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Tricks of the Mind

by [Cindy Olsen](#)

The ashes were still smouldering when Solo pulled up on a borrowed speeder bike. He stayed on the bike, staring at the remains – burnt wood, charcoal, cinders and warped, black armour – the smoke curling in his nostrils as the noise from the idling engines thudded in his ears. A chill prickled the hair on the back of his neck, and for a moment he felt certain someone was watching him. His gaze found no sign of life; there was nothing here except himself, the shuttle Luke had used to flee from the Death Star, and the remains of Darth Vader.

It hadn't been difficult to locate the clearing. Luke had explained that he had escaped from the Death Star as it had destructed around him, and had landed the shuttle a few kilometres from the Ewok village. Using his lightsabre to slice the tinder, the young Jedi had constructed a pyre and burnt Vader's dead body. *Luke's father's body*, Han reminded himself with a shudder. And Leia's father as well.

It had been difficult enough wrapping his brain around the concept that Luke and Leia were siblings. Despite knowing that Leia loved him deeply, Solo had believed that she would dump him in favour of Luke; lately his own behaviour had disturbed him enough that *he* would've dumped himself if he'd been Leia. Instead, she had told him that Luke was her brother. The Corellian had totally misread what he'd thought the princess was going to say. At the time, he'd put his error down to the neurotic shadow that had dogged him since his release from the carbonite. The same affliction that induced a tremor in his right hand, had caused him brief schizophrenic episodes, and weighed an oppressive layer of despair across his shoulders.

These symptoms were disruptive enough that he had actually agreed to take the medication the doctor had prescribed for him. His innate distrust of drugs had not

made it any easier to accept the drofic. Yet the spice derivative had eased his anxiety, cleared his mind, and made him feel confident in leading the strike team on their mission to disable the Death Star's shield generator. For a while, he had felt like his old self, the way he had been before Bespin. Before the torture at the hands of Vader.

His confidence in his abilities had disappeared, along with the drofic capsules, during their third day on Endor. The mission had started out smoothly. The four-day trip to Endor may have been circuitous, but it allowed them to hide their Rebel origins, and had given Solo the opportunity to settle into the rank of general. He had even gotten used to Leia dispensing the medication to him every 10 hours. He had suspected that she took pleasure in playing this part in his recovery, and was grateful it was one less thing he had to worry about.

Crix Madine's plans for landing the task force on the moon had worked remarkably well. The encrypted code had provided their shuttle clearance to deliver parts and technical crew to the moon's Imperial base. Except the shuttle had conveniently developed engine and replusor trouble on descent through the atmosphere, and crashed some 50 kilometres from the shield generator, exploding on impact. The search and rescue vessel that had surveyed the crash site would have been unable to detect any survivors, especially as the task force had safely disembarked as soon as the shuttle had dipped below sensor range, before it then headed off on auto-pilot to meet a fiery end. That may have left the task force with no escape vessel, but they knew that if the Alliance failed to destroy the Death Star, there would have been no Rebel Fleet to return to.

The trek towards the shield generator had been reasonably uneventful. For Solo, the most difficult thing had been maintaining his temper with the droids. Luke had suggested that Artoo might prove useful in gaining access to the generator bunker, and therefore Threepio had been enlisted to act as translator for his astromech counterpart. So, suitably camouflaged, the droids had joined the team.

It wasn't until they were within 10 kilometres of the generator that they encountered the first Imperial scouts. Part of a speeder bike patrol, the six troopers had parked themselves near a ford in a river, intent on taking a break in the dappled sunshine. Knowing it would be difficult crossing the river with the two droids unless they had access to the ford, it had looked as if they had no other choice. They could've tried to go around, but as they were unfamiliar with the topography, that may have taken time they just didn't have. The Rebel Fleet was on its way, and the defensive shield around the Death Star needed to be taken down.

After Solo conferred with his 2IC and Luke, it was agreed that the team needed to take the troopers out, and they needed to do it quietly. That, Solo now

realised, was his first bad decision, and he had still been on the medication back then.

As the leader of the task force, he had hung back with Leia and Luke while the younger members of his team had crept up on the unsuspecting troopers. The Imperials had not gone down without a fight. The young corporal in his task force, the only other woman apart from Leia, had been killed in the skirmish that followed, and the Bothan had received a grievous chest wound. All troopers were eventually accounted for, but not until Luke and Leia had taken off on a speeder bike to chase three of them down.

That had been another bad decision: allowing Leia to accompany him as part of the command crew. Past experience had proven that she would not be afraid to leap into the fray when things got tough. But he should've known that his relationship with her would affect his better judgement when it came to her safety. And so he had forced his team to lose precious time as they sat and waited for Leia and Luke to return from wherever they had headed off on the bike. They had also used the opportunity to stabilise the wounded Bothan, and offer empty words of encouragement to him.

