia carefully set her cup aside on the table.

"He had more respect among us than I think he was aware of," the older woman was saying.

"Don't talk as though he's dead," Leia interjected. Dark, dampened lashes lifted and she looked at Mon with the same conviction of belief the other woman had spoken about only moments before. "He isn't." Images of Han filled her: the wisecracking, smug smile and dangerous eyes, the lean, rangy form leaning casually against a hatchway, or crouched over some repair job on the *Falcon*. She'd often thought his eyes were his best feature but then neither could she ignore his hands: work-roughened, they could deftly pull and aim a blaster with a speed that was legendary, could take the controls of anything with an engine and expertly



drive or fly it, could swing a jaw-breaking punch or even, on a rare occasion, caress a tear away with an earnest, natural tenderness that Leia found surprisingly easy to accept. And to love.

Mon's gaze held hers and a reverent silence dropped over them. "I hope you're right. But, Leia, if he's still in carbon freeze you know what the effects of hibernation sickness can do."

Indeed, she did and couldn't help but be frightened for Han. Hibernation sickness could be lethal. Major organs were forced to struggle in order to function normally again. Severe muscle spasms would certainly bring on convulsions. The torment would not end there. While the victim fought the throes of those tortures, the brain would certainly race to right itself from a massive loss of stimulus. Sensory deprivation could effect short-term memory as well as long, rendering the brain unable to keep memories in any sort of real order. The end result could be madness.



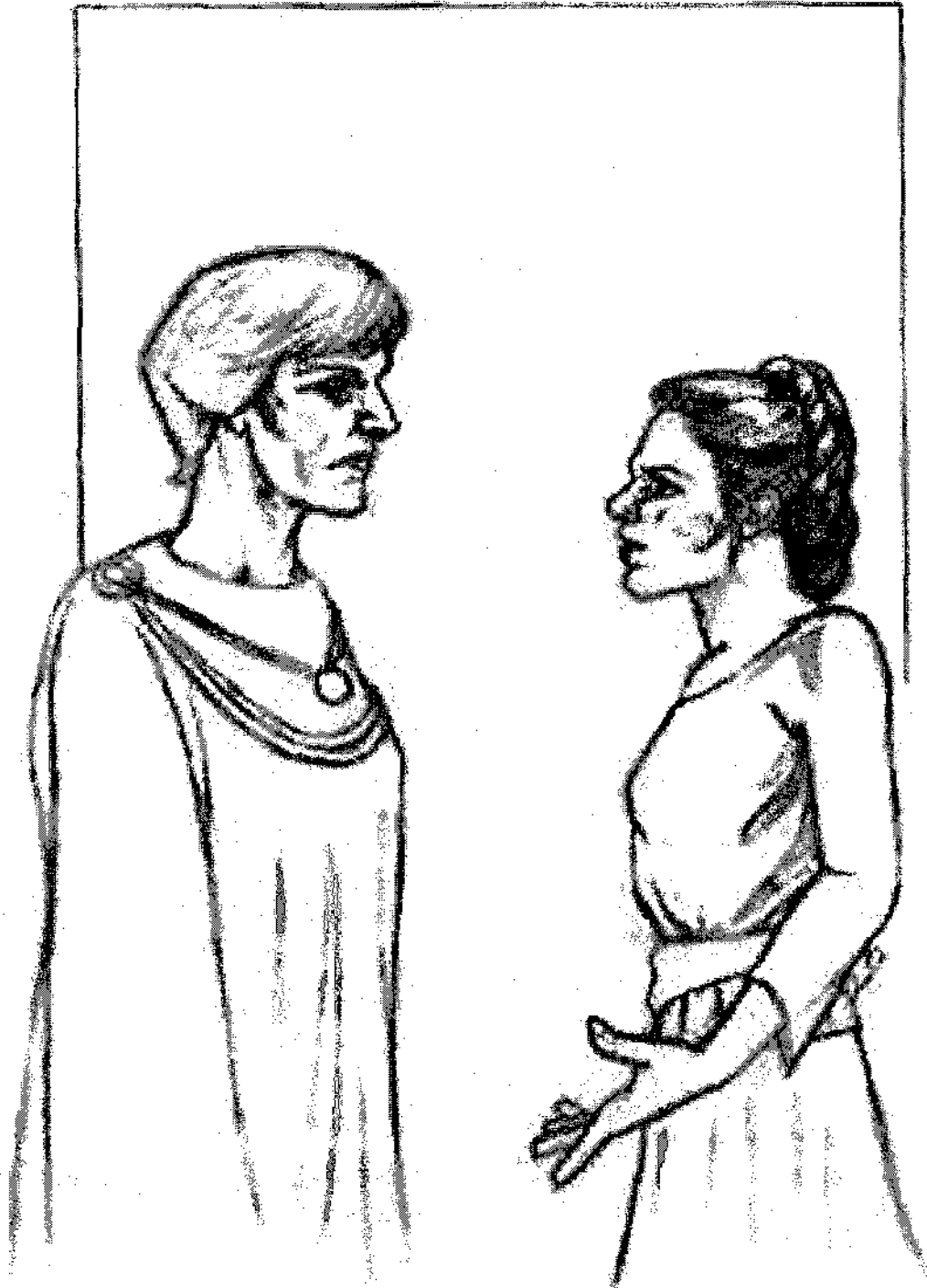
Luke's hands flew up, as if trying to ward off something horrible from coming at him. The dim lights that came through the canopy, that shone from the hanger ceiling, blurred in his vision and suddenly the world around him came down, twisted and reeled wildly, propelled him on a wild hyperspace ride until, without warning, it slammed into him. What Han had experienced as he had been frozen in carbonite, Luke now felt.

*The blast of ice-fire struck form everywhere, colliding into the very center of his body, exploding along each nerve ending like a long, scaring arm of pure lightening. In one heartbeat his bones felt as though they'd snapped, his muscles atrophied and his internal organs felt as though they were being squeezed in a vise. Arteries pumped wildly, then suddenly all but ceased to send blood through his body as everything slowly... slowly... slowly shut down to the barest of support. As fast as it all happened, it also seemed to take forever. Eyes tightly shut, metallic carbonite coursed its thick frozen trail down his throat as the glassy substance choked off a scream no one would ever hear. As it froze, it strangled him - his reaction to gag, to retch it back up, proved futile. He could no more stop it than he could throw himself forward, away from the agonizing pain and the bone snapping cold. Head thrown back, hands clawing at the thick substance that hardened like stone, like duracrete, he had fought, in the instant of the blast, to escape. The scream that had begun was lost somewhere in the fixed effigy of dull, iron grey, as frozen as the rest of him but still echoing, ringing incessantly in his mind. His lungs burned like acid with that one scream he had tried to let out.*

*But the freezing process had sucked it away.*

*And darkness had slammed in on him like a heavy shield door. Trapped in the unreal, unnatural silence that pressed in from everywhere, he hung, caught suspended in a vacuum of horror. A terrifying shock gripped him as he realized he was still alive - still conscious. Like a tidal wave, panic consumed him and he clawed, mentally, for the ability to draw air, just one breath in the dire hope that someone, anyone would hear. But the breath would not come and his mind fought in vain to grasp his condition. Asphyxiation and cold held him prisoner. No light, no touch could enter. In this frozen void, time was suspended between the endlessly long beat of his heart and the images that sprang behind his eyes. Foremost was one face, one pair of liquid brown eyes that had held him transfixed until he could no longer maintain contact. Her last words, confirming*





*what he'd known for some time were spoken in a desperate moment; the sound of her voice, the image of her, was his only salvation against the utter darkness, the cold pain of suffocation, of insanity. He did not know if he could hang on.*



"It's all the more reason," Leia answered, her voice barely above a whisper, "why I have to go after him."

The Alliance president's expression was grave. "Even if doing so, your absence to this cause meant the lives of countless others?"

Leia bristled. "That's unfair!"

"War's unfair!"

"You're saying I should just abandon Han to that hell?"

"I'm saying let someone else rescue him...if he can be rescued. Your duty, Leia, is to the Alliance. First and foremost."

"I know my duty. I also know that my father raised me to believe that even one man's life is worth something."

"Yes, he did believe that. But he faced his share of sacrifices too, often for the betterment of thousands, even millions. Such decisions are never easy, especially when they involve those we love." Her gaze, while as steady and determined as Leia's, was not without concern or compassion. And it made what she said next all the more difficult. "You love this man. That much, while I can't bring myself to agree with it, is evident. So, as a friend, as someone who's known you since birth and has often thought of you as a daughter, I have to ask...how far into this relationship are you?"

*You want me to stay because of the way you feel about me.* "Not as far as I'd wanted."

Mon's sigh was a clear indication of her relief. She shook her head. "You're a fool. A stubborn minded and stubborn hearted fool. I could order you to remain here."

"You could."

"I fear for you, Leia. This will come to no good."

"I'll be the judge of that."

"You'll have to be." She stepped forward, closing the space between them and took the princess into her arms. "Be careful. Be very careful. And come back to us."

"I will. I promise."



He was not breathing. Every bone, every muscle ached. He fought with all his will to control the shaking in his limbs. Nausea came over him like a tidal wave. The effect of touching his friend's presence had not been what he expected. It had been abominable. Unspeakably horrific. Luke struggled against the effects of the experience and at last forced himself onto his knees. When had he collapsed onto the floor? He couldn't recall. Frigid sweat soaked him completely. It trailed down his back, covered his chest, ran down his brows, stung his eyes. Left hand trembling, he held it to his throat and then to his heart. His vision was going black around the edges. A familiar voice resounded in his mind: **Release your hold. Breathe.**

Luke lurched forward, bracing both hands against the deck plates and sucked as much air into his lungs as they would hold. He coughed. Strangling, he struggled to breathe again. Coughed more. Eventually, spent and panting, he stretched out on the floor of the cockpit and let his senses come back to normal.

It had hurt like cold fire, the essence of that touch, that connection with Han, and it would remain with him always. Eyes squeezed tight against the memory, he wept and whispered in a shaking voice that only *Millennium Falcon* seemed to hear, "Han, forgive me." He inhaled and exhaled in a series of calming breaths and let the healing balm of the Force surround him.



It was early; the dark of night still reigning over the coming of dawn. *Millennium Falcon* departed the rebel base. Once beyond the gravitational pull of the planetoid, she shifted anxiously into hyperspace. In the cockpit, each absorbed in their own thoughts, three friends watched silently as the star field blurred into a silver-white steam. Tatooine, the place where their journey together had begun more than three years ago, was a long way ahead of them, an ancient ball of sand in orbit around twin suns. Luke settled back into the pilot's seat and brought the image of the desert planet and the image of his friend to his mind's eye. The others sat nearby. They knew nothing about the connection he had made with Han through the Force and he intended to keep it that way. If they were oblivious to their friend's pain, they would suffer less for him. Especially Leia. As always he felt the Force. It pulsed gently around him and within him. He reached out and this time the universe did not spin away with him. Beyond light years of space he held out his hand, stretched his mind easily, confidently, knowing exactly the moment when he once more made contact.

This time the cold and the pain did not assail him.

This time he would not let go.



*"I've always been an extrovert. For the most part, people like me. But actually, I have few real friends. I met the closest ones I'd ever have in my life at Cloud City. I just didn't realize it until we rescued Han from Jabba."*

--- Lando Calrissian

## STORMBOUND

"Twenty years," Mara Skywalker thought aloud.

Her husband, watching as his sister and Han shared a glass of Chandrillian wine in celebration of their anniversary, glanced at her. "Yes. Twenty years," he repeated, a glimmer of mischief twinkling in his blue eyes. "Who'd have ever thought it."

Mara turned toward him. "You, for one." Her wry grin matched his.

"Me. For one..." Luke became introspective. He watched the happy couple and sipped at his drink. "Twenty years...twenty *four* since Leia got him out of carbon freeze."

"That rescue was quite a story, from what I heard."

"Well, what you heard was what the media told. It wasn't the way it really happened. Not all of it at least." Luke grew quiet, caught up in memories.

"So," Mara initiated, encircling one arm in his and leading him away to a quiet corner of the garden, "what really happened?"

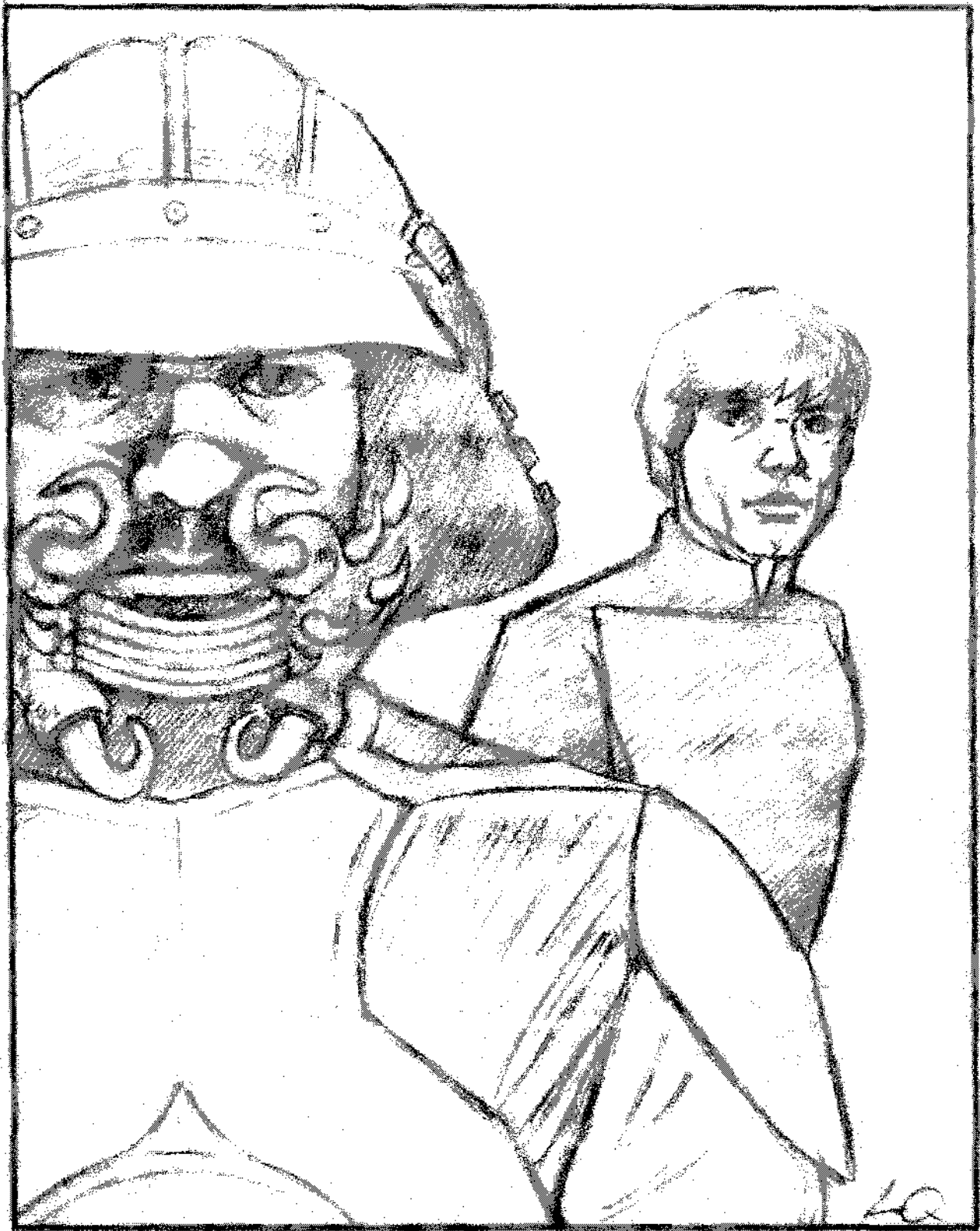
"We were all Jabba's prisoners," Luke began. "Or so *he* thought..."

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Jabba was dead.

It was over.

Wavering lines of heat danced on the desolate horizon of sand and sky. Tatooine's twin suns beat down mercilessly on the desert. Free from Jabba the Hut, Luke and his friends had spent a few well-deserved moments reveling in the joy of their reunion. But before leaving the Great Pit of Carkoom, they witnessed, in shared silence, the last explosions that destroyed the Hut crime lord's sand barge. Burning fuel rose in a foul smelling coil of black, oily smoke



against the brilliance of the desert's glaring, cerulean sky. The skiff's deck plates shuddered with the blasts. Fire belched forth from the imploding innards of the large craft, spewing rolling clouds of red, orange and blue flame as one internal detonation fed another and another and another. The crippled vessel, her repulsorlift engines rent and shattered, had dropped from the air like a huge, lead weight. Golden sand billowed outward from under her and from behind the curtain of dust, she screamed her demise as metal screeched against metal and tore at her keel which snapped like a brittle twig. The entire bow twisted and split completely away. More smoke spilled from her and then, with a long, loud, wrenching groan she rolled over and over, leaving gouges down the sharp decline of a long dune. She rocked when she hit the bottom and there she breathed her last dying breath. Soon the desert's elements and scavengers would leave no visible trace of her.

Standing at the helm, Lando Calrissian turned the commandeered escort skiff easily to port. It was time to leave Tatooine. Time to go home. Wherever that was.



The wind of Tatooine has no mercy. From the south it rises, a scorching, suffocating furnace. At high velocity it churns the seas of sand high into the air. The blue sky becomes an ochre wall that moves over shifting dunes, cracked salt flats, tabletop plateaus and deep gorges. Needle-like sand, a driving whirlwind of barbed projectiles, scores the face of rocks, or worse, tears unprotected flesh from bone. The howling wind is deafening, a constant roar droning incessantly; it has been known to leave the rare storm survivor completely mad.

Luke and his friends had been lucky. The skiff's supply holds had been stocked with enough survival gear to give them adequate protection from the elements. Would that their means of transportation had been so well prepared. The turbo fans that normally kept sand from clogging the engines were not designed to contend with the extreme conditions of these storms. Mile after long, grueling mile the craft sputtered and lurched as its systems struggled to keep it going. But the storm had the upper hand in the battle, save for one thing: Luke. Remembering how Yoda had used the Force to raise his student's submerged X-wing from the swamp, Luke did likewise to keep the sand skiff airborne. It took all his concentration, all his strength to do so, and for a long time he was successful. But his training, while rigorous and unrelenting, had been short. In reality, he had barely scratched the surface of what Yoda had planned on teaching him. The fact that he managed to keep the skiff going at all was a profound testament to his strength of will, his belief in the Force, and his undying dedication to his friends. Without Luke's tenacity, the skiff would have failed long before it arrived at a place of relative, if not complete, safety.

The highlands of the desert were rugged, filled with escarpments and gorges. A rough terrain, they had once known coastlines of interconnecting seas. Lush vegetation and a variety of wildlife had flourished here. And so too had civilization. But beneath the rock-strewn ground and salt flats, no evidence now remained to the naked eye of irrigation trenches, marketplaces, homes, temples, amphitheaters, and more. Only a small fraction of ruins remained relatively intact and unburied. Luke sensed this place. Pushing himself beyond his known limitations, he homed in on what his mind saw.



The skiff, settling on the buckling tiled floor of an ancient building, shuddered roughly as its engines were shut down. The turbo fans, overheated and clogged, made long, slow, scraping sounds that echoed against stone walls and ceilings. Finally they stopped. Surprisingly, the infernal droning of the storm could not be heard here. The silence was eerie. Oppressive. And altogether unsettling.

Exhausted from the effects of the storm, Luke and his friends wanted nothing more than to shake the dust from their clothing and hair, wash the caked sand from their faces, and stretch out on the skiff's decks for some much needed rest. But they were in an unfamiliar place and such luxuries could not be immediately afforded. In different ways, everyone sensed danger. The added energy lent by sheer adrenaline, was a welcome ally. The air was charged with anticipation; it was like waiting for a bomb to explode. All armed, Chewbacca, Lando, Leia and even Han, who still fought the recurring effects of hibernation sickness, stood with Luke. Here and there small scuffling noises echoed faintly against the stone walls and high ceiling. Carefully, Luke took his light saber from his belt.

And then it came.

From out of the darkness, eight Tusken Raiders rose. Their loud, croaking war cries split the air along with the resounding crack made by their long barreled slug-throwers. Shots thudded and ricochet off the skiff. Intending to overrun the ship and overpower its passengers, the cloaked, desert Raiders charged forward. But the battle never had a chance to begin. Instead, Luke's ignited light saber brought them to a dead halt. Illuminated in green-white light, the leader motioned his companions to back away. With muttered, fear-filled exchanges, they obeyed. Luke stood his ground for a few moments longer.

Behind him, Lando lit a survival lantern, Leia broke out a water canteen and ration bars and Chewie dug into a weapons hold and handed Han two blast pistols and two extra charge packs for the laser rifle. Only when Luke felt certain that the Tusken's would not make a second charge did he join his friends.

Exhausted, they passed a canteen from one to the other, sparingly sipping water to replenish their dehydrated bodies. Luke eased himself down to sit beside Leia. His efforts in having kept the skiff airborne for so long had pushed his strength to limits he had never before been aware of. Now, with the rush of adrenaline subsiding, he fought to remain conscious. He took his turn in drinking a small amount of water and then, relaxing his body and mind, he eased into a regenerative trance he'd learned from Yoda.

After a time he woke, replenished by the energy of the Force. He opened his eyes. The dim light from the lantern gave off a subtle glow. Everyone sat close together. Leia cradled Han's head in her lap and stroked the hair away from his brow. He dozed fitfully; hibernation sickness had given him a harder time in staving off dehydration. Leia's gaze strayed from him to settle on Luke.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

Kneading the back of his neck with one hand, he smiled wanly and nodded slightly. Chewie passed him the canteen but before he drank, he gazed at Solo.

"He's held up pretty well considering," Leia said before he could ask.

Luke reached out and took the Corellian's wrist in his hand; the pulse could've been stronger. "How much water do we have left?"

"One full container," Lando told him.

Rolling onto his knees, Luke peered over the side railing. In the dim light he saw the shapes of the Tusken Raiders. From the light of their tiny campfire, other shapes were discernable; on the floor lay the stripped bodies of a half dozen Askajian herdsman. Everything they had had been taken by the Tusken's. Especially their large water containers. It was unfortunate that the Askajian's hadn't been the only other people stormbound here. They would have shared what water they had and hence made it possible for Luke and his friends to remain put, to rest and recover until the storm died.

"We have to get to the *Falcon*," he stated flatly and took a small swallow of water.

"But the storm ---" Leia began.

"Is what it is," Luke gently replied. "We need more water. And we won't get it here." Leia's worry, fear and anxiousness were equally shared by all. Glancing once more at Han, he added, "He can't afford to wait until the storm blows itself out." He gave Leia the canteen and she placed it to Han's lips, trying to get even a trickle down him. His eyes opened to mere slits and he shifted slightly, coughed raggedly.

Luke looked to Chewbacca and Lando. "Check the equipment hold. See what we have to blow the grit out the skiff's engines." He took his light saber in hand.

"What are you going to do?" Leia asked.

He smiled. "Stand watch and make sure our company doesn't come calling again."



The time passed slowly as they waited for the skiff to be made travel worthy. It was slow going. There wasn't much light to work by and the sheer exhaustion they all felt made matters all the more trying. Staying quiet, concentrating on their individual tasks, they all entertained their own thoughts.

Chewbacca, because of his utter belief in his destiny and that of his friends, had no misgivings that they would eventually reach *Millennium Falcon*. However, he was becoming increasingly short tempered; his shaggy coat was so matted with sand and grit that his skin itched incessantly. Luke's decision to leave here as soon as possible had been music to Chewie's ears. The first thing on his personal agenda was a long, relaxing sonic shower.



But the Wookiee's thoughts were immediately interrupted when he heard Leia's anxious voice asking if Lando was alright.

Getting the turbo fans cleaned had proven more difficult than the gambler had initially anticipated. He'd pushed himself to get the job done and more than once had been forced to stop, to wait for a dizzying wave of fatigue to pass. He finally heeded Leia's suggestions to take a brief rest and get a little water. Accepting Chewbacca's helping hand, he was soon back up on the deck of the skiff. After a few minutes he stood alongside Luke. They strained to listen to the whispered sounds of the Tusken Raiders less than thirty meters away. But Lando's thoughts eventually strayed.

He looked over his shoulder, dark eyes settling their gaze on the friend he had betrayed and then helped rescue. The features of Calrissian's handsome face, usually so full of disarming charm, were drawn and haggard. He recalled the events that had led to Han's rescue. His seeming anger at his friend on Cloud City had been his own subtle way of telling the Corellian smuggler to get out of town --- fast. Unfortunately, Lord Vader's presence hadn't allowed Lando the opportunity to be more forthright about the dangers awaiting *Millennium Falcon's* crew; the gambler-turned-city administrator had been watched at all times. Still, Lando had often wondered if there hadn't been some way to keep his friends safe. *I had no choice* had been his excuse when he'd admitted his part in Vader's plan. But the look on his friends' faces when they'd learned of his betrayal would go with him to his grave --- despite the fact that he'd later been forgiven. He looked over at his sleeping friend and at Leia and hoped that perhaps someday, he could forgive himself.

"We couldn't have pulled the rescue off without you."

Luke's comment struck Lando completely off guard. He stared at the younger man and had to wonder if Luke had read his very thoughts.

Luke held his hand out. "Thanks."

Feeling undeserving of the gesture, Lando simply could not forget that he had banked on a bargain with Darth Vader and regretted it ever since. If only he'd played his cards differently...

"Helping to get Han back was the least I could do."

Luke's clear, blue eyes remained fixed on him. "We've all lived with things we would rather have done differently," he stated. "I spent a lot of time berating myself for not getting to Cloud City sooner, than if I had, Han might never have been put into carbon freeze at all." His gaze drifted and his voice dropped a bit. "I finally reached a point when I had to stop counting how many times I *could* have done things differently. Things go the way they *should*, Lando."

He flexed his arm out a tad bit further, silently imploring Lando to accept it and when he did, he silently rejoiced in seeing a glimmer of the charming smile return to the gambler's face; Lando, perhaps, had at last stopped reckoning his own demons.

As Calrissian returned to help with the fans again, Luke's attention was drawn back to the Tusken Raiders. Their fear when his light saber had been ignited had surprised him in a

way he'd not anticipated. He'd had the profound impression that they had seen such a thing before. In the forefront of his thoughts, he could only imagine that perhaps Obi Wan, in his long years of seclusion in the desert, might have been forced to use his own lightsaber in self defense. If so, the Tusken's would not have forgotten it and most assuredly would have passed the story on from one clan to another. Luke had wondered if the encrypted journals he'd discovered hidden in Kenobi's abandoned home held any reference to such an incident?

Hearing soft footsteps behind him, he smiled and without turning said, "How's everything coming along?"

Leia slid one arm around his. "Fine. Chewie's getting pretty irritable. I think he's going to get first dibs on the sonic shower once we're back on the *Falcon*."

"I'd hate to see anyone try to fight him for that."

"How about you?" Leia inquired. "You look more exhausted than the rest of us." She paused for a moment, wondering if she should say more. "You kept the skiff airborne."

He shrugged slightly. "Something Yoda taught me." His attention drifted, though not noticeably so, drawn away to his sleeping friend on the deck nearby.

Han dreamed...

