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At What Price

by [Catriona Campbell Boyle](#)

The huge ceremonial hall was silent and empty. Vague, muffled sounds broke through the still air from the caverns beyond the thick stone walls. For a moment, as the massive metallic door slid open, the sounds grew to an ear splitting din; fighter and speeder engines throbbed and whined, men screamed orders above the clamour, and below the noise from the busy hangers, soft footsteps scraped on the flagstones which paved the floor of the hall. The sounds from the active Rebel base were chased back as the door closed.

Han Solo stood with his back against the doors, pleased to have a moment of peace to himself. He looked around the hall, his eyes flitting briefly over the great blocks of granite from which the walls were constructed, and the vines that gripped at those walls, covering them with pleasant green foliage that broke the monotony of the grey stone. He glanced forward at the raised dais, at the tall, slender openings in the rock which served as windows to light and air the hall as well as giving a panoramic view of the jungle beyond. In his mind Han saw row after row of Rebels; pilots, ground troops, technicians, engineers, all with eyes front, and upon the dais stood General Dodonna, Commander Willard and the Princess Leia Organa.

He descended the steps into the hall and walked across the paved floor, remembering back to the ceremony when he had crossed this atrium with his companions. He had been embarrassed then and, he had to admit, proud. He reached the opposite stairs and sat upon the second step. His head fell into his hands, his elbows rested on his thighs, and his mind turned from the ceremony to more troubling images from his recent past, his spirits now unsure and confused about his immediate future.

Everything had been so easy before his return to Mos Eisley, before he was persuaded by necessity to accept an offer of seventeen thousand to pilot an old man and a farm boy to Alderaan, before he impulsively turned back to Yavin to save the boy and found himself a reluctant hero. Now, suddenly, everything was so complicated. He had been asked to stay with the Rebellion by the general and the princess, had been asked to fly to Xalan to carry through an arms deal that had been set up through a recently acquired Rebel contact in the city of Antee. He had turned them down, had even said no to the money they offered. He wanted to leave, to gun the Falcon's engines and shoot back to the stars with Chewbacca. He wanted to pay off his debt to Jabba the Hutt with his reward for rescuing the Princess. He wanted his freedom.

But why did he feel so damned guilty? Why had he sought out the silence and solace of this empty chamber? Why did he feel he was deserting his new found friends in an hour of need? The Rebels were evacuating Yavin IV, and every hand was required to clear the base before the Empire returned, and Han was intent on leaving within a couple of hours. The Han Solo of two days ago would not have cared less - he would have packed up his money and fled as soon as possible. However, he remembered the kid's words before the battle, the disappointed and accusing ones about being best at taking care of himself. He remembered the relief he had felt when he returned to the battle to find Luke still alive and he remembered the embrace from the princess and the delight he had seen shining in her eyes after the victory.

A bird twittered from among the creeping Ivy behind him and he shrugged, fighting to shed his misgivings. What did it all matter anyway? He was leaving and, in a few days time, he would have another spice run and the Rebels would be forgotten. His guilt at leaving them would be dismissed among the other worries and cares he would encounter as he travelled through the spice routes.

He grunted as he pulled himself to his feet. He had best say goodbye to Luke before he left, although he could already hear the kid's heated arguments.

It took him some time to find Luke in the sprawling Massassi fortress the rebels had taken for their base. After being misdirected by several pilots and fighter techs, he finally found himself outside in the landing field scanning the trees at the edge of the clearing. He smiled as he spotted the youth sitting on a large branch several metres up a tall tree. He jogged quickly across the field, shielding his eyes from the glaring sun as he stared up at his friend. Luke Skywalker was sitting securely in the nook created by the trunk and the branch; one leg dangled freely, his features obscured by the shadows from the tree's thick summer foliage.

"Comfy, are we?" Solo questioned once he stood beneath the over hanging branch.

Luke glanced down and smiled at the Corellian. "Trees," he said, gesturing with a hand at the expanse of jungle behind them. "I've always wanted to climb one." He explained with, Han thought, a strange thick tone to his voice. "There weren't many trees on Tatooine."

Han chuckled, imagining the childish excitement Luke must have felt as he set out to conquer this solid, living giant and his pride as he achieved his goal. "Do you think you can get back down?"

Skywalker shrugged and leaned forward to look down at the ground and at Solo. "I may need some help," he confessed ruefully.

Laughing, Han started up the tree. Within minutes he was pulling himself up onto the branch next to Luke. He sat for a moment puffing from the effort of the short climb, then he glanced at Luke and the wise crack he had balanced on his lips tumbled as he finally realized the youth had been weeping and was trying his best to stall any further tears.

Luke glanced away, staring out at the landing area and the stone fortress.

Han sat in silence. He was uncomfortable with tears and was unsure how to react to Luke's, so he kept quiet, hoping the young pilot would speak first. He listened to the birds singing, to the fighter engines revving up in the hanger bays, to Luke sniffing. Finally, unable to bear the silence, he looked back at Luke and, seeing fresh tears swell and spill, he cleared his throat. Looking for a reason for Luke's grief, he asked: "The old man?"

Luke nodded. "Partly." He sniffed again and wiped at his eyes with the sleeve of his khaki uniform. He glanced up at the clear blue, cloudless sky. It reminded him, at that moment, of a desert sky just before the harvest.

"Homesick?" Han questioned further as he followed Luke's gaze and as he realized he still had no idea how a young farmer from Tatooine had gotten mixed up in the mess of the last few days.

Again Luke nodded. "A little. But not for Tatooine, not for the farm..." He trailed off.

"Your folks." Solo stated with sure firmness.

"My aunt and uncle," Luke told him with a little hitch and shudder to his voice. "But... they're dead...now."

And Han began to fit Luke's story together in his mind. "The Empire?" It wasn't really a question.

Another little nod. "They were looking for the droids. Traced them to the farm. I wasn't there. I..." He stalled, drawing in a steady breath. "I found them."

Han sat still, quiet again, allowing Luke to talk, allowing Luke to tell his whole story and he realized what was happening. It was only now, after the adventure was over, that Luke had found the time to reflect on the events of the past and to grieve for all he had lost. The youth had fulfilled a dream and had committed himself to the Alliance, but he had paid a terrible price - he had lost his family and his friends.

Try as he might to resist the feelings, Han found he was moved by Luke's story. Now it was his gaze which flickered to the sky and in his mind he saw the stars he craved, the freedom he sought. He wanted to leave these Rebels, wanted to return with Chewbacca to his own life, the life he loved, the loneliness he preferred. He glanced back at Luke as the boy completed his story, but Han's thoughts were of the conversation he and Luke had shared prior to the battle. He had asked Luke to join him and Chewbacca and it was only now he understood why. Luke reminded Han of himself in younger days and he wanted to protect the boy, teach him, to give him the guided start in life that he did not have. Besides, he liked the kid.

Han wrestled with these thoughts both accepting them and dismissing them. Yes, he liked Luke, hell he even liked the feisty Princess, but that shouldn't matter. He and Chewie were a team - they had debts to pay, places to go, and an uncomplicated life they both enjoyed. They had to leave.

"Listen," he began uneasily, feeling guilty, knowing now wasn't really the time to be telling Luke this. Luke turned towards him and Han saw the salt traces left by drying tears on his cheeks. "Ah," He hesitated, drew up his courage and plunged on. "Dodonna wants me an' Chewie to do a supply run, of sorts, to Xalan. Something about weapons. You ever hear of the Seven Crystal Towers of Antee? "

Luke shook his head, a smile beginning to tinge his lips as he guessed why Han was asking.

"A sight everyone should see," Han told him. "So, you want to come? Maybe we could get Miss High and Mighty to join us. What do ya' think? "

Luke's smile brightened to a grin and the pain dimmed in his eyes. "I'd need to get permission from my flight commander."