It was almost an hour before Luke had come jogging back to the ford, though he hardly seemed out of breath. Leia had not been with him. Solo's world had nearly caved in on him, and he had realised that no amount of medication could calm the fears he held for her, ease the anxiety that gripped him. The look of delight on the face of the only surviving Imperial trooper had forced Solo to the edge. The man's helmet had been removed, his arms and legs bound, and his mouth gagged, but the triumphant glee in his eyes was unmistakable. Solo had instinctively reached for his blaster and pressed the muzzle to the trooper's temple. Luke had calmly reasoned with the Corellian that killing the trooper would not get Leia back. Solo had argued that he would at least feel a whole lot better, but he had known that wouldn't have been true.

His next mistake: to leave his team to tackle the shield generator on their own, while he, Chewie and Luke headed off to find Leia. Solo's 2IC, a seasoned lieutenant with years of experience as a commando, had not questioned his decision. In fact, Jax had even voiced his support; Leia was, after all, the Princess of Alderaan. Solo hadn't been entirely convinced by Jax's opinion, and suspected the elder man was just happy to see the back of an over-promoted Corellian smuggler. Regardless, Solo's first loyalty was to Leia, not the Alliance, and so he had parted company with his team, albeit with the promise of rendezvousing near the shield generator the following morning. He'd had no intention of fulfilling that promise unless he'd found Leia.

They settled their packs on their shoulders and had barely ventured ten metres away when two muffled blaster shots had sounded. The trooper and the mortally

injured Bothan. Solo's 2IC already proving he had the guts to make the calls when they mattered.

It had taken most of that day to eventually find Leia. Having the droids along may even have proved fortuitous, for if Threepio had not sprung the trap that had ensnared them in a net, the Ewoks may never have 'captured' them and taken them back to their village. When Leia had suddenly appeared from one of the walkways, Solo had been verging on the homicidal. As Leia had taken to holding the drofic capsules for him, it had been nearly twenty hours since his last dose of medication. Not only was the Corellian frantic for Leia's safety and furious that they had been delayed in their search, Luke had somehow convinced Solo and Chewbacca to hand over their weapons to the Ewoks and allow themselves to be bound and taken prisoner. Luke had explained that he felt the fierce little creatures would be able to help them. But, as Solo soon discovered, it had appeared that before they would receive that help, the Ewoks literally wanted a piece of him for dinner. His anger and distress had significantly increased.

Then Leia had appeared and the relief that flooded through him had been overwhelming. She'd looked tired, a little dishevelled, and her fatigues were a good deal dirtier than they had been. The Ewoks had prevented her from approaching him, but just to see her had been enough to calm his irrational thoughts. He was unsure exactly why the Ewoks freed them, but it occurred shortly after he'd experienced one of the strangest delusions he'd had since his release from the carbonite: Threepio floating in a wooden throne, high across the forest canopy, screaming to be put down.

His reunion with Leia only solved half his problems. The adrenalin rush provided temporary relief from his symptoms, but he knew he needed the drofic if he was going to survive the rest of the mission. He didn't want to push Leia for the medication, didn't want to make it look as though he was only happy to see her because she had his drugs, so he waited for a chance to ask her.

The Ewoks officially accepted them into their tribe and offered their assistance, and Solo was starting to think that perhaps this mission might work out after all, that he might be able to make amends for some of the errors that had occurred. But while Solo made arrangements for retrieving their weapons and seeking additional supplies, Leia and Luke disappeared from the hut. His next mistake had been to go looking for them.

He had seen them from a distance, shadowy figures on a walkway, holding hands as they stood close, speaking in hushed, emotion-filled voices. Solo had tried not to over-react, tried not to think the worst. He knew that Leia and Luke had always been close. But he also knew that Leia loved *him*, not Luke. She had told him she loved him, had been sleeping in the same bed with him since the flight to Bespin. And although the Corellian couldn't be sure what had happened

between the princess and the young Jedi during the time he was frozen in carbonite, he knew Leia would not betray him.

If he had known then what he knew now, Solo may not have approached her. For this would have been when Luke had revealed to her that he was her brother and Vader their father.

Vader was their father.

It was no wonder she had been so upset, had found it difficult to respond to his demand that she tell him what was going on. The anger and paranoia had clouded his judgement, and he had grabbed her by the shoulders, forced her to face him.

"Could you tell Luke?" he had growled at her darkly, his fingers digging into her arms. "Is that who you could tell?"

Solo closed his eyes in self-disgust. *Is that who you could tell?* There was no excuse for treating her so violently. No matter how bad his mental state. *Is that who you could tell?* He loved Leia. Would willingly kill or die for her. *Is that who you could tell?*

It had taken her tears to bring him to his senses. If anyone else had shaken the princess like that, they would've worn a fist in the jaw. But because he had done it, she was crying. She had stared at him silently, desperately trying to keep her lips from trembling while the tears ran down her cheeks.

And then he was holding her, wrapped his arms around her and held her to his chest, apologising for everything he had done and thought. "I'm sorry, Leia. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." The tears had pooled in his eyes, but had not fallen.