*He stood in the center of a circular room. Arched window openings adorned with spiraled columns allowed the air and sun to filter in. The sound of waves echoed against the stucco walls, the tiled floor and the domed ceiling where frescos of figures from another, ancient time stared down at him. The sea air had the tang of salt. It mixed with the fresh scent of flowering plants and aromatic herbs on the summer breeze. Through the windows and open doorway, sunlight cast a soft, golden glow throughout the room. The place felt at once very familiar, as if he should know it and yet, he could not remember it at all. A tall, lean muscled man stepped into the room. He wore dark pants, high leather boots and a leather tunic. The light-weight, full-sleeved shirt beneath it had no collar and he wore it open at the throat. His dark blond hair was cut short. The gray eyes were piercing but when he gazed at the small child cradled in his arms, they revealed a different emotion, one full of pride and happiness. Stepping from behind him, was a woman, slim and elegant with a magnetic expression in her eyes. Her brown hair was thick and sun-streaked. Clasped at the back of her head, the remainder of it trailed in soft curls down her back. The gauze-like, toga style gown she wore had two layers, one of ivory white, the other in claret red. The material cascaded over her slightly swollen belly, revealing a stage of mid-pregnancy. She circled one arm with her husband's and with her free hand, she stroked the child's hair. After a moment she took a silver chain from around her own neck. From it hung a coin-like charm etched with the image of a bird in flight. Placing it over the child's head, her joyful laughter mixed with her husband's as their son toyed with the gift.*

*Then suddenly, with alarming speed, the sun receded from the room. A dense fog enshrouded the couple and their child. It thickened into a dense, black smoke. Menacing flames licked at them. The painted figures on the ceiling opened their eyes in horror. Screams of terror, of pain, came from their gaping mouths, echoing those of the little family. He covered his ears and squeezed his eyes tightly shut. The stench of blood, of charred flesh and bone assaulted him. He*

*desperately fought back the burning, acrid taste of bile rising in his throat. The noise of suffering rose to a deafening fury. His own screams joined all the others. And suddenly, realization struck.*

*This family was his own. The child held in the man's arms was him.*

With a gasp, he awoke, eyes wide open. As with the sunlight in his dream, the memory of the people vanished as quickly. He drew a ragged breath.

"Will you go back there?" he heard Leia ask. "To Dagobah?"

Luke's voice came back with, "Yes."

Leia's somber answer was tinged with unmistakable sadness. "How long will you be gone?"

"I don't know. As long as I need to be."

Even in the dim light, and even with his impaired vision, Han noticed the shadow of sadness that passed over Leia's features. It was like a sea change. Luke placed one hand under her chin and gently tilted her face upward. "I *will* be back," he stated. "Don't ever doubt that."

She rested her head against him as he Luke pulled her close. "I'm going to miss you."

Hearing their voices, especially Leia's, made Han's heart sink. Tatooine's twin sun's had risen only once since Leia had released him from his prison of frozen carbonite. For six of Tatooine's months he had endured his frozen confinement, survived moment to unending moment in the agony of constant asphyxiation and the all-consuming, raw bitterness of a cold so intense it had seemed more like the flames of Hell. Helplessly suspended in a crushing vice-like grip from which there was no escape, he had screamed against the onslaught of the cold that slammed full force into him, that seemed to burn flesh, scorch muscle, scald organs and sear into the very marrow of his bones. But no one had heard him; the scream had been captured, etched open-mouthed on the solidified block of carbonite his body had been encased in. Within that hellish nightmare, time had ceased. Expecting that the freezing process would surely kill him, he'd instead become tragically aware that he was somehow still alive. Soon came the ceaseless nightmares caused by sensory deprivation. Borne from the lack of external stimulus to his brain, his mind fed on its own memories --- some pleasant, some loathsome; some recent, some dredged from the distant past. But others, terrible to remember, boiled out of his subconscious where he'd buried them long ago. He'd had no resistance as they rose and began to gnaw their way beyond the confinement of their forced repression. In the infinite darkness, their whispering voices mingled, calling forth endless phantasms he had thought he'd forgotten long ago. He heard their pleas and their warnings, witnessed again and again their torment and their agony --- as well as that of his own. He fought to stave off the unrelenting echoes and memories in a persisting battle that could not be engaged anywhere but on the vast plains of his staggering sanity and even after he'd been released from the tomb of carbonite, had gulped air into his laboring lungs, the maelstrom of all his life's memories rushed up, peaked and descended like a colossal tidal wave, crashing, crushing, battering against him. He had barely been able to keep from succumbing totally to the horror of it all, save for one thing. Leia. She had been his anchor through it all, the lifeline for him to grasp while the tide of



his life's memories washed over him, while the onslaught of carbon freeze impaled him, while the agony of his reanimation tormented him.

Now, with his bleary gaze resting on the backs of Leia and Luke, Han remembered the carbon freeze chamber, remembered the expression on Leia's face, the taste of her kiss, and the conviction in her voice. *I love you*. Six months. He wondered. How much had changed since then?

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"Well," Luke said to Mara as he set his drink glass down on a plant ledge. "That's how it really happened. That's the real story. It took us all night to get the skiff ready. The Tusken Raiders, though curious, were too afraid to afford risking death at the end of a light saber." A sad expression clouded Luke's features. His voice dropped a bit as he added, "A few years later I discovered Obi Wan was not the only Jedi they had learned to fear. He shook off the thought of his father, a young and angry Jedi, slaying an entire group of Tusken Raiders. Looking up, he continued. "Even by the time we reached *Millennium Falcon* and my X-Wing, the sandstorm, although subsiding, was still strong. We all looked like death." He let out a short chuckle. "Even the droids looked awful. With Han needing to get to a medcenter, time wasn't a thing to waste. I did manage to go back to Ben's old place and retrieve the journals I'd found hidden there when I'd first arrived. Anyway, we all said our goodbye's. I knew Han felt that there was something between Leia and me. There was. Even she and I knew it. It just wasn't what we'd thought though. I knew Han had questions and they frightened him. The future was so uncertain then. For the second time in my life, I left Tatooine wondering if I would ever return."

"And did you?" Mara ventured.

"Well," Luke cocked his head to one side and smiled a private smile, "That's another story, isn't it?"

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*"I was still a kid when I left home. Not that I wanted to be called 'kid' but I guess, looking back on it, I was just like any other boy in his late teens, wanting to be on my own, wanting to be all grown up. Wanting adventure. I had never been anywhere further than Anchorhead until I met Ben Kenobi. Never flown in anything bigger than my T-16 until I was on Millennium Falcon and never would have guessed, even in my wildest dreams, that my life, and the lives of everyone on board that freighter, was about to change forever. "*

--- Luke Skywalker, Jedi Master

## *The Dark Side Of Victory*

Distant voices, drunk on that elation known only to the victors of battle, drifted on the night air. They stirred through the forest like an invisible breeze, gently swaying in the canopy of the giant trees. The current should have swept Leia Organa with it but instead, she was sullen and preoccupied. Sitting on a soft patch of grassy earth, she rested her head against Han's shoulder as he settled back against a fallen tree limb worn smooth by the elements. "I wonder," she pondered quietly, looking in the direction of the nearby village, "If all the ones who didn't make it know that we've won. Do they know that Palpatine's empire is too crippled to survive now? "

Han Solo was neither a religious nor a philosophical man but he was perceptive and he understood where Leia's heart was. "I'm the last person who'd know the answer to that," he told her. "Maybe the best thing to do is to honor them by celebrating what they died for." He lifted his chin slightly, gesturing toward the village and the many there rejoicing in the victory of what had quickly been called 'The Battle of Endor'.

"I will," she promised. Her voice was barely audible as she added, "In a while." Turning into him, she reached up with one hand and stroked his brow, then brushed the tips of her fingers over his left cheek, his lips, the scar across his chin. For such a long time she'd had precious few moments to call her own. Precious few to be with him. Now, when she could afford it, she found herself torn between taking it and running away from it.



"Leia?" There was something haunted about the expression in the deep brown of her eyes, something tentative and yet somehow anxious in her feather-light touch. It worried Han in ways he wasn't used to, with emotions that he felt awkward with but could not bare to ignore. Nor did he want to. He wrapped his hand around her fingers. "You're cold." Instinctively, he drew her closer. Nestling the side of his face into her hair, he kissed the top of her head. "You just won the biggest battle yet against the Empire today," he said lightly, trying to break her somber mood. "You're *supposed* to be happy."

Reflexively, Leia tightened her arms around him. "I am happy."

She looked up at him with a grateful yet weary smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. His heart ached for her as he watched it fade sadly away and he knew that *she* knew, he didn't believe her.

"I'm fine, Han." Her attempt to alleviate his concern was limp at best and she tried to bolster it by adding, "Really."

He hated the lie as much as he knew she hated herself for saying it. "Really..." he repeated, more to the night than to himself, or even to her. "Leia?" He tried to get her attention but she seemed distant; he didn't like it that she wouldn't look at him. He didn't like it that she trembled, or that the moonlight caught the presence of welling tears in her eyes. His concern for her simmered uncomfortably into fear. Cupping her face between his hands he gently tilted her chin upward. "Don't shut me out." He shook his head, adding, "It won't work, sweetheart."

She'd shut her eyes tight and he could feel the shiver that coursed through her, could feel her try to regain her composure in spite of it. Could feel, against his chest, her heart beating like a frightened bird. He said her name again. By slow degrees, her eyes opened, their gaze graduating upward to settle on his face. She tried to smile for him but failed utterly. This wasn't the Leia he knew, the Leia who took her losses and used them to fuel her dreams, her victories, the Leia who had sacrificed so much of herself for those around her, the Leia who faced down an empire even when all hope seemed lost. There was something very disconcerting and terrifyingly familiar marring her features. Suddenly, he realized he'd seen that look before. And his blood felt like ice. "This has something to do with what Luke told you last night. Doesn't it?"

Unable to find her voice, and not wanting to acknowledge the truth in his question, she disengaged from his arms and slowly rose to her feet.

Her silence gave Han all the answer he needed. Reluctant to let go, he held to her hands. "You wouldn't tell me anything then," he said as he stood up. "Why?"

She stepped away until her fingers were barely touching his, until she drew back just a fraction more and they no longer connected. "It's not..." she rasped, afraid of how to begin and fearful of the outcome. "I never meant to shut you out. I don't mean to now."

"Then talk to me."



In four words he made it sound so simple, so easy. Unaccustomed with being at such a loss, Leia Organa, a leader of the Rebel Alliance, Princess to a ruling house of an annihilated planet, former senator of the Imperial government responsible for that destruction, suddenly found herself at a crossroads. She was incapable of deciding where or how to begin to tell Han that the man responsible for causing so much death and destruction to so many, for causing so much pain to Luke, to her, to him, was her father. The knowledge churned like sour bile in her gut; she felt physically ill and the color that was normally a soft tinge of rose in her cheeks, faded into an ashen gray shadow.

" You told me," Han pressed, " that Luke is your brother."

She risked a sidelong glance at him and whispered, " Yes."

" You haven't told me how he knows that. "

" No."

" Is that what he told you about last night? Was that why you were crying? "

" Yes."

He couldn't ignore his suspicion that perhaps she and Luke had, after all, developed feelings for each other, feelings that were far from being that of friends. " Leia? "

Abruptly, she turned completely away, forcing the sting and the burn of bile down.

Taking a tentative step toward her, Han extended one hand outward. His voice had a quality of nervous apprehension, of terrible dread, that he found nearly impossible to contend with. How could this be happening, he dared to wonder? Only a little while ago, when she'd explained to him that she was Luke's sister, had kissed him with such honesty and passion, he had been the happiest he'd ever been in his life. For once he felt there was a future before him, one more important than anything else. Leia's dreams, her hopes, her visions, even if they hadn't been his before, were now and they were worth everything he could give himself to. Suddenly it all seemed to be falling apart and he found that too unbearable to accept without any explanation. " I need you tell me what happened last night. *How* does Luke know you're his sister, and why is that so bad? "

She suddenly sensed what he perceived. " It's not what you think...there's nothing between Luke and me. Not that way." The salty droplets that brimmed in her eyes and fell down her cheeks should have felt warm on her skin but instead were cold. Swiping them away with the back of her hand, she shook as she drew in a breath. " Luke knows who our father is."

He didn't understand. Her words had been barely audible. He shook his head slightly, wondering if he'd even heard her correctly --- Luke, he knew, had *never* met Bail Organa. "But Luke never met B ---"

" Bail Organa wasn't my biological father."

" And Luke knows who your *real* father is? "

" Was," she corrected. She didn't want to hear his next question. Her voice caught against a barely contained, bitter sob. " Please don't ask me to tell you any more. I can't."

" You can! " he insisted.

" No."

There was an unexplained anger, a terrible hurt in her that, although he knew was neither caused by nor directed at him, was nonetheless disconcerting. He refused to let her avoid the issue. Stepping close behind her, he laid his hands on her shoulders. " I've dealt with some pretty bad stuff in my life. Done a lot. Taken a lot. I lived with things I'd rather not remember. " *And some I can't*, he thought, yet didn't say. " But watching you like this...that I can't take, sweetheart."

" Then maybe it's better if you don't."

Her comment was so totally unexpected that it cut right through him. He gripped her upper arms and spun her around. " Stop it, Leia! " Though he'd only shaken her slightly, she flinched and instantly he let go of her. " I'm sorry..." he breathed. " I'm just...trying to understand what's going on. I don't want to argue with ----"

"I'm *not* arguing, Han." She tilted her chin upward so no more tears could escape --- so she didn't have to acknowledge the hurt in his eyes. Struggling to find a small center of calm, she finally continued. " I just...this isn't easy...you have no idea----"

" Maybe I could if you'd let me." He ran one hand through his mussed hair. " I love you. You *know* that."

She nodded, still looking away from him.

" Then explain to me why that isn't enough? " He paused and then added sadly, " I deserve that much at least."

Searching within for the ability to continue and not fail, Leia shivered as another chill coursed through her. " Because I don't want to lose you."

Only once, when he'd looked up at her from the carbon freeze pit on Cloud City, had Han ever known Leia to look so utterly distraught. Vibrant: usually. Exhausted: too often. Angry: usually with him. But not this. Her fear was uncharacteristic and even contagious. Instincts honed from living on the edge of life and death sent alarm klaxons blaring within him as he realized that what she had just said could mean the end of everything he had hoped for with her. " We need to find Luke."



Luke Skywalker was tired. The battle he'd fought against the emperor had left him drained like nothing else ever had, or possibly ever would again. But the sounds of joy, of relief, of victory coming from the Ewok village lifted him up, renewed his strength. It surrounded everything. Soared beyond the canopy of the trees to drift into the night sky. He stopped on the path, listened to the voices of celebration, let them dance all around him, tug at him like the tiny hands of forest sprites, luring and prodding him to hurry, to join his friends in the revelry. Even from this distance he could make out several familiar voices: Wedge, Tycho, Gavin, Lando. So many others. All close friends, trusted comrades. The part of Luke that had grown from an innocent farm boy to a seasoned fighter pilot smiled in the knowledge that they had survived. But another part of him, the Jedi and the son, wanted to hold onto the sadness of losing the father he'd so long wanted to know, had finally found only to lose again. A short time ago he had set the remains of Anakin Skywalker's body upon a funeral pyre. Part of Luke could not hold back the ache of that loss. He had known that underneath what was Darth Vader, existed another man. One who knew Light from Dark. Who recognized love from hate. Anakin Skywalker had defeated not only the emperor, but his Dark Side as well. He had saved his son, saved a galaxy and been redeemed in the Force. Any hatred Luke had once held for him, he could no longer find in his heart. There was only love. Could *be* only love for the father who had sacrificed himself for his son as well as the entire galaxy. How, Luke was forced to ask himself now, could he not feel glad to be alive? He quickened his step, eager now to join in the celebration. Much had been lost in the last few years but as always, losses were followed by gains, many of which, Luke had come to learn, were unforeseen.

A little chill tingled up his spine and his brow creased, deepening the lines of fatigue at the corners of his eyes. He stopped, becoming very still within himself --- within the Force. "Leia," he mouthed silently. There was a sense of urgency and desperation in and *for* her. Galvanized by concern, he changed direction, skirting the far perimeter of the village, using his bond to her to lead him where he needed to go.



A short while later, within the lodging the Ewoks had allotted for the strike team, Luke settled down in front of a wood-burning, covered brazier with Leia, Han and Chewbacca. Flames of yellow-orange and blue-white flickered and danced, casting a warm glow on all their faces. Since first meeting, more than three years ago, they had become a close-knit foursome. A family. Each had brought a special characteristic to the fold. Luke, a sense of adventure and a bold spirit accented by an innocent, honest charm. Leia, a purpose for idealism, for justice, balanced by a rare combination of relentless spirit and keen foresight. Han, a brazen courage and undefined skill marked with a brand of humor that was as aggravating as it was uplifting and even, in the worst situations, calming. Chewbacca, an unsurpassed sense of loyalty and

dedication forged by genuine trust and love that would willingly go beyond all measures. Each had gained something from the others: Luke, a needed responsibility to a cause; Leia, the ability to recognize her emotions as much as her sense of a duty. Han, a reason to trust others and learn to cast off the manacles of self-interest. Chewbacca, the knowledge that his future was completely intertwined with the whole as much as his Life Debt to the one.

The burning wood crackled and popped, sending tiny red sparks up against the brazier's shield. It reminded Luke of the funeral pyre he had laid his father's body upon. He gazed at his sister and he could feel her fear, her aberrance at who their father was; she saw only what he'd become. Not who he had been. Even though she knew he was dead, Leia could not let herself be free of him. Just as clearly, Luke could sense the growing doubt in Han that her feelings for him were subordinate to that knowledge which she was too fearful to share. Rubbing his hands together, Luke warmed them in front of the fire. He glanced toward Han and then looked steadily at Leia.

"You *must* tell him, Leia."

"I know you're her brother," Han said. His eyes were hooded, suspicious and they darted to Leia and back to Luke.

Luke read the terrible question on his friend's face. He could even feel it as if it were a physical thing. "You don't have to worry, Han," he smiled. "There's nothing I feel for her, or her for me, other than what a brother and sister *should* feel. But," he added, "there *is* more that you have to know."

Leia's face went white. "No!"

Han held Luke's steady gaze. "How long have you known that you were her brother? Who told you?" He glanced briefly at Leia, saw the tense lines in her brow, at the corners of her lips. The light from the fire cast shadows on her features that accentuated the haunted expression on her face. Whatever was doing this to her, he wanted it gone, would do anything to take it away and make the sun come back into her cheeks, her eyes, her heart. He wanted *his* Leia back. Now.

Luke sat cross-legged beside his sister and took her chin in his hand, turning her attention toward him. "He needs to know," he said, saying each word slowly and with understanding compassion. "You need to know that he does. Whether you decide you can have a relationship together or not, Han deserves the truth, just as we did."

Tears swam in her eyes. "Did we, Luke? This could destroy our lives..."

He pulled her head against his chest and felt her let go of a hard sob. "I don't believe that." Leaning back just enough to look at her face to face, he smiled at her. "I *know* that it won't. Trust me. It'll take time, but everything will work out for the best."

"Even if it---"

"Hurts," he finished gently. He looked over at Han, but his words were still for her. "The only thing that's hurtful here is your belief that Han can't handle the truth in this matter." He pulled away a little more, the action being a subtle way of placing her right into Han's arms. He propped his elbows on his raised knees and steepled his fingertips together. "Our father was Anakin Skywalker ---" Leia's hand taking Han's didn't go unnoticed. "He was a Jedi Knight trained by Obi Wan. But something happened and he turned to the Dark Side of the Force. He became Darth Vader."

"Vader?" Han exclaimed loudly. "Vader is your father?"

"Anakin Skywalker," Luke calmly insisted, "was our father. Darth Vader was something that the Dark Side turned him into."

Chewbacca sat forward. \*\* Who told you this? \*\*

"I first learned it from Vader, on Cloud City. After we left Tatooine, I returned to Dagobah and an old friend there confirmed the truth. It was there that I learned that Leia is my sister."

"What 'old' friend?" Han wanted to know. "Who are you talking about?"

Luke waved one hand nonchalantly. "That doesn't matter." He could see the question in Han's expression. "Have I ever lied to you Han?"

"No."

He nodded slightly and then continued. "Then please accept everything I'm saying as simply the truth. I don't know all the details about Anakin Skywalker's life. I don't even know if there's anyone alive who does. We may never know. But believe me when I say he was a good man and when I left here last night, I did so knowing that some of that goodness still existed in Vader." He turned his gaze totally on Leia and said calmly but emphatically, "I wasn't wrong. He did love us, Leia."

Memories of what she had endured at Vader's hand, of the brutality that had followed him wherever he'd gone, all done with the blessing of Palpatine himself, rushed at her. "I wish I could believe that, if only for you. But I can't. When I was his prisoner on the Death Star, he tortured me. If he was so strong in the Force then why didn't he sense I was his daughter? His own flesh and blood! How can any father do that to his own child?" Han leaned near to her, shoulder to shoulder and she welcomed the feel and comfort of his arm about her.

"Anakin Skywalker wouldn't have," Luke explained. "But Darth Vader did."

\*\* You, \*\* Chewie suddenly directed to Luke, \*\* always knew your name was Skywalker. True? \*\*

"Yes."



The Wookiee looked at Leia. \*\* You were raised as Bail Organa's daughter and no other's. Even adopted, you believed in that identity without question. True? \*\*

" I had no reason not to. Bail Organa was the father who loved me, raised me, and taught me. He'll always be the only *real* 'father' in my life."

Luke gazed lovingly at his sister. " Our father --- "

" Stop saying that," Leia painfully insisted. " Please."

"Anakin," Luke continued as if she'd never interrupted him, " never knew about you, Leia. In all honesty, I don't believe he even remembered who *he* had been either. Not until tonight. He was sorry for everything he'd done. I'm not blaming you for how you feel, Leia. You know that. Maybe if he'd known where his decisions would've taken him, he would have acted differently. He *did* love us though. And he wanted you to know that."

" I already know more than I want to." The curtain of her long hair swayed as she shook her head. " I'm glad he saved you from Palpatine. But I'll never believe he loved us and I'll never accept him as my father."

Her fear was all consuming. " There's *nothing* to be afraid of," Luke tried to assure her. "He's gone now. "

" He'll *never* be gone! And I'll *never* forgive him for what he's done."

Luke's blue eyes hardened with worry for her. " Don't let that darkness rule your heart, Leia. It can destroy you if you let it. I know it's hard for you to accept the truth. It was for me too. I hated the way it made me feel and it hurt...it hurt more than I can say that Ben hadn't told me everything about him. But I have to forgive him too, just as I have to forgive our father. Maybe some day you'll find a way to as well. "



*Tatooine. So full of danger. So much of everything connected to our lives has its roots there. It's as if Fate somehow pulls us toward it, like an invisible umbilical cord that cannot be totally severed. I wonder, how many more times will my family be drawn to this place? Will the children that Han and I, or those that Luke may have, be forever connected to it? And what of their children? Or has Fate, in leading me to Shmi Skywalker's journal, finally released us from Tatooine?*

*Shini...my grandmother. I've only had her journal a short time, yet I find myself still going over it, as each time I do so, I find myself more and more connected to her. If she had lived, what*

would her son's future have been like? What of the future of his children? What of the future of us all? Through my grandmother's words, I now have a new perception of my father who, for so long now, I haven't been able to consider as anything other than Darth Vader. Not a person. Just a thing. A monster. All that, and more, has changed now. I no longer fear starting a family of my own. And I no longer hate Anakin Skywalker. When I first learned that I was his daughter...I was so completely devastated. Until that moment, I thought that nothing could possibly compare to the way Alderaan's destruction made me feel, or how I felt when Han was so brutally tortured at Cloud City and then put into carbon freeze. When the Rebel Alliance defeated the Imperial forces at the Battle of Endor, the celebration that night was, for me, overshadowed by the fear of who I was.

That night we all agreed that the knowledge of Luke and I being twins wouldn't do any harm. After all, I had always known that I'd been adopted and Bail Organa had never kept that a secret. Legally, I had been made his daughter and heir. So, the fact that I had a lost brother never raised any ugly publicity. Because people would ask, we decided that it was best to acknowledge that our father had been Anakin Skywalker. Just as Luke surmised, no one made the connection that he was also Darth Vader. Truth is truth and nothing can change it. Only through the future of one's children can some things be brought to right. Now, I realize that Luke was right and I never did have anything to fear from who our father became. In the end, all that really did matter was that he did love us.

— Leia Organa-Solo





*"I've never known two people who have to spend so much time apart, and yet, they are always together."*

---- General Wedge Antilles

## *No Interruptions*

Glancing up briefly at the undulating limbs of the slender trees, Leia almost wished she could just remain on the rooftop garden. Here she could try to forget about everything -- the unfinished business on Endor, the fleet, the underhanded politics and irritating situation here on Bakura. Everything.

Well, almost everything.

Over a half hour ago, believing she had heard Luke call her through the Force, her brother's feelings of uncertainty and loss had overtaken all else at the moment. The timing could not have been worse; once again, the anxious beginnings of something very intimate with Han had once again been interrupted. Tearing herself from his embrace had not been easy for either of them. Now, as she made her way back to their shared suite, she fought against her worry that what had begun so tentatively could not be resumed.



Jaw clenched, a harsh Corellian curse issued from between Han Solo's set teeth. Leia had been gone for over half an hour. The cold shower he'd just taken had helped in one respect, but as far as dampening his anger and his wounded ego? It hadn't. Bunching the oversized bath towel in his hands, he shot it into the sano-hamper and walked out into the bedroom.

Pulling on a pair of dark blue boxer shorts, he glanced at the chrono glowing in the dark on the bedside table. "Come on," he argued aloud, "it's not like she's been gone all day!" Still, the sudden interruption, just at the beginning of what had promised to progress into something very nice between himself and Leia hadn't been easy to accept. He could still see the rising guilt in her eyes, could still feel her hands sliding fraction by fraction against his work-roughened palms until only the tips of her fingers clung to his. The moment had hung precariously, teetering between anxiousness and indecision.

And then...she was gone.

And he'd felt empty.

They never seemed to get any time alone.





Leia's heart beat a fearful tattoo as she stepped into the center of the darkened, all too quiet suite. Hugging her arms about her chest, her gaze darted about the spacious living room. Was Han here, she wondered? What if he had decided that picking up where they'd left off wouldn't be worth it? Her heart sank at the thought, but in truth, she couldn't hold it against him if he'd left. She lowered her face into the palm of one hand. The cold shivered that coursed through her was totally unrelated to the room's temperature.

Suddenly, a soft hiss broke the silence and the lights came up to a soft glow. She raised her head and turned around. Han stood silhouetted in the entry to his bedroom. Staring at him, it took Leia a moment to find her voice. "I wasn't sure if you had waited."

"For awhile," he confessed as he approached her, "I wondered about going back to the Falcon. But..." he shrugged, his words hanging on emptiness. Leia's gaze drifted to the carpeted floor and he lifted her chin. "Look," he began apologetically, "Luke's your brother, your family. You had every right to go. I shouldn't have been angry about ---" Her fingers covered his mouth.

The honesty in his voice was matched by the sentiment in his words. "I want to be with you," she told him. There was an edge in her tone. She knew he understood it's source. Her mouth covered his and instantly, the intimate conversation that spoke in natural rhythms more than the exchange of words began to re-ignite.

And would tolerate no interruption.

They kissed, each holding tenaciously to a mutual need, each confident that at last, there was time for this.

Han effortlessly lifted Leia into his arms. A small portion of his brain recognized the soft sound of her shoes dropping onto the plush carpet. She breathed his name and the effect increased the delightful dizziness that quickly began to take control of him. He kissed the sensitive hollow at the base of her throat. His hands traveled down the sides of her neck and onward. She didn't object while he took his time undressing her. She wondered if the room echoed the sound of her breathing as the fine material fell away from her, caught for the briefest moment on her erect nipples and billowed slightly before it pooled around her ankles. A little gasp escaped her as he traced the curve of her breasts and then took one nipple between his lips. His hands continued to explore the contours of her.

Leia's pulse matched the pounding of his own heart; her growing need answered his. It would have been so easy to let go. But he fought, and succeeded, to control himself. "Not yet," was the silent mantra that repeated itself in his mind. He wanted to take his time, wanted to allow her the luxury to be completely comfortable with this. Forcing her was not a price he was willing to pay. And so he chose to guide her, one step at a time, for as much as she wanted him to. It didn't matter, at this point, that she didn't know how to expertly read his particular signals. That would come easily with practice. For the moment, he was absorbed only in answering to what *she* wanted and when *she* wanted it.

The room seemed to spin around and Leia realized that Han had rolled over. She smiled down at him and took his hands in hers, coaxing him to sit up. She stood between his

legs. He pressed a kiss against the silken skin of her belly, and she shivered at the anxious flutter it caused in her stomach. His hands cupped and caressed her buttocks and then her hips and when his fingers eventually explored between her thighs she could not contain the choked cry of pleasure that escaped her. Impulsively, she gripped his shoulders hard and arched her back. Her hands raked through his already tousled hair. "If anyone interrupts," she swore in a voice husky with increasing desire, "I'll have to shoot them."