"No problem," Han assured him. "I'll speak with Dodonna." He looked down at the grass below, and then smiled back at Luke. "But first we have to get you down."

He climbed down first and dropped the last metre. Turning he guided Luke down, all the while aware of the small voice at the back of his mind. It scolded him, kicked him, and called him an idiot.

* * *

Chewbacca raised his foaming mug of beer to his mouth and took a long draught. He smacked his lips in delight as the hot bitter liquid lifted the edge from his thirst, and he set his glass back onto the bar. He turned his back to the counter and surveyed the cantina full of lunch time customers. He let his eyes roam the crowd, studying the patrons, looking for familiar faces, searching for anyone who looked suspicious enough to be part of the meet, anyone who could push a blaster into Han's back. His gaze fell onto the table where the meet was to take place. It was situated in a secluded nook and had a 'reserved' sign sitting in the middle of its polished wooden top. The wall behind the table was covered with an ornate tapestry which depicted the Seven Crystal Towers of Antee glinting in the sun light to full dramatic effect. Its presence there worried the Wookiee, as he had no way of knowing whether it was genuine solid wall behind the cloth or a hiding place for an assailant. If it was the latter Han would be an open target no matter where he sat. It simply meant they both had to be extra vigilant when the proceedings got under way.

Chewie turned back to the bar and lifted his glass again, this time sipping at the cooling beer as he tried to make it last until it was time for the meet. Han should be arriving in the next few minutes to conduct his own pre-deal perusal of the cantina. He sipped at his drink once more, wondering what his partner was going to do with Luke and the princess during the deal. He and Chewbacca had their timing down to a fine art and if anyone else was to be involved they might throw them off. He hoped Solo would send them off on a sight seeing tour.

"You're in the wrong bar, pal."

Chewbacca glanced down and behind to find a young human male at his back and, surprisingly, he appeared to be unarmed. He smiled at the large Wookiee and climbed upon the vacant bar stool beside Chewbacca. This brought him to shoulder level with the puzzled beast. Chewie rumbled out a question.

The youth shrugged, still smiling. "I don't know what you're saying buddy - but Slick says to me that he wants you down at the Spacer's Gathering. The venue's been changed." Although he barely looked to be in his mid teens he leaned forward and gestured at the barkeep, at the same time shouting out his order. "Bring me a flask of this year's best - and I want it cold!"

Chewbacca was not taken in by the boy's confident act. He may have used Badure's nickname for Han, but that merely meant he knew of Han and that he knew of the meet. The Wookiee was a little concerned, but he had been assessed in similar ways before by the other parties involved in deals and this may be one of those times. He growled out a warning, his tone a threat in itself.

"Not convinced, huh?" The human received his order, poured a measure of the spirit into his glass and sipped it before delving into his pocket for money. He paid the bartender. "In that case," he continued at Chewbacca. "Solo says: 'shields are down, and the ship is steering true'."

Chewbacca stared inquisitively at the youth, cocked his head and murmured under his breath. The human had just used one of the 'all clear' signals he and Han used in just this type of situation. The boy may be a legitimate messenger from the Corellian, but then again he may not. Chewie glanced over at the reserved table just as a servo droid removed the reserved sign and watched as a crowd of tourists, who had just entered the bar, seated themselves.

The Wookiee hesitated a moment longer, then nodded his understanding. Ignoring the remainder of his beer, he murmured his thanks to the human and left the cantina, still a little perplexed. Why had the venue been changed so near to the arranged time? What had gone wrong? He stood in the doorway a moment looking across the street to the bustling covered market place, and then he gathered himself and hurried down the busy road, wondering if the dark clouds gathering in the distance meant it would rain later.

Inside the cantina the youth smiled as he finished his drink, relieved that his information on the pair had paid off and the code words and nickname he had been given were the correct ones. He set his glass down upon the bar and glanced up at the bar keep who handed him the sign from the table. As he made his way to the exit he jauntily replaced the sign. "Sorry gents, this table's just been reserved."

Ignoring the group's protests, he left the bar. The mid-day sun was still shining brightly when he stepped out of the door way and started up the street in the direction of the old space port. As he walked he maintained a keen eye on the people who passed him or who had stopped to admire goods in store windows. It would cost him dearly if he missed the three he was looking for.

* * *

"So, this is the Great City of Antee, huh?" Luke Skywalker's tired, sarcastic tones spoke of his disappointment. He stopped still in the centre of the busy street and gestured widely at his surroundings. He was standing in the middle of a slum, his boots deep in the slick mud track which passed as the road surface. Tall, stone tenement buildings rose around him, giving him the tight feeling of claustrophobia.

Once these structures had been an architects delight - golden sandstone with ornate carvings on doors, lintels and windows. They had been the homes of the rich. However, over the years they had decayed and crumbled. The rich moved out and the poor moved in, bringing with them the dirt and disease associated with overcrowding and ancient sanitary facilities. Deep cesspools overflowed, spilling their contents onto the road, their waste mixing with the mud in which Luke stood. The rank stench of death mingled with the smoke that rose high, casting a stinking pall over the area. Luke had never felt so sick, and the mental image of the Crystal Towers Han had created for him shattered and crumbled.

"Hey, come on kid. This ain't it. "Solo gently patted Luke's shoulder, pushing him on, making him walk. It was not wise to stand still too long in this part of town. "This is the back door, the part the tourists ain't meant to see." Han explained to him as Leia, who was strolling beside them, listened in.

"So why are we here?" Luke questioned, pulling his boot from the mud, the squelch the movement caused making his skin crawl. "What's wrong with the front door?"

"Criminals." Han answered easily, cheerfully and truthfully. "They would have arrested you on sight if we'd landed at the tourist docking bays. They're a little more lax at the old bays, which is why we're not all banged up in a couple of cosy cells at this precise moment."

Next to him the Princess smiled and slowly shook her head. "I think, Captain," she said, joining the conversation. "That you have your definition of 'criminals' slightly wrong." Her smile widened as Han raised his eyebrows in his surprised 'me!?' expression. She was enjoying Solo's relaxed mood; when he felt good his attitude had the annoying habit of being infectious. She glanced at Luke, hoping the pilot would relax too, but the deep frown on his face betrayed his shock and disgust at the poverty he had seen here. It was one thing to hear of these conditions, but it was quite another to witness it at first hand. Leia wanted to brighten his mood - after all that was the real reason Han had agreed to the trip and why she had joined them.

"You mean to say," she continued at Han, "that they would have arrested you and Chewbacca on sight. I've heard your activities in this sector were quite nefarious to say the least. "

"Nefarious?" Han chuckled loudly, liking her choice of words. He glanced at Luke and nudged him, causing him to stumble a little. He shot Han a foul look, but the Corellian didn't notice. "I'd never have come up with such a word this early in the day. Superior breeding must be something, huh kid?"

As the question was directed at him Luke nodded in mute agreement, a tiny smile of humour creasing his face, but it was tinged with puzzlement and soon fell away to a frown of total perplexity.

There was a short lull in conversation as the slum gradually began to recede and the small group entered better neighbourhoods. Finally Luke could stand it no more. Tentatively, and somewhat embarrassed, he tugged at Han's sleeve and whispered. "Han? What does 'nefarious' mean?"

In the ensuing laughter from Han and Leia, the three friends failed to notice the dark clouds which settled over the sun shrouding them, and their watcher, in shadow.

The rain was pounding hard into the concrete walk-ways and roads by the time Han, Leia and Luke reached the cantina in the city centre. Han paused in a rather deep puddle on the side walk, ignoring the crowds which ran for cover. He stared at the public house, studying the doorway. Hopefully Chewbacca was already in place and had secured himself in a good vantage place from which to observe the deal and his back. He turned back to his companions and grinned at Luke. The youth was standing with his head tilted back, letting the rain fall directly onto his face. It appeared Luke had never experienced a rain storm before. The kid was smiling broadly.