She had not cried for long, and when she lifted her head from his chest, her face held no accusations or recriminations. Cradling his cheek in her hand, she had whispered, "My poor Han."

Her sympathy for him had brought on a wave of self-loathing. She was excusing his behaviour, refusing to blame him for his treatment of her. He hated himself even more when he asked her for his medication. To his own mind, he had sounded like a desperate drug addict. Unfortunately, Leia had not been able to provide him with surcease; the drofic capsules had been lost, along with her pack, during the high-speed pursuit through the forest.

Looking back on it now, it was beyond him how he'd managed to survive the rest of the mission. Perhaps the adrenalin, or his need to protect Leia, had driven him on. He had reunited with his team, much to the disgust of Jax, he suspected. There had been a few more questionable decisions on his part, a few fortuitous

shots with a wavering blaster hand, and an awful lot of chance, good luck, and the surprising assistance of the Ewoks. In the end, they had succeeded.

The explosion of the Death Star had led Leia to reveal to Solo that Luke was her brother. At first he had thought he was hearing things, that this was another delusion his mind had conjured up. But she had assured and re-assured him that it was so. She had, however, held off telling him about Vader until after the celebrations. She left it until this morning, just after breakfast and before she returned to the medical frigate to have her blaster injury attended to.

Vader is Leia's father.

They hadn't made love last night, but then again, they hadn't made love since Bespin; the effects of the carbonite stretched all the way to the bedroom. Solo wondered, even if he had been capable, whether he would've *wanted* to make love to Leia if he knew that Vader was her father. The revelation had shocked him to the core. How could she be the daughter of such a monster? There had to be some mistake. But then Luke had re-affirmed what she had told him, and he knew there was no mistake.

Vader is Leia's father.

The princess had given him space to come to terms with her heritage, and departed for the medical frigate without him while he ostensibly remained behind to attend to repairs on the *Falcon*. She promised to return by that evening, for she had arranged a private celebration to be held on the *Falcon* for Luke, Lando, Chewbacca and the two of them. She had also promised to bring back more medication for him.

That concept made him nauseous. Vader's daughter was supplying him with drugs. Drugs to combat the sickness that her father had forced upon him. Drugs he loathed but now relied upon for his sanity.

Solo closed his eyes as the anger tore through him. Anger with himself for having such contemptible thoughts. Anger that he was no longer the man he once was.

Swallowing the bile that rose in his throat, he flicked off the engines and dismounted from the speeder bike. There was only one being who was responsible for all of this. The pain, the suffering.

Vader.

The blaster was instinctively in his hand and he strode towards the pyre, struggling to ignore the tremors in his fingers. A shiver down his spine told him there was another presence in the clearing apart from his own, however his

corporeal senses said otherwise. He was alone. There was just himself and Vader.

It suddenly occurred to him there were no bones in the pyre. Amongst the ashes, the wood and the twisted remains of armour, there were no human bones. It was not possible for the fire to have consumed them; the heat would not have reached sufficient temperature. The bones simply were not there.

The blaster was firing before he knew what he was doing. The shot was off-target, his accuracy affected by the shaking of his hand, and it sliced through a log instead of the dome of helmet he had aimed for. His failure inflamed his fury, and it burned through him, white hot and vibrant.

He brought his left hand up to steady his right, found it improved his aim as the blaster bolt ripped the armoured chest-plate apart. A memory of Bespin – aiming for the same spot on Vader's body – flashed through his mind, and he chased the remaining shards of armour through the ashes with repetitive blaster shots. His success only served to fuel his anger, and he directed the laser towards the helmet, each pull of the trigger forcing a growl from his throat.

Then just as quickly as he completed the final shot into the pyre, he turned the blaster back on himself and brought it up to rest, double-handed, under his chin. He closed his eyes, and gently squeezed the trigger.

Night was settling across the forest, the air still warm from the afternoon sun. The calls of nocturnal creatures and insects echoed through the trees, and in the distance the sounds of the Ewoks nestled high in their village could be heard.

Leia stretched her legs out in front of her, propped her arms out behind her, and tilted her head back towards the sky. The twilight hues had faded, darkened, and the stars were now visible. Sitting out in the clearing, in the shadow of *Falcon* yet away from the canopy of trees, it was the first time that she'd been able to see the night sky. The Endor atmosphere was pure and clear, and the stars shone brilliantly above her. But thinking about the stars only drew her thoughts back to Han.

She had returned from the medical frigate about two hours ago, and had been disappointed to find that Han was not working on the *Falcon*. A slightly annoyed Chewbacca had told her that Solo had been missing for most of the day. He had no idea where the Corellian had gone, but when he turned up, the Wookiee promised to give him hell; the *Falcon* was not going to repair herself. As Chewie didn't appear worried about Han, she reasoned there was no need for her to be worried. Yet she couldn't shake the feeling that something was not quite right. And if she was truthful with herself, she knew what that something was – Han.