"Use *my* blaster, Princess." Han laughed softly, seductively. "It's got a bigger charge."

More than anything, their shared, light laughter banished the dregs of any misgivings either of them held concerning the sanctity of their privacy.

Leaning closer into him, Leia slid one knee over Han's thigh. He could feel the rising warmth of her at his fingertips. Her breathing grew heavier and, rising on her toes, she began to move with his ministrations. With his free hand, he traced the back of her other leg. The sound of her voice, saying his name in a way she had never said it, nearly drove him deliciously mad. Her hands slipped beneath the waist of his shorts, and as soon as they were discarded, he drew her down to lay along side him. She planted kisses on him, confirming with each one that she trusted him more and more implicitly.

Unbidden, the darkest alleys and tunnels of his life flashed in his mind. He could not understand what it was he'd done to deserve her. He thought he heard her utter his name again...but his pulse was pounding too loudly in his ears to be certain. Suddenly, she tensed. It was just a fraction but he had to ask, "Do you want to stop?"

"No."

Reaching up into the dark curtain of her hair, Han brought her face closer to his. "If your not sure ---"

"I'm not sure about myself." Her confession was awkward and shy. "I'm not experienced with this. "

"I am," he assured. As far as he was concerned, her lack of knowledge here didn't matter right now. In truth, he was a bit nervous himself. She was different than anyone he'd ever known. Her beauty went beyond anything physical. She brought out qualities that he had buried long ago --- and some he'd never known he had at all. He gazed at her with an intensity of spirit that he'd never felt. He wanted her forever. Wanted to share his life with her. Wanted to grow old with her. The words that spilled from him somehow seemed inadequate, but he said them anyway. "I love you."

Leia's smile was radiant. More often than not, Han Solo infuriated her, and yet, he had never deceived her. Though he often bragged about himself, he did not pretend to be anything other than who or what he was. Leia could trust his opinions, his instincts and more than anything else, his feelings. Like her, he was a rare combination of stubborn will and straightforward reactions. Even if he was less subtle about it. The rare, quiet side of his nature chased the shadows of her nightmares away. Like no one else, he had the ability to make her laugh when things were at their worst. All of a sudden, her inhibitions and fears concerning her lack of experience in lovemaking seemed utterly ridiculous to her. While her fingers trailed across the scar on his chin, the lines of his shoulders and arms, her lips brushed the base of his neck. His soft moan elicited a wry smile from her. Her confidence rose and she ran one hand

over and along the inside of his right leg. Her own insistent needs led her and when he shifted, giving her room to explore and caress him further, she lost all inhibitions, and all self doubt.

After a time, they switched positions. With his need cuddled against the smooth skin of her belly, he kissed her deeply and then carefully, gently, entered her.

She sucked her breath in and moaned his name. Told him she loved him.

The words struck him as profoundly as they had the very first time she'd said them, at Cloud City. "Tell me again," he pleaded. She did so over and over, and he moved steadily, surely, deeper within her. At last she met his rhythm perfectly. His heart leapt with her sigh of passionate surprise as she came ever closer to climax. She was intoxicating and as her movements, as her voice begged for more, he gave it unconditionally. He pressed his lips against her neck and tasted the salty sweat that ran in a rivulet from her dampened temple.

Completely mesmerized by one another her, the tempo of their movements escalated and eventually became more and more desperate. Together they climbed to ever higher peaks of ecstasy, until finally, Leia's back and hips arched in a compulsion to clutch herself even more tightly about him. The heat within her, surrounding him, was finally more than Han could take. He cried out with her as she convulsed and pulsated wildly all around him, sending his warm release to surge and mix within her.

Later, as she lay gathered to him, Han brushed her hair away from her face and she looked up at him. "Still worried, Princess?," he asked her, using that title with gentle, playful affection.

Leia nuzzled her head against his shoulder. "I guess I just needed a scoundrel in my life."

His laugh was tired but satisfied and he stoked her hair some more. "Told ya."

Her heart beat steadily against him. Not for the first time, he wondered how he could ever have tried to deny his feelings for her. He would travel any distance, tackle any obstacle, for no other reason than he loved her. The power of that commitment was almost frightening. For a very long time he had not allowed himself to care about anything other than himself, Chewie and the *Falcon*. They were his world.

Until an old, mysterious man, an innocent, adventurous farm boy and two annoying droids had walked into his life. They had been the beginning of it, the chiseling away of all the carefully placed blocks of stone in the fortress around his heart. He'd been convinced, or so he'd believed, that he had put up a good fight. But he had not counted on their having another weapon and as fate would have it, they had placed it right at his front gate. The princess had fired her well-aimed shot. "*I don't know who you are, but from now on, you listen to me.*" He'd set the powder to his own cannon and fired right back at her. "*Listen sister, I take orders from one person. Me!*"

The ensuing war lasted three years.

The union was to last a lifetime.





Leia did not recall actually falling asleep. Her last recollection was hazy, of having the down comforter pulled up past her shoulders, of being drawn to and embraced within the pleasantly warm, smooth contact of body against body. Now, waking in the darkness, raised up on one elbow, shifted a bit and drew her right leg along her lover's. His head lolled toward her and a muffled "Mmm..." vibrated in his chest. She felt it against the palm of her hand and smiled.

In the time she had known him, Han had been many things: appallingly impetuous and insubordinate, infuriatingly conceited and condescending. But underneath his caustic, egotistical armor he was also understandably cautious and observant, charmingly selfless and humorous. He possessed an uncanny ability to read her emotions and intentions. For a man who found it difficult, out of necessity, to trust others, Leia could rely on him more readily than most people. True, she mused, watching him sleep, he had often teased her and took an impish glee in using bastardized versions of her title, knowing it made her angry. He argued with her on too many occasions to count and never held any inhibitions about informing her when he thought she was wrong. But he also made her laugh, also readily agreed with her when she was right and even stubbornly backed her when others objected to her plans. His feelings for her were intensely honest and beyond the measure of mere words; should everything else be lost to her, Han would remain.

Leaning forward, her fingers lightly caressed his brow. She bent to brush her lips to his but stopped as he flinched, caught up in an unsettling dream. He pressed his head further into the pillow, drew a sharp deep breath.

Leia's heart wrenched. She had witnessed his nightmares of carbon freeze often enough. "Damn you, Vader!" Gently cupping one hand along Han's cheek, she called his name.

*The darkness was infinite, unnaturally cold and altogether uninviting. From time to time a bubble of light would spark, showering images and voices of people he felt he ought to know but could not, for the life of him, recollect. In one image a woman held a laughing boy in her lap. He squealed playfully as she gently put a pair of shoes on his feet. Another image bumped into that one; the same woman smiling as a tall man ran down the ramp of a ship, tossed a duffel bag onto the ground and caught her up at the waist. The boy she'd held left the attendance of an older woman and ran quickly to the waiting arms of the man. That image was replaced by another. It revealed the little boy's face. Where the other scenes had portrayed moments of warmth and tenderness, this image, as it tumbled nearly out of control, held something altogether different. There was a piercing scream; the child's expression was etched in terror and flames kissed the smoke filled darkness around him. The image spun on a crash course directly toward him and he flinched away from it.*

*Suddenly, all the visions, too many to count, gathered in a nauseating kaleidoscope of unconnected pieces from a puzzle that he could not put together. They closed around him until finally, they fell, shattering into glass shards. Instinctively, he tried to shield his face but a small hand gripped his. It held tightly. From far away, he thought he heard a familiar voice and strained to move toward it, struggled through the suffocating darkness and the agonizing cold.*





Leia's anxious gaze was riveted on him. "Han?"

He blinked his eyes open, noticed her hand in his. He curled his fingers over hers. "It's okay," he breathed. She said nothing but continued to watch him. "Leia," he soothed, rolling onto his side to face her, "It was just a dream." He looked askance, struggling to recall the images. But his efforts served to no end. "I can't remember," he whispered raggedly, more to himself than to her.

"I'm not convinced of that." Leia's expression and concern were unwavering. There had been something very vague, yet unsettling, in his tone and in the expression of his eyes. Pushing him to talk about it, however, would get her nowhere.

And so, deciding to chase the shadows of his nightmare away, she pulled him closer and he lingered in her kiss, her touch, her nearness. With no interruptions, she took them to that edge where troubled thoughts and dark memories found no welcome.



*"An old lady, a palm-reader, once told me my fortune. I asked her if I'd ever be rich. She said yes but only after money wasn't important to me."*

--- Han Solo, on his wedding day to Leia Organa.

# Falling Rain

Turning onto her right side, Leia arched her back, extending her right leg toward the foot of the bed. Sleep-bleary eyes blinked open as she felt the space beside her; the bed linens were cool to her touch. She wondered how long ago Han had gotten up. She glanced across the room at the chrono panel on the built-in desk console. It was barely past dawn. Breathing out a sigh, she gathered his pillow against her face and his familiar, faint scent teased her senses. She remembered having awoken, hours earlier, cocooned within his arms, her head resting on his lean-muscle shoulder. For several minutes, she had listened to the easy sound of his breathing, felt his heart beat steadily beneath her palm until the need for sleep pulled once more at her. Before drifting off again, she had kissed him, the warmth of her breath had caressed his lips and she'd whispered, "I love you."

Sitting up now, Leia caught the aroma of fresh brewed kaffe as it wafted through the open hatchway of the cabin. She swung her legs over the side of the bunk and noticed the holstered blaster hanging beside the bed---a clear indication that Han hadn't left the *Falcon*. Throwing on a pair of dark blue sweat pants and a sleeveless t-shirt, she brushed out her hair, wondering the whole time why Han had awakened so early. Since the battle on Endor and the trip to Bakura, neither of them had managed to get much sleep. Still, she couldn't imagine why he'd awakened so early.

The main compartment and galley, lit only by subdued blue, yellow and green lights on various components and cabinets, was quiet. Leia poured herself a mug of hot kaffe, dropped in two sweeteners and took a generous sip of the robust brew. Heading toward the ship's cockpit, she passed by the main hatch. As expected, it was closed but nonetheless, unlocked. The control panel indicated the ramp-way was down; Han had purposely raised and locked it last night, a precaution he never overlooked. For a moment, Leia wondered if he'd gone into the Ewok village but, knowing he would never go anywhere without his blaster, she just as quickly discarded that possibility. A quick glance at the panel display informed her that it was a cool 56 degrees Fahrenheit and raining. She flipped a toggle and engaged the viewer.

Han Solo sat midway down the ramp. Barefoot, he wore an old pair of drab-olive fatigue pants and a dark gray, pullover sweater with a rolled-neck collar. The breeze ruffled his already

tousled, brown hair. Forearms resting on his knees, he held a mug of kaffe in his hands and idly drank from it. Lightening flashed in the distance and he mentally clicked off the seconds, waiting for the corresponding rumble of thunder. *Five miles away*, he guessed. In all his life, he had never thought about rain unless it presented an inconvenience to him. Now, having spent six horror-filled months trapped in a slab of frozen carbonite, he found that he liked the sound of rain, the way it smelled. Even the way it felt.

The hiss of the opening hatch caused him to glance over his shoulder. His heart rate slightly increased as he watched Leia step outside. Her hair was loose. A little smile accented the blush that colored her cheeks and he realized that he must have had a dumb schoolboy look on his face. He'd never known anyone quite like her; she took his breath away...even when they argued. For a moment, he thought he remembered dreaming that she'd kissed him while he'd been asleep and then wondered if indeed she had. He held his left hand out and she took it, sitting beside him. "I thought you'd sleep in longer," he said.

Leia's eyes darted from his sharp features to the rain-drenched glade. "You were gone," she playfully chided.

His brow raised and he smiled at her candor. Things had changed considerably between them since Bakura...considerably and quite pleasantly. Han privately hoped it would last for the rest of his life. He kissed her in an unspoken apology for leaving their bed. His hand tightened gently around hers.

His kiss, his touch were having a pleasant effect on her. She cleared her voice, asking, "When did it start raining?"

Han took a swallow of kaffe. " `Bout a half hour ago. Give or take."

"It sounds wonderful." And it did. After hearing the sounds of battle and destruction for so long, Leia had almost forgotten what it was like just to sit and enjoy the sounds nature had to offer.

Finishing off the kaffe, Han set the mug aside. Another flash of lightening coursed through the sky. More lightening followed as the heaviest part of the storm cell approached. Bigger drops of rain began to hit the ground now and they listening to it pattering against the *Falcon's* hull.

"Have you been up since this started?" Leia asked.

Han's answer sounded far away. "Longer."

Leia suspected his inability to sleep for very long was a result from the ordeal he'd endured since being frozen in carbonite. She sometimes wished he would talk about that. But he was reluctant to and so she hadn't pressed him. After all, she reminded herself, it was her father who'd done it. Luke seemed to appear comfortable with the knowledge that they were the children of Darth Vader. But Leia wasn't. Too clearly she remembered Han's screams while he'd been tortured on the scan grid, too many times she'd awoken in the night having dreamt of the pain etched on his face as the blast of the freezing process had struck him full force. She would never forget those images. Nor would she worry whether she, or anyone else, ever forgave Vader for his cruelty.



"Leia?"

She started and shook herself mentally back to the present. "Hmm? "

Han's arm was draped around her shoulder. " You're shivering. Do you want to go back inside? "

" No. I like it out here. I like being with you."

The real meaning in her words struck him profoundly and he couldn't take his eyes from her.

Setting her cup down, she slid her right arm up along his back and as he tenderly placed a work-hardened palm to the side of her face, she reached to his neck and pulled him to her, welcoming the warmth of his kiss. " Where do we go from here? " she whispered afterward, wanting to know, plainly, about the direction of their relationship.

" I have no regrets, " he shrugged. " And no expectations. All I know for sure is that I love you and nothing else matters."

" What about the future?"

" That's whatever you want it to be."

She gazed directly into his eyes. " My future's nothing without you."

The rumble of thunder was closer now, and the rain poured down. With Leia cradled in his arms, Han stood and entered the shelter of *Millennium Falcon*. As she touched the control panel to close the hatch, the smile that brightened her face was worth more credits than Han Solo could ever imagine.

And that was quite a bit.

*Beware of memories for they are a blessing as well as a curse.*

--- Ancient Wookiee proverb

# Ghosts

## Coronet City, Corellia

*Tiered gardens. Vibrant colors. The heady aroma of herbs, of flowers. Sound of surf and birds. Blue sea meeting golden sand for miles on endless miles. Tingle of salt in the breeze. Summer warm on his skin. Eyes the color of his own smiled down at him, drew him close. He pressed one side of his face against clean, soft, white material that billowed in the gentle wind. Something moved, alive against his cheek. He shivered with wonder and then, caring hands, masculine, strong and capable lifted his boy body up. Spun him effortlessly round and round. He gazed at the face before his, the ash blonde hair and gray eyes. The smile mirrored his own. Joyful, he stretched his arms outward, far as they would go, let his head fall backward. There was laughter, like bells in the clear morning air. He trusted. Loved. And was loved. He spun, faster and faster. Vision blurred.*

*Fear beat at his heart. Everything became...heat. Intense. White-hot. Glaring and painful. He fell. Hit the ground. A woman lay next to him. In his panic, he fought to call to her, but like a mute, no sound would come from his lips. Her body was raw, fire-blackened and bloodied and her hands, her fingers, once slender and elegant, were now nothing more than charred talons. She curled those foul, burnt claws around something and pulled him toward her. Horrified at her appearance, he backpedaled against her hold, choking and gagging and sobbing against pain, terror and despair. Still struggling to make her let go, he was off balance, fell over he, was suddenly eye to eye with her. He felt her breath against his face and heard in her words a pitiful, aching search for forgiveness. She cried in grief for him and for the child now dead within her ravaged womb. Her fingers jerked, hard, and her hold released. Something— someone? --grabbed from behind and he fell backward. Blood, thick and black-red, was sticky and all over him. His gaze was frozen on the woman; she gasped. Horror froze on her face and she stared*



lifelessly at him. The light in her eyes was gone and the love in her voice was silenced forever. He tried again to call out to her, to scream, but his voice only echoed in his mind.

*Dizzy, nauseous, the scene of carnage around him, the stench of blood and burnt flesh overwhelmed him, drew the acid, burning bile from his gut and filled his mouth. He retched gray ashes. Flames roared up walls, coiled around the columns and ate at everything. The noise was deafening. A shadow loomed over him, smiling with violet-black lips. It placed a translucent, cold hand to his ear and leaned so close its foul breath made him retch again. The voice was like gravel scraping over dry pavement. It embraced evil, cruel and intentional, and breathing out a hideous laugh, it said, "Don't dream about ghosts."*

*He screamed. And this time found his voice. His head pounded. His eyes rolled back. And he forgot.*

Han Solo bolted awake, the scream that rose in his throat died against a hard gasp --- like a drowning man finally gulping in air. Drawing in life. Collapsing against the pillows, he breathed, exhausted and covered in a cold sweat. When the hammer pounding of his heart began to recede, his head lolled to one side and, slowly, slowly he opened his eyes. The numbers on the bedside clock glowed bright blue in the darkened room; dawn was still hours away. For several moments he lay there. Simply breathing. Not moving. His head pounded mercilessly and he pressed a thumb and forefinger against the bridge of his nose. After a moment, he gazed over at his sleeping wife. Rolling onto one hip, he brushed the thick, dark auburn curtain of her loose hair aside, kissed her forehead, wondering why, in all the world, she could put up with him? Of late, he'd tried her patience, made her worry and yet she had not pressed him about what it was that preoccupied his thoughts so much. He'd almost told her tonight --- after they'd taken their time with lovemaking --- but he hadn't realized how desperately tired he'd been until afterward. Lying together, they'd spoken little, choosing instead to let tender caresses convey what words could not. Somewhere between the expression of her touch and whisper of her voice carrying him away, he remembered telling her he was sorry, so sorry about being so distant lately, remembered too, although hazily, how she'd held him, stroked her fingers through his hair and kissed him to sleep. He pressed his lips against the crown of her head now and reluctantly, regrettably, slipped away.

Swinging his legs over the bedside, he rose, crossed the room to the fresher and took something for his headache. Without a sound, he gathered his clothes from the floor and pulled them on. Quietly unlatching the door so it would make no noise, he stepped across the threshold but not without a hesitant, guilty, backward glance over his shoulder. She would wake up worried and cold without him there and he hated himself for not confiding in her. Warring with himself, his fingers dropped away from the elegantly curved door handle and he began to take a step toward her --- but stopped as old memories pricked at his mind, and won him over. Ducking his chin, he turned away, silently and bitterly cursing himself as a coward. A fool. The door closed behind him, a soft, little click the only sound of his leaving.

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### ***Illafian Point, Rathalay***

*I love it here. This house, the miles of beach, the peace... Until Han brought me here a few years ago, I wasn't aware that such a place existed so near to Coruscant. Since then, this has become our haven, a place where, from time to time, we can escape from an extremely hectic and all too public life.*

Leia paused from her personal journal entry as gasps of surprise split into a cacophony of liling laughter; the sound burst beyond the open doors that led from the children's large room and sailed into the vine-covered rafters over the sprawling veranda. Too often she barely had time to enjoy such simple yet priceless gifts as listening to her children's laughter.

*The hours in a day pass very differently here; I am not juggling my time around staff meetings, senatorial sessions, budget conferences, lobbyist luncheons and diplomatic dinners. Instead of having to be Leia the Princess, Leia the Rebel Alliance Hero, Leia the Diplomat and Chief of State, I can revel in being just me: Leia the woman, the friend, the sister, the wife, the lover, and I am happy. Content. We are a family here. The most important decisions to make here are what to have for meals and how many stories Han will have to tell at bedtime.*

Her serene smile grew wider as Han's voice mixed with that of their three children; she easily imagined the wonder in their eyes as they listened, totally absorbed in the details of some tall tale their father effortlessly spun from some adventure he and Chewie had embarked upon in their wilder days as smugglers. Inadvertently, her thoughts strayed to their most recent trip. A hint of a dispirited laugh echoed from her lips; had her husband still been a smuggler, their recent venture to his homeworld could not have been more stormy...or dangerous.

*We arrived here yesterday enroute from Corellia. I was as angry as Han that we were met by reporters as soon as we stepped off the Falcon. But, as Chewie was quick to remind us, having them there was better than having them waiting for us at the house. I agreed to answer some question about the trade delegation I attended and the economic and civil strife which plagues the Corellian population. Those matters concerning my family's personal experiences, I kept to the barest minimum; it is a promise Han and I agreed on long ago. While our privacy is always at risk, we vowed that our children would be entitled to as much of it as possible. There simply are just some things the rest of the world doesn't need to know.*

*It's a miracle that we survived the ordeal on Corellia. But some wounds bare no physical scars. On the trip home, Han and I tried our best to make things seem as normal as possible, but we were not totally successful. The general mood onboard the Falcon was somber. We all had our share of nightmares but Anakin, being the youngest, seemed to suffer the worst. I still cannot fathom where some of his unsettling dreams stem from as they actually began to take form before he and the twins were abducted. It's strange... Several nights ago, on the ship, he awoke from a particularly awful nightmare and for some time he was completely inconsolable. When asked to say more about it, he couldn't remember anything, yet he clung to Han in a way that, well, it gave me an odd feeling, as if Anakin was somehow afraid for him. Han's patience was tested to new*

limits as he could do nothing to take away our son's fear. I'll never forget the look in Han's eyes; it hurt him deeply that his efforts were so useless and I wasn't surprised that he ordered Chewie to change course and head directly for Rathalay.

I have to smile when I recall that legendary, unshakable resolve in Han's voice as he told me, "I sent a message to Coruscant, told one of your aides you'd be canceling all meetings for at least a week. Well...Don't look so surprised! Hell, we need a damn vacation from our damned vacation!" I burst out laughing and Han was left speechless. The change in plans brought the lifeless mood aboard the ship to one of excitement. In a bouncing dance around the decks with Jaina and Jacen, Anakin's fear from his nightmare was quickly forgotten. He tugged at Han's shirttail, begging him to make sandcastles with him as soon as we got here. Even now, days after the fact, I find myself holding back tears at the image of Han taking our little boy into his arms and telling him he could think of nothing better he'd like to do. As with the twins, Anakin is very dear to him, and oftentimes, they are inseparable. Sometimes I wonder if he can read things about Han that others cannot.

I remember something Luke said when he saw us off on Coruscant: 'It must be hard being married to a mystery man.' At the time I didn't notice that he was only half joking. I made light of the fact that Han was no mystery man, that what you see is exactly what you get. Han's past, I stated, is a mystery because he's never said much about it, and probably never will. I told Luke that I 'didn't think a family tourist trip to Corellia was going to do much to shed a dazzling light on the hidden corners of Han's personal history.' He asked if that bothered me and I said that it used to but not anymore; Han is Han. How much more did I need to know?

Suddenly, the evening breeze stirred, sending strands of her loose hair to tickle her face. Leaning back into the sumptuous, upholstered cushions along the back of the two-seater, woven cane couch, she drew her knees toward her chest, listening as Han continued to weave yet another bed-time tale for the children. It never ceased to surprise her that Jaina, Jacen and Anakin always begged for a second or even third story. Her heart grew warmer by degrees: time was, she recalled, when the mere thought of Han Solo telling bed-time stories would have been the most unbelievable thing in the universe. Still a rogue, he'd come a long, long way from the self-serving, hardened smuggler she'd met on the Death Star and yet, there was much she had never learned of his past. He'd deftly avoided the subject with anyone. Since the war, and especially since their marriage, there was the rare occasion when he'd agreed --- grudgingly --- to an interview. He conveniently steered away from questions that led to prying into much of his history. Leia had scarcely believed he'd been as diplomatic as he had about it; her crass, sardonic, opinionated husband had made even the most expert journalists forget they'd even asked about his early years until long after their conversation was over. Still, there were times when she'd wished he would be more open with her. Especially now.

The sound of voices had become a soft lull against the evening breeze that toyed lightly with the wind chime she and Jaina had made earlier that same day. Leia wanted nothing more than to join Han in hushed 'goodnights' to the children followed by the moment when they would watch three pairs of heavy eyelids close contentedly on the coattails of dream-filled slumber. She set the journal pad aside on a low, octagon-shaped table and rose from the couch. Noiselessly she made her way to the large suite the children shared.

White, lightweight curtains reached the length of the double doors. They billowed lazily back and forth, back and forth on the air. Glowing golden against the large, square tiles under

her feet, a pool of light spilled outward toward her toes. She heard Han's voice as he gave the quiet command, "Lights low," and instantly the household computer system plunged the room into near darkness. Tiny lights, recessed into the paneled ceiling, automatically came on and cast soft shadows over everything. Leia watched as her husband, sitting on the edge of Jaina's bed and holding Anakin on his lap, looked at his daughter and then to her twin brother. It took no Force ability on her part to understand where his thoughts centered: like her, he was beyond relief that they were here. Safe and happy.

The bed covers rustled slightly as Jaina drew them up to her waist. Across from her, Jacen could not help but giggle as Anakin struggled a great deal to keep his eyes open. Chin dropping to his chest, the youngest Solo's head bobbed back up as he tried to remain awake. "Come on, Sleepybones," his father coaxed quietly, "Time for you to go to sleep." With the boy cradled in his arms, Han rose. "Uhg!" he playfully groaned, "You're getting to be so big, I can hardly carry you."

"'Nother story, Daddy."

"No."

"Pleeease," Anakin begged sleepily as he was carried to his own bed.

"No," his mother's voice now affirmed as she suddenly appeared by his father's side.

Laying Anakin down, Han turned a welcoming smile on his wife.

Finding herself --- quite pleasantly --- at the mercy of his hazel eyes, Leia flushed. Bending slightly toward her, his kiss was electric, and carried with it the urgent anticipation of spending a delicious evening together --- with no interruptions. The moment between was abruptly interrupted by Anakin's impetuous "Yuck!" Giving the boy a teasing look of consternation, both parents harmonized with, "Goodnight". Han pulled the covers up to the boy's chin and gave him a wink. Anakin had never figured out quite how to do that, and therefore did his own interpretation by pulling one eyelid down with a finger.

One hand covering her mouth, Leia failed to suppress a light-hearted laugh to which Han replied, "Don't get him started, sweetheart. You know how he gets when you play up to his ego."

She kissed him on the cheek. "Those would be *your* genes, dear." One side of his mouth curled into the lopsided, wry grin she had come to love.

"'Nother story, Daddy," Anakin insisted, unable to resist the opportunity to press the issue again.

Han turned an 'I told you so' expression on his wife; she smiled and mouthed a silent 'sorry' to him. "No," he told Anakin. "No 'nother story'. I have to save some for tomorrow, okay?"

The boy's sleepy grin was mischievous and he started to respond with a stubborn little, 'no' but a huge yawn worked against him and he only managed a dramatic sad, "Okay," instead. He smiled timidly when a large, gentle hand mussed his bright, sun-bleached hair and

playfully tweaked the end of his nose. Never a quitter, he opened his mouth to plead just one more time...but as so often, Daddy was one step ahead of his game.

"Go - to - sleep," Han gently insisted, emphasizing each word with a tap on the end of Anakin's freckled nose.

Another yawn preceded, "Night, Daddy, 'night Mommy," and the seven-year-old finished with a hug and kiss to each. In no time his eyes closed and his breathing became rhythmic, a sure sign that he was fast asleep.

"Goodnight." Han bent forward, brushed back the boy's hair and placed a tender, loving kiss against the smooth skin at his temple. "Love you," were the words he whispered into the child's ear before joining Leia with the twins.

"I can hear the wind chime," Jaina was saying.

Leia tucked a stray length of dark hair behind her daughter's ear and smiled affectionately. "I had lots of fun putting it together with you."

Jaina smiled back at her. "Me too. Tomorrow, can we make another one? I want to give one to Chewie so he can give it to Malla next time he goes home."

"Sure. I think she'd like that very much."

"And Aunt Winter. I want to make one for her too."