"I wouldn't do that for too long, Luke." Solo advised him. "You never know what kind of pollutants are in that rain."

"You mean it could be dangerous?" Luke asked sounding surprised and a little unsettled. Only he could choose a corrupted environment in which to enjoy his first rain fall.

"Nah," Han drawled in good humour. "Probably it'd only curl your hair."

Luke shot him a ' I don't think that's very funny ' look, and then turned to the cantina door. "Is this where the deal is?"

"Yeah," Han replied, shooting a quick glance to the princess. "Listen," he directed at her. "I'm used to doing this myself. Why don't you take the kid shopping?" He gestured to the market place across the road.

"Shopping?!" Luke rasped incredulously. He had been looking forward to the proceedings and the possible danger of the deal. "Look, Han, I didn't come here just so you..."

"No offence, Luke," Han hurriedly continued. "You can hold your own when things get tough, you've shown us that. But these sorts of people are unpredictable, edgy. They like clients to turn up alone; it gives them a sense of power."

"Which is why..." Luke continued to protest.

"Chewie's there for back up if I need it. 'Sides it's the way we work; you'd only throw our timing off. "

"Thanks a lot. How am I supposed to learn stuff if you won't let me help?"

Leia placed her hand on Luke's arm, aware that time was short and Luke was delaying Han's entrance to the bar. "Captain Solo is right, Luke, "she told him softly, beginning to see reluctant resignation cross his face. "If they work best alone then that's how it should be. We can't risk losing this deal, especially when we'll soon have a new base to set up and fortify."

Luke nodded unhappily. "Okay then, but I..."

Leia pulled on his arm before he could continue and directed him towards the crowded covered market. "Come on you'll enjoy yourself." As she walked away beside him she shot a glance back at Han. "We'll meet you back here in...what? Two hours?"

Han nodded his agreement; that gave him plenty of time to complete the deal. He turned for the cantina door smiling at Luke's distant question of "Two hours of shopping?!"

It took a few moments for his eyes to adjust to the dim light of the bar. He stepped down into the room, scanning the area for an empty table. The first he spotted was the one reserved for the deal; he would avoid that one for now. He wanted a table away from the site of the meet, but one with a clear view of it. He worked his way through the room, smiling as he saw a crowd of tourists rise and vacate a booth which, although not ideal, would serve his purpose. He quickly crossed to it and threw himself down in the seat before anyone could steal it from him. He sat back studying the occupants of the bar as a servodroid scuttled up to him to take his order. He frowned deeply as he realised his Wookiee co-pilot was no where to be seen.

"Gimme a Ka'abin beer," Han told the droid. He wanted something light and low in alcohol as the drink was merely to give him something to do until his contacts arrived. His gaze went back to the bar looking for Chewbacca, but the Wookiee was not there. Han sat back again, not overly concerned by Chewie's absence. It

was not unusual for the Wookiee to leave the bar to relieve a call of nature. He waited patiently for his drink; there was plenty of time for Chewie to arrive back before the contacts showed up.

* * *

Luke's mood brightened considerably when he and the Princess were swallowed by the noisy, bustle of the market. He was amazed by the sights, sounds and smells of the place. It seemed as though every type of people in the Galaxy were represented here. There were humans and variation on humans, Yak Faces, Mon Calamari, Hammerheads, Gamorreans and some creatures he didn't recognise and even if he had known the species he was convinced he would be unable to pronounce their names. He and Leia pushed on through, deeper into the market. His ears were assaulted by screeching, bartering women, by stall keepers crying out the bargains to be found on their patch. His nose twitched at the smell of exotic cooking, strange alluring perfumes, sweat and the stench of rotting fish. He had never encountered anything remotely like it in his life and he could not help feeling a little swamped by it all. He moved closer to Leia trying to appear as relaxed as she was.

"I've never seen anything like this," he gasped as a very large, very dangerous looking reptilian creature pushed passed them, crushing Luke into one of the stalls.

Leia smiled enjoying Luke's delight at discovery and experience. "Then the markets on Tatooine are different?" She asked.

"Market?" Luke echoed remotely as he stared at the spread of wares on the stall into which he had been pushed. "I've never been to a market!" The gathering of farmers in Anchorhead once a month couldn't really be called a market. "This..." He turned to survey the crowd. "This is something else!"

Leia laughed happily, her own enthusiasm growing with Luke's excitement. "Come on," she grabbed his arm and pulled him along. "I'll treat you to an olfactory and taste delight. Marave Berry Tarts!"

Behind them their watcher ducked from sight behind the nearest stall, his eyes following Luke and the princess as they made their way to the bakery area of the market. He smiled and turned, looking out from the market to the street and saw that the rain had stopped and the sun was beginning to break out from the concealing clouds. Soon the towers would be visible again and the market crowds would disperse back into the open streets. Glancing up the road a little he spotted a four man patrol of stormtroopers and frowned; they were early.

Thinking quickly the youth crept closer to the two shoppers.

"Look at that!" Luke exclaimed, his mouth now full of berry tart. He was pointing to the neighbouring stall which sold exotic ornaments. "I've never seen anything like that before! It's lovely!"

Leia followed the direction of Luke's finger until she spotted a tiny figurine in traditional Xalan dress. Luke picked it up, turning it in his hand. "She's so...colourful!"

"Yes," Leia agreed. "She is pretty"

Luke glanced up looking for the stall keeper. "Excuse me, sir?" He held out the little dancer. "How much is this?"

The keeper looked briefly at the ornament. "Twenty." He told Luke shortly.

Luke fumbled in his money pouch, withdrew the correct amount and paid the man. He then slipped the little figurine into his jacket pocket.

"You should have bartered with him," Leia told him as they left the stall. "You could probably have got it cheaper and...Hey!" She felt a sharp tug at her clothes and turned around quickly to see a teenage boy make off with her wallet. "Hey!" She shouted after him again.

"I'll get it back," Luke told her and took off after the boy.

"Luke you'll get lost!" She called after him, then cursed to herself as he was swallowed by the crowd. She started forward, intent on following him.

"Excuse me, miss."

The voice was polite but it chilled Leia with its distinct hollow sound. She froze in shock and fright.

"I think you'd best turn around."

Leia did so, slowly, to find that the crowd had cleared an area for herself and the stormtroopers. "Can I help you?" She enquired fighting to keep her voice calm, telling herself they had only responded to her shout to the pick pocket.

Leia could almost see the lead trooper's sneered smile as he answered. "Yes, I think you probably can, Your Highness."

* * *

Pushing and shoving his way through the bristling shoppers Luke almost fell out of the market and into the street. Puffing with exertion he glanced around, but

could see no sign of the youth who had stolen Leia's money. He cursed under his breath in anger and turned back to the market to find Leia being escorted out by Imperial soldiers.

"Princess..." he whispered to himself in horror, his hand immediately moving for his blaster. He stepped forward about to shout to her, to tell her to get down, so convinced was he that he could handle four troopers, when he felt a hand on his arm. He spun around in fright expecting to find himself facing yet another Imperial patrol - instead, he was faced by the teenage pick-pocket.

"Don't," the boy told him. "You'll only end up in custody yourself, or dead." He nodded, gesturing up the street to where two more soldiers had appeared. "Don't be stupid."

Luke hesitated. If he didn't attack the soldiers Leia would once more find herself in an Imperial detention block. If he did attack, he would be taken by the second patrol. Luke moved his hand away from his weapon and watch with impotent despair as Leia and her escorts disappeared around a far corner. He would have to get Han. He turned around looking for the cantina and realised this was not the street from which they had entered the market. He also became aware that the second patrol was heading in his direction.

The boy tugged frantically on his sleeve. "They saw you with her!" He hissed, pulling Luke along, trying to galvanize his steps. "Come on. I know a safe place."