Solo may have physically recovered from the hibernation sickness, but the effects of being frozen in carbonite for ten Standard months still haunted him. It was not really surprising. A year of semi-consciousness, sensory deprivation, and continual mental and physical agony: the effect it would have had on him should have been expected.

Leia was most concerned with the way Han now perceived things. He seemed to have trouble filtering and processing the information his senses took in, and his emotional responses were off the scale. For a while, the medication he'd been taking had created the illusion of normality. However once he was off the drug, the reality had hit her again. Han was in need of serious psychological therapy. There was no doubt that she loved him, that she would continue to stand by him and do everything possible to help. But he was not the man who had been taken from her on Bespin.

"He'll be here shortly," Luke quietly assured her.

Leia tugged at the bandage around her arm and glanced at her brother. "I know."

It had never disturbed her before that Luke had the uncanny ability to sense her feelings. But now she knew he was a Force user *and* her brother, she wondered to what extent her private life would be transparent to him.

Luke did not look up as he placed more kindling on the small fire he had just lit, but she saw his smile in the flickering light. "Then why are you worrying?"

Because I'm afraid he might not be able to cope with the fact that I'm Vader's daughter. That's why. I can't even cope with it.

Leia did not respond, instead took the opportunity to loosen the bandage that had started to chafe on the synthflesh covering her blaster wound. She was almost grateful when Calrissian chose that moment to stomp down the ramp, momentarily blocking the light that spilled out from the freighter, his arms laden with a tray of food. He was chuckling and shaking his head in awe at the variety of fresh fruits and vegetables.

"Leia, you are a marvel!" Calrissian crowed as he brought the tray over to the fire. "I've always appreciated those friends who have contacts in high places. But you, my dear. Only *you* could come up with a spread like this."

Smiling tightly at the lavish praise, Leia started to rise. "Can I help?"

Calrissian placed the platter on a blanket that was spread out on the ground. "No, no, no! You're wounded! Besides, you provided all of this. The least you can allow us mere males to do is prepare it for you."

Luke came to her side and placed an encouraging arm around her shoulders. "Just relax and take it easy, Leia."

She settled back onto the ground, muttering at them, "I'm not an invalid."

Luke chuckled at her defensiveness. "No, but it would be good for you to have a rest."

"Oh, *you* can talk, Skywalker," she told him. "If anyone needs rest, it's you."

Luke followed Calrissian's lead and tried a wedge of the crimson-coloured fruit.

"You're right," he agreed, munching on the sweet flesh. "That's why I'm heading back to Dagobah for a while. I need to re-charge just as much as anybody."

Re-charge. His reference was to the droids, Threepio and Artoo, who were currently back onboard a Mon Calamari cruiser undergoing repairs. But she understood what he was saying. His confrontation with the Emperor and Vader must have been draining, physically and emotionally. There were probably other issues he needed to resolve, perhaps both personal and Force-related. Despite this, she didn't feel comfortable that her newly found brother was leaving her. She had hoped that between the two of them, they might have been able to help Han.

"When are you going? How long will you be away for?" she wanted to know.

"I thought I'd head off in the next few days." He squeezed her shoulder. "Don't worry. I won't be gone for long. There's just a few things I need to take care of."

"But—"

"It'll get me out of your way. Give you and Han the chance to spend some time together."

"If he ever shows up," Calrissian interrupted with a laugh, his mouthful of food. "I've never known Han to be late when a meal is on the table."

Luke caught the way Leia's face stiffened, but instead of reprimanding Calrissian he steered the conversation in another direction. "I want to know where Chewie's gotten to with those falakik he promised."

His nudge prompted Lando to his feet. "I'll go hurry him on."

Leia's gaze fell into the fire. She only distantly heard Calrissian calling out to Chewbacca as he trudged back up the ramp, and having Luke sitting next to her only made her yearn for Han to be there.

Calrissian re-appeared, this time clutching drink flasks to his chest. He exchanged a few comments and laughter with Luke before passing out the drinks. Leia accepted the flask, but her smile was forced. Her eyes returned to the fire. Entranced, she watched the flames flicker as a gentle breeze drifted out from under the *Falcon's* landing gear. She wondered where Han was. Wondered what he was thinking. If he had come to terms with the revelation she had told him this morning. And when would she and Luke tell the rest of the Alliance about their parentage?

An exuberant Wookiee bellow and the rich aroma of cooked meat had them all looking towards the ramp. Chewbacca was making a grand entrance with a plate piled high with skewered cubes of meat. Calrissian *whooped* with delight and rubbed his hands together, urging Chewbacca down towards the blanket. The noise and the spectacle distracted Leia enough that she missed Luke turning towards the darkness.

"Hello Han."

Leia's head whipped around, her eyes straining to see into the night.

The young Jedi beckoned with a tilt of his head and encouraged, "Come and join us."

Chewbacca added his own welcome, and then Leia finally saw Han as he moved forward into the light. He was still wearing the fatigues he'd been issued with for the commando mission, which was probably why, Leia realised, she had been unable to see him until he was only a few metres away. No doubt Luke's Force ability had allowed him to detect Solo's approach from some distance, and Chewbacca's refined hunting senses would likewise have helped. Yet the princess had sensed nothing.