Leia leaned forward, playfully scrunching noses with Jaina. "Okay. Now, time to go to sleep."

Rising up on her elbows, Jaina placed her arms around her mother's neck and kissed her. "Goodnight, Mom."

"Goodnight. Sweet dreams, my love."

Across from her, a similar scene played out between Jacen and his father. The boy asked about taking a tour to an offshore island where a one-of-a-kind sea lizard existed. Han easily promised that tomorrow he would make plans to take him there. "They're really rare. I want to get some pictures of them."

"I'll bring along an extra power crystal for your vid-cam."

"Thanks, Dad."

"Okay," Han smiled as Jacen hugged him. "Get some sleep now. It's going to be an early day. From what I hear those lizards aren't easy to find after it gets too hot."

Jacen also exchanged another hug with his mother before rolling over. "I can't wait 'till tomorrow."

"It'll be here before you know it," his mother told him with a kiss against his forehead. "Goodnight."

" 'Night. Love you."

Responding in kind, Han and Leia exchanged a private, wordless look of excitement now that the remainder of the night would be theirs. Galvanized by that single thought, they quietly but hurriedly inspected the spacious room for any stray toys that needed to be put away. Satisfied that all was as it should be, they made their way, hand-in-hand, toward the veranda. Han yawned as he began to pull the tall, double doors shut. " Time for *my* bedtime story now."

Leia, one arm entwined with his, looked upward. " Should I tell you a long story," she asked suggestively, " or a short one?"

The question diverted all his attention to her and he absently left the door ajar as he pulled her closer. " It's not the length ---" she joined him as he finished with, " of the story that counts, it's the size of the chapters."

A heady moan escaped him as she kissed him and tugged him further along the veranda.

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*Round and round and round he spun, held in the security of hands he trusted. The blue sky overhead became a dizzying blur and then...the world went dark, was filled with flames that roared like a living beast. Smoke filled his lungs and he crawled in something sticky- the odor made him gag. He made his way through the black, roiling smoke and the images came, memories he had been subject to before and did not want to witness again. He felt sick, and terrified, and called out to the one person he always trusted to protect him. But there was no answer. There was only horror. The images in the smoke and flames around him spiraled in a nauseating kaleidoscope of faces that somehow should have been familiar and yet he did not know where the memory of them came from. Eventually they slowed, congealed into a foggy, misshapen Specter that walked from out of the darkness toward him. On its arm, clinging like a highly prized courtesan, was a Mystery; it held a ragged, black fan of tattered faces in front of fog-filled eyes that peeked at him wickedly, coquettishly. The macabre pair stopped in front of him and Mystery bent at the waist, leaned closely toward him and snapped her fan tightly shut. Her lips were painted black and she parted them, breathed against the face that was not his and then her mouth opened wide, the bottom jaw unhinging unnaturally all the way down to her knees. The sound that emanated from her was the voices of all the ghastly, terrifying images captured in the frayed work of her fan. He knew them and should not have known them. He struggled to ask why but fear choked his words from him. Specter's eyes slid from the companion's gaze to look straight at him, to smile dangerously. He struggled and struggled but an invisible web held his limbs tightly, pressing him down and down and down into the smoke. A hand, raw and bloodied, clawed toward him from the darkness below and he thought he saw a pair of hollow eyes stare up at him. Something pulled at him, as if it had him by an invisible cord around his neck. Above him, Specter and Mystery leaned over his petrified form and in unison, whispered, " Don't dream about ghosts."*

" Daddy!"

The doors banged hard against the wall, rattling on their antique-style hinges as Han burst into the room, Leia tight on his heels. Anakin stood in the middle of his bed, pale-faced and wailing. He held his arms out to his father, who took him immediately, cradling him against one shoulder. "Anakin. It's okay, son. I'm here. I'm here." The horrific way the boy screamed made Han's blood feel like ice.

Head tucked against his father's neck and shoulder, the boy was inconsolable; tears streaming down his face, he choked against the tight, racking sobs that griped at his little chest and burned his throat. "There were ghosts...they sh...showed me...pictures..."

Han stroked the boy's hair and held him even closer. His voice melded with Leia's as they told him he was all right, that they were here and there was nothing to be frightened of.

Anakin arched backwards, gripping his father's shoulders. "They were..." he screamed, "... all bloody...and...and..."

From across the room, the twins, startled and fearful, had come to be near their brother. Sitting beside Han, Leia pulled them close, one arm about each of them.

"It's okay," she said. "Everything will be fine."

Jaina gazed up at her, tears welling in her brown eyes. "He's so scared, Mom."

"Yes, I know, sweetheart. But he'll be fine soon." She gave her husband a hopeful look.

Jacen was patting his little brother gently on the back. "Don't cry," he cooed to him softly. He looked at his father with a wan smile.

Han mustered a confident, if cheerless one of own and gave him a nod. "Why don't you go in the kitchen and get your brother some water to drink." By allowing the older children to feel useful, their own fears would, he hoped, be put to rest.

"Hot chocolate," Jaina offered. "Hot chocolate always makes him feel better."

Leia rose. Normally, at this hour, she would not have given in to letting the children have anything sweet but, if it would ease this situation she willing to allow it. "Hot chocolate it is, then." She placed one hand over Han's and squeezed it.

"It's okay," he rasped and she caught something...off...in his voice. The meaning of his comment was clear, but she had the oddest feeling that the words were not only meant for Anakin but himself as well. Why? There was an uncomfortable, haunting expression in the depths of his eyes that she didn't like; it felt like...fear and it made the skin on the back of her neck prickle. On Corellia and several nights since, she'd seen that look on his face ---especially when she'd known he had not slept well. Words she had written in her journal now echoed in her mind: *'I cannot fathom where some of his unsettling dreams come from...'* It was only a feeling, but she wondered if Han suspected something about Anakin's nightmares that he was unwilling to discuss.

Jaina tugged her mother's hand, a silent reminder that they had something to do. As Leia led the twins toward the hallway, Jacen enquired, "Will he be all right, Mom?" And she

mussed his hair, gave him a smile, answering, " Yes, sweetie, Anakin will be fine. Don't worry. Your dad's handling it. " She glanced quickly over one shoulder and wished she could believe that.

Alone with his son, Han continued to hold him reassuringly. " You were just dreaming, kiddo." He laid one cheek tenderly against the boy's head and gave him a kiss. "There's nothing to be frightened of. Don't cry."

But Anakin shook his head and knuckled the corner of one eye. " I saw ghosts, Daddy..." and his body shook with more sobs.

" Anakin, there are no ghosts ---"

" Yes there are! They know you! You h...hear them too! Make them go away, Daddy!"

" I don't hear any ghosts. You just dreamt it---"

Frustrated, Anakin struggled. " Nooo! They told you---"

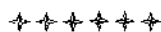
" They told me what?" Han asked gently; perhaps it would be best to just let the child tell him all about his nightmare. Perhaps, he prayed, that would make it all go away. " What did they say, huh?"

" They said..." The boy blubbered against his tears.

" What?" Han coaxed again. " C'mon, big guy, you can tell me."

" They say, 'Don't dream about ghosts'." "

Cold dread coursed up his spine as a sick realization hit him. He caught his breath against the myriad of disjointed, ghoulish images that filled his mind. Somehow, unbelievably, his young son had tapped into his own ragged nightmares and witnessed the loathsome phantoms even Han barely understood. He squeezed his eyes tightly shut against the sorrow and guilt that descended on him and invaded his heart. " I'm sorry, Anakin," he whispered. He looked into his son's eyes, understanding fully now how afraid and confused the child must have been over the past couple of weeks. He ached horribly with that knowledge. Words of explanation failed him utterly and he could only repeat, " I'm sorry," not caring that his eyes burned with bitter tears. Inwardly, he cursed himself. Finally, the struggling little body in his arms became calmer, the breathing more rhythmic. " I'm sorry," he repeated again. Anakin was already asleep.



Later, as she tucked the children back in, Leia closed the doors to their room and went to join her husband outside. In the darkness she could see his silhouetted form further along the veranda ledge. Drawing near, she noticed that he quickly placed something into a pocket of his khaki shorts. He ran one hand through his wind-blown hair and then slammed his fist against the tiled ledge. Leia flinched as a piece of the colored ceramic broke. With it, she felt a piece of him break too. Stepping closer she slid one arm along the middle of his back, and let her hand rest along his hip. " He's alright now," she said. He did not answer, merely looked out toward the luminescence of the waves breaking over the reefs and nodded sadly. She picked

his hand up, ran the tip of one finger tenderly over the cut made by the broken tile. " You should put something on this. "

He drew his hand back. " It's nothing. " His voice was barely audible.

" And what happened in there," she gently ventured, " was that nothing too? "

His head snapped toward her. " What? " Incredulous, he couldn't believe what she asked. " How can you say that? "

There was self-doubt in his tone and behavior. The reign on his emotions was teetering precariously and therefore, Leia did her utmost to remain calm. " Please don't act like I'm accusing you of anything, " she expressed earnestly. " I'm not. You know that. But something's going on with you lately and ---"

" Nothings 'going on with me'," he defended.

Leia's eyes flashed. " I won't accept that! " she volleyed back. Loosing her temper had not been what she wanted but neither was she about to have him avoid the topic. " Ever since we left Coruscant you've been edgy, you haven't slept well, and don't try to tell me Anakin is the only one in this family having nightmares! " The breeze had blown some of her hair across her face and she pulled it back, using the brief moment to collect herself. " Talk to me Han."

Hands braced on the ledge, he leaned his weight forward. " Leave it alone, Leia," he rasped. His eyes cut back to her. " Please."

Gripping his left arm, she forced him to turn toward her. " No. This goes beyond anything we went through on Corellia. This is deeper and much more personal."

His head was beginning to pound, stiffening the muscles at the back of his neck. He glared at her. " It isn't open for discussion."

" Not open ---- Well, it damn well should be! In case you haven't noticed, something about *you* is affecting our son ---"

Fire met fire. " *In case I haven't noticed?* What just happened in there," he barked and jerked a thumb in the direction of the children's room, " scares the shit out of me. " His voice cracked and he turned his face away from her, biting back the burning in his eyes, fighting the shaking that he felt throughout his entire being. He fought to breathe evenly and in a voice that sounded very far away, said, " I should never have gone back."

" But you did. And neither you nor Anakin have been yourselves since. He follows you around like...like he's afraid for you."

" Well, that's an understatement!"

" This is no time to be glib ---- "

" Glib? You think this whole thing's not eating at my gut?"

" I *know* it is! I *just* wish I knew *what* you were thinking these days," she implored.



He shook his head sadly, and the volume of his voice dropped. "I hoped coming here...it would stop...that..."

"That what would stop? Anakin's nightmares? The nightmares you were having on Corellia?"

He threw her a startled look and she answered quietly, "You didn't think I knew. Please, Han. I want to understand ---"

"Can you? Really? Because God help me if I can!"

"He's seeing your own dreams. Isn't he?" He didn't answer. "*Isn't he?*"

He looked at her with imploring, hurt-filled eyes. "I don't know how he seeing things...stuff he has no way of knowing *anything* about. I didn't think I even remembered ---" Abruptly, he turned away from her and ran his hands through his hair and started to move away.

So, her suspicions had been correct. Han's memories and his dreams were the source of Anakin's nightmares. She could feel his guilt, his shame. Now the fear she'd felt coming from him was all the more real. She took him in her arms. "Don't shut me out, Han. I want to help. You're as afraid of what's happened as Anakin is. I feel it. The twins feel it too. "

"Great," he replied derisively. "Now I guess you'll tell me I've upset the whole Force!"

Leia's hands balled into tight fists that she firmly planted on her hips. "That was totally uncalled for and you know it!"

"Well I'm sorry, Your Holiness!"

"Stop yelling! You'll wake the kids up."

Pointing a finger at his chest, he leaned forward, nose to nose with her. "I am NOT yelling."

"Shush! You are too!"

"Listen to you!" He blasted, and gestured toward the shoreline with a wave of one arm. "They can probably hear *you* all the way down the beach."

"No one lives down the beach for miles, Laser Brains!"

"My point exactly!" His expression was suddenly confused, as if wondering why he'd just said what he'd just said.

"If you wake those kids up, so help me, I'll ---"

"I'm not wakin' anybody up. For crying out loud, the kids are at the other end of the house, Leia! You ought to be worried about waking Chewie up instead!"

Her arms folded across her chest and she cocked her head to one side. "Chewie went in to town tonight," she seethed. "Or did you forget? He won't be back for hours!"

He wagged a finger at her, started to say something, then huffed, "So?"

Leia rolled her eyes skyward. She'd had more of this she wanted to take. "So...nothing!"

"So there's nothing to discuss, just like I said before!" He turned on his heel and strode away to the short set of steps that met a pathway down to the shore.

Leia followed him as far as the second step. "Where are you going?"

"For a walk!" he retorted. "I promise not to wake anybody up!"

"You're...Your...." She stomped a foot in anger. "Impossible!"

"I know!"

Fuming, she watched until she could no longer see him. How had the evening come to this? Mad as she was, her heart ached for him. She remembered the awful dreams he'd had as an after-effect of carbon freeze --- dreams brought on by sensory deprivation. Horrible as they'd been, they had eventually receded then stopped due to the busy work of fighting the Imperial forces and getting the New Republic soundly on its feet. Having them resurface was probably the last thing he'd expected when they had gone to Corellia. And now Anakin, with his heightened sense in the Force, was catching the spill over of images his father suffered. Her heart ached for him, knowing how Anakin's fear troubled him and how guilty and responsible he felt about it. If only he'd let her help. "Hard-headed...nerf herder!" she muttered hotly.

She headed back to the children's room, checked on them again and was relieved that they remained peacefully asleep. If only her husband could do the same. Returning to the couch, she plunked down into the cushions, arms folded across her chest. Legs crossed, she bounced one foot up and down, up and down, up and down. Shifting a little, she rested her right arm along the back of the couch; her fingers tapped, tapped, tapped on the woven cane. She was as mad with herself for the argument as she was at Han. Why, she wondered, when it came to him did her deportment and diplomacy get jettisoned? The answer was no mystery; she loved him. And because she did, her worry escalated. A stray lock of hair dangled irritatingly into her face; she blew it out of the way only to have it fall back again. With a huff she reached for the hand-held data pad she'd discarded earlier. Switching it on, she scrolled absently through the journal entry she'd left unfinished. Perhaps continuing with it would cool her off --- but no sooner had she begun than she recalled Han had been very quick to place something in his pocket before she'd gotten close enough to see it. Her anger fueled all over again and she flung the data pad from her lap. It hit the facing wall of the house and clattered to the tile deck. The casing on it was cracked and the screen now had an odd angle to it. There was a little chirping noise as the neon-green power light winked off. Lips pursed in a tight line, Leia gazed at the broken thing. "Well, that's just swell."

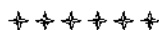
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For over an hour he'd walked the shoreline, concern for Anakin, shame for having started a stupid argument with Leia and disillusion with himself for having decided to obtain

information he probably should never have pursued, ate away at him. He kicked at a lapping wave. If he hadn't allowed his own nagging curiosity about his past get to him he would have let it remain as it was...pieces to a puzzle that probably could never be put together. But he'd been unable to let it be, had needed to at least try and find those parts that had been lost for so long. Yet, going back to his homeworld had only made it worse.

Reaching into his pocket, he closed his hand around the little data chip he'd tucked away there, brought it out, looked at it and came damn close to throwing it as far out into the surf as he could. Not for the first time he had to wonder if he'd done the right thing, not only by asking for the information it contained but for having kept it to himself, for letting alarming details simmer into a damaging, stewing mix of anger, hurt and frustration. Absently, he rubbed the back of his neck, kneading the tightness that had settled there --- the headache that had begun earlier had not subsided. It worried him that his son was unconsciously tapping into his own nightmarish images; he had never expected that. Nothing like it had ever happened before. Since Luke, or Leia for that matter, couldn't always 'read' him through the Force, he had naturally thought his children wouldn't be able to either --- especially when he kept his feelings and thoughts under tight control. But truth be told, he hadn't done a very good job of that lately. And it didn't help that Anakin had uncannily strong senses. *Face it. You screwed up!* Anakin's fear, as well as his own, was his doing and only *he* could put it to rights.

Foam-fringed waves lapped at his feet. He looked beyond the slight rise of reed-covered dunes toward the house. While there were no signs that she was still awake, all the same, he knew Leia would be waiting for him. He owed her an apology. Not just for having caused the argument but for all of it: the worry, despair, anger. He felt foolish, embarrassed and completely disgusted with himself for acting like she was interfering. As his wife, his friend, the mother of his children, she had that right, didn't she? He mumbled a stiff curse at his inability to have shared with her the reason for his strange behavior of late, for the cause of their son's disturbing dreams. Glancing at the chip, he turned it over between thumb and index finger, drew in a breath of resolve and put it back in his pocket.



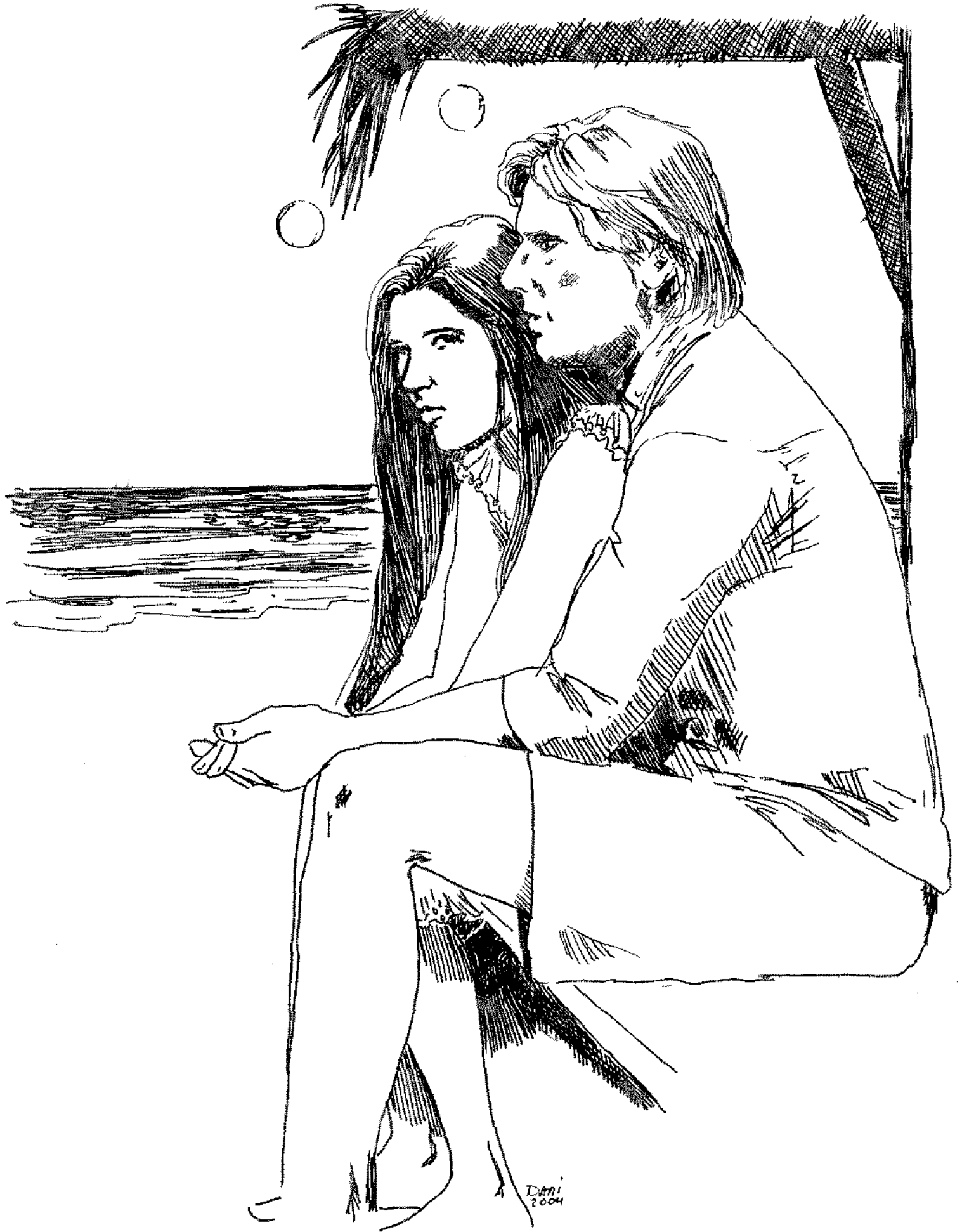
She was sitting on the top step as he approached and, offering him her hand, was comforted he took it and sat beside her. An awkward silence nagged at both of them until finally, each one said, "Sorry," over the other. They laughed a bit apprehensively. She shifted closer against him and his arm went around her shoulders. The chill that had settled on her now began to lift. "I'm going to go out on a limb here and guess that you didn't wake anyone up while you were gone?"

"Only the sea gulls." Taking one of her hands in his, he brought it to his lips and kissed it. "I'm...really stupid sometimes."

Leia settled her cheek against his upper arm. "No. Just really impossible. "

He grew very quiet and withdrawn for a few moments. When he spoke again it was only above a whisper, the tone betraying the rawness he felt in his heart. "I know what Anakin saw in his dreams. I've seen the same things." He had to take a breath, collect himself before going on. "He asked me to take it all away and I...I don't know how." He bent his head downward and shook it ever so slightly. "Leia, I never imagined it would ---"

The crack in his voice tore at her heart. "I know you didn't. Anakin knows it too. "



His gaze slid up to look into her eyes and then he looked away again, too ashamed to hold the sorrow or the love in her expression. He felt his chest tighten with guilt as he could not help but recall Anakin's fear. He could still feel the boy's body shaking as he cried, asking him to take the nightmares away. "I don't know what to do for him. I feel so goddamned helpless."

She cupped his face between her hands. "Listen to me, Han. Sometimes the best help is to help ourselves first." His doubt was evident, even if he didn't express it outwardly. But she knew him; despite his own misgivings he saw things clearly enough to put his own fears aside and do the right thing. He had done it many times before. Now would be no exception.

Shifting slightly, he reached into a pocket and withdrew the small data chip and held it out to her. "I got this when we arrived here. It was passed to me when I got our docking and travel documents back from the port authority."

Leia took it and turned it over between her fingers. "There are no markings."

"Because the information isn't supposed to exist. I took a look at it last night. I guess you should too." He craned his neck toward the octagon side table. "Didn't you have a data reader out here?"

She shrugged slightly. "It's...having some problems."

At that moment he spotted it, and easily surmised the cause of the 'problems'. "If you can't take care of your toys, sweetheart, I'll have to take them away."

"Yes dear."

"Guess it is my fault though, getting you all riled at me."

"I lost my temper too."

Drawing her closer, he planted a kiss on the crown of her head. "And people said we'd never get along."

She raised her gaze, met his mouth with her own and lingered in a long, forgiving kiss. Afterwards she looked once more at the chip she still held. Her gaze was intense, questioning, but before she could ask more he supplied the answer for her.

"It's from the NRI." He gave a shrug. "When Lieutenant Kalenda first met Chewie and me there was something she said that I couldn't quite put a finger on...made me wonder if NRI knew things about my past that even I didn't. I thought about asking them, then decided not to, figuring it was better left alone."

"Doesn't always work that way."

"No. It doesn't." He pulled his arm from around her, slowly rubbed his palms together. "When we got to Corellia..." He looked toward the shoreline and after a moment began again. "Wookiees have an old proverb, *Beware of memories for they are a blessing as well as a curse.*" He laughed derisively and pulled one hand through his hair. "I don't know which part fits, Leia." He paused, recalling the images in his dreams. "All these years, I never went back to Corellia because...well, let's just say there are too many memories and none of them worth revisiting."

" But you were hoping this time would be different, " she speculated.

" Yeah, only..." A hooded, painful expression pinched his features. " It's not just the things I remember, Leia, it's the things I *don't*."

" Just like after ---" She started to add 'carbon freeze' " but he didn't give her the chance.

He nodded. " Just like back then."

" I thought so. I haven't wanted to intrude ---"

" You would have been right to...after what it's caused."

" I've been so worried, Han. Chewie knows it, so do the children. They love you so much...I love you so much."

" I sometimes wonder why ----"

Leia brushed her fingers along his chin, applying just enough pressure to turn his head toward her. "Because you're a good man."

" No..." he shook his head. " No, I'm not, L---"

And she silenced him with a kiss. Pure and unconditional. " You're a *good* man, Han."

He wasn't sure, down deep, if he could really believe that, but he did know Leia and if he doubted anything it was never her love for him or his for her. He gave her a dubious, questioning look. " What happened to 'rogue'? I always liked that one."

Her smile was inviting. " It's still there. You're stuck with it." Her smile faded a little then and she said softly, " But all the same, you're *are* a good man. An impossible, pig-headed, infuriating man ---"

" Okay, okay. Point taken."

She leaned in to kiss him. " And always, all mine."

The weight that had been on him for weeks now gave way, made lighter by this small, tough little fire-brand of a woman that held him as close to her body as she did in her heart and spirit. He was reminded of just why he'd fallen in love with her and how he'd felt ever since.

Over the course of the next few minutes, Han told her about the information on the chip. Some of it he had known already: his cousin, Thracken Sal-solo, had told him years ago about his paternal grandparents, Denn Solo and his wife, Tira Gamma. They had lived in a colony on Tralus, one of the five inhabited planets in the Corellian system. They'd had twins, a son and a daughter. The night the children were born, there had been a pirate raid on the colony. Trying to get his family to safety, Denn and his son --- who was not yet even named --- became separated from Tira and Tionn. In the aftermath of the raid, Tira and her daughter were found among the survivors. But of Denn and the infant boy, there was never a trace. Heartbroken and afraid, Tira returned to her father's estate on Corellia --- the same one Han had visited

when he was eleven --- and had never remarried. Years later, Tionn was wed to Randil Sal; the couple had one child, a son, Thracken. He and his mother were the only relations Han had ever known he'd had.

"What else does NRI know?" Leia inquired.

"Not a lot. Seems some records were buried pretty deep. They suspect there's more that was wiped from all the databanks."

Intrigued, Leia sat forward. "Suspicious."

"Can't argue with that. "

"Who did Denn work for? "

"You'll love this...The Corellian Engineering Corporation." As expected, his wife's eyes widened. "Yeah," he agreed. "Powerful outfit."

"And extremely political."

"Seems Denn was a consultant in 'research and development'. NRI seems to think that might have been a cover and I'm inclined to agree. It's no secret the CEC used spies. Denn didn't die in that raid on Tralus. He changed his identity and for years went by an old family name on his mother's side. Called himself 'Denn Varis'. There was an obituary on *him*."

"Is it legitimate? "

Han gave a nod. "About thirty years after the raid on Tralus, Varis died in a fire that broke out in a home he shared with his son."

"Your father? "

"Yeah. He had a family...apparently no one survived. Not even any of the household servants." Looking askance at nothing in particular, he grew quiet and distant, trying to put pieces of fragmented memories together. "The report doesn't say it, but that sounds like a hit job to me."

"Han, how can they be certain Denn Varis was really your grandfather? There could be a mistake ---"

"No!" he replied more sternly than intended. "Sorry, sweetheart."

She leaned in and kissed him lightly on the lips. "It's alright. I understand. "

"There's no mistake. Knowing that Palpatine had connections with in the CEC, one of Kalenda's sources decided to check into some of his private files."

"Palpatine's files?"

"There's...stuff...passages that were in code."

" Yes. I remember Intelligence finding secret data banks when the Alliance forces took control of Coruscant. From what I understand, the codes were extremely difficult to break. Some of them never were."

" There's a file on my father," Han remarked, very slowly and with a raw edge to his voice, " that cropped up briefly in some decoded material." He paused uncomfortably. " It had to do with the Jedi."

Leia held her breath for a moment as his gaze locked on hers; the bitterness, the confusion that radiated from him was nearly unbearable. She had no difficulty understanding how blind-sided and shocked he must have been to learn any of the NRI report but this...*this* was beyond unexpected.

Casting a sideways glance at his wife, Han read the question on her face. " No, my father wasn't a Jedi. But he did know some of them. Very well too. Especially one."