"You two! Remain where you are!"

The order from the lead trooper was the catalyst Luke needed and he soon found himself sprinting after the teenager down ally ways and back streets with the pounding sound of pursuing Imperial footsteps ringing in his ears. As he drew his blaster and fired off a few shots the clouds finally parted and the Seven Crystal Towers of Antee glinted in the sunlight, casting wild rainbow colours over the city.

* * *

The hour of the meet drew closer and Han sat a little more upright in his chair and took a sip from his second drink of the afternoon. He had changed to soft liquids as he was eager to keep his wits about him. He let his eyes roam the room once more, now anxious at the continuing absence of his Wookiee co-pilot. Chewbacca had never failed him before; he was always so careful when a deal was about to go down. Han was not particularly looking forward to pulling off the deal by himself. It wasn't that he didn't think himself able, only that it was impossible for him to watch every corner of the bar and engage in tricky negotiations at the same time.

He put down his glass and checked his chronometer, then glanced at the empty reserved table. No sign of his contacts yet and only a few minutes to go. It definitely looked like they were waiting for the correct moment to appear. He lifted his glass again, sipped at it and set it down. He checked the time again, looked around the bar, tapped his foot in time to the piped music and had another glance at the hour. It was time.

No one came through the door. The table remained empty. Han sighed heavily in suppressed anger, sarcastically surmising that his contacts had gotten lost in the same place as his partner. However, he knew they were probably doing the same as he; waiting for someone to turn up first - wanting to see him before they showed themselves. If that was the case they would all be sitting here all day. He sized up the patrons of the cantina, noting their species, their clothing, their languages and the weapons they wore. He could see no one taking an interest in the empty table and turned his attention to the door, watching as several scruffy human spacers entered. As they passed the reserved booth Han noted it had stopped raining outside.

He checked the time again and leaned back, trying not to let his anger show. He took another sip of his drink and winced at it's sweetness. It was beginning to look like these people were not going to show; so much for the Alliance's much-needed arms and supplies. The Princess was not going to be pleased.

Han sat where he was for a while longer watching the door way as the street beyond brightened, recovering from the rain shower. The piped music was abruptly cut as a live band struck up with a heavy beat. Han's feet tapped along in time although he did not recognize the tune they were playing. He finished his drink and, as he had time to spare before meeting with Luke and the Princess, he raised his hand to attract the attention of the servodroid for another order.

He hesitated as two uniformed men stepped into the bar, walked directly to the reserved table and seated themselves.

Han watched them as discreetly as he could. Was this just Imperial arrogance on display, or were these soldiers his contacts? On his guard now, Han continued to observe the Imperials as one of their number, a major, motioned to the bartender to serve them. Han believed he could see anger in the major's features as he conversed with the bar-keep while the other soldier, a lieutenant, scanned the customers in the bar.

"What the hell's goin' on here?" Han muttered to himself as he lifted the empty glass to his face in an attempt to hide his features. He sipped out the last dregs of the sweet liquid. When the bartender had returned to his duties and the Imperials began to whisper together Han threw several coins onto the table and left the bar quickly, his mind contemplating the implications of the Imperials' presence.

There were several alternatives to consider: it could have been a trap, but why were they being so obvious? Or the Imperials were the contacts - that meant they were either Rebel sympathizers or, more likely, just plain crooked. Or, the contacts didn't show and the Imps decided that a reserved sign did not extend to them. Well, whatever it was the deal sure didn't work out. Then he thought about Chewbacca's absence. Was it a trap? Had they gotten Chewie out of the way to snare him more easily? If that was the case they would know who the Alliance representatives were, which meant they knew where the Falcon was docked, that would mean they would have it staked out and they would have seen Luke and the Princess and.. .

He looked over at the covered market, leaving his thoughts unfinished, and stepped away from the bar's dripping door lintel. He didn't relish standing here waiting for Luke and Leia but this was where they had arranged to meet. He wanted to get back to the Falcon and check her out. He leaned against the cantina's wall, hoping his travelling companions wouldn't be late

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Once more Luke's boots squelched in the thickening mud of the slum district. Behind him the Crystal Towers shimmered hazily in the early evening sunlight. They had lost the soldiers a few blocks away and their pace had fallen to a slow walk; however they remained alert should the Imperials find them again. He looked to his companion, now taking the time to study him. He was a little shorter than Luke, but stockily built with a shock of black hair. His eyes were ice blue. He was dressed casually, but expensively and it only now struck Luke as being odd. Why would someone who could afford to dress in the best tailored clothes be picking pockets? And, how would such a person know their way through such a neighbourhood?

Luke suddenly realised the youth could be leading him anywhere and to anyone. "All right." He said as firmly as he could. "This is ridiculous! I don't even know who you are." He squinted at the boy in the sun light, his nostrils flaring in response to the noxious smells permeating the area.

The teenager glanced at him but kept walking. "Not now!" he whispered under his breath just loud enough for Luke to hear. "When we're safe."

Luke stopped dead in his tracks. "No, now!"

The boy slipped his hand into his pocket and turned to regard Luke, his lips were pursed with annoyance. He withdrew Leia's money pouch and threw it to Luke who caught it. "My name is Rogan D'anti, and I took the woman's money to try and get you both to follow me."

"Why?" Luke questioned, perplexed.

Rogan sighed with exasperation. "I saw the Imps take an interest in you, I was trying to help." He glanced around nervously and saw a particularly scruffy group eyeing up the pouch he had just given Luke. "Listen, will you put that thing away and come with me. We're starting to get noticed."

Luke put the wallet into his inner jacket pocket and then released the safety strap on his holster, hoping the movement would deter any would-be robbers. "Why help us?" He persisted, when Rogan started up the street. "You don't even know us."

Again the boy stopped, but instead of exasperation toning his expression Luke saw slyness and satisfaction cross his face. "Wanna bet?" He grinned. "It's not every day you get to see the Rebel Princess Organa and her Jedi Knight rescuer."

Luke's jaw dropped for a moment then clamped shut with surprise. Rogan turned and continued up the slum street. Luke glanced to the side and spotted the same scruffy bunch. He hurried after the youth now more curious than ever, and more than a little afraid.

* * *

"No, Artoo. Captain Solo doesn't want the lifters realigned. They're fine. He was *quite* specific when he said he didn't want us to touch anything." See Threepio explained in response to his smaller counterpart. He and Artoo Detoo were by the holographic game board, enjoying an hour or so of recreation while their human masters were away on other business. Threepio did not mind being left behind; the excitement of the last few days had been quite enough for him. However, Artoo appeared to have acquired a taste for adventure and was already bored with the game they were playing. Now he wanted to give the Falcon a major overhaul.

Threepio listened carefully to the little droid's screech of electronic explanation and nodded in agreement. "Yes, the ship did shudder badly on landing. However, I believe Master Luke was piloting." He gestured to the waiting game pieces. "It's your turn."

Artoo's game character, a particularly ugly little green reptile, hopped across three board segments and throttled Threepio's major character.

"Artoo!" The golden droid announced indignantly. "That's an illegal move!"

Equally as indignant Artoo let out a screech of whistles.

Threepio shook his head. "No, I don't think cheating makes a game more exciting, it..."

"But it makes it a lot more interesting."

"Oh my..." See Threepio turned in surprise at the whispered tones to find the intruder standing just inside the entrance to the passenger compartment. He internally adjusted his scanners and guessed by Artoo's squeal of enquiry that the astrodroid had not detected the alien's presence either. The creature was tall, well over two metres, humanoid; its skin was fish-like, constructed of scales that seemed to constantly shift colour and hues. Threepio had never seen its likes before.