He'd been wearing the same clothes for nearly a week. Torn, dirty, and stained with sweat and blood – blood from Leia and his two fallen soldiers – he appeared even less like the man she loved. And despite having the opportunity to change into his old shipboard clothing, it seemed as though the thought had not occurred to him. For herself, Luke and Lando, it was one of the first things they had done when they were able to.

As he came to a halt at the edge of their impromptu dinner party, Leia was able to clearly see his face. Bloodshot and glassy, his eyes moved quickly across the scene before dropping to the fire. It was then that she noticed he held his head downcast, chin tucked towards his chest. She would have thought her first instinct would be to greet him with a hug. But something told her it would be best to leave him alone.

"I knew you wouldn't miss out on a free meal!" Calrissian joked, reaching for one of the falakik from the platter that Chewbacca had laid on the blanket. "Grab a seat and grab a plate, my friend."

In that instance, Leia almost wished it was just the four of them celebrating the demise of the Death Star, like it had been from the start: herself, Luke, Chewie and Han. For if Lando weren't here, it would mean they had never been to Bespin. Never have run into Vader. Never have suffered through the agony of the carbonite.

"How's your arm?"

Solo's softly spoken question caught her off-guard. He was still staring into the fire, and for a moment, Leia thought she had imagined he had spoken. When she didn't reply, his gaze drifted from the flames towards her, and the expectant look he gave her required a response.

"It's healing well. No permanent damage or scarring."

"Great." The word was at odds with his tone. His eyes moved up to the *Falcon's* open ramp. "Better go clean up."

Keeping his head down, Solo skirted around them and strode into his ship. She watched him leave, and sat there staring up into the *Falcon*, attempting to find an excuse to follow him.

Leave him be, a softly spoken male voice told her. She glanced at Luke. The voice had sounded almost like her brother's, but it hadn't been his. She wondered if he had planted the idea in her mind.

Leave him be, the voice repeated. The voice was most definitely not Luke's, but she was still uncertain if the suggestion was his. Then Luke looked at her curiously as he slid a cube of meat off the skewer and into his mouth, and she knew he wasn't the source of the voice.

<Princess.>

Chewbacca was holding the plate of falakik towards her. Leia selected one of the skewers and murmured her thanks, just as Calrissian leaned across and took what had to be his fourth or fifth falakik. The Wookiee snarled playfully at the man's gluttony.

"Han better hurry up," Lando opined around a mouthful of meat, wiping the marinade from his moustache, "or there'll be nothing left."

Leia bit carefully into the tender meat. Calrissian's claim seemed rather hollow; she knew food was the last thing on Solo's mind.

"Well then, we'll save him some," Luke suggested.

Chewbacca obviously thought that was a good idea, because he started piling the skewered meat onto a separate plate, much to Calrissian's howls of protest. Leia felt compelled to step in before the noise got too much for her.

"It's all right, Chewie," she told him. "I don't think Han's hungry."

"Not hungry?" Lando snorted dismissively. "I've never known him *not* to be hungry."

The princess turned her attention back to the piquant meat lest she said something she would later regret. The voice in her head was gone, but the idea had stayed. She would give Han time to clean up. 'Leave him be', at least until she knew what she could do to help him. What it was that he needed.

By the time Solo made it to the safety of his cabin, the pain was unbearable. The gun-rig fell to the deck as he released it from his hips, and continued to hang from his leg until he popped the tie-down strap from his thigh. He dropped the medpack on the desk, his fingers fumbling with the catch as he struggled to open it. He grabbed the spray pack that contained a disinfectant/anaesthetic and turned to the small mirror mounted near the closet.

The face that confronted him was not his own. Pale and drawn, the red-rimmed eyes and dark stubble of beard were the only colours on his skin. He lifted his chin, wincing when he saw what had been causing him pain for the last few hours. The blister was a perfect circle, the size of his blaster's muzzle; the legacy of trying to blow his head off with a blaster still hot from target practice.

There was a brief moment of agony as he sprayed the disinfectant/anaesthetic on the wound, then the pain-killing properties slipped in and his shoulders sagged in relief. He reached back into the medpack and brought out a tube of salve. The burn was now numb, but he gingerly applied the salve, being careful not to burst the blistering skin. He finished by placing a strip of synthflesh over the burn, and sat down heavily on his bunk.

Han had no idea why he was still alive. The urge to kill himself had been completely instinctive, unpremeditated. At the time, it had seemed the only solution to the problems that plagued him. He had been almost grateful that he'd finally found the guts to turn the blaster on himself. But something had gone wrong – or right. The blaster's firing system had made an audible *click* as it caught on the safety latch. Finger quivering on the trigger, he had remained in that position, the blaster pressed into his chin, listening to the blood rushing in his

ears. He couldn't recall setting the safety. Perhaps that had been instinctive as well; a self-preservation mechanism kicking in. The stubble on his chin had offered temporary protection from the heat of the blaster's muzzle, but eventually the burning pain had forced him to drop the weapon.