He looked over at her, and for a moment Leia read something very much like betrayal in his eyes. When he said, " Obi Wan Kenobi," Leia felt thunderstruck.

One hand curled into a tight fist and he struck it hard against the step. " He *knew!* That old man knew my father, Leia." His eyes turned to a bleak, overcast gray. " He *knew,*" he ground out again. " And he never said anything. Not *one* goddamned, *lousy* word." Drawing his hands over his face, his fingers rubbed tired eyes. Looking skeptically, he remembered the time on the *Falcon* and the fate-filled trip to Alderaan. He'd entered the galley very late one night and wound up in a strange conversation with the old Jedi master. It had been an interesting talk, almost like a fencing contest. " I wondered," he continued, "how it was he knew so much about my ship. Not the normal stuff about her design, stuff most people already knew, but odds and ends...almost like...bits of her history. It was almost creepy. I had the feeling he wasn't always talking about the ship so much as he was talking about me. At the time I just thought he was being a weird old wizard, playing mind tricks. Now..." He looked up, ran a hand through his hair and shook his head slightly. " Maybe I'm crazy, Leia, but I'm beginning to wonder if Kenobi came looking specifically for me in that cantina on Tatooine."

" You can't be absolutely sure of that, Han."

His eyes fixed on her. " Can't I? 'Solo' isn't one of the more common Corellian names. He knew who I was. "

" Okay," Leia offered calmly " Let's say he knew. Maybe he meant to tell you, but just never got the chance."

" He was *on* my ship for days! He had plenty of chances ---"

She laid her hands on his. " Han, you aren't always the most responsive person when it comes to talking to people. You have to give Obi-Wan the benefit of the doubt."

" Why? Don't forget, Leia, he knew about *your* father too! He kept *that* a secret until Luke found it out --- the hard way!" Han shook his head in frustration. " He had *no* right! Not to the two of you and not to me. *Bastard!*" He cursed, striking a fist against the step again. " Just like Garris Shrike. He knew about my family --- and *never* told me."



Leia looked down at the data chip. "What else does this have on it?"

"Nothing. That's it. If there's more it was probably lost during the purge Vader carried out against the Jedi. Leia, I don't know if there's any more to find out but...I have to look for it. I have to. What happened to my family? How did I end up on the streets when I was a kid?" He swallowed hard against painful memories. On the streets, hunger had been his only companion. He knew it so well his guts had hurt beyond belief from it. Knowing, in the back of his clouded memory that he'd been taught never to beg, he had done it nonetheless. He'd asked for food from passersby, only to be shoved aside or ignored totally. In ragged clothes, he had been dirty, barefoot and terrifyingly afraid. He remembered one day in particular; he stood in a cold puddle of unspeakable filth and tried very, very hard not to cry as people elbowed against his thinning body. He was alone, with nowhere to go and more horribly, no memory of how he'd come to such an existence. He only knew his life had not always been like this. He had been four years old then. "I lived worse than a rat on those streets, Leia. I was...like garbage."

Had anyone ever tried to find him? Leia had to wonder. She batted away the sting of tears with the back of one hand and edged closer to him. "I know where there might be more information." He started to ask where but she was ahead of him. "Luke. He has the remaining Jedi holocrons. And he also has journals that he found in Kenobi's place on Tatooine when we came to rescue you from Jabba. It's mostly in code. I don't think Luke's ever had time to decipher all of it, but considering this," she held up the chip, "I don't think he'd mind giving it his utmost attention."

Wiping a tear from her face, Han remarked, "Anything for family, huh?" he offered with a half smile.

"Anything."

Han's brow lifted in a dubious expression. "He's not gonna believe this, ya know."

"He will," she assured.

He shared another kiss with her. "I keep wondering," he said a little while later, "What if my father's still alive?"

"We'll look for him," she confirmed solidly, then let a wry grin brighten her features. "NRI isn't the only organization with resources. After all, I *am* the Chief of State. I have mine too."

He laughed as he hadn't in a long time and taking her by the hands, stood up. "You're sounding a lot like a scoundrel, Your Highness."

"I have a good teacher." She welcomed the warmth of his arms as he pulled her closer.

He smiled into her hair. "The best, Your Worship."

"Mmm...Name calling. I love it when you call me names."

She smiled and nothing else but him existed. He smiled back and let that smile broaden as she brought her unbound hair over one shoulder. She was captivating. Wearing a

sleeveless, calf-length gown slit to mid-thigh on both sides, the soft, satin material was a rich plum color, perfect for her complexion. Slightly loose, it fluttered playfully in the breeze against her figure. His eyes traveled over her expectantly.

She could sense his desire. "Maybe we should pick up where we left off earlier...."

"Yeah..." he swallowed.

"Good." She sighed as he pulled her tight against his own body.

He bent his head down and met her mouth in a long, welcoming, anxious kiss. A memory, one that did not bring fear or mystery, pricked at his mind: *'there's no mystical energy field controlling my destiny.'* Liar, he chided himself. *You're holding it right now.*

Encircling him within her arms, Leia looked up through dark lashes. "I'm more glad than ever that we came here now. Everything will be fine. "

"Well, you're always right."

"Most of the time, dear." She got that 'Jedi' look on her face and he asked what was wrong. She nudged him with an elbow. "Nothing, silly," she smiled. "Anakin is still sound asleep. Having good dreams."

And everything, he knew now, would be all right. "I love you." His hands slid up to her shoulder blades and back down again, resting in the supple curve of her lower back. One side of his face nestled against the top of her head, he breathed in the light scent of some perfume he'd never recalled her wearing before. "That's new," he said as she began pulling his shirt off.

Her lips pressed warmly against his chest. "You noticed."

His breath caught. "Oh...I noticed," he rumbled, nearly incoherent. The combination of her touch, her smell and her voice was so intoxicating that he gladly let the effect take him under its grasp; he could drown in her and never want to resurface. "I thought maybe..."

"Yes....?"

"Maybe you'd already gone to bed before I got back here."

She shook her head. "I'm spoiled. Ever since Bakura, I don't sleep well without you."

"Ah, Bakura," he recalled pleasantly, immediately bringing to mind the first time they had made love. She'd been wanting, yet nervous. He'd been eager, yet patient. They'd spent hours learning and teaching, one from the other. "Talk like this, Princess, could get you into trouble."

Anticipation mixed with mischief in her tone. "Really?" She slid one foot against his ankle. "How much trouble could I *possibly* get into?"

He could have sworn his knees were buckling but somehow, miraculously, he remained standing. "Very," he kissed her once, "serious," and again, "trouble," and again.

Suddenly dizzy, Leïa grasped him for support.

Lost in the feel of her body pressed against him, he did not hear the words she uttered next. "Huh?" was the only response he could even halfway manage.

She wet her lips. "I said," she began, but choked back a little cry as his fingertips traced over her erect nipples. "I said...it *already* happened."

His mouth nuzzled the nape of her neck hungrily. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." Her leg curled around his calf and her head tilted sideways. "Three times as a matter of fact."

Comprehending the reference to their children, he quipped, "And all worth it."

"Yes," she smiled.

Tongue playing with the curves of her ear, he grinned impishly as he felt her shudder. "Wanna try for a fourth?" he ventured, but a sudden, playful poke to his ribs made him change course. "Just checking," he backpedaled verbally. "Three's good. I like three."

Her laugh was throaty. "Liar."

"Name calling," he mused. "I love it when you call me names, Your Worship."

She laughed softly, wickedly and took her time dragging one index finger down the length of his torso. "My list of names for you is *quite* extensive."

Forced to swallow a groan, he asked, "How extensive?"

"Oh, it goes on," she imparted, planting a soft kiss right at the base of his sternum. Her fingers tugged at the waist of his khaki shorts, "And on," she added. "I've had a *lot* of practice."

"Have you now?" The thrill of her touch was driving him pleasantly, deliciously mad.

Mouth pressed against the lean muscles of his chest, she tasted him, felt him shiver against her. Everything was going just right. "It's not finished, of course," she informed as she deftly slipped one hand under the waist of his shorts.

He instantly sucked his breath in. "Ah, that's...good..."

Smiling with satisfaction, she fondled him lovingly. "It's a work in progress, you see."

His throat closed over a gasp. *See? He thought? I can't see. Not a damned thing!*

"I could recite them," she solicited, "if you'd care to have a listen...?"

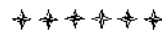
"I'd...care..." His words trailed off into oblivion; he was quickly losing all ability to think straight. *Why did she keep asking questions?* His heartbeat pounded in his ears and he shut his eyes tight as her hand gave a gentle squeeze. Balanced precariously on a far off precipice in his mind, he thought he heard himself breathe her name.

She shushed him and braced him as he swayed on the balls of his bare feet. "Easy there," she giggled.

"Easy?" he blinked. "You're making this *very, very* hard, Leia."

"I noticed," she replied playfully while at the same time freeing him only to take hold of his hands. Gaze riveted on him, she wordlessly led him the short distance to the open door of their master suite.

As if in a trance, he followed, fluidly sinking next to her as she lay back on the spacious bed. For a long time he neither thought, nor cared about the ghosts of old memories. There was only Leia's touch to lead him somewhere else. Leia's skin, smooth against his own to take away the pain. To banish the guilt. Leia's scent to fill his mind. He no longer listened to the whisper of the evening breeze, or the sweet tinkling of the wind chime, or even the distant splash of waves rising and curling over the reefs. There was only Leia and the sound of all the names she had promised to call him.



### ***Iseenee Nine, The Outer Regions***

The rain came down in gray, wind-driven, cold-to-the-bone sheets. On a muddied boardwalk, a rusted sign, lit by a green neon light that blinked and sputtered, read 'Cyn's Marker, Est. 21486'. The numbers were barely visible. Hadn't been in years. No one minded. This was the only place in town that served a decent drink. It was the only cantina in town. The *only* place for light years. Rain pummeled against the sign, sounding like steel pellets fired at a metal target. An all-terrain vehicle roared up the roadway from one end of town. It fishtailed to a stop. Several passengers climbed out, all donning foul weather gear of some type or another. They bent as they trudged through the sucking mud, shoulders hunkered and heads tucked, chin to chest, against the howling wind. Their breath on the chilled air was stolen away, whisked off into the driving damp and the dark of night. One man trailed behind the others, as if the elements had no effect on him or rather, he no longer cared.

He entered the bar, swept the drenched hood back from his head, stamped his boots against the rough boards of the floor and shrugged casually out of the long slicker that reached nearly to his ankles. A long-barreled blaster, worn easily and well cared for, hung from a plain leather holster along his right thigh and a few side-glances from narrowed eyes made a respectful, but quiet acknowledgement of the weapon, as well as the man wearing it. His sharp features had once been ruggedly handsome and turned more than a few heads. But grief, loss and years of living hard had left their mark in the lines that even his age would not have put there. His gaze met a few and he nodded vaguely to some, and not at all to others. He held the slicker to one side, gave it a slight shake, sending frigid beads of rain water to join those already collected into a series of puddles. Turning his head slightly, the bearded chin angled toward one shoulder and he caught the eye of Cyn Nikai, owner and operator of the establishment.

She was a short woman, barely four feet in height who ruled her place with an iron fist. But fair prices and a sense of humor had long ago earned her unwavering respect. The few times when that *hadn't* been the case, she'd learned, much to her pleasure, that she'd had a

few friends favoring a fast draw with a blaster and hardened knuckles that they weren't afraid to use. Cyn was happy here. And safe. From a strip of raised platform that ran behind the length of the marred yet polished wood counter, she conducted business on a nightly basis. Her wizened features wrinkled into a sardonic grin as she regarded the man with a mixture of candor and equal respect. By the time he had draped his slicker over the far end of the bar, Cyn had snagged a shot glass, poured a double measure of whiskey and placed it in front him. "Beauty of a night," she stated in a smooth, drawling accent.

The sip of whiskey warmed its way down his throat and he gave Cyn a half smile. "You've a flair for understatement, old girl." His voice was easy, more soft-spoken than one would imagine.

Cyn poured herself a drink as well, tossed it back, refilled it. "Some say," she huffed, "it's my *best* feature."

A grunt of a chuckle answered her comment and he raised his glass. "To best features then." Setting the glass down he rolled it between strong, capable hands.

Cyn poured him a refill. "That one's on the house. For takin' care of that 'problem' that was in here last week."

He smiled faintly and then his gray-eyed gaze traveled with avid interest to the holo-vid display projected on the wall above the back counter of the bar. With a nod of his chin, he gestured at the program that faded in and out, plagued by intermittent, and irritating static.

Cyn glanced over one shoulder. "Damn storm's playin' havoc with the wave-feed tonight. That channel's 'bout the best I've gotten in two days."

Leaning one elbow on the rolled edge of the bar, the man wiped droplets of rain from his face and scratched casually at the stubble on his face. He observed the crowded room with a casual look. The tables didn't lack for patrons; they rarely did. Drinks were flowing with regularity. A game of sabbac was being dealt at the center of the room and the three whores working the floor were obviously advertising their wares proudly. One took a customer by the beard and led him, laughing, up the carpeted staircase. "Rain doesn't seem to have hurt business any."

"Darlin'," Cyn informed with a wave of one hand, "as long as the mines don't play out, and I keep this place well stocked and the weather here stays *consistently* lousy, business is always good." His smile was like his history, faded and torn from too much loss and too much grief.

He tipped his drink to his lips, let more of the liquid burn its way delightfully down his throat. Though the holo-image continued to waver and wink, he watched intently as a journalist gave a report from outside of the New Republic Senate on Coruscant. As the wave-feed blinked in and out, the audio did the same; each vacillated from absolute clarity to a sheet of hissing mist that was all too reminiscent of the driving rain outside.

*"--- after escaping the explosive civil uprising --- Corellia --- th -- and her fam --- reportedly --- on Illafian Point ---"*

A studio anchorperson asked a question that was little more discernable than her co-reporter's at the Senate Square. *"In her press conf --- the Pres---ent said --- trade with the Cor --- System would be now be even more diff --- cult to establish. Is there any --- from the Senate about --- to --- system?"*

*"Nothing is definite at this time, Shenn, but the Sen --- is hopeful ---"*

A minute of static overwhelmed the broadcast and when it snapped back into view, a replay of the President's recent press conference was being shown. President Leia Organa Solo stood before a mixture of journalists from dozens of worlds. As she calmly and directly answered questions, her youngest child suddenly appeared at her side. Her husband instantly, silently and gently caught the boy up in his arms and turned away, disappearing into the background. Questions about the welfare of the President's three children suddenly rose in a cacophony; no comment was made other than the children were safe, unharmed and while their ordeal was naturally frightening, they were quickly putting it all behind them. Announcing she would take one more question, the President pointed to a reporter at the back of the crowd. *"Tal?"* she said and indicated to a T'wilek, *"I'll take your question and then that'll be it."*

*"Thank you, Madame President. Ma'am, this was the first time your family has traveled together to the Corellian system. Is it true that this was also the first time in twenty years or more since your husband had been there?"*

*"That's true."*

*"What was his response to the drastic changes there?"*

*"He is as concerned about the welfare of that entire system as I am."*

*She turned to leave but halted as another reporter blurted out, "Is it true that the instigator behind the civil uprising is a relative of your husband's?"*

*The President gave the speaker a cool look. "He was involved, yes."*

*The reporters clamored for one more question to be answered but their attempts were to no avail; the president turned away. The replay was over and the broadcast quickly returned to the anchor journalist who announced that they would talk with some guests about the Corellian Crisis right after the commercial break.*

Cyn Nikai turned back to face her friend only to find herself looking at an empty whiskey glass; several credits, more than enough to pay for the drink, had been laid beside it. Immediately, she looked toward the door. *"Hey! You got change comin' back from this."*

*"Keep it." His grey eyes, full of a distant sadness, settled on her. "Thanks for everything, Cyn." He positioned his hat on his head, tugged on the brim in a gesture of respect. "You're a real lady. Take care of yourself."*

*"You'll be missed, Roenn."*



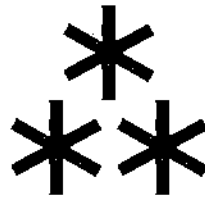
He gave her a rare, true smile. "Not by many."

"Hey, you promised me once to tell me yer last name."

His smile faded sadly away and his voice was but a whisper. "It's not the first promise I haven't kept. Sorry."

She was sad to see him leave but the day had been a coming; men like him did not plant roots. "Where ya headed?"

He shrugged into his slicker, eyes reaching for memories. He laid his left hand against the door, gave it a little shove, looked out into the pouring rain and saw his breath held on the cold of the night. "Home."





*There are shadows that haunt our lives, hover over us like predators, relentless in their pursuit. Grotesque memories stalk our waking hours and trouble our restless sleep like a suffocating fog. Ominous shades forever remind us of our fading, unredeemable past. Some are blessed to forget or die young; they are the fortunate ones. Others are cursed to remember and carry the mark of their sins to the grave. For us, there is no forgiveness.*

--- From the Tatooine Journals of Obi-Wan Kenobi

## SPECTRES OF THE PAST



"That's it?" Han Solo snapped, irritably, his voice edged with sarcasm, cursing under his breath.

For the better part of two hours, he and Leia had been subjected to a seemingly endless procession of historical data-chip documents covering the final days of the old Republic, coupled with some very sketchy testimonials about the Jedi Order and its suspected long association with government intelligence operations. Luke Skywalker calmly switched off the data screen and sat back, listening in silence as his friend continued.

"Except for the added stuff on the Intel link with the Jedi, there's nothing here the NRI hasn't already given me." The irritation was evident in Solo's voice. So was the disappointment. "Just admit it, Luke. You've got nothing here for me." Leia placed a reassuring hand on his arm, trying to calm him.

"No," he responded, curtly, pulling away. Rising from his place beside her on the sofa, he moved to one side of the spare living quarters in which his brother-in-law lived. "You told me Luke had evidence that might give me some leads about my father. So far I've seen crap!"

"Luke had to start somewhere," Leia defended, also rising from her seat. "There is a great deal of information to research, dozens and dozens of records. It can't be done in a few hours."

The Corellian ignored his wife. "I thought you'd already been through these things once before, Luke."

"Most of them," came the calm reply. "Not all. Some involve the Republic connections to the Jedi; I wanted to go through those first, just in case there might be any---."

"I don't give a gundark's ass about the Old Republic," Han abruptly interrupted, "or the way things used to be. I couldn't care less about the Clone Wars. All they did was screw all our lives to the wall. And I sure don't give a damn about all the Jedi and Rebellion purges. Terminated planets have nothing to do with me."

Solo caught the look of sudden pain in his wife's face, and Alderaan's destruction at the hands of the first Death Star flooded his vision. Realizing his mistake, he quickly altered his tone. "Look, I'm sorry millions of people and hundreds of worlds were wiped from the galaxy, but nothing any of us can do will bring them back. Leia, I'm sorry, but I've paid my dues to the Rebellion and the new government and all I want right now is to get on with my life. I want to raise our children without this damned *excess baggage*."

"I know," Leia responded sympathetically, but took no step toward him. Instead, she resumed her seat. Absently smoothing a wrinkle in her skirt, she folded her hands in her lap, and stared down at the floor. Problems between the couple had been building steadily for months. Solo's nightmares and newly discovered fragments of information about his past had proven more than either of them could handle. Leia knew the stress her husband was under, and understood his fits of anger. She accepted the fact that his pain often provoked him into say things he would later come to regret. Bringing her own irritation under control, she turned toward her brother.

"Luke, is there anything else you've uncovered which might be of help to Han?"

"Yeah," Han quickly chimed in, now nervously beginning to pace. "*Anything?* Anything even remotely helpful is better than nothing at all. I'm at the end of my rope here, kid."

Without looking at either his sister or brother-in-law, Luke stood up, but did not immediately respond. Instead, he busied himself with removing the last data-chip from the halo-disc-drive and returning it to its storage case. He was not a tall man, but over the years since the end of the Rebellion, he had become one of the most imposing figures in the New Republic's hierarchy. His personal strength, easy manner and unshakable confidence had made him a man to be reckoned with and respected. He had developed a reputation not only for his Jedi skills and knowledge, but also for his uncanny ability to deal with people in a crisis. Along with his sister, Skywalker's capabilities had proven to be a valuable asset in many of the new government's negotiations with the renegades of the defeated Empire. When he finally spoke, his voice was measured, the words carefully chosen.

"There *are* a couple of Jedi crys records that might shed some light on things, I don't know. I didn't mention them earlier because I haven't completely collated all of the information yet. They were among the hidden documents I discovered in the caverns on Tatooine, where we took refuge during the sandstorm after your rescue from Jabba. They were left there by Ben Kenobi."

"Bring 'em on." Han's eyes brightened. "There has to be *something*. Besides, another hour of vid-surfing isn't going to make that much of a difference now, is it? We're not talking secret disclosures here, are we?"

"I can't say for sure." Luke admitted. "As I said before, I haven't finished going through all the entries myself. I can't really give you an educated guess about secrecy issues." He smiled slightly, then added, "But somehow I have a feeling everyone in this room is more than a little trustworthy."

Skywalker headed toward the corridor leading to his private rooms. "I'll just be a couple of minutes. You might want to refill your cups."

When Luke had gone, Han resumed his seat next to his wife. "I'm sorry about the Purge remark. I don't know what got into me."

"I do. And it was uncalled for." Leia's voice was quiet, tinged with exhaustion. The past few weeks since they had returned from Rathalay had been fraught with turmoil over Han's obsession with his past. One small data-cube full of vague information about Han's family had led to one line of inquiry after another; but each had been met with a disappointing dead end. Luke had become their last resort. And now even that option seemed to be going nowhere for them. She stood up, gathered the empty kaffe containers, and moved quickly toward the kitchen.

Han started to follow her. "I shouldn't have said anything."

"No, you shouldn't have," she agreed, flatly.

"Leia, I--"

Her sudden response cut him off before he could finish. "Please, let's not go into it now. Not here."

Solo backed down. Normally, he might have pursued the issue, but the expression on his wife's face was enough to tell him not to do so. It was the same, uncompromising face she showed to difficult, uncooperative negotiators. Small she might be, even fragile to those who did not know her, but Leia Organa Solo was no weakling. Confrontations with her often came at a price.

"Fine." Suddenly, he felt hot. Removing his pullover sweater, he tossed it on the sofa and resumed his seat. "We can discuss it later."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

The next few moments seemed an eternity. Only the humming sound of the kaffe warmer cut through the silence between them. Leia busied herself pouring the hot brew into the three cups, while Han stared at the ceiling, feeling foolish and contrite, fighting against the urge to say something further to his wife. He knew his frustration and impatience did not make things any easier for either of them. He simply wanted immediate answers about his past so he could be free of the nightmare visions plaguing his dreams. These long months of not knowing the truth were taking their toll.

Leia moved back into the room, deftly balancing the three steaming kaffe mugs. She placed one beside Luke's recliner, crossed in front of her husband, handed him his drink and resumed her place beside him. The tension was almost overwhelming, as they sat in silence, slowly sipping the hot liquid, their close proximity belying the distance between them.

Both of them were relieved when the Luke finally returned, carrying a rather compact and unfamiliar vid-scanning system and several leather pouches. He pushed the previous vid-equipment out of the way, and replaced it on the table with the new one.

Han was so distracted by his own conflicting thoughts, he almost missed what Luke was saying to them.

"---Jedi technology produced some very useful tools for maximum documentation and transmission of data. This is not a halo-projector, but rather a vid-imager for the projection of two-dimensional images. Apparently each Jedi carried with him a compact personal cam device for the recording of events and personal observations, which could later then be disseminated for historical archiving and study."

Luke opened one of the leather pouches and carefully withdrew one small clear triangular disc. He held it up and spoke with admiration. "These crystals hold a great deal of data, but unlike halo-discs, the projected images will be appear flat."

"---I apologize this particular crystal is not in the best of shape. Some of the images will be out of focus and the resolution is often poor." Skywalker voice sounded hesitant as he placed the vid-crys into the halo-drive and switched on the imager. "In fact, in many of the rescued crystals, whole sections are missing, or out of sequence entirely. This may have been deliberately done to confuse anyone not familiar with Jedi protocol, should the records fall into the wrong hands. I have also discovered that the security encodes for these particular vids are incompatible with our own current technologies. Obviously, the Jedi developed their own encodes to prevent anyone from accessing important and secret data."

As Luke activated the first crystal, the images sputtered and shimmered to life. Scratchy and somewhat faded, perhaps more from the ravages of time and improper storage than from secret tampering, the projection filled half the room. Almost immediately, jagged interference lines began to run diagonally across the image; they were annoying, but not completely effective at masking the activity unfolding before the three viewers.

The halo-screen revealed a flurry of activity in the distance. What appeared to be human figures moved in and out of view, carrying a variety of freight storage bins, large and small. Exactly who these people were or how many was difficult to determine. Most of them were out of focus entirely. From the gray, uneven structure of the walls around them, they appeared to be working within the confines of some vast cavern. A bluish illumination emanated from some artificial source, but in the foreground of the halo-screen an orange glow could be seen, possibly from a fire burning nearby. After a few moments, another figure emerged from the shadows beyond, approached the holo-cam, and dropped to his knees directly in front of the lens. He was clad in a torn and ragged sage green overcloak, the wide hood pulled low over his face. For several seconds, one hand filled the screen, momentarily blocking the visuals. The lens was obviously being adjusted, because, for the first time, the interference lines disappeared. After a few seconds, the figure leaned back on his heels and flung the hood off to reveal a dirt-smudged face beneath. Ringed by unkempt, rust blonde, collar-length hair and a beard, the youthful features looked careworn, perhaps even sad. But staring intently into the vid-cam lens, the piercing blue eyes sparkled with life. Leia felt a soothing warmth emanating from this man.

Han cocked his head to one side, recognition slowly dawning. "The Emperor's black bones, is that Kenobi?"



"Yes," Luke whispered quietly. "I think Obi-Wan was in his middle thirties here."

Leia heard the reverence in her brother's voice and saw the awe in his eyes as Luke concentrated all his attention on this younger version of his Jedi mentor. He had only known Ben Kenobi for a short time, but the man had made a life-long impression; Luke never mentioned him without a show of respect. She recalled how highly her adopted father, Bail Organa, had spoken of him, just before he sent his daughter on her perilous mission to find the exiled Jedi. Now, watching this last of the Old Order Knights, Leia could understand both their feelings about him. For, despite the layers of dirt and grime, Obi-Wan Kenobi was definitely charismatic, even compelling. And by his demeanor, she could also tell the man was well versed in commanding the attention of others. He seemed tired, but his voice was strong, steady, and self-assured.

*"This is the last entry I shall record for some time; the safety of all here is paramount now. But what we have done must and will be preserved. There has been so much slaughter in these past few months, even I do not know how many of my Order still remain alive. Palpatine and his armies have been relentless in their pursuit. At least Master Yoda is safe. Varis and I have seen to that."*

Han reacted almost violently, leaping to his feet. Varis was the name his grandfather and father had once used. "There is the proof! That bastard knew my father!"

"Han !!" Leia grabbed her husband's hand, embarrassed at his outburst.

"It would seem so," Luke remarked calmly, unfazed by the derogatory blast. "I never made the connection. I recall the name being mentioned once or twice before. It didn't seem important at the time."

"Damn right it's important." Solo interjected.

Anything further he may have added to this response was interrupted by the faint sounds of a woman's voice calling from somewhere off-screen. One of the figures working in the background shouted out, "I'll go!" and quickly disappeared in the direction of the sound. Leia gently coaxed her husband back down into his seat beside her.

Obi-wan Kenobi paused, turned his face in the direction of the voice, and listened. Then, with a slight drop in volume, he continued recording.

*"Skywalker has been true to his promise, and swift in his betrayal. No one is unaffected now. There is only one more task left to me. And then Anakin must be brought down. He must not be allowed to bring further destruction upon the Jedi nor upon those few who have aided and protected us. If I die in the attempt, it shall not be before his own death is on my hands."*

Now it was Leia's turn to react. Leaning forward, her interest deepened, while her heart began to race. She glanced toward her brother. *Why did you never say anything about this recording before now? This is important, to me and to my family. Why did you keep it from us?* Across from her, Luke sensed his sister's silent inquiry, but did not respond. All of his attention remained focused on Kenobi's recording.