"Sir," Threepio attempted to compose himself. "May I enquire how you gained access to this ship?" He adjusted his scanners again. Although his optics told him the alien was there, his internal system could detect no trace of him. Fleetingly, Threepio recalled stories and legends he had heard concerning a rare species; the Y'iami, the people who lived but did not live, the people who could pass a sensor and leave no trace, hidden by their shield of scales. Was this being such a creature?

The intruder smiled, his thin blue lips pulled back to reveal a toothless mouth. No humour reached the black eyes. "I had a little help," he confessed, his voice was low and soft and it vibrated gently in the droids' auditory centres. He stepped into the compartment, leaving the door clear for his companions to enter.

"Oh my..." Threepio uttered again, as two stormtroopers stepped out from behind the creature. It took a few seconds for him to realize his scanners had also failed to detect the hidden soldiers. "Oh my..."

* * *

Tired of standing around in the street, Han cut across the road, avoiding several speeders, and ducked into the market. Glancing across the road to the cantina, he noticed the two Imperials leave the building and stroll along the street. Again he wondered if they were His contacts and what their motivation was. His eyes drifted back to his time piece and he noted he still had half an hour before Luke and Leia were due back.

He looked around the various stalls deciding to take a walk around the market himself. If he was lucky he would bump into the Gruesome Twosome and they could all head back to Falcon. He needed to discuss the last hour's events with some one and the princess might have some ideas; besides he wanted to see Chewbacca and find out what had happened to his back up.

Plunging his left hand into his trouser pocket and keeping his right free to hover over his holster, Han sauntered further into the shopping precinct.

* * *

Luke stood at the dirt streaked fourth floor window and watched as the clouds gathered once more, obscuring his vision of the Crystal Towers. The glittering, clear crystal structures were the reason he was on this planet and he felt like cursing them. It began to rain again and Luke turned from the window wondering which was the more miserable - himself or the weather?

"Listen," he began, speaking to Rogan. "I've been pretty patient. But it's time you told me what this is all about, and why you can't just take me back to the space port. I have friends there."

"I can't," was his reply. "Not just yet."

The boy's voice did not sound like it came from directly behind him. Luke turned fully to find Rogan standing at the door, holding a blaster on him. His own blaster! Luke's finger's instinctively moved to his holster to establish what his eyes told him. Rogan certainly was an accomplished pick pocket, which confirmed his fumbled effort to take Leia's purse was indeed an attempt to attract their attention. "Now what?" Luke asked as calmly as he could, though his mouth had just dried.

Rogan grinned with devilish delight. "Now you stay here for while."

The door slid shut and there was a cycle of clicks as the lock was activated.

"Hey!" Luke ran to portal and pulled on the handle. It didn't budge and he kicked it hard with anger and frustration. "Damn!"

He leaned against the door and surveyed the room. It was sparsely furnished with a sagging sofa and a scored, cup marked table. The decorative paper was peeling from the walls, and it smelled musty and damp. He returned to the window and stared into the street below, watching the small figure of Rogan dash from the building and disappear around a corner further down the road.

Luke turned his attention to the window latch. It was locked and looked fused but he tried to force it nonetheless, and failed. He removed his jacket and wrapped it around his fist. He took a hard punch at the glass.

"Ow!!" The glass remained solid and the shock wave of the punch rippled up his arm.

He unwrapped his jacket and gently massaged his wrist, trying to disperse the pain. Again he looked around the room for anything which would aid an escape. There was nothing. It would appear that his imprisonment here was not a coincidence, that Rogan had intended this all along. But, how did the youth know him? How did the youth plan this? Who was Rogan?

Luke threw himself onto the sofa. Why did Rogan save him from Imperial hands only to lock him in here? Was the boy a junior bounty hunter looking for a reward? What was happening with Leia? How was Han faring with the deal? Would the Corellian find out what had happened to himself and Leia?

So many questions. So few answers.

* * *

Their work was complete. The droids' memories had been erased; the automatic log recording of their entry had been wiped. They had learned all they could.

Itael followed the troopers back through the ship towards the hatch, briefly glancing into the passenger compartment as he passed. It was only then the cylinder caught his eye.

"Wait," he called to his companions, as he re-entered the lounge area, and lifted the object from the acceleration chair. He turned the lightsaber in his hands, and a shudder of revulsion rippled through him. A Jedi!

Itael turned to the troopers. "Yavaire did not mention a Jedi." There was anger in his voice, and disgust.

The lead trooper shrugged within his armour. "Skywalker is a farmer who carries a 'saber. There is no evidence that he is Jedi."

As the soldiers turned to leave, Itael dropped the weapon back onto the chair and wiped his hands upon his tunic, as though to rub off the feel of the saber's touch. Though they said the boy was not Jedi, the sword vibrated with its owner's unnatural power. It was an unpleasant sensation.

Swallowing his nausea Itael followed the Imperials from the ship. He was unsettled, and concerned at this unexpected find.

* * *

As in the cantina Han couldn't keep his eyes from watching the minutes creep past on his chronometer. He was back at the agreed point to meet up with the princess and Luke, but there was no sign of either one. The market across the road was beginning to close for the day, the shoppers had dwindled and several of the stalls had their shutters down.

He tapped his foot on the sidewalk, drove both hands deep into his pockets to warm them and started to whistle a nonsensical, unmusical tune. If he stood here much longer he was going to get a proposition. He stared over at the market

hoping to see his two friends emerging full of apologies. There were plenty of people leaving, but not the two he was looking for.

Gathering his growing anger Han returned to the market. It was quieter now, the crowds having dispersed, and Han hoped this would aid his search. A waft of cooked Marave berries tickled his nose and his stomach rumbled; reminding him it had been several hours since he had eaten. He found the bakery stall keeper closing up for the night and spotted two remaining tarts lying on the display trays.

"Can I have those?" He pointed to the tarts, his other hand fishing in his vest pocket for some cash.

The keeper lifted them, wrapped them, and handed them to Han. "Ten," he told the Corellian.

Han counted out the cash, took out a tart and chomped down, relishing the sweet taste. Again he glanced around looking out for Luke and Leia.

"You haven't by any chance, seen a dark haired woman and a blonde kid?" He asked the stall keeper.

The man gave Han a withering look. "Sir, I've served many people today."

"Yeah," Han agreed, understanding the other's point. "But she's all 'hoity toity', and he's all 'wonder and amazement'."

The stall keeper glanced over at the opposite stall appearing thoughtful. "Was the woman wearing a blue jump suit, her hair braided? The boy wore a yellow jacket?"

Han nodded vigorously, pleased by the positive answer.

The man grinned, and there was something about the grin which dampened Han's enthusiasm. "Yeah, I noticed those two." He pointed across at the closing ornament stall. "They went over there. The woman had her purse snatched, the kid ran after the thief..." He paused.

"And?" Han prompted.

"An Imp patrol came by and picked up your lady friend."

A chill passed through Han. Did this mean the Empire knew they were here and why, or was the princess just plain unlucky to have been recognised? "And Luke?" Han pressed. "What about the kid?"

The keeper shrugged. "Didn't see him again."

"Thanks," Han numbly acknowledged the man. He turned from the stall, dropping the remaining tart into the dirt and litter of the day. He had just lost his appetite. He quickly left the market and began to run back to the slums, to the docking bays, to the Falcon. He hoped his suspicions were wrong, he hoped he would find Chewie, he hoped he would find Luke. Mainly he hoped he would be able to figure out exactly what was going on.

* * *

The sudden slap caught him, hard on the cheek. He reeled back, surprised and hurt, as the sting from his cheek brought quick tears to his eyes. But from lessons past he remained standing, his hands clenched behind his back, his finger nails digging into his palms as he fought to keep his composure, fought the cry of pain which balanced on his lips.

"I wanted the boy first!" Lieutenant-General D'anti barked at his son, who stood rigid before him.