The failed suicide attempt had left him nauseous and unstable, and he'd spent a bad ten minutes vomiting and dry-retching into the dirt beside the pyre. Not confident of his ability to ride the speeder bike, he'd left it near the shuttle, and had spent some time wandering through the forest in a semi-daze, trying to work out if he was annoyed or grateful that he couldn't even manage to kill himself.

The ice-cold water from a stream had provided temporary relief from the pain of the burn. Lying flat out on the ground, he'd immersed his face in the gentle current, rinsing the bile from his mouth and the smoke from the pyre off his skin. Then he'd rolled onto his back and allowed the guilt to wash over him.

Most of his adult life had been spent eluding death, and although he'd never seriously considered his own mortality, he'd at least had a healthy respect towards dying. His suicide would have seen him achieve what countless adversaries had failed. Including the carbonite and Vader.

He knew his death would have affected more than just himself. The Life Debt Chewbacca owed to him would've been shattered and incomplete. No doubt the Wookiee would've been inconsolable and racked with guilt at his inability to save his Honour Brother from himself. Solo knew that Luke and Lando would've had similar feelings of guilt and sympathy. But the person who would've been affected most by his death was Leia.

For such a young woman, Leia had experienced more grief and hardship than anyone deserved. She had witnessed the annihilation of her homeworld, and struggled through years of war against the Empire. He knew the last ten months had been the most trying on her, for they had both endured living nightmares throughout the time he'd been frozen in carbonite. Killing himself may have solved his immediate problems, but they would have forced more grief and anguish onto the woman he loved. Suicide was a thoughtless and selfish act that the old Solo may have contemplated, the man he had been before he fell in love with Leia. It was because he loved her so dearly that he should have done everything in his power to protect her from the kind of pain and distress he knew his death would have caused. And yet he had come so close to causing her the very things he should've been protecting her against.

It was late afternoon by the time he'd found the strength to rise from the place beside the stream. He'd hoped that Leia had returned from the medical frigate by then, trying to convince himself that he did want to see her, that he didn't care who her father was. If he said it often enough, perhaps he would believe it.

The gathering he had found outside the *Falcon* had surprised him, until he remembered the celebratory dinner Leia had mentioned that morning. He'd been in no mood for partying, and the laughter from his friends only caused him more guilt; here they were celebrating life and friendship, and he'd been aiming for the opposite. Fortunately he'd been able to move into the *Falcon* without any delays, or questions he was not sure how he would have answered.

Solo leaned forward and pressed his head into his hands. His mind was so full images and emotions from the past day, it felt like it would explode or drown him in cognitive overload. He was tempted to head back outside and ask Leia for the medication she had promised she would return with. The drug had already proven that it offered temporary relief. Temporary was all it was. Although only mildly addictive, he was concerned that he could become reliant on the drug. The fact that he *wanted* the drug was enough reason not to take it. Besides, what kind of life would it be if he used a spice derivative to replicate the emotions and actions that were now so foreign to him? He did not want to live a lie.

One thing he did know for certain was that exhaustion was causing him more confusion. Sleep would be the only safe way to slow his brain down, give his body time to recover. But as there was no way he'd been able to sleep in his current state, he turned his attention back to the medpack. A sedative would be his only salvation.

He'd had no personal experience with the hypo-tranquilliser, had no idea how effective it would be or how quickly it would work. Fully clothed and boots still on, he settled himself out on his bunk, pressed the hypo-infuser to his neck and administered the sedative. He was out before he could return the infuser to the desktop.

The flames and sparks curled towards the sky when Luke threw another log on the fire. The falakik were cold, the remaining skewers of meat that had been saved for Han now sat on the plate, congealing in their rich juices. Leia checked her wrist chrono for the fifth time in as many minutes. It was obvious that Solo wasn't coming; he'd entered the *Falcon* nearly an hour ago. The Corellian's absence was noticeable, but Luke, Lando and Chewbacca did their best to maintain the casual banter and good humour that had started the evening.

Only Leia seemed not to be enjoying herself, and *she* knew the others knew she wasn't enjoying herself. The itch from her new healing skin was also doing nothing for her mood, and the only reason why she hadn't already gone to check on Han was because she didn't want it to look as though she was mothering him. *But, she decided, things have well and truly gone beyond 'appearances'.* Without a further word or hesitation, she rose and climbed the ship's ramp.

As she had been unable to see him in the cockpit from outside, she knew he wasn't there. She suspected he would be in his cabin, but giving him the benefit

of the doubt, she detoured through the main hold before heading there. The hatch to his cabin was closed, and she knocked gently before entering.