*"Anakin must be stopped, not only for the sake of the galaxy, but for the family he has abandoned. They must be sheltered now, at all costs, to the exclusion of all else. The future depends on it."*

The vid-disc went dark then, and for several minutes, the growing apprehension in the room was matched only by the static coursing across the screen.

"Is that all?" queried Han impatiently.

I told you there were missing sections. It'll resume in a few sec---." The halo-screen crackled and sputtered to life again, "There."

Kenobi was still speaking.

*"---his will is strong and his legions unstoppable. The Republic is collapsing. With the Jedi eliminated, nothing can stop Palpatine. Soon his control will be complete. Many surviving opposition members of the government are fleeing to their individual home worlds; others have taken refuge on neutral planets. But their safety is only temporary."*

The Jedi paused, his face solemn, eyes glistening in the glow of the nearby fire.

*"The only thing for the rest of us now is to find our own safe haven and rebuild what forces remain. Time will tell whether or not we can def--."*

Behind Kenobi, another figure approached suddenly, one hand gently grasping the Jedi's shoulder. It appeared to be the same figure who had earlier responded so quickly to the woman's voice.

*"Ben. She is asking for you. Her time is near."*

The words were delivered sottly, their speaker almost apologetic. Without hesitation, Obi-Wan rose quickly and moved away from the vid-cam, his voice betraying a slight tremor as he spoke.

*"Would you shut this down for me? I'll finish it later."*

The other called after him.

*"We should leave soon, but she can't travel yet."*

There was no response. The unidentified figure, clothed in a dark brown vest jacket over a black shirt, remained for several seconds watching the retreating Jedi. Finally, he bent down, exposing only part of a stubbled chin to the vid-cam. Extending one bruised hand toward the screen, he whispered a command.

*"End vid-session."*

Just before the screen disappeared, something fell from behind the open shirt collar. A small silver medal, dangling on a braided leather cord, tumbled into view, swinging toward the cam lens, almost striking it. It glinted in the firelight. Etched on its surface was a bird of some

kind, wings spread in flight. Then the image was gone. But not before it triggered a reaction in Han Solo.

"What the hell----?" The words caught in his throat. Rising, he stumbled toward the now empty space once occupied by the holo-screen, calling out to Luke as he did so. "Wait! Go back!"

"What is it?" Leia queried, alarmed by her husband's unexpected panic. She stood and hurried toward him.

"The pendant---from my nightmares," he snapped as if expecting everyone to know what he knew. "Get it back, *dammit!*"

"Luke," Leia looked back at her brother, but he was already busy readjusting the vid imager's playback controls.

The final few seconds of the holo-screen projection flickered back to life, the medal once more becoming visible. Han's eyes widened.

"*Freeze that!*" Han shouted. "Now, advance it frame by frame." Luke did so. "That's it. Wait. *Stop there.*"

"Hell's soul. That's it. Just like in my dreams." The image on the medal was clearly a bird of prey, its beak parted, wings flung out and back, the sharp talons outstretched downward in attack position.

"What is that?" said Leia.

"It's a highland tor falcon," breathed Han, his voice barely a whisper, "from the northern regions of Corellia."

"It's beautiful." Leia was fascinated by the detail in the artistry.

"I've seen pictures." Luke contributed. "The breed is extinct now."

"Yeah, long extinct," Solo confirmed, his gaze still riveted on the medallion's frozen image. "The Imperials killed them all off for sport. Hunted them down the same way they hunted down the highland tribesmen years back."

"The workmanship is incredible." Leia moved closer, becoming curious. "Look, there's an inscription. Can you see it? Along the edge?"

"I see it." Luke answered. "What's it say?"

"I'm not sure. Can you sharpen the image, Luke?" Leia inquired. "Adjust the resolution and in---"

"*Increase the size,*" Solo quickly finished, his voice still impatient.

"Doing it now. Got it."



The image tripled, grew larger as the falcon was magnified a hundred times on the halo-screen, filling the space until the words sharpened to crystal clarity. The three of them carefully examined the letters etched around the perimeter of the medallion's silver surface. For several seconds no one said a word. Leia was the first to speak.

"I still can't make out what it says, can you?"

"No." Han replied, obviously disappointed.

"Neither can I." Luke added. "The language is unknown to me."

"It *looks* like one of the highland tongues, maybe Na-Shahran," Han remarked, hesitantly, "but, no, the accent marks aren't right. It's not like any I've ever seen before. Damn, where is 3PO when you need him?"

Luke and Leia exchanged glances, both smiling in unison. Never in all the years they'd known the Corellian had he ever been anything but perpetually annoyed with or hostile toward the gold protocol droid, even when the unit actually offered helpful information. Now, Solo was finally admitting he needed his help. Leia couldn't suppress a chuckle.

"*What?*" Han looked from his wife to his brother-in-law, saw their amused expressions and quickly became defensive. "Well, he *is* a protocol droid, after all; he knows languages. I just thought if he were here, he could----." He felt himself backing into a corner. "Come on. 3PO has his uses. I never said he wasn't useful. Well, alright, I did, but he---oh, just forget it."

Luke laughed. "Let me make an image copy and you can take it to 3PO to examine. If anyone can translate this, he can." He then quickly inserted a data chip into his primary holo-drive, connected it to the vid-imager and ran a duplicate.

Han seemed relieved. From behind him, Leia reached out and took her husband's hand, squeezing reassuringly. "This was in your dreams?"

Han nodded, letting the warmth of her touch comfort him. "In one of my dreams after carbon freeze. And even after that. I had the dream several times. I remember a woman putting it around my neck. My mother, I think. There was a smell of salt in the air, flowers, and laughter. Frescoes." He paused, frowning. "There were frescoes on the wall. I'd forgotten that. I didn't like them. Why I'm remembering this now, I don't know. But that pendant belonged to me. I'm sure of it now." The image of strong masculine hands lifting him up and spinning him round surged into his mind; at first it surprised him. "I was in my father's arms." Suddenly, his face became ashen. For the first time, he turned away from the image and spoke quietly to his brother-in-law. "Luke, switch to the original image size. Please."

Luke saw Solo's expression and immediately did as he requested.

Solo pulled his hand from Leia's and slowly approached the halo-screen. He carefully studied the stubbled chin, the only visible part of the pendant's owner. One hand shook slightly as it reached out to touch the incorporeal image, tracing the curve of the face.

Leia saw the strain in his features, sensed his pain. "Han, what do you see?" she queried softly, but knew the answer before he offered it.

"Leia," he whispered. "This must be my father." Anger began to rise from somewhere deep inside him, and he moved even closer to the halo-image, wanting it to give him the answers to a million questions and reasons for the thousand nightmare visions that had plagued him for years.

"Are you?" He questioned the silent image. "Are you Roenn Varis---*Solo*." Suddenly, his tone became accusatory. "What happened to you? What happened to my mother? Why was I left on a filthy street in the middle of nowhere? Why didn't you look for me?"

"Han." Luke gently interrupted, as optimistically as he could. "There's another cry disc you might want to see."

"Yeah, take this off," he said, flatly. "I'm done with it." Returning to the sofa, he stared down at it for a moment, then sat instead upon the hardwood floor. Leia joined him there, leaning against her husband's shoulder, her legs tucked to one side. She placed one hand over his. He grasped it in his own, brought it to his lips and lightly planted a kiss. "I'm alright," he reassured her. "I'm fine."

Luke placed another vid-cry into the imager. "This one I'm pretty certain was recorded on Tatooine, I'd say about seven or eight years after the other one." The halo-screen flickered into view, the image much cleaner than the one before it had been.

The face of Ben Kenobi once more filled the screen, his angular features beginning to show evidence of aging. His rust-blond hair, now slightly tinged with gray, was cropped very short, the neatly trimmed beard barely visible on his face. His expression was solemn and resigned; the piercing blue eyes no longer sparkled. It was enough of a significant change from the previous image that Leia was shocked. This time, too, she sensed an overwhelming sadness even before the Jedi spoke his first word. Looking across Han's shoulder toward her brother, she realized Luke sensed it as well. But he'd obviously seen this disc before, because his expression was not one of shock, but rather one of empathy.

Obi-Wan began speaking slowly, as if choosing every word and nuance carefully. He paused only once before the end.

*"Word reached me today that Varis has been taken by Imperial agents and imprisoned. How he was captured, I was unable to learn, but knowing Roenn, he did not fall to them without a fight. Where the Empire has incarcerated him, I also do not know, but torture is certain to be the first order given by his captors. His inner strength will sustain him. Hold fast, my friend. You will survive; you will endure.*

*"Perhaps tomorrow I will discover more when I go into Mos Eisley for supplies. Still, part of me dreads the knowing, for I can do nothing to help him now, even if I could hire a transport. He must bear this trial alone. The promise I made long ago to another, reminds me that my first responsibility lies with the boy. Each time I see him, which, out of necessity, is limited, I can envision the man he will one day become. He is very clever and already has a strong sense of self. His mother would be pleased and very proud.*

*"For me, I have resigned myself to the long isolation of my exile. But even isolation cannot free me of the memories, memories that too often trouble my sleep and haunt my waking hours. Like mirages in the sand. Sometimes they seem strangely distant, as if they*

*belong to someone else. Yet they remain as real to me as these stone walls that enclose me now, marking the boundaries of my existence.*

*"The suns are setting; another day has fallen to night, and always I recall other suns, other days, other nights. Only a fool or a madman forgets. I know that I am neither. That is my punishment.*

*"For the rest, let the dead I can no longer serve, be at peace. Let the living survive, to find all that they seek.*

*"It is with a mixture of both sadness and hope that I note the passing of my seventh season on Tatooine, and the beginning of my eighth."*

Kenobi paused, became very still, his haggard features now half hidden by the long shadows of evening. Then, with a depth of feeling none of them had heard before, he finished his entry with a single phrase.

*"Eilesh n' klaish, pash kiel'ar, m'chridhe."*

Bowing his head, he whispered a command.

*"End session."*

A fraction of a second passed and both Jedi and halo-screen disappeared. For several minutes, silence filled the room, the three viewers lost in their own thoughts.

Finally, Leia ended the silence. "What were those last words he said? I didn't understand the language."

"It's an ancient dialect called Hajah-sul, part of the Old Jedi Order, commonly used for ritual ceremonies, personal verbal exchanges and in secret transmissions. I stumbled on it during my researches on Yavin IV. It's no longer spoken."

"What do the words mean?"

"Well, I'm not an expert, but, as near as I can make out, they translate roughly as *once, always, and now, my beloved.*"

"That's beautiful. Who was he addressing, do you think?" Curious, Leia was intrigued. "Do you think Obi-Wan ever had a wife?"

"I doubt it. But I really can't say." Luke seemed strangely preoccupied. "I don't know very much about his past. My research is still in the early stages." He wasn't ready yet to tell Leia he had actually seen much more of the journal entries than he was willing to admit.

"I recall adopted father once telling me most Jedi had been celibate, taking vows against any relationships of a personal nature, because it might cloud their judgment or block their union with the Force."

"It didn't stop your real father, did it?" Han interjected, caustically.

Leia ignored his remark. "We really know nothing about Anakin Skywalker's relationship with our mother. I wonder if they were happy in the beginning. I like to think so, but the few things Ben Kenobi said don't really explain very much, do they? I was just thinking about that woman who cried out in the first crys-disc. Do you think she could have been our mother?"

"I don't know." Luke shook his head. "So many records from that time have been lost, we may never know." Leia sensed evasiveness behind his answer, but quickly ignored it as she turned back to her husband.

"Han, what do you think?"

"I'm glad someone is asking me what I think," Han remarked flatly, without emotion. "I think my father is dead. And all of this has just been a monumental waste of time."

"How can you say that?" Leia could no longer ignore Han's black mood. "Look at what we've uncovered tonight."

"*What have we uncovered?* That Roenn Varis Solo once wore a pendant that belonged to me? That he was captured almost thirty years ago and Ben Kenobi did nothing to help him? He was taken by the Imperials and tortured, Leia. You, of all people, should remember what that's like. And he was probably locked up a hell of a lot longer. If he's not dead, he probably should be."

"Not necessarily, Han." Luke offered. "He could have survived. Rebel forces freed most political and military prisoners at the end of the conflict; some right after the second Death Star was destroyed. He may have even escaped, perhaps even long before the Rebellion began. We don't know."

"Who are you kidding, Luke? Roenn Solo worked for the Jedi. The Emperor would never have left him alive. We both know that."

"There's still archival information I haven't had time to research completely; and there are more of Kenobi's journal entries to examine. We may yet find something."

"Luke's right, Han," Leia agreed, diplomatically. "There's a good possibility your father is still alive out there somewhere. If he is, we'll find him."

"If he *is* alive, which I doubt, then why hasn't he ever tried to find *me*? It's not like we're low profile here, or inaccessible." Solo's tone was becoming belligerent. "Practically everyone in the galaxy knows who we are. No, if he's not dead, I don't think his family matters to him anymore, so that's just fine with me. He can rot in hell for all I care. It's pretty clear from Kenobi's entries that the Jedi meant more to my father than I did."

"Han, you're not being fair." Leia chided. "He could have been in prison for years. Torture might have crippled and disabled him to the point that he is physically unable to reach us. You can't simply jump to conclusions."

"I can. And I will." Han responded with a finality that allowed no more room for argument. "I think I know enough at this point to pronounce my father dead, even if he is not. You two do what you want. I'm tired and I'm going home now. Sorry I wasted your time, Luke."



"My time hasn't been wasted. I was glad to help," Luke insisted, then, added, more to Leia than to his brother-in-law, "I'll keep looking through these records."

"Good." Leia said as she moved to the couch and slipped Han's discarded sweater on over her blouse. There was definitely a chill in the air. "I'll start with the Imperial prison records; fortunately, almost all of those are still intact. Maybe I'll get lucky and find out just how long Roenn Solo was in Imperial custody and maybe even find some record of his release."

"*IF* he was released." Han smirked, exasperated. "Would you two listen to yourselves. You're both chasing phantoms. Let me make this as simple as possible for you. The Jedi Knights, and every agent who ever worked for them, were slaughtered by the Empire. Imperial forces captured my father. They threw him in prison. They tortured him. I don't believe he survived."

"Obi-Wan believed it," Luke said, quietly.

"*Obi-Wan?* Oh, come on, Luke, wake up. Stop hanging on the ravings of that crazy old wizard. He was exiled alone in the desert for twenty years; that should make you suspicious of anything he says. After all, he lied to you from the first moment you met him. Then he gets himself killed without ever telling you your father's identity. And Leia's too. Tell me you can't still be blindly buying into his crap?"

"I owe Ben Kenobi my life." Luke's voice hardened, his expression solemn. "So do you. And it's none of your concern where I look for truth or who I trust to give it to me."

For several awkward seconds, the two men's gazes were locked in defiance. Then Solo threw up his hands and turned away. "I give up. You do what you want. I only know *I* don't want to waste another second on this wild squib chase."

Leia attempted one more diplomatic argument. "Han, we'll never know for certain whether or not your father survived if we don't at least try to look for him, exhaust every line of inquiry. I, for one, intend to keep looking. You should, too. Look at what you learned tonight, with less than one crys-disc of information. You know your dreams won't stop just because you've convinced yourself that your father's dead. They may even get worse now."

"Then I'll deal with it, in my own way." Han interjected, moving toward the door. "Can we please go? I want to tell my children good night."

Leia planted a kiss on her brother's cheek and gently squeezed his arm. "I'm sorry Luke, I'll contact you later." She quickly followed her husband out the door.

For several minutes alone, Luke Skywalker stood by the door, lost in thought. Then he dimmed the lights and returned to his recliner. Tucking one knee beneath him, he reached for the small leather pouch housing the remaining crys-discs. Removing one of the crystal triangles, he held it up in the dim light and rubbed one finger back and forth across its clear shimmering surface. He was relieved the information contained in this particular crys had not been seen tonight. The circumstances were not right. With Han walking a tightrope over his own past, Leia had more than enough to handle in stabilizing their marriage, maintaining serenity for their children, and fulfilling her obligations to the New Republic. Filled with the deepest admiration, Luke recalled how, in all the long years since he'd met her, Leia never once lost her center. She would not do so now.



He placed the crys-disc into the vid-scanner and the emptiness of the room flooded with another man's experiences and vivid memories. Luke fast scanned the entries to the end, stopping once more at the one section he always allowed himself to experience first, whenever he viewed this particular journal. Kenobi was still young, and probably recently exiled to Tatooine. Luke knew this must have been the lowest point in the Jedi's life; he also knew why and for that reason this moment in the journal held the most profound significance of all.

*"The promises I have broken, the dreams I have destroyed, the friends I have lost, the voices I silenced forever, and the faces I shall never see again. One face I shall never see again.*

*"You are my beloved.  
Though we are parted  
We are never separate.  
Our souls are joined eternal,  
Our hearts beat as one.  
May we forever remember,  
Once. Always. And now.*

*"Eilesh n' klaish, pash kiel'ar, Ay'shahla, m'chridhe, m'Kiri."*

Luke paused the image. *M'Kiri*. He repeated the word over in his mind several times. "My soul," he translated aloud. Luke had never known his real mother. Now, thanks to Obi-Wan's meticulous journal entries, Luke knew everything about her—her life, her love, and her sacrifice, even the manner of her death. He also knew how much she had meant to Kenobi. But his Jedi mentor's personal disclosures were not something Luke was prepared to share with his sister just yet. Revelation happens in its own time. Moments of discovery had to be considered very carefully, because such knowledge was never easy to accept. Ben Kenobi had taught him that. And Luke Skywalker knew that Ben Kenobi was a great man.





*"Grief is an odd companion. It clings like an obsessive lover, but all the while it pulls you down to a dark place you never realized could exist -- and never want to go to again."*

--- Han Solo

## INTO SHADOWS

*All around, the structures of a civilization tumble in on themselves. Buildings groan as foundations buckle under subterranean stress. Beams and girders screech; collapse in final, mountainous tidal waves of dust clouds. Glass explodes into showers of deadly hail or shatters from frames to becoming lethal javelins. Water gushes from broken pipes and reservoirs, all adding to the flooding in the street, carrying with it debris so mangled and twisted that most of it is unrecognizable. Power cables whip and thrash in the heated, hurricane-force wind that wails like a thousand dying rancors. In snaking patterns, the cables send sparks in the air, adding to the fires that burn out of control; there is no one to fight them. It is everyone for themselves. It is a state of sheer panic -- impossible, unbelievable. The noise of such utter destruction, the screaming of people hopelessly locked in this terror, is a roaring in my ears like nothing I've ever heard before. The planet, Sernpidal, cries in its death throes. But in all of this, somehow, the only voice I'm aware of, even above my own screams, is that of my best friend.*

*Suspended in the air like a bird riding a thermal draft, the Millennium Falcon waits for its first mate. Yet, battered and bloodied, he remains. The air combusts in fireballs; the ground heaves beneath. An eruption-- so strong it threatens to split the bulkheads of the ship-- takes him down. He's vanished!*

*I can't breathe. Can no longer scream. My eyes, burning from the heat of the fires and wind, search the nightmare scene below me. Finally, I see him, clambering to his feet on legs that tremble with the effort. Head thrown back, he bellows a Wookiee curse, shakes his broken, blood-caked fists at the descending moon. Against the howling wind, I cry out for him, still reaching. Begging. I want so badly to deny any of this is happening.*

*Abruptly, the Falcon rumbles, shudders in agony and tries to lift away, struggling to take flight. Though the loading ramp retracts and refugees hang tightly to my legs, imploring me to leave him, I can't. The wind swallows my voice. I can feel them dragging me up the ramp, pulling harder and harder, hanging on. But he's so close now! Too close to leave behind. Above the deafening sounds of destruction, I hear his final bellow to whatever cruel and unjust Fate has allowed this to happen. As if in answer he's consumed in a blaze that engulfs him, that turns his blood-matted coat into tendrils of flame and smoke. Still defiant, he keeps shaking his fists at the planet's falling moon. Right before my eyes, he's devoured. Gone forever. The ramp is nearly*



*shut now and suddenly, for an instant, I see his bones turned black, then white and he is no more. If anyone asked, I would swear the Falcon's straining engines cry for him.*

*Pulled inside, the ramp secured, silence surrounds me. All I hear is a pounding in my chest. From the refugees crammed onboard, a hundred pairs of eyes stare. A hundred faces gape. I can't say anything. There is only a name, resounding in my mind, echoing in my heart: Chewie!*

It took me a couple of minutes before I realized I hadn't screamed his name out loud. Not for the first time, I woke, shaking in a cold sweat. Again and again it haunts me, relentlessly invades each minute, never mindful of whether I'm awake or asleep. Never letting go. Always gripping at that one particular moment I wish I could forget, but can't. And never will. I feel like a doomed sailor in a raging storm, swept overboard and pummeled by ferocious waves. Hammered under, pounded down to a dark memory. Into shadows... Maybe the flashbacks, dreams, whatever they are, wouldn't be so bad if I'd only done something else on Sernpidal. There had to be *something*, just one thing that could have saved him. Then Chewie'd be alive and I'd've never had to explain anything to his family, or mine. Never would have had to tell them he wouldn't be back. Ever. Well, at least that's over now. If Leia hadn't been there... I don't know. I think I might've gone to some out of the way place--- Tatooine or somewhere--- and drunk myself to death. Hah! Who am I kiddin'? I'm doin' a pretty good job of that right in my own house. I don't know why Leia puts up with it. Or me for that matter.

*Shifting, I tried carefully not to wake her. Fool! She sleeps little more than you. Instead of trying to disappear in a bottle of whiskey, you ought to be helping her convince that idiot, Borsk Fey'lya, and the council that the Yuuzhan Vong are real. If Chewie were still here, you'd be fighting in the thick of this mess. If he could see you, he'd tell you to get off your drunken ass and get busy. Hell! Your own kids have more guts than you! Some hero...*

Figuring I might as well get up, my hand slid across the smooth skin of Leia's bare midriff and at once her hand covered my own, fingers entwined, holding me there. No words; she's said 'em all before. And more. Hours ago, she stood in the room, wearing a sheer, floor-length caftan she'd admired one day. Without her knowing, I'd bought it for her, not so long ago; a private anniversary gift. Leia, just out the fresher unit, hair damp and hanging loose all around her, caught my gaze and smiled tentatively, not sure whether to intrude on my mood. For the first time in weeks I'd felt compelled to let her take me far away, nearly begged her to. Setting aside my shot glass---half filled with the strongest Corellian whiskey money can buy--- I'd gone to her. In complete love for me, a wise-ass pilot with more faults than anyone has a right to, she took me. The expensive garment was suddenly a pool of garnet colored silk around her ankles. Her eyes never strayed from me and as I picked her up, I marveled---as always---at how something so light in weight could carry so much strength. I don't know what I'd do without her. The only thing worse than losing my best friend or one of my kids would be losing Leia. In her embrace, surrounded by her, feeling her slide against me, straddle my hips, she leaned forward, planted kisses on my mouth, face, throat, chest, making me burn in a way only she has the power to. She made me think only of her. Feel only her. I couldn't tell if it was the alcohol haze or just the fact that we hadn't been together like this since before I'd left for Sernpidal, but for a while nothing but us existed. She took her time and then, sharing the gasp I'd let out, slowly took me deep inside her, wrapped me in a blanket of warmth that went beyond anything physical. Because she knows me so completely, she could sense that I wanted to bury myself in her soul. Moving gently, she whispered words of love, promised that everything'd be alright...just let her take me away.

If only I could.

Once again, unbidden, the nightmare on Sernpidal invaded, violating the most private part our lives. Against my chest, Leia's breath exhaled in a shudder. In a stupid, feeble gesture, I said, "I'm sorry." She kissed me again then, whispered, "It's not your fault." Years ago, before marriage, I'd once told Wedge Antilles that I didn't deserve Leia. I still don't.

Over the last few weeks, she's given time, words, comfort...yet, nothing seems to help heal the feeling that I've betrayed my friend -- a friend I, not Anakin, left to die. How could I have blamed him for raising the ship, for getting us out of there before it was too late? How can I tell him I'm sorry? My shame and guilt are so strong that I can't find the strength to set it all to rights. And yet, despite everything, Leia understands. I've never known sorrow to be so draining, so consuming. But because she understands that, has experienced it, Leia remains next to me, an anchor on a beach of shifting sand. I sometimes wish she would point a blaster at me and tell me to get my act together. But she'd never give up that easily. Not like I have. Han Solo, a hero of the Rebellion... I could almost laugh. Never felt like any hero. And now, I don't know what I feel like. I just don't want to feel. I'm beginning to wonder why Leia ever agreed to marry me, but then, I was a different guy. Or was I? Until Chewie died, I'd considered myself a lot of things, most of them unmentionable in polite circles. But 'coward' was never one of 'em. Yet, despite everything I ever did, I never let anyone I cared about down. Never let my best friend die.

Needing to get some air, another drink, I'd begun to roll away. Leia's hand held fast though and I didn't need to see her tears to know they were there; we've been far too close over the years and we read each other well. As I moved away, she said, in a hushed voice, "I wish I could make it different."

I answered, "I know." I wondered if that sounded as empty to her as it had to me.

Started to leave what I should have held fast to, I began to say something to her -- then decided better of it. Instead, I bent down, retrieved the caftan and laid it carefully at the foot of the bed, My gaze settled on her again. "Leia," I began and she looked at me, knowing I wanted to say so much. But words failed me and all I could utter was, "Nothing."

I crossed the room, palmed the door open to the private balcony. The breeze was chilly. I didn't care. Leaning on the waist high wall, I looked out at the city. From this height, one can see the lights of the buildings stretch for miles: up, down, outward. They're almost like stars. I've always felt looking at the night sky was calming. But not this night. Not any more. I couldn't accept this familiar comfort any more than I could my wife's. Or our children's. Or Luke's and Mara's. Or our friends. I still hear their voices catch when they say Chewie's name or offer words of sympathy. I see myself in my kids as they still fight back tears. Even Luke, who, with all his Jedi insight and wisdom, can't seem to believe Chewie's gone either. The first time I saw him after Sernpidal, he looked more shattered than I'd seen him since Mara's illness began. Or after he put his father's body on a funeral pyre back on Endor. Or after old Ben Kenobi died so many years ago...

Here and there the lights of Imperial City flickered and danced. A lone air taxi skirted among the towering spires. I tried to hang on to its image, but the memory of Sernpidal cast its shadow. Again. I'd nearly choked on the whiskey as once more, I saw Chewie, still cursing to



a blood red sky. Still the noble friend, loyal shipmate, honest partner that I'd laughed and argued with, fought enemies and endured hardship with, trusted with not only my own life, but those of my family. For more than half my life he was all those things. By all rights I should've died first. Years ago. He's the reason that I've survived too many mishaps and more close calls than anyone has a right to. *You big fur ball. I never told you how much I cared about you. You were gone before I could thank you for saving my son's life.*

Leia's words echoed softly in my mind, "*I wish I could make it different.*"

Just then, without looking, I realized that she'd stepped through the sliding doorway. Just then, without looking, I realized that she'd stepped through the sliding doorway. As she drew closer, I welcomed the feel of her hands in mine as she nestled herself against my back. I'd brought her arms around me. It was comfortable to just remain like that, her way of letting me know she wouldn't let go. No matter what. Typical. "I keep seeing it over and over," I told her. "I wish it would stop."

"It will," she promised as she brushed her lips between the lower points of my shoulder blades. "You have to believe that, Han." Unable to say anything, I merely nodded and brought her hands up and kissed her palms.

After a time, we went back to bed. She was so tired--no thanks to me. Waiting until I heard the rhythmic breathing, telling me she was sound asleep, I moved away again and quietly got dressed. Spotting the shot glass I'd set aside, I bolted back the last of the whiskey. For a moment I just stood there, staring at the thick blue-green glass; the remaining drops of the amber liquid slid to the bottom. *Your slipping*, I told myself. *Right down to the dregs.* Funny...I hadn't felt this way since I'd been court-martialed out of the Imperial Navy. The charge: dereliction of duty, striking a senior officer, inciting a riot. All committed while allowing and assisting the escape of a slave laborer--- a Wookiee. Funny how that big 'walking carpet' changed my life. I started to throw the glass against the wall but it would have woken Leia so I handed it to Threepio when I got downstairs. Miraculously, he didn't say anything. Just stared as I left the house. Hell, if I didn't know better, I'd swear that tin-plated, priss of a professor felt sorry about Chewie too. Droids! Go figure.