"It wasn't my fault, sir." Rogan tried to explain events as calmly as he could as the light tears spilled down his crimson cheek, tried to hide his own success behind the failure of his given task. "The wrong patrol appeared. I had to think quickly."

The Imperial officer glared at the teenager, watched faint trembles ripple through Rogan's tense muscles. "And tell me, boy, what do I do with the Alderaani princess? She is experienced, toughened. I'll learn nothing from her, and the Alliance would have paid Yavaire any ransom he desired to get her back! Now he, also, has the wrong package." D'anti paused, trying to force the anger from his body as he weighed up the situation. He turned his back on his son and stared out of his office window at the sprawling city.

"Tell me," he continued, somewhat calmer. "What was Major Yavaire's reaction?"

"He wasn't pleased." Rogan answered, truthfully, recalling the Major's outbursts after the Corellian had failed to show for the meet and after he learned he had the wrong hostage.

D'anti turned, a slight smile tingeing his lips. "And his plans now?"

Rogan swallowed, feeling stifled in his father's office, feeling trapped by the man's presence. "He's going along as planned. As well as confirming who their negotiators were the Corellian's log and droids told Yavaire's men that Solo saved Skywalker's life above the Death Star. Yavaire thinks this means that Solo has a fondness for the farmer, so he intends to use Skywalker against him instead of the princess. "

The General considered this information; the Major certainly was taking a gamble; a gamble D'anti was going to ensure he lost. He was going to pull the rug from under Yavaire's feet, put an end to his illegal trade in surplus arms; the major's dealings offended D'anti's military ideals. It would appear Yavaire now valued money above the Empire he had sworn to protect, that Yavaire now stooped to the level of the Rebels to fill his pocket, would sell arms to his own enemies for financial gain. There was also the matter of his son's loyalties that Yavaire had corrupted, and then there were the added bonuses to be had from ending the officer's career at this time: imprisoning the Alliance representatives and collecting a promotion and... "The money?"

"Hidden. Neither the droids nor the log could say where. Nor did they say how much Solo was given." Rogan reported, dutifully.

D'anti regarded his son, hearing a slight tone with the sentence. Was it possible the boy was lying? It was difficult, at times, to know what was going through his son's mind, what motivated him. He had worked with the boy for the past year after his men had discovered the rebellious runaway on the city streets, after he had learned of the contacts his son had made, the skills Rogan had perfected. The boy was an ideal little street informer for Imperial Security. He had thought he had worked the defiance out of the youth. It might be prudent, in the near future, to repeat some of the lessons they had studied together.

He smiled at teenager. "Thank you, Rogan." His tone was one of dismissal. "You may go."

Rogan nodded briskly and turned on his heels. Relief flooding him; relief at escaping his father's stifling presence, relief that his father appeared to have accepted his explanation of the day's events. But there was a creeping sense of fear. He was scared: scared of the pressure he had accepted when he started down this path, scared of jeopardizing the lives that hinged upon this deal going through, but most of all he was scared his father would discover exactly what his son had been planning. His father, who had never stopped to question why his son had run from him.

"How can you expect to command respect when you show none yourself?" General D'anti stared down at the thirteen year old before him. "When you enter these premises I expect you to dress appropriately. You have the uniforms I had tailored for you."

"But, Dad I..." Rogan stammered, dismayed by his father's greeting.

The general's forehead came down in a scowl, his eyes became slits. "What did you call me?"

Rogan swallowed with difficulty. "Uh, 'Dad'."

"Did you hear nothing of what I said? Respect, Rogan." D'anti turned from the child. "While in this building you will address me as General, or sir. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," Rogan whispered staring at his father's back, his eyes filling with tears of hurt. He had been looking forward to joining his father on Xalan, he had seen little of the man as he grew up, could not understand why his mother never joined her husband at his postings. He had been excited about getting to know his sire, of learning about a section commander's life, of sharing the fun and secrets he saw his friends enjoy with their fathers. However, he had been with D'anti for six months and had found the man cold and withdrawn, a man who hid behind rules, regulations and respect, a man who placed those same values on his son, and who was swift to punish the least misdemeanour.

"Now," D'anti continued, his back still to Rogan. "What did you wish to see me about?"

Rogan glanced at the school score card in his hands, at the grades he had achieved during the tests. He slipped it back into his pocket. "It can wait. I'm sorry to have disturbed you, General."

D'anti never heard the tone of Rogan's voice, never saw the pain in his eyes, never saw resignation replace pain as the youth left the office.

It had begun, after all his planning, it had begun.

* * *

Luke was at the window again, his frustration growing by the minute. Less than a centimetre of glass separated him from freedom and he could not break through the toughened material. He stared down onto the darkening street, watching the people and their activities; the prostitutes selling themselves on the street corners, the drug pushers palming their wares into other hands, ragged children playing in the mud.

He was about to turn, saddened, from the scene when he noticed a figure jogging up the road. He peered into the twilight and recognised the runner.

"Han!" He breathed, resting a hand against the glass. "Han!" He shouted and began to pound on the window. "Han!"

Oblivious to his young friend the Corellian ran on toward the docking bays.

With a last fierce thrust Luke struck the pane of glass with as much strength as his anger and frustration could muster. He was rewarded only with pain.

He turned from the window, unwilling to look any longer at the scenes below, unwilling to look upon his snatched freedom. At least Han still had his liberty, there was some conciliation with that fact.

He sat upon the sofa, curled his legs under him and dragged his jacket over his body. He might as well get some sleep since he wasn't going anywhere tonight and he might require all his strength and alertness tomorrow.

* * *

Cautiously Han approached the open door of the docking bay. He drew his blaster and carefully peered around into the bay. There the Falcon sat still and silent - her hatch open. He peered in further, trying to see beyond the bulk of the ship. It was quiet, but Han felt uneasy. He had secured the hatch when he, Luke and the princess left earlier that day. He distinctly remembered repeating the locking code to Luke so the kid could use it if they got split up.

With that thought, he holstered his gun and strode angrily toward the ship.

"Luke!" He roared. "Luke!"

There was no reply, no meek face appeared either at the hatch way or the cockpit window. Han drew his gun once more.

"Chewie?" Han called again, changing the name and his hopes as he started up the ramp. "Chewie! Are you in here?"

Han gripped his blaster tighter as the silence continued.

"Threepio?" He tried.

His anger dissolved back into cautiousness and he crept aboard the ship and slowly made his way to the passenger compartment where the droids had been left. A sense of relief briefly waved through him when he saw they were seated by the game board.

"Threepio?" He questioned the droid's uncharacteristic silence. Then he noticed the droid's optical lights were deactivated. He glanced at Artoo and saw the same. The droids had been shut down. Quickly he reached behind the golden machine and switched him on, steeling himself for the inevitable outburst.

Threepio's lights flickered on and he glanced up at Han. "Captain Solo!!!"

"Who shut you down, Threepio?" Han quickly asked before the droid could launch into his usual verbal stream.

"Who, sir?"

"Yes. Who?"

"Who what?"

"Who shut you off!" Han barked in exasperation.

"I don't know, sir." Threepio responded beginning to sound more like himself, less confused.

"You have no idea?" Han questioned further. "What? Did they sneak up behind you?" There was a touch of sarcasm to his words.

"I have no memory, sir." Threepio informed him.

Han thought for a moment, his mind racing over the day's events, trying to find a link between everything; Chewie's disappearance, Luke's disappearance, Leia's capture, the failed deal, the Imperials and the deactivated droids. "What's the last thing you remember?"

"Chewbacca arriving back and asking after you."

Han was immediately more alert. "Chewie was here? When?"

"Before we were ordered to erase part of our memory and shut down."

"You remember that?"

"No sir. I assume that."

"Did he say anything?" Han questioned further placing his gun back in its holster.

"Who, sir?"

"Chewie!"