For a moment she thought he was simply resting and hadn't heard her enter. She moved further into the cabin, having to step over Solo's gun-rig that had been left carelessly on the deck. Upon drawing closer, he seemed unnaturally still. He was also fully clothed, the mud from his boots soiling the covers, which was hardly the way to relax properly. And the cabin light was a bit harsh for anyone to sleep through. Then she saw the hypo-infuser clutched in the hand that lay across his chest, and she felt an instance of sheer panic. The relief washed through her when she noticed his chest rise and fall.

Don't be so stupid! she yelled at herself, wondering why her mind had jumped to the conclusion that he had committed suicide. Collecting the infuser from his hand, she read the label and noted that the hypo had contained a rather potent sedative. She estimated that he would be unconscious until at least the following morning.

Her heart was still racing as she returned the infuser to the medpack, berating herself for the over-reaction. It wasn't like Han to resort to medication to put himself to sleep. She was more used to seeing him down a few beers to help him relax. There was no need to remind herself that was in a time before the carbonite. She wondered if she really should've been surprised that he had sedated himself. The only time he'd slept free from nightmares was when he was on the spice derivative. He'd obviously felt he needed the tranquilliser.

Remembering the drofic she'd brought back for him, Leia retrieved the individually sealed capsules from a pocket and placed them on the desk next to the medpack. She noticed that other items from the medpack had been used and her pulse increased as she turned back to Solo, searching for signs of injury. The patch of synthflesh under his chin was immediately apparent, and she questioned how she'd managed to miss it the first time; her concern for whether he was alive or dead had evidently clouded her perception.

Leia brushed the fringe from his forehead, grateful that the wound didn't appear large or life threatening, however she was certainly interested in finding out what had caused it.

A terrifying image suddenly appeared in her mind: Han holding his blaster up under his chin, closing his eyes and pulling the trigger. She recoiled away from him, an instinctive scream caught in her throat. She stared at him in horror, convinced she had witnessed the cause of his injury. Then just a quickly she negated the belief. There was no way Han would try to kill himself. That was just her over-active imagination, her smothering concern for him. Besides, she had no extra-sensory cognitive ability, no special perception skills that would allow her to divine what had happened to him.

The Force runs strong in my family. Luke had told her that on the night he'd revealed he was her brother. Still, that didn't mean she had the same abilities as Luke. *You're wrong, Leia. You have that power. In time, you'll learn to use it as I have.*

Use it the way our father used it? she thought bitterly. *The way Vader used it?*

She shook her head. *No.* She couldn't afford to believe the vision was anything other than an unexpected and abhorrent delusion on her part. Han wouldn't attempt to take his own life, no matter how he felt. He was too strong and vibrant to do that. He loved her too much. And if the vision was correct, then what was he doing lying stretched out on his bunk? Why was he still alive?

Leia reached out a hand towards her lover, tentatively stroked his hair again. No other images came to her mind, so she extended the caress to his cheek. *My poor Han.* The same words she had thought after his jealousy of Luke had driven him to shake her roughly. To treat her in a way she had never experienced from him before. *My poor Han.* Driven to this state courtesy of Vader and his damn carbonite. *Her father responsible for the misery of others, yet again.* She would not blame Han if he had trouble coming to terms with her parentage. She could only hope that eventually he would forgive her. Just as long as he continued loving her. Meanwhile, she would do everything possible to help him.

Deciding he didn't look overly comfortable, Leia gently removed his boots and socks, loosened his belt, and unfastened the front of his shirt and his trousers. As she did not wish to wake him, that was the extent of loosening his clothing she was prepared to risk. She covered him with a spare blanket from the closet, kissing his cheek before she pulled away from him.

"Sleep well," she whispered. "Love you."

Before dimming the light to 'night' mode, she picked up the gun-rig and laid it out on the desk. She looked at him one more time and closed the hatch.

She initially intended returning outside to spend the remainder of the evening with her friends, however by the time she made it around to the main hold, she felt as weary as she suspected Han was. It was tempting to go back to his cabin, snuggle up next to him like she first had on the long, slow flight to Bespin. But she didn't want to disturb him. Rubbing at the bandage around her arm, she headed to the other place on the *Falcon* that she loved, apart from Han's cabin; the pilot's seat in the cockpit: Han's seat.

Leia settled into the seat, tucking her legs up underneath herself and recalling the way the chair conformed to Han's body. For a moment, she felt connected to her lover, imagined she could feel the gentle sleep rhythm that enfolded him. She closed her eyes and slowed her breathing, allowed her fantasy to take flight. In

her mind, she was able to discern the cadence of his breathing, the beat of his heart, the patterns of his brain waves. And although she pretended there was something distinctly 'Han' in what she could sense, something that identified them as having been generated by him, even in her imagination she sensed there was something not quite right about him. She reasoned with herself that this must be a coping mechanism she was using. An invention or justification that allowed her to come to terms with his ailment.

The soft fall of footsteps drew her back to the reality of the cockpit. She opened her eyes and looked over her shoulder as Luke entered through the hatchway. He gave her a small smile in response to her frown, and took a seat in Chewbacca's chair.