Traveling mainly on foot, I struck out for the only place that offered total privacy...but not peace. It rained for awhile but I didn't care; it kept things quiet in a weird sort of way until finally, I reached the docking bay of *Millennium Falcon*.

And here I am. I access the locking code and the boarding ramp extends. For a long time, this was the only home I'd ever had. The first that I could really say had truly been mine. She has a different feel now. Like a part of her soul is missing. I know it is, because mine feels like that. Climbing the ramp, I think I hear something. Nothing loud really but it's enough to catch my attention. Pilots often believe hangers and aircraft are haunted. I wonder. Did I just hear some errant sound that passes in deserted buildings? Or was it the *Falcon*, breathing out a cry for a noble friend who will never return? Standing here, listening, I pat one hand against her carbon scored skin. "I know..."

"All the values I have learned about living -- patience, courage, loyalty, sacrifice, endurance, and love -- I learned from my parents"

--- Jaina Solo

## VOYAGE HOME



Through the cold, infinite night of space, I slide among the stars, the black, matte finish of my armor-plated hull --- no longer familiar in shades of carbon-scored white and gray --- has so far proven to trick and conceal me from the new enemy, the Yuuzhan Vong. Like a heroic warrior I am scarred from combat and wear those badges proudly. Yet, like a veteran soldier, I am no fool; I know I may not survive the coming battles. There is a plague, which infects this galaxy, but like many, including those I carry now within me, I will at least risk my own destruction in seeing an end to it. My only hope, my only dream is that I am worthy of the task. Worthy of the sacrifices those dear to me have already made. And continue to endure.



### Part One: Waiting

Onboard *Millennium Falcon*, one compartment was unnaturally quiet.

Jacen Solo held firm his mother's hand. Glancing from her still, blanketed form, he checked the drip line that fed life-sustaining fluid into her veins. As he fearfully prayed, again, for the strength she needed to survive, a shadow passed over him and his eyes darted upward, noting the worried, anxious expression on his father's face. Instantly reminded of the grief Han had suffered after Chewbacca's death, Jacen sadly reflected on how powerful and consuming a toll it had taken. It had come too close to self-destruction. Now, knowing how critical his mother's condition was, the boy's eyes tried desperately to belie the fear his heart held for his father. "She won't give up," he said, feeling the need to lend some optimism to the situation and worried that he'd only succeeded in failing miserably.



The sound of those words cracked the silence and Han caught his son's gaze. Long ago he had acquired talents of his own. They had been cast in a childhood of subjugation, hammered during an adolescence of bondage, and honed in a life of smuggling. Hardship and danger had scored the pattern of his natural talent of hearing the slightest emotions, or lack of, in the words of others, at detecting the tiniest of nuances, or overabundance in body language. It was an instinct that had kept him alive when nothing else would have, a talent that had played a major role in creating a reputation equally respected by friends as well as enemies. That ability served him well now as he heard both the barely controlled tremble in his son's voice and the uneven draw of his breath, saw the hardening in the line of his mouth and tightening in the corners of his eyes. Laying a hand on Jacen's shoulder, he said, "I wouldn't want to be the Vong that meets up with her after this. Your mother has a will that won't let go easily."

Still overwhelmed by the sacrifice his mother had made back on Duro, Jacen quietly commented, "Uncle Luke calls it 'spirit'."

Han nodded knowingly, haunted by a memory of long ago, during the trip to Yavin Four:

*"What do you think of her, Han?"*

*"I try not to, Kid."*

*"Good."*

*"Still, she's got a lot of spirit..."*

Gazing at his wife, Han held the memory close, his will of not letting her go an anchor against the possibility that he could actually lose her. Leia was responsible for everything that sparked his sense of purpose and belonging. If not for her, he'd have never met Luke, the brother he'd never had but gained. Nor would he and Leia have had had children. She was a future he had long ago hoped for, has lost hope in, and then been given. "She's got a lot of spirit, kid." The words were spoken with reverence. "I've never met anyone with more of it."

"Is that what made you fall in love with her?"

A vague, wistful smile tugged at the corners of Han's mouth "I wasn't willing to admit it for a long time." He cocked his head slightly to one side. "Your uncle said I was 'thick-headed' and 'stubborn'." Han's demeanor altered in such a subtle way that it reminded Jacen of that moment just before a tide quietly changed, or daylight became dusk. After a steadying breath, Han reached out, one hand brushing against Leia's cheek, and added, almost as a whisper, "Of course, he said that about you too, didn't he?"

Feeling as though his presence would only intrude on private memories, Jacen gave his mother's hand a gentle squeeze before rising to leave. Words formed on his next breath, but died unspoken as he saw the strain and sadness in the face across from him. Han's attention was focused now entirely on Leia. As he watched his father take his place at his mother's side, Jacen witnessed the quiet transformation of father and friend to husband and lover. In Han Solo's eyes was a resolve his eldest son had never seen and for the first time realized the strength of love, the tenacity of will that bound his parents one to the other through so many times over the years. His father would never let go.



Reluctantly, Jacen left his parents alone. Once outside the compartment, he leaned against the bulkhead and closed his eyes. There were so many things he had wanted to say. There were so many things that he wanted to confess. That he was glad his parents had at last reconciled. That he was relieved the rift between his mother and sister had been repaired. That he was sorry he'd ever doubted Anakin's abilities as a Jedi. That he was ashamed of fearing that his family would not survive intact. He had once pessimistically visualized all of them becoming simply the splintered remnants of some indestructible illusion that legend said could not be broken. And above all, he wanted to say that he loved all of them more than life itself and could not now tell them so.

Until recently, Jacen hadn't believed he would survive his indecision concerning his own path. From that place deep inside where no one could reach, he wondered at the cost of what his newfound convictions would bring to the uncertain future they all faced. Only time would tell the outcome. For now one thing was certain. Lives would be risked and perhaps even be lost. The galaxy would never be the same and might yet fall to the enemy. But Jacen Solo's family would never fail each other.

✕

The hours passed slowly. Jaina sat in the freighter's cockpit. Jacen had gone to the galley to get them some energy bars and something to drink. Though no one onboard had much of an appetite, he had reasoned they had to have something. As the time passed, everyone's concern for Leia heightened. Even C-3PO could not escape the worry for his mistress of so many years and eventually had gone to check on her. Surprisingly, Captain Solo had not ordered him to leave. Rather, the usually brash Corellian had been quiet, making no comment save for, "You did okay helping out up front, Threepio."

The droid looked from Leia to the downcast face of her husband. "Thank you, sir."

Han had merely nodded, completely lost once again to his own thoughts.

Wanting to ask if he could be of any further assistance, the droid had decided that the most he could do was keep a steady, unobtrusive watch on all aboard. Especially on Leia. With that intention a priority, C-3PO had stepped from the small compartment, his destination the cockpit. Pausing for a brief moment, he had looked over his shoulder; Han Solo raised his wife's tiny hand, pressed his lips to it and closed his eyes tightly. If C-3PO had possessed a heart, it would have gone out to the captain. Upon his return to the cockpit, the droid busied himself for a few moments at the navi-computer, his assigned station on the trip to Coruscant, and then asked Jaina if he could be permitted to shut down for awhile. She had easily agreed, assuring the droid that if he were needed they would let him know. To his benefit, Jaina had turned the bright overhead lights off, leaving the compartment bathed in the periodic winking of tiny, colorful instrument tell tales ---it would be very unlikely that anyone would notice that he wasn't really switched off. The droid turned his seat to face the instrument panel before him and, as he'd said he would do, made a routine check and analysis. Unbeknownst to his young companion, he had taken readings from the ship's med-station. A few moments passed quietly. He detected a drop in Leia's temperature. Her pulse and respiration, though weak, showed no change and he therefore decided there was no call to alarm his friends. He would, however, keep a continual vigil on Leia's vital signs. Just as Jacen returned, C-3PO was more profoundly aware that he'd hated the lie he'd told; it went against his ethics as a protocol droid. But the

stress suffered by those he had come to consider his own 'family' was enough for him to make such a conscious decision. He feared that eventually they'd become too weary and someone onboard would have to be aware of any change in Leia's condition. In reflection, he supposed he should have mentioned his intentions, but judged that his friends would deny their fatigue and manually switch him off. By performing his own 'deactivation' he could 'power up' instantly should anything out of the ordinary occur.

In the forward seats, the twins were clearly worried not only for their mother but their father as well. Jaina continued to gaze at the myriad of stars visible from the viewport of the cockpit. The subdued atmosphere gave her a sense of privacy but not security. Coruscant seemed too far away and Jaina feared her mother would not survive the journey.

In the co-pilot's seat, Jacen stifled a yawn and rubbed the bridge of his nose between a forefinger and thumb. "How are you doing?" he asked. He glanced at the energy bar he'd given her. Still unwrapped, she held it in one hand. "You ought to eat that," he instructed calmly.

Jaina sighed in exasperation and ripped the top of the wrapping off. Chomping off a bite of the bar, she glared at her sibling. "There! I've eaten. Happy now?"

Her brother twisted in his seat, giving his attention to the panel in front of him. "Dad wasn't hungry either." He suddenly wondered why C-3PO had been so quiet and peering over his shoulder he inquired, "What's with him?"

"He asked if he could switch off for a while. I let him."

Jacen merely shrugged. With the mood his sister was in it was probably just as well the droid remained quiet.

After a few awkward minutes, Jaina asked, "How's Dad?"

"Holding on to Mom."

Jacen tried to hide the tightness of emotion in his voice but wasn't entirely successful. The conversation and observation he'd had with his father hours earlier were still very fresh and could not easily be set aside. Nor did he want to. "I'm glad they're together again." He noticed as his sister tucked her chin and blinked back tears. Like him, she had wished their parents had been able to spend more time together. But Jacen was also aware that his sister feared their mother would die and there would be no opportunity for her to change things between them, no time to say she was sorry. No time to say all the things that needed saying. "Don't worry," he told her, "Dad won't let her leave."

But for Jaina the encouragement her brother tried to lend did little to ease her mind and heart. The memory of words she had angrily exchanged with her mother, words she wished she had never spoken, words she might never get a chance to apologize for, haunted her thoughts.

*"You'll never catch up. Not with my help, not with a dozen assistants. That's because you take on everyone else's problems. Well, you weren't there for mine."*

*"Jaina, I'm trying to help them --- and you."*

*"I just don't want help anymore. You showed me I had to learn to do without you. So I did."*

And might, she now feared, have to do so forever.

She glanced at the deck, wishing for the thousandth time that they were home. In her young life she had traveled most of the galaxy and never felt so far from one destination as now. Duro to Coruscant was a hop and skip by anyone's standards. Why did it have to seem so far away now? Suddenly she remembered the trip their family had taken to Corellia. She'd only been nine at the time. "Are we there yet?" she and her brothers had asked countless times. A part of her wanted to be that little girl again. The one who could remain riveted to her father's voice as he told stories or squealed with laughter as he playfully tickled her and her brothers in a gentle game before bedtime. The one who her mother had rocked and soothed away angers and fears upon learning of her father's brutal treatment by the Yevetha, Nil Spaar. The one who would clutch her Wookiee doll, Elba, close to her cheek after being tucked in bed. She even wanted to be that little girl who'd been scolded and excused from the dinner table for calling her father's ship, "the dumb old *Falcon*". What she wouldn't give now to hear her mother's reprimand for that insult. All those moments, so long ago, now seemed to have occurred only yesterday. And yet they remained out of reach...as far away as home now felt.

Turning toward her brother, she felt more than saw the understanding in his eyes. "How could I have been so wrong about her? About myself?"

"You couldn't help how you felt," Jacen consoled.

"I feel...ashamed."

Jacen nodded. The compartment grew awkwardly quiet and he decided the silence needed to be broken. "You were pretty brave back there."

Jaina Solo shook her head. "I was scared. More than I think I've ever been. Even after I went EV."

"I know. I was too. Mom was," Jacen caught himself, "is, very proud of you, you know."

Tears welled in her eyes and brimming over the lashes, ran a course down her cheeks. "That's the worst part."

"It doesn't have to be."

Staring out at the stars, Jaina answered, "Maybe it needs to be." For a moment she thought she could feel that warmth which had passed between her and her mother, just before Leia had slipped into unconsciousness. Strangely, it seemed to have settled on her once again and Jaina found herself wondering if in some way, her mother was rocking away her anger and fears again. "I wish home wasn't so far away."

C-3PO turned his head, giving away his false state of deactivation. "Jaina! Jacen! Your mother's vital signs are dropping!"

⌘

## Part Two: Promontory

### Leia:

I struggle, desperate to open my eyes, but can't overcome their weight ...unlike so many others in my life. Something covers my hands, radiating special, familiar warmth that I feared lost to me forever but as fate would have it, found again. Yet, although I finally recognize it, despite how hard I fight to grasp it or allow it to sustain me, I am unable to hold on. There is too much pain here, too much cold. I am so tired...

Nearby, a voice, gentle and caring, calls my name from out of the darkness. It is a voice I know, one that I have missed terribly over the years. Peering into this nothingness I have slipped into, I see a tiny shaft of light. It blossoms and in wonderment I move toward it. Toward the voice. But every step is a battle as I falter against something that refuses to release me, holding me to that other world that is too full of pain. The light beyond grows, and I somehow know that it offers peace from the agony and weariness in my body. The voice beckons still and like a moth to a flame, I let myself fly toward it. Just let it take you, I tell myself. You don't have to fight anymore. I breathe deeply and give myself over. Without warning, something pops. It is so loud I have to cover my ears. I realize the line that has kept me anchored elsewhere has begun to unravel one strand at a time. Less hindered now, I move faster and finally the warm light is all around me and there is no darkness, there is no cold. There is no pain.

Suddenly, directly in front of me stands the man who raised me, was my mentor, my teacher, and above all, loved me as if I'd truly been his own daughter.

I reach out and take his hand in one of my own; another foot of rope lets loose but still I am bound to it. If I could discover how to untie it, I would. All I want is to remain here, to bask in this reunion. "Father, are you going to take me with you?"

"I can," he answers in that kind voice that I loved so well.

A different voice breaks through from elsewhere. "Mom! Don't!"

My father looks at me with questioning eyes. "Are you sure you're ready?"

Other voices call to me, begging me to stay with them. I understand the implication of what my father asks but weariness is claiming my thoughts. What would it cost if I just breathed a sigh and let go, let my father put his arm around my shoulders and lead me out of here? Certainly those I leave behind will go on with their lives.

There's that damned rope again, tugging at me. I could swear it has a voice. "Leia, please!"

But the light is so warm here, and as I enter, it bathes me in a sensation that is so exquisite no words can offer a description of it. Everything else is so far away now. Even the other voices are faint. However, the rope still tries to hold me and its voice is something near to a gasp as the length unwinds. I grip my father's hand tighter.



"I'm ready."

Compelled by the promise of peace, I fall into step beside him, let him guide me onward. The weakness that had encompassed me lifts away completely.

But somewhere, I hear someone crying and from out of nowhere, something like a drop of rain falls on my face. I stop to feel it run down my cheek and as I do so, the rope surprisingly jerks hard enough to toss me off balance. My hand is torn from my father's. I am alone, standing on the edge of a promontory. I cannot see my father anymore and the warm, glowing light is gone. I look behind me and see my past. The faces of those I have known drift by. Moments in my life appear from out of a mist. I see the destruction of my home world, the medal ceremony on Yavin, kissing Han for the very first time, my wedding, the birth of my children, the face of my daughter before I drifted into this place. So many memories...

Turning, I look at the gulf on the opposite side of the narrow ledge. A future of infinite possibilities is shown to me. I see what influence my leaving or remaining might have on them. And on those I still love. There is still too much for me to do and experience. I know where I belong and I desperately search for the frayed and tattered remains of that rope, knowing now what it is --- and who.

A sound cracks the barrier between frontiers, like ice breaking on a frozen pond. It is terrible and lonely and it pierces my heart as no physical injury could ever compare to. Something I cannot see but recognize touches my brow, my cheek, and I breathe deeper as that special warmth, the one I had allowed myself to drift away from, brushes lightly over my eyes, caresses my lips, igniting its own light within me. My name, whispered with an intensity only the heart of one's spirit can generate and understand, urges me to return, to step from the promontory and into the future. The rope is now not only my anchor but a ladder too and without hesitation I fight against the coming pain and growing cold to make my way to the surface.

My eyes are reluctant to open but my need is too strong; although nothing is quite clear, I realize, through a haze, that the face before me wears the signs of fatigue brought on by fear and worry. The eyes, however, hold a strength, a belonging, and a need that will not let go. No matter what. I think that if I had gone into that realm of warm light, he would have followed and not cared what the price may have been. Still hindered by weakness and pain, I manage to curl my fingers around Han's hands. My voice is less than a whisper. "You look terrible."

### **Part Three: No Frontiers**

#### **Han:**

The hours stretch on endlessly. And I sit here waiting, hoping --- even praying. Just when I think I've lost all track of how long it's been since we left Duro, someone comes by to remind me.

"Get some rest, dad. You look almost worse than mom. She'd have a fit if she could see you now."

"Later."

"You ought to try to eat something."

" Maybe in a while, son. You go ahead. See that Jaina has something too."

" Don't worry, you know Mom, she never gives up."

" No. She never has."

They all mean well but still, I can't afford the time to leave her. I can't afford to let go of her. Not when I might lose her. She's the one thing in my life that's given me the reasons to become who I am or can make me feel this terrified. I see my own fear reflected in the faces of Jaina and Jacen. And I don't have to see Anakin or Luke or Mara to know that same look haunts them too. When I was a smuggler, with no family to worry about, things were so different. More simple in a lot of ways. And a hell of a lot more lonely. In those days, I would have run away from this kind of commitment. In those days, I lied a lot to myself. Yeah, in those days...and then along came a princess with a spirit I've never seen matched by anything. And probably never will again. I let that change me, because I wanted her and her everything more than I wanted anything. So all I can do is stay here beside her, hold on to her, hoping she knows I'm here. Suddenly, I find myself thinking again of the last several months, of the frontier of misunderstandings, jealousy and anger Leia and I had allowed to come between us. So often, I wondered if I would ever find my way back to her, afraid I'd said things she could never forgive, that the trip across my own wasteland wouldn't be worth it in the end. After all, I'd said and done some pretty shitty things to her over the past year. I'd done the one thing that wound up doing more damage to myself than all the booze I'd drunk after Chewie died. I'd hurt her. When I saw her on Duro she should've slugged the hell outta me. Instead, she kissed me. For someone who's been called smart, I sure was wrong; how can you separate yourself from someone who's a part of you?

The monitor above the bed registers another drop in vital signs and I seem to feel her hands grow a degree colder. My voice cracks, "No..." and leaning forward, I say her name again. I've never seen anyone's skin so pale. For a moment her face is a blur; I wipe away a tear that travels down her neck, then look up into the stricken expressions on the faces of my kids. A beeping noise from the monitor sounds an alarm --- she's slipping away. Above the voices of our children, I hear my own voice. "Gods, Leia! Your hands are like ice!" I hold them tighter. Touch her face. Kiss her. " Don't do this."

I almost think I imagined feeling a slight movement from her hands, still caught in one of my own. " Leia? " Afraid to breathe, I watch her face, see the vaguest flutter of her lashes. I'm hardly aware, from the pounding of my heart, that I said her name. But I know she heard because she tells me I look terrible. I could almost laugh out loud and even wonder if I just did.

I don't know what the future holds, but I do know one thing. There won't be any frontiers between us.



True to my reputation, I carry my charges with speeds that are still legendary, like the bird of prey for which I am named. Alive in ways that only some can fathom and understand, I respond to every breath of those I hold dear. I hear the silent prayers. In each and every heartbeat, I feel the resonance of pain. In their eyes, I witness the fear of facing another loss. But in their whispers of hope I also find an undiscovered swiftness unknown to me. And so, I will not fail to bring them home.





*"When peace reigns, sons lay to rest their fathers. When War is sovereign, fathers bury their sons."*

— Jacen Solo

# BLOODSTRIFE

The evacuation from Coruscant had been horrific to say the least. If such a thing can even be put into words. So many people scrambling, fleeing in utter panic, consumed and blinded by overwhelming terror to get to a ship, any ship. To be within the web of such chaos is to hear the voice of Hell. Enemy as well as friendly fire shattered duraglass and transparasteel, blasted plastiform and formacrete, much of it igniting blazing fires. All of it added to and magnified the fall of the city and the amount of injury inflicted on those trying to escape, to find even a corner of safe haven. The earsplitting roar and thunderous drone of military and civilian aircraft, mixed with the chirr of sky buses, zing of personal speeders, and clarion of emergency vehicles. All melded with the squall of shouting voices, shrill screams, and wailing cries. War, especially striking such a heavily populated location, is truly the stuff of nightmares, the filaments and girders on which the construction of inconceivable terror is founded. It is never forgotten, forever embedded in the memories of those unfortunate enough to have met it. It is tragically and undeniably without comparison, making no distinction between age, gender, race, religion. It is brutality on a level that not even Nature is capable of inflicting, for it is waged intentionally and the innocent are always victimized.

## Part 1: Contemplation

The refugee camp on Hapes was no different than most we had seen. Crowded rows of tents housed displaced people hailing from a myriad of cultures. Some people argued over the simplest things, others were just grateful to be alive. The injured either screamed in pain or bore it silently. The old mourned their losses mostly with quiet tears, the young with piercing cries; and both echoed the fears of all. While some were inconsolable, others attempted to give comfort. The sound of the injured was often indistinguishable from that of hunger or loss. Even the most hard-hearted of people could not ignore the pain of such tragedy. While circumstances of that magnitude can cause strife, it often serves to bring people together and usually lends a greater understanding to life itself.

Staying in the camp while the Falcon underwent repairs and an interior cleaning, Han and I could merely take it all in stride. The uncomfortable conditions were the least of our worries, for we had suffered so much more on a personal level.

In the still, dismal gray of late afternoon, Luke and Mara had come by to visit and discuss the arrangements for what would take place that night. I had fixed some coffee but no one drank. We spoke in hushed tones, lacking the energy or inclination to converse with any fraction of alacrity. It just wasn't in us. The loss we all shared was too new, too great, too raw. Luke looked at me with a pain I understood all too well. But his awkwardness with Han was unbearable; he could hardly look at him, feeling utterly and solely responsible for approving a mission Han had been so adamantly against and one that had proven so costly. My heart went out to both of them.

Eventually, unable to cope, Luke grew anxious to leave, needing not only time to prepare for what was to come later but needing to be alone too. In departure, Mara displayed rare, outward emotion by putting her arms around me for a few moments and then, even more uncharacteristically, she hugged Han close before turning to leave. The two of them have never been exactly the best of friends. But they *are* family and that puts more differences aside than not. Reciprocating her sincerity, he held her hands, kissed her lightly on the forehead, and told her we'd be fine, that all of us would be fine. If the conviction in his voice was any indication of the outcome of the war, the Yuuzhan Vong will most certainly have to find some other galaxy to call home.

With Luke and Mara gone, Han and I sat across the camp table from one another, the mugs of coffee untouched and cold. Quiet minutes stretched like hours. Strange...how silence can be so loud. After a time, Han said, "We have a few hours yet. You want something to eat?"

I shook my head and answered half-heartedly, "No. I don't think I could." I cleared my throat a little and added, "Maybe later."

He ran a hand through his hair, over his face, and I could feel how tired he was. Both of us were exhausted. For a few moments he stared at the coffee in his mug, swirled it around a little, fidgeting. Thinking. Rising slowly, still holding the mug, he told me he was going to check things on the *Falcon*.

I read the question in his eyes. "I think I'll try to rest for a bit." He knew I wouldn't but realized it was just my way of acknowledging his need, as well as mine, to be alone for a short time.

Indifferently, he nodded, sighed and swallowed hard. I ached to wrap myself around him, to bear every ounce of pain he felt --- just like he'd been doing for me ever since Anakin had been hurt, ever since we'd lost him and ever since Jason had been captured. However, had I done so, he would have crumbled. I asked how long he'd be gone.

"I don't know," he muttered offhandedly, an uncommon, uncomfortable tremble thick in his voice. "Until tonight...as soon as Luke's ready."

At that moment he turned just a fraction, just enough to look at me. Hazel eyes mirrored my heart, pain teetered precariously on the edge, not wanting to allow the dam of emotions to burst apart. That would come ...later. Breaking my gaze, he looked outside again. I knew he

clung tenaciously a strength he now maintained for my benefit alone. I wanted to tell him it was alright, that he didn't have to be strong for me. But I didn't. I Couldn't. It would have been a lie. If not for him, I would have allowed our loss to take me under its rip tide, to hold me under and drown me. But Han is my anchor, my safe harbor in a world turned upside down and torn apart.

He tried a sip of the cold, bitter coffee, grunted in disgust and tossed it onto the ground; he stared at it for a moment, the mug dangling from its handle on the crook of his index finger. "When things get back to normal," he remarked in a vain attempt to be light, "Let's not buy instant anymore, okay?" From over one shoulder he gazed at me, his composure labored. A lame grin lurked at one corner of his mouth. "Stuff tastes like bantha piss."

It wasn't that the comment was very funny, it wasn't. But it reminded me of how, in the worst of situations, Han often says something to take the edge off. It's one of the traits that made me fall in love with him. "Yeah. It sucks."

Suddenly, I felt his warm, tender touch on either side of my face. Lifting my chin, he brought my gaze up to meet his. A heartbeat, a kiss, a raw whispered, "I love you," and he quietly left.

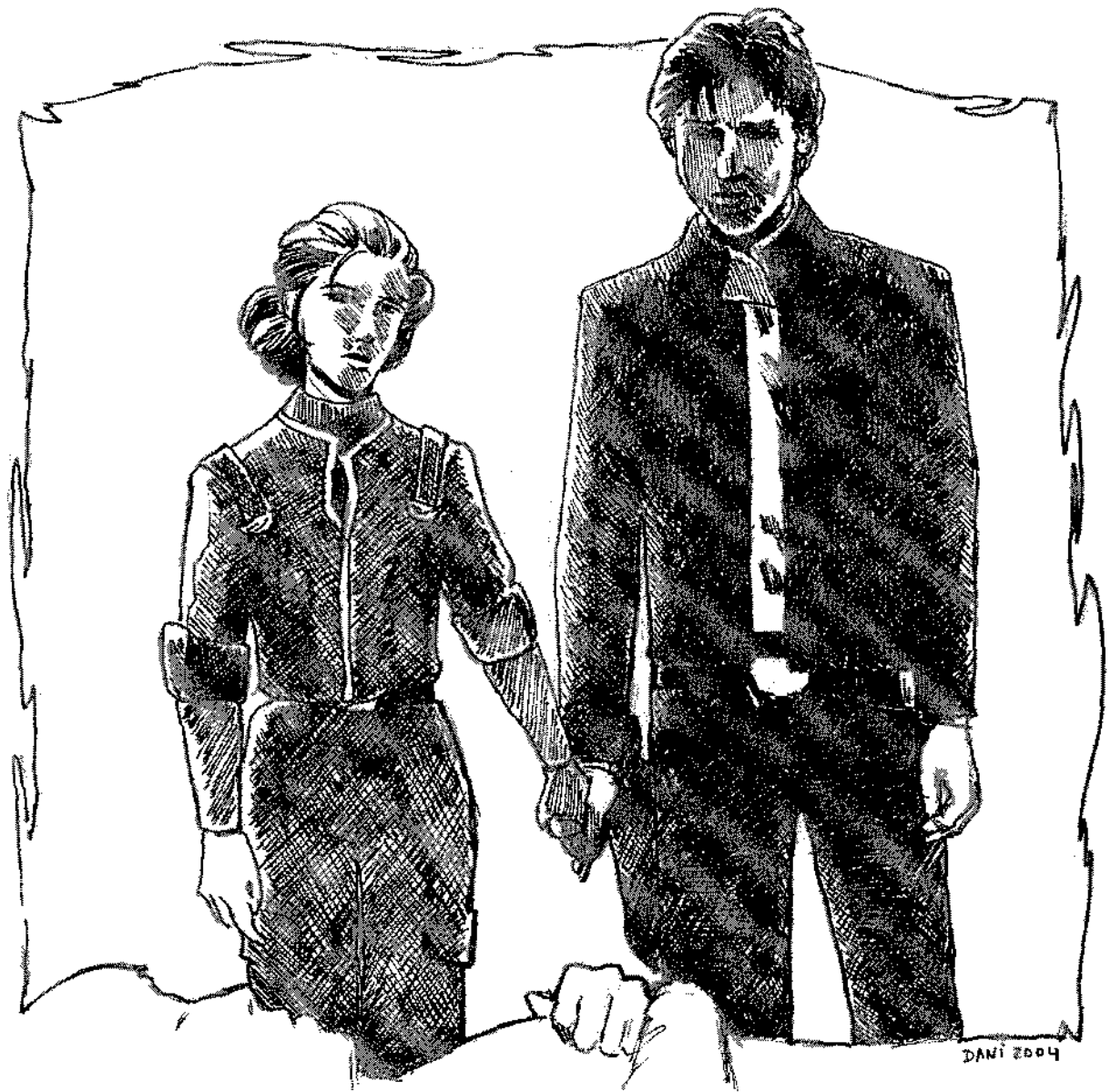
The tent flap slipped back into place, the rough, sturdy material scuffing against itself in a hush that matched my own whispered response, "I know. I know."