"Oh!" Threepio came as close to a negative shaking of the head as he could. "He merely asked where you, the Princess and Master Luke were. He left when I replied I did not. He did appear to be rather annoyed sir." He paused for a beat and continued. "By the way sir, where are the Princess Leia and Master Luke?"

Han crouched down by the Artoo unit. "The Princess is probably in an Imperial cell and Luke..." He shrugged. "Luke appears to have mislaid himself."

"Oh my!"

"Yeah my sentiments exactly, though I would have used stronger words." He re-activated Artoo and stood.

Immediately the little droid unleashed a screed of electronic chatter and tilted to look up at Han.

"What did he say?" Han asked, in the vain hope the little droid would have fared better than Threepio.

"He's asking where Obi-Wan Kenobi is."

Han looked numbly at the little droid. "He's dead."

Artoo let out an explosive burst of expletives.

Solo looked to Threepio in surprise.

"He says he has a message for him."

"Message?" Han was confused, where could the old man fit into all of this? "What message?"

"He says it's classified sir." Threepio hesitated and leaned closer to the Corellian. "Uh, sir? I believe Artoo doesn't remember anything from leaving the princess' ship, before we entered into Master Luke's service."

"Great!" Han announced. "Chewie doesn't turn up for a meet, Luke gets lost, the princess captured and to top it all I've got a couple of droids on ray hands with amnesia! It's not my day."

"Sir..?" Threepio began.

Han waved him silent. "Look, why don't the two of you renew your memory from the ship's log..." A dawning look of horror filled Han's eyes. "Oh no!" He dashed to the cockpit with the robots in close pursuit.

It was as he feared. The log detailed everything up to their arrival here. Everything after, including the mystery visitors, was blank. The log only picked up again as Han entered the ship.

"Well, at least she didn't lose too much. But who ever it was wanted their privacy while invading ours. Damn!!" Solo burst with sudden realization. "That's why they picked up Leia! They know exactly who I was carrying and why we're here! But how did they get passed my security coding?" He turned to the robots. "Threepio, d'you know my coding for the log?"

"No, sir. But Artoo could very easily by-pass such a simple coding."

Han nodded mutely. To say they were in trouble was an understatement. Who ever they were dealing with had all the information, had all the aces and left Han chasing his tail in frustration. "Go ahead," he told the droids. "Renew your memory, I'm going aft." He started back, and then turned with another thought. "And watch what you're doing!"

He didn't wait for an answer. Half way along the corridor to the back cabins he stopped and crouched down. Carefully he prised his fingers under one of the floor panels and lifted it from it's place. He laid it against the wall and sat back on his haunches gazing at the boxes in the hidden hold.

A nice little pile, he thought to himself as he surveyed the boxes of precious metals and crystals.

Greed Solo? A small, whispering voice taunted at the back of his mind.

No. He firmly replied as he climbed down into the hold, and settled by the only box containing cash. *Only my just payment for services rendered.*

He opened the box and withdrew an amount of money and stuffed it into his pockets. He replaced the lid and was about to climb out when he heard soft footsteps.

He was about to pull his blaster when there was a soft, familiar growl. He jumped from the compartment as his partner entered the ship. "Where have you been?" He asked, suppressing his relief at seeing the Wookiee and nursing his annoyance at being left by himself for the deal.

The Wookiee rumbled out an answer and added a question of his own, a touch of anger in his words.

"*Where was I?*" Han burst, placing the floor plate back. "I was the one in the right place, buddy!" He turned on his heels and headed for his cabin. "You should have stayed put here when none of us showed. We've had company on board."

Chewbacca voiced his apology, explaining he had returned to the original meeting point. It would appear they had walked circles around each other. Following Han he aired his puzzlement.

"Huh?" Han stopped at the cabin door. "We couldn't both be at the right place and the wrong place at the same time. It doesn't make sense."

Chewbacca tried to explain.

"What kid?" Han's face darkened as the Wookiee continued with his tale.

"And you believed him?" He angrily hit the stud to open his door. "How could you be so gullible?" He entered and headed for the hydro-syth...

Chewie's next words made him pause, his hand hovering under the filters.

"He did? And you've never seen him before?" He let the clear, recycled liquid pool in his palms, then he splashed his face and neck. "You think he knows Badure?" He reached for a towel and dried himself.

Chewbacca shrugged.

"Something's goin on, Chewie. You're tricked into going to another bar, I narrowly escape a meet with Imps, Leia's captured, the kid's missing, someone's been on the ship and fiddled with the droids and the log - but the money's untouched. Things keep adding up, but nothing makes any sense!" He threw the towel down, his frustration and underlying fear betrayed by the action and his words. No matter how many times he repeated the day's events they never provided any answers.

Chewbacca barked out his sorrow and surprise, then a question.

Han considered for a moment. "That'd be no good. All the channels are probably being monitored. Besides, I already asked Dodonna who the contact was, but he wouldn't tell me. Not even Leia knows. General said he'd be too valuable to lose if one of us spilled if captured."

The Wookiee grumbled out his displeasure, and gestured to the floor.

"Yeah, I know. But, I didn't want to worry you." He looked distant for a moment, recalling sitting on the tree branch with Luke, then added; "I had other reasons for coming here."

Seeing Han's fleeting expression, Chewbacca rumbled quietly, before motioning to the floor again.

Han caught himself and followed his partner's meaning. "That? I took a little info money. I'm going back to that bar to ask a few questions." He glanced up at his co-pilot. "This time I want you there as back up, no matter what anyone else tells you!"

* * *

Leia slid her legs from the cold metal bunk, stood and stretched. She crossed the floor of the cell to the door, placed the side of her head against the hard surface

and strained to listen for any sounds coming from the corridor beyond. From her time spent in the detention block on board the Death Star she knew it was a pointless task, but somehow it broke the monotonous boredom. She lifted her head and surveyed her holding pen - it looked exactly like her cell on the battle station and she wondered if Imperial designers ever had any sense of imagination.

Her lips curled into a vague smile and she returned to the bunk and sat down, her smile faltering as her despondency returned. Just over a week free from four black walls and she was a captive again. She had been marched into the Imperial headquarters, presented proudly by the lead trooper to a captain with fanatical glint to his eyes. He had gleefully informed her that General D'anti - whoever he was - would be notified of her capture, and if she had anything to say to do it now.

Somewhat numbed by the swiftness of the events, Leia could think of nothing and was removed to the detention centre. Now she had no idea how long ago that had been, could not even guess if night had fallen. In a cold, black cell every minute was exactly like the last. She curled her legs up onto the bunk and lay down, resting her head on her elbow. Glancing at the door once more, another small smile flickered as a memory of the previous week returned. The memory of waking from a light doze to find a short, harried stormtrooper standing in the open door of her cell. And this brought thoughts of Luke and Han.

Had Luke made his way back to the ship and to Han? Had the Corellian completed the deal? Were they contemplating another rescue? These thoughts abruptly ended with a sudden, terrible realization. If the Imperials knew she was here, then they knew who with and quite probably why! Han and Luke could quite well be in the neighbouring cells.

No, she wouldn't think that, couldn't contemplate that. There had to be some hope and, for some unknown reason, she knew that Luke and Han were that hope. They were still free.

Calmed a little, she closed her eyes fighting to keep further disconcerting thoughts at bay and forced herself to focus on trying to sleep. If her previous experience was anything to go by she would require all her strength in the days to come.

* * *

It was late evening and raining again when Han and Chewbacca returned to the cantina. They entered together, Han first with Chewbacca at his back. They paused briefly at the door as Han shrugged water from his clothing and swept back his soaking hair. The cantina was packed with customers - Han guessed the bad weather was helping business - and he and Chewbacca had to push

through the throng of peoples and servodroids to get to the bar. Squeezing in between two Yak Faces, Han raised a hand to attract the bartender. It took a while, but at last the small man approached him.