"What did you want to talk to me about?" he asked quietly.

Leia's brow crinkled into a scowl. She *had* wanted to talk to her brother about how they might be able to help Han, but as he was leaving for Dagobah, she felt less inclined to discuss her concerns, especially if he didn't think likewise. There were other things she also wanted to talk to him about. Personal things that a brother and sister should share. But that would no doubt lead to discussing other matters she couldn't – wouldn't – deal with. Not now. Perhaps not ever.

"I'm worried about Han." Luke said nothing, yet his eyes encouraged her to continue. "He hasn't been the same since..." Ridiculous, but she couldn't even say the name of the place where the nightmare had begun. "I don't think he's fully recovered from the effects of the carbonite."

When Luke didn't respond, Leia asked incredulously, "You haven't noticed?"

He shrugged a shoulder. "Perhaps I'm cutting Han some slack. Giving him time to find his feet again."

Her nostrils flared. "And you're saying I'm not?"

To her annoyance, Luke smiled congenially. "You're closer to Han than anyone, Leia. If you're worried about him, then your concerns are probably justified. You should trust your feelings and intuition."

Leia's eyes narrowed, suspicious that Luke seemed to have agreed with her too quickly. But his face was open, honest, expectant, and she continued without further questioning his motives.

"I need to help Han," she explained. "And I want you to help me."

"Isn't the medication working?"

Despite being discrete when it came to dispensing the drofic to Han, it did not surprise her that Luke knew about the medication. Much to her irritation, the young Jedi seemed to know a lot about *everything* lately.

"It is, but it only relieves the symptoms. It doesn't solve the problem. And I don't want Han to be on drugs for the rest of his life."

"You might have to accept that as a possibility," he told her simply.

Leia folded her arms across her chest. "I don't have to accept anything. Not if there's some way of helping him."

Luke nodded thoughtfully, and Leia wondered if he was oblivious to her animosity or merely ignoring it to annoy her further.

"What do you think is wrong with him?"

In frustration, she dropped her arms and leaned towards her brother. "I'm not a psych counsellor, Luke. I don't know what's wrong with Han. That's why I need your help."

A level of modesty washed over him. "I don't know if I can be of much help. My master taught me some pain-blocking and basic healing techniques. These allow me to cope with pain and stress, and accelerate the healing processes."

Leia actually smiled. This was what she wanted to hear. Something positive.

"But I've only used them on myself," Luke continued. "I've never tried applying the Force on another being to heal them. I don't even know if I can."

"Why not?" Leia reasoned, struggling to remain calm. "Surely the principles are the same."

"The Force doesn't work on principles, Leia. It's something you feel. It guides you, and—"

"But you could still try it on Han," she interrupted.

His face twitched uncomfortably. "I could. But I don't think it would work on him." He hurried to explain himself before she could interrupt again. "Han's too strong-minded. And I wouldn't want to fight him, or enforce my will on him. Besides, for any healing to be successful, he'd have to *want* to let me in."

Leia closed her mouth before she put her foot in it and said something she might regret. Luke was right. Han would not be receptive to anyone prodding around in

his sub-conscious. She wasn't even sure the Corellian believed in the Force, despite having been exposed to Luke's 'mumbo jumbo' for the last few years.

"You might be able to do it, though."

Leia met her brother's sparkling eyes. "I might be able to do what?"

Luke's grin widened. "Han would let you in. He trusts you. He wouldn't fight you."

Leia pulled an indifferent face. "Maybe."

"What do you mean, 'maybe'?" he admonished. "There's no 'maybe' about it."

"So what if he would let me in," she shot back defensively. "I don't know what to do. I don't know how to control the Force. And even if I did, I don't know how to help him. That's your department."

"It could be your department too."

"No it couldn't."

"I could show you what to do."

"How could you show me what to do when you said you didn't *know* what to do?"

Luke paused, and Leia became aware that she seemed to be saying anything to deny that she might have Force skills.

"Let me show you a few techniques to help heal your arm," he suggested. "That can't hurt, can it?"

Leia held her lips together tightly and remained silent.

Luke took her silence as acceptance and continued. "And I can also show you how to enter Han's mind, providing he lets you in. Then if or when you feel comfortable, you could always try applying the same healing techniques on Han." He shrugged. "Who knows. They might work."

Leia chewed on the inside of her mouth. Perhaps Luke's suggestion wasn't that ridiculous after all. If she did have some latent Force ability, at least she may be able to speed up the healing of her blaster wound and relieve her of one more aggravation. As it was, the itch from the synthflesh was starting to drive her crazy. Leia closed her eyes at the inappropriate description she had chosen. If anything, she owed it to Han to at least try what Luke was offering. For the time being, it seemed to be the only hope she had.

And if it didn't work? The worst that could happen is that she would still have a sore arm for a few more days.

Leia returned her gaze to her brother. Luke was watching her intently, the corner of his mouth turned up into a hopeful half-smile.

"All right," she agreed. "Where do we start?"

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