## Part 2: Merit

I didn't sleep. I didn't rest. There were simply too many memories racing in my mind. In my heart. Eventually, I left the tent and went to the landing facilities. As I'd expected, the *Falcon's* ramp was down, but the hatch was closed. Han was aware that I'd come onboard ---- nothing happens on his ship without his knowledge. Besides, we've shared too much of one another to be blind to the other's presence, or to feel what touches us.

I found him in our cabin, sitting on the edge of the bed, forearms resting on his knees. The lights were turned down very low, but I saw the small, slender box that lay discarded and open on the floor in front of him. Rather than look up as I sat beside him, he wrapped a hand around one of mine. The simple gesture said more than words could have. His other hand was balled into a tight fist; I did not have to ask what it was he held. And my memory raced back years...

*Luke and I had gone with Han and Chewie to Ord Mantell. We were to meet a contact and pick up supplies desperately needed for the construction of the base on Hoth. Something about the way the contact had acted over the holo-link wasn't right. Han said she sounded too calm and therefore, too scared. We all had a bad feeling about it...and we were right. After meeting her in a crowded marketplace we discovered, too late, that Imperial spies had found her out. To make matters more disastrous, a bounty hunter happened to recognize Han by the red Corellian Bloodstripe adorning the outer seams of his trousers. Caught between two enemies, we were sitting ducks. The Imperial authorities tried to move in quietly, knowing as well as we that everything in sight was an obstacle. But the bounty hunter was not so patient and when the firefight erupted we fought our way among shoppers and vendors, booths and hover sedans. In all the confusion we lost track of the bounty hunter; he ambushed us from a side alley. I'd seen him first and shoved Han out of the way before a blaster bolt could take him squarely in the back. Luckily, it only grazed me across the shoulder blades, not a serious wound*



*but the look on Han's face as he scooped me off the ground was a mixture of anger and fear. Chewie had been our wild card, drawing fire away as Han carried me. Still, the Imperials pressed ahead. As for the bounty hunter, Chewie had seen him go down, shot from behind by someone we never saw. Just who our unseen accomplice was we would not know for a very long time.*

*We eventually made it back to the Falcon and Han and Chewie flew at breakneck speed, leaving Ord Mantell far behind. On a course that wove between the core worlds, Han caught the Corellian Trade Spine on the other side. It made our destination closer but also more dangerous to get to; he dodged Imperial blockades, pirates, and privateers. Finally, we arrived on Hoth. My injury was attended to. I was none the worse for wear but according to Luke, Han was in far worse shape, feeling responsible for the red Bloodstripe having made us as much a target as it had him. He did not wear it again until long after the Battle of Endor.*

The war with the Yuuzhan Vong forced him once again to relinquish wearing the Bloodstripe.

As I sat there, he finally uncurled his fist; the matching strands of broken red piping, so rarely awarded throughout Corellian history, lay neatly folded in the center of his palm.

"I haven't seen those in a while," I whispered proudly.

From his expression, I instantly understood what it was he was going to do. Sometimes, actions speak louder than words. Tears stung my eyes. And this time, I let them come. My bittersweet smile was reflected by his. Without speaking we rose and walked hand in hand to the aft cargo hold.

My hand still cradled in Han's, we stepped up to the repulsorsled on which our youngest child lay. Instead of the chilly air in the hold, I felt something warm and reassuring and in the space between one heartbeat and the next, it brushed around us. Han's hand held mine a little tighter. Had he felt the same thing I had? His eyes closed briefly then and he took a breath just before he drew back the drape that covered Anakin. For a long time he gazed in silence upon our son's peaceful features, as if to indelibly etch them into memory. Gently letting go of my hand, he reverently set about attaching the red Bloodstripes to Anakin's pant legs. Afterward, he reached up and brushed his fingers through our son's light brown-blond hair --- an easy, caring gesture I'd witnessed so often before. Then he bent and placed a tender kiss on Anakin's forehead, as if merely saying 'goodnight'.

Taking my hand once more we stood our vigil together. There were no words between us; there didn't need to be. What I'd felt as we entered the hold enfolded and comforted us. And in that moment, we were not alone.

*"Life, despite anything that hinders it, always finds a way to continue. It is the way of things."*

--- Mara Jade Skywalker

# Genesis

*Ossus: region of Cecere*

*We arrived barely a week ago. The days are warm. It's the season of high spring and each day plants sprout more buds, blooms and shoots. Migrating animals have made their way back to this pastoral, temperate region. Having settled in their summer burrows and nests, they will raise their young and feed on rich foods until the long summer eventually gives way to fall and then the long journeys will begin again, just as they have for countless millennia. Life, despite anything that hinders it, always finds a way to continue. It is the way of things.*

*The trip to get here took longer than we would have liked but neither Han nor I could have justified pushing Millennium Falcon very hard. On Coruscant, during the last battle that finally ended the war against the Yuuzhan Vong, she took considerable damage. Han says the repair work will be so extensive to get her back to specs, that she'll have to be rebuilt practically from the ground up. I know he'll be glad to have her back to normal again and so will I. I now feel as close to her as anyone other than Han. In the time I've been his co-pilot, Han and I have become closer than ever. I do not believe either of us would have survived the war had this not been so.*

*Regardless of how much a place or person is affected by it, war always leaves its mark, it's ugly scars -- whether visible or not. Some wounds go deeper than others and naturally take more time to heal. Some never fully do. Perhaps they aren't intended to and the pain from them can surface to haunt us in moments we least expect.*

--- Journal entry, Leia Solo

Pushing off the sandy bottom of the clear lake, Han Solo broke the surface and grabbed the edge of the dock. Peeking over the edge, he spied his wife. Leia sat in a short legged beach chair. Her hair was as dark and rich as it had been when he'd first met her. Worn in a single braid, it trailed over a bare shoulder. She looked up from her data pad and smiled as his eyes traveled over her and the plum-colored, strapless, swim suit she wore. "I like your suit," he rumbled amorously.

“ Flirt.” His lopsided grin, she noted, was as charming and as inviting as ever.

“ Maybe you should get it wet,” he invited with an added wink for emphasis.

“ I plan to,” she promised coquettishly. “ When I’m finished with this.”

He sighed, his disappointment only slightly feigned. “ Okay. But promise not to take too long.”

“ I promise.”

Effortlessly, he pulled himself up onto the dock and sat at the edge, feet dangling over the side. He leaned forward, hands braced on the ends of the weathered boards, and gave a shake of his head, deliberately sending water spraying in every direction. Leia laughed playfully as the shower hit her. “ Oh! You’ll pay for that!”

He looked over one shoulder and replied, “I hope so, Your Worship.”

They had not relaxed like this since the outset of the war against the invading Yuuzhan Vong. There hadn’t been time to. Even the brief intervals between traveling from one place to the next, between one mission and the next, he and Leia, like so many others caught up in the struggle to survive, simply hadn’t had the opportunity to really unwind.

He caught the towel she threw at him and chuckled softly as he dried his face and arms. He laid back, his left hand resting on his chest and his right arm, bent at the elbow, draped over his eyes. The afternoon sun had warmed the wooden planks beneath him and the heat was soothing against the muscles in his back. Lying there, he thought of nothing, was content to merely be still and just listen. The warm, gentle breeze whispered through the tall grass and rustled its way among the leaves and bows of trees. Occasionally, high branches creaked as they swayed lazily to and fro. Tiny insects whizzed and buzzed during their journey to collect pollens. Small amphibious creatures croaked short spurts of some secret chorus, went silent and then would start all over again. Birds sang lilting songs and small animals chirped their calls back and forth to each other.

Suddenly, the sound of a splash followed by a child’s laughter rose on the air.

Han raised up. Squinting against the sunlight, he saw a small row boat. Luke paddled it easily from around a nearby, sandy point. Mara and their son, Ben, were with him. The small boy pointed at the concentric rings on the water where a fish had jumped. Luke and Mara could not contain their own lighthearted comments at their son’s fascination with everything around him. Ben laughed some more and then, obviously pointing in wonder at some other fascinating thing, loudly exclaimed, “ Ohhh! Daddy, look! “ The sound of his voice, his laughter, was filled with awe and excitement and above everything else, innocence. It was a good sound.

One that reminded Han of his youngest son at the same age.

The memory struck like a burning lance straight to the center of his heart. Reflexively, he held his breath against the suffocating tightness in his throat. His hands instantly clenched into fists. He had to squeeze his eyes hard shut against the burn that rose against them.

Unexpectedly, a hand gently stroked his damp hair. He hadn't been aware that Leia had come to sit behind him. As she took his left hand in hers, he sucked in a ragged breath.

"It always hits when you least expect it." Too well, she knew what her husband was feeling, what images had come into his mind. She visualized their son, Anakin, when he'd been the same age as Ben was now --- a toddler, full of wonder for the world around him, eager to experience it all and anxious to share his amazement with everyone. Hearing Ben's laughter had struck Leia as hard as it had struck her husband. It was a natural reaction, one that simply couldn't be helped. Well over a standard year had passed since Anakin Solo had died in the war; he'd only just turned seventeen. Grief was an ongoing process and the pain of that loss was a wound that could never fully heal. Through her own brimming tears, Leia bent forward and kissed the hairline along her husband's brow. As he reached up to her with one hand, the sunlight glinted against the wetness rolling off at the corners of his closed eyes. With her thumb, she tenderly wiped them away and then pressed her face into his open palm. After a moment, she moved to sit along side him. "We're going to be alright," she whispered. "I promise you, we will."

He nodded vaguely, a part of him believing her words and another part of him unsure that things would ever be alright again, no matter how much they tried to make it so. The war had done so much damage.

Slowly, he sat up. Leia shifted and settled her back against his chest. The old pair of bush shorts he wore were still damp but she didn't care. They sat for some time, watching Ben, Mara and Luke, letting memories surface and taking comfort from one another. Eventually, when Luke paddled the small boat around the next sandy point, Leia and Han returned Ben's enthusiastic wave and those of his parents. Leia's smile turned introspective. Surrounded by so much death and destruction during the war, her nephew was a clear reminder that beyond the destruction and death brought on by war, there was a future.

Han's hand tightened fractionally around hers. She turned her face to him and kissed him for a long time. A few years ago, their world had been full of promise. Leia had retired from full-time public office. Jacen and Jaina had barely turned sixteen and Anakin fourteen --- all three had their lives ahead of them, full of possibilities. And then the Yuuzhan Vong had invaded the galaxy and everything had changed. Leia and Han had watched their children lose the last vestiges of childhood and grow all too soon into battle-seasoned adults. The first blow they'd suffered from the invasion had been Chewbacca's death on Sempidal, the second when Anakin had died on Myrkur. That experience was doubly hard for them as Jacen was missing in action. Everyone, even Jaina and Luke and Mara, had believed him dead. At times, Han believed Leia's feelings that Jacen was still alive. Other times, however, he could not ignore the possibility that she might be wrong. Not knowing where their son was, or what condition he was in was a constant, emotional drag on them. Each day was fraught with worry for him and also for Jaina, who, struggling with the loss of her brothers, let her grief give way to anger as she tread dangerously on the edge of the Dark Side.

In ways far beyond anything they had faced or suffered before, Leia and Han had relied heavily on one another for an anchor in that desolate wasteland. With their family scattered to different corners of the world, they had often found refuge only in each other. After Anakin's death, Han had become increasingly reckless with the missions they had accepted. Leia understood his actions were rooted in his resolute desire to see an end to the war. She realized that, like her, he desperately wanted to gather their tattered family and escape, if only for a while, the death, the destruction and the constant threat surrounding them. His brazen courage,



something she had always loved about him, had begun to spin out of control. She feared he would go too far and in the end, she would lose him. Now, with the war over, being in such a place as Ossus, the days lent themselves to relaxation and reflection instead of survival. However, as surely as she knew Han relished this time, she felt it begin to take a toll on him, even though he'd not acknowledged it fully to himself. At times like this, she could feel the beginnings of his doubts about the future.

"I have something for you," she said finally and asked him to get the canvas bag she'd brought with her from their rented cottage.

Stretching one arm behind him, he lifted it and set on her lap.

Reaching inside, Leia withdrew a portable holo-player. Setting it down in front of her, she pressed a slender panel on one side. A shallow drawer swished open. Its contents were tiny, flat chips, each one containing holo-vids. "I thought the whole collection had been left on Coruscant. With everything that had been going on, I'd completely forgotten that we still had some of these onboard the *Falcon*." Some of the chips were nothing more than commercially produced and recorded dramas, documentaries or comedies; others were home-vids, taken over the years since their marriage. It was one of these that Leia plucked out and inserted into the player.

"What's on that one?" Han asked.

A wistful smile played on his wife's lips as she turned to look at him. "Something that both of us need right now. Something that will remind us that there's a good future aside from everything we've been through and maybe, in a way, because of it."

He couldn't imagine what could possibly be on the chip to make the days, the years ahead of them be full of the same hope and promise their world had once held. Planets had been destroyed or forever altered. Whole species obliterated. So many lives lost and so many more forever changed. What kind of future awaited them now? For a moment he almost told her to stop, that he didn't want to be reminded of Anakin, of Chewie, or the way things used to be. Not right now. But she'd already laid the chip in place and switched the power on. As an image flickered into view, he could not help but be taken by surprise. He smiled.

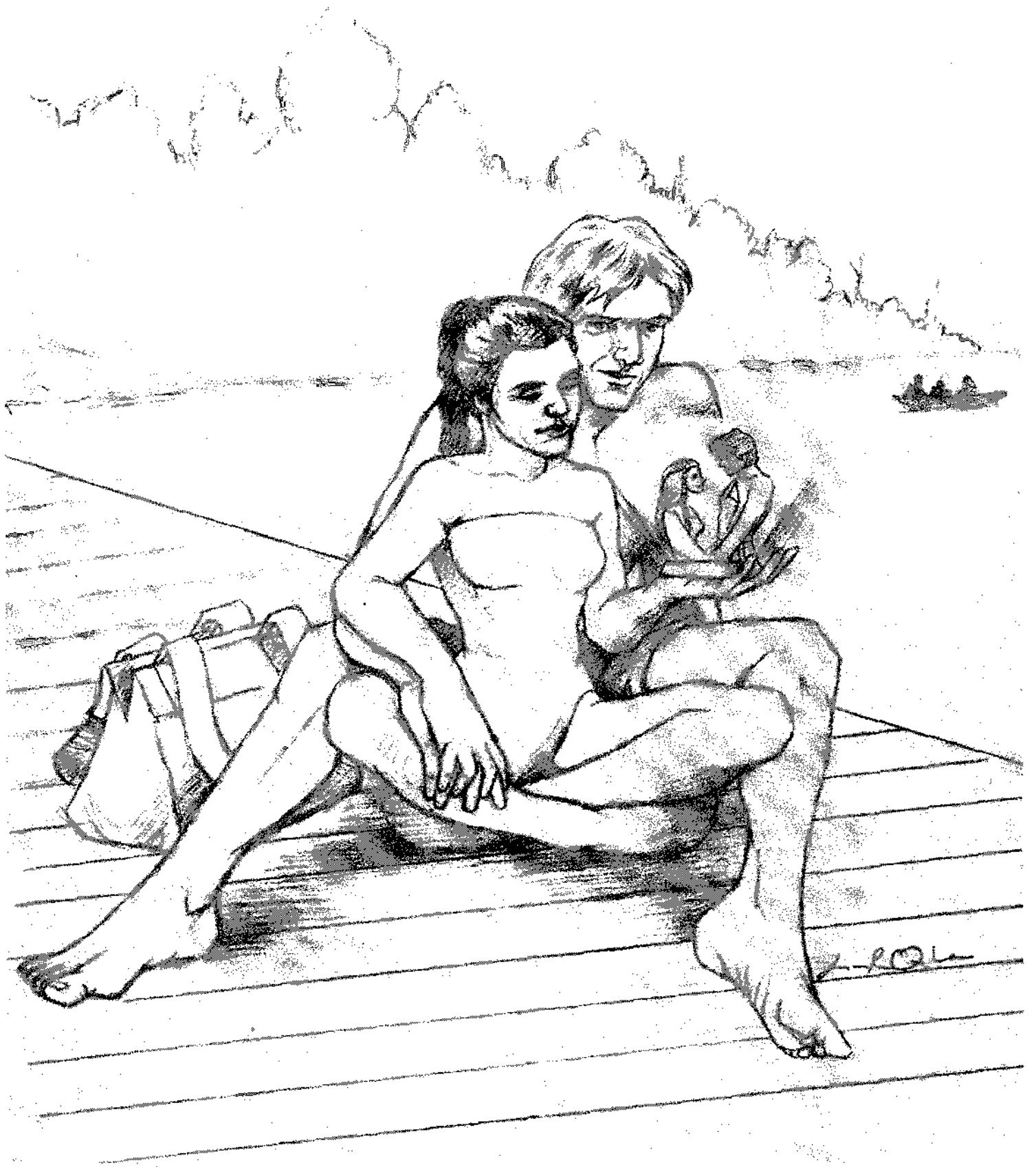
*Small lanterns had been set out down the pathway and all around the circular area by the natural pool; the illuminating effect lent an ethereal, peaceful quality to the place. Beside the water several people had gathered: Luke, Winter, Wedge, Jella, Lando, Chewbacca, and a handful of others that were Leia and Han's closest friends.*

*Luke gave his sister a kiss on one cheek. "You look beautiful."*

*She blushed. "Thank you," she answered. "I feel beautiful."*

*And she was.*

*Her hair was worn loose down her back, accented by a long braid at each temple that hung well past her shoulders. Another braid, over the top of her head, held her hair away from her face. It was a casual style, but comfortable and more importantly, Han loved it that way. Her gown was similar to the one Lando had given her on Cloud City but the color was different. Two*



shades of green, it had a flowing, ankle-length vest that accented the long, sleeveless silk bodice cut straight across the breast. It was comfortably clasped at the waist by an engraved metal, frog-style closure. The slightly padded collar was scalloped and extended across her shoulders to the long, sheer sleeves. At the wrists, a delicate, interweaving pattern of vine leaves set off the narrow cuffs. She wore no jewelry except for a coiled silver bracelet and matching ring. The overall effect was stunning in its simplicity. The style had been common on Alderaan and one of her favorites; the green color was commonly worn by brides in Corellian weddings. As Han stepped nearer to her, she warmly smiled and lightly took his hand, thinking he had never looked more handsome.

Baring the rarely awarded Corellian Bloodstripe that many had come to associate him with, the crisp black trousers Han wore matched his black uniform jacket; red piping lined the formal, upright collar and traveled the length of the front closure that was set off by silver buttons. When unfastened one quarter of the way down, the jacket's open flap revealed a gray underside. Although sometimes seen in the Imperial Navy, the uniform was strictly Corellian, and worn by officers hailing from that system. It was a style that pre-dated the reign of Palpatine and one that the Corellians were still adamant to keep. Han hadn't worn his own uniform in years --- not since he'd been court-martialed for releasing a Wookiee slave. He'd almost tossed it out after that but for some reason had not. He guessed he knew why now. After formally accepting a commission in the New Republic Alliance, he'd had it cleaned, pressed and repaired. No marks remained of having had his rank and insignia stripped all those years ago. It was now virtually brand new. Even better, Leia liked it on him.

He returned her beaming smile and bent toward her. His free hand lightly cupped the back of her head and he gently pulled her slightly forward, planting a kiss on her forehead. "I love you," he whispered and together they turned to face their friends.

Thoughtfully, Luke regarded the small gathering and then settled his attention on his sister and Han. Reciting the words that combined Alderaanian and Corellian ceremonies, he began: "We gather to celebrate the beauty of love's dream. To honor two hearts wishing on the same star. It is said that when lovers meet, they hear the echo of a shared dream. It is said that as two souls journey through life together, they come to learn the infinite capacity of the heart. That we are loved and that we have made a difference is an essential need of the spirit. We wish you the laughter of humor, patience of understanding, serenity of contentment, strength of your bond in the face of adversity and the warmth of life's moments shared. May you always know how much you are loved and how fortunate the universe is to have both of you in it."

Following an old tradition now almost forgotten, the couple had composed vows for one another. No assistance was allowed from anyone for it was believed that by doing so the words lost their potency and hence the bond between the couple would become spiritually invalid.

Leia's eyes were shining. She gazed at Han. "You are my beloved. My best friend," she added with a smile that beamed brighter than all of the lanterns, "and my finest hero. Your love is a quiet strength that gives meaning to every beat of my heart."

Han ardently held her gaze. "When the wind blows, I will steady you. When the rain falls, I will shelter you. When the sun rises, I will walk beside you. When night comes, I will dream with you."

The holo-vid showed them sharing a long, passionate kiss accented finally by a round of applause from their friends. Leia switched the viewer off as Han asked her where she'd found it.

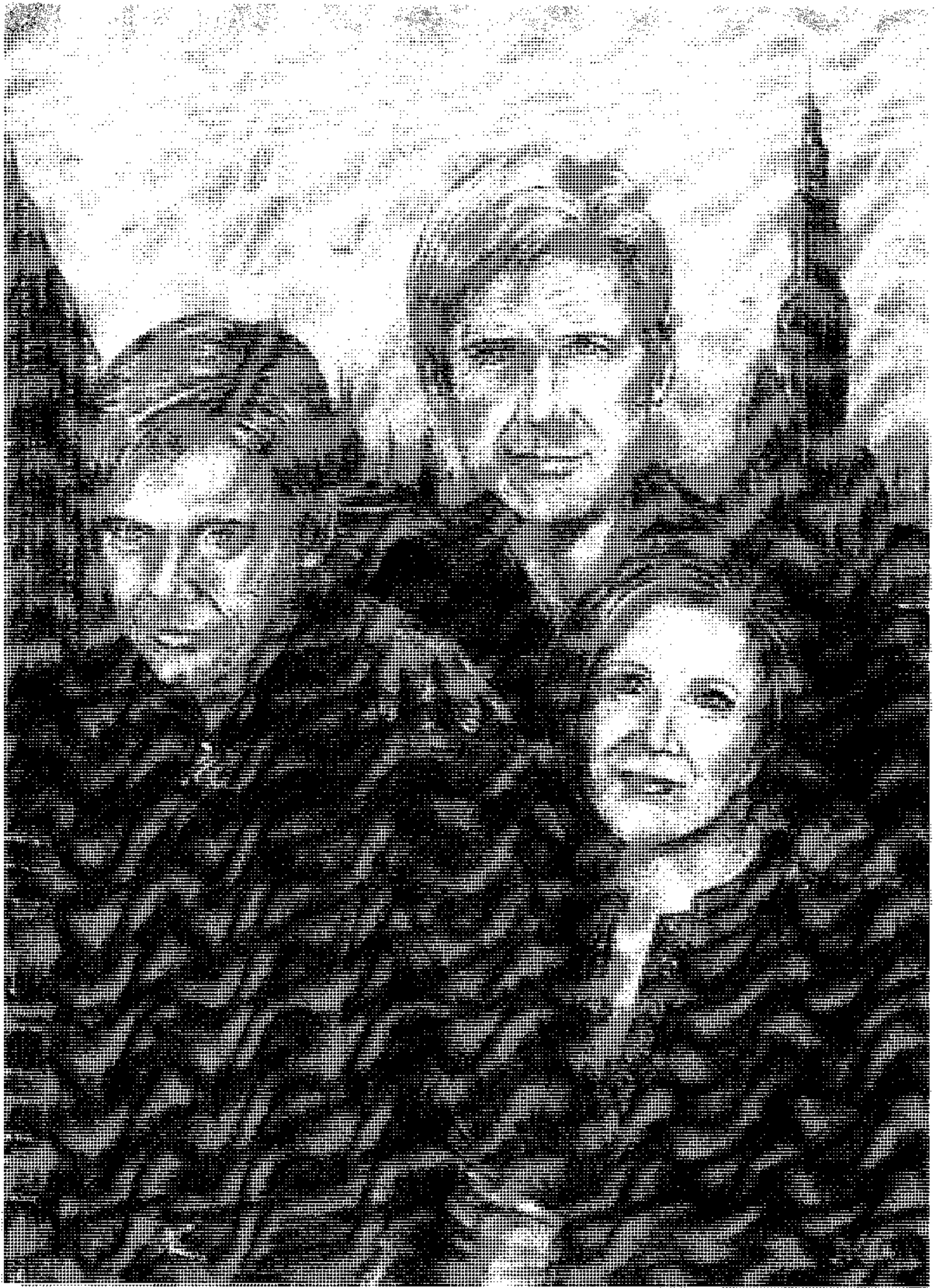
"I came across it while we were cleaning the Falcon on the way here." She choked on a tight little sob. "I'd never thought...in my wildest dreams, that it was with us all this time, through so many journeys...so many times when everything seemed so lost." She turned toward him, took his face between her hands and added, "You're *still* my beloved and my *best* friend."

His chest heaved a little and he blinked back rising tears. She was his whole life. The children they'd had, joys they'd shared, losses they'd suffered, all of it embodied the future that had once been before them and was still there. Yes, the war *had* changed their lives but in doing so, it had also brought them together in ways they hadn't foreseen.

From around the other side of the lake, Ben's laughter echoed on the air, a simple, joyful reminder that life never really ends. Like the changing seasons, the warmth of fond memories would, in time, melt the coldness of painful losses. It was the way of things. Placing his hands over hers, Han took them from his face and simply held them. The sun on his face brightened his already vivid hazel eyes and he repeated a phrase that meant as much as it had years ago, "I will dream with you." Leia's smile, her kiss, and her embrace were all the answers he needed. After a while, he stood. She rose with him. He held her against his chest and she let out a blissful laugh as he lifted her easily into the air and twirled her around. He came to a halt at the edge of the dock and standing there, kissed her for a very long time. Her warmth was, as it always had been, as it always would be, like the sun on his soul and it made him dizzy with passion. Their lips parted and a wry smile lifted one corner of his mouth. "What about being your 'finest hero?" He asked mischievously.

Her eyes gazed into his. Placing her hands flat against his bare chest, she said with ardent sincerity, "You're my *only* hero."

And promptly gave him a little shove that sent him backward, arms and legs flailing, right into the lake!





# THE KINDRED

MAY, 2005

IN AN ERA OF CHAOS,  
BELIEFS WILL BE CHALLENGED.

IN AN AGE OF FEAR,  
COURAGE WILL BE  
TESTED.

IN A TIME OF MISTRUST,  
FRIENDSHIPS WILL BE BROKEN.

IN A MOMENT OF BETRAYAL,  
LIVES WILL BE DESTROYED.