"What'll it be, Spacer?"

"Uh, give me a Spasch, heavy on the herbs." He glanced back at Chewie, who growled his order to Han. "My partner will have a Trarse hops beer, and it had better be hot!"

The little man grimaced with disgust.

Han shrugged. "That's how he likes it."

The bartender glanced up at the Wookiee. "And who am I to argue, sir."

Han watched the man make up their order as he delved into his pocket for some cash. "Do you take the table reservations?" He asked casually.

"Nah. That's Taset's jurisdiction. Likes to deal with that himself, if you know what I mean." He placed the drinks upon the counter and explained himself. "He likes to keep an eye on all the proceedings."

Han nodded with understanding and passed Chewie his steaming mug of beer. He sipped at his own glass of spirits and paid the man. "This Taset, is he the owner?"

"Huh, uh " There was a nod of affirmation.

"Where can I find him?"

The bar man pointed to the back of the cantina. "In back, with the stores."

"Thanks."

Han motioned to Chewbacca to follow and, carrying their drinks, they both followed the barkeep's directions and slipped into the back store room. It was packed with barrels, cases, kegs and shelves of food. He could see no one. "Watch the door, Chewie." he whispered, as he walked further into the room. "Hello!" He called.

"Yes?" A voice responded.

"I'm looking for Taset," Han explained as he walked around a large, neat pile of cases looking for the speaker. "I was told I'd find him here."

"You have found him."

Han spun on his heels to find the cantina's owner crouching by a barrel of beer. He was a Xalan Plainsman; one who had obviously given up the nomadic life long ago. He was tall, like all the plains people, but he sported a paunch which was more common to indulgent humans than the wiry nomads. He had wispy white hair and two orange eyes. His skin was the colour of Saffron.

"You are wondering why a Plainsman is owner of a city bar?" His voice was gravely with a peculiar hollow tone.

Han nodded. "The question did cross my mind."

Taset smiled, displaying his sharp carnivore teeth. "I won the bar from it's previous owner when he lost a hunt, and I decided to keep it."

"What happened to him?" Han asked remembering the stories he had heard about the Plainsmen and their gambling hunts. Apparently the bet can only be between two beings, one is the hunter, the other the hunted. If the hunted can reach a certain marker some distance away he wins. If the hunter catches the hunted then it is he who wins. Many of those hunted are never heard from again.

Taset laughed heartily. "I ate him. Human flesh is so very tender."

"That sounded like a threat," Han responded. There came a low growled warning from behind him.

"It was not intended to be one. I would not have much custom if I ate my patrons," he shrugged, glancing at Chewbacca. "That a side, Wookiee meat is too tough for my palate." He snorted laughter.

Chewbacca howled from the door.

"It's okay Chewie," Han hastily assured him. "I think he was joking."

Taset stood and wiped his hands on his apron. "What can I do for you Corellian?"

"I was told you take the table reservations."

"Yes." He turned and walked towards the back of the room, where Han saw a large desk placed before a wall of shelves. Taset seated himself pulling a computer ledger towards him. "Which night do you require?"

Han sipped at his drink. "I'm not here for a reservation. I want to ask you about this afternoon and the table under the tapestry. Who booked it and why?"

Han was sure he saw a flicker of fear cross the Xalan's features, but when he answered, his voice was as firm as ever.

"I do not keep records." He switched the computer off. "My customers require privacy." Taset rose from the desk. "Now, if you will excuse me, I have work to do."

"I'm sure you do," Han agreed, steadily. "But I'm also sure your memory stretches back a few hours. "

Taset looked closer at Han as though he was altering his first impressions of the spacer. "Now, that sounded like a threat."

"It wasn't intentional," Han told him a wry smile on his lips. "I just want to know who reserved the table. I can offer a little incentive."

Taset looked on in interest as Han withdrew a sum of money from his pocket and counted out what he considered an appropriate amount.

The bar owner licked his lips. "The table under the tapestry. Yes?"

"Yes." Han echoed the word as he placed the money on top of the desk.

Taset appeared to be weighing things in his mind. The money had touched his greed, but there was still hesitancy. Han assumed his customers could rely on total privacy and if it got out he had given information it may damage his reputation, if not his life. Han placed down more money.

"It was booked by a Major Yavaire." Taset's hand darted out to the pile of cash.

Han caught the Plainsman's wrist before his fist could close over the money. "Why?"

"For one of his deals, but the party did not arrive."

"What was the deal?"

Taset withdrew his hand and stared at Han, the fear had returned to his eyes. "Who are you?" He glanced over at the Wookiee. "Are you Security? You are police?"

Han knew he was onto something here. "Why?" He pressed. "Why are you asking? What was the deal?"

"I do not know," Taset told him retreating further. "I only take the reservations."

Han placed down more money. "I think you do know."

Taset licked his lips again, torn between fear and greed. "If I said...if I told...my life would be..."

More money.

"Arms," He blurted. "Weapons."

"For who?" Han barked, hearing Chewbacca move closer to help with the intimidation.

"Anyone with money!"

Han looked doubtful for a second. A crooked Imperial Officer certainly was no real surprise, but the Princess and the kid, not to leave out himself and Chewie, would be a good catch for this Major. Was their capture his real intention? Thinking quickly Han picked up the money pile and handed it to Taset. "There'll be more if you reserve that table for fifteen hundred hours tomorrow, and tell this Major to be there"

"Who... Who shall I say, sir?" Taset was relieved to have the money, but still extremely nervous and fearful.

Han smiled. "I'm sure you'll tell him a little of this conversation. Let him work it out." He threw the remainder of his drink down his throat and placed his glass down upon the desk. He turned, with Chewbacca, to leave.

"You are not security?" Taset asked at his back.

Han opened his mouth to answer then closed it with a smile. He glanced to his partner then turned to the bar owner, he tapped his nose and smiled. "That would be telling."

They stepped back into the busy bar room and disappeared into the crowd. Taset breathed a sigh of relief, tucked the money away in his desk and locked the drawer. He turned as the shelves at his back moved aside and another entered the room.

"A nice little profit, Taset." The voice was low and soft.

Taset turned to his companion. "I earned it, Itael."

"Yes," the word was hissed, and followed by dry sarcasm. "Though the Corellian helped by being predictable. Yavaire will be relived."

"Who is he?" Taset asked, looking in the direction of the bar.

Itael laughed showing his wide, toothless mouth. "You worry too much about General D'anti, Plainsman. He is Yavaire's contact, the Rebel negotiator." He turned his black eyes upon the bar owner. "I shall tell the Major his deal is back on before he gives our little hostage to Security."

"Hostage?" Taset asked in curiosity.

Itael's mouth twisted into a grimace of disgust. "The Corellian's young companion," he started toward the door, his scales shifting colours in the dim light from the bar room. "See to the table, Taset."

Alone once more, Taset opened his desk drawer and withdrew the money. He smiled and started counting.

* * *

Luke was hungry and thirsty. He had slept badly, tossing and turning on the old sagging sofa that poked at him with its protruding springs and broken frame. He felt grimy and sore. His muscles were stiff and his head was starting to ache. He was beginning to feel more than a little scared. If he had judged the Xalan sun correctly it was now just after midday and he had neither seen nor heard from Rogan D'anti. He couldn't quite understand why the boy had locked him here, couldn't see why Rogan should save him from the Imperials just to hold him prisoner, and how did Rogan know who he was? It was only days after his departure from Tatooine and the subsequent events and, although he was aware that the Empire probably knew him by now, surely they had not circulated his I.D. around the Galaxy. After all he was only one Rebel pilot out of many.

"It's not every day you get to see the Rebel Princess and her Jedi Knight rescuer."

Rogan's words from the previous day returned to him and Luke shifted upon the sofa attempting to find a more comfortable position. What did he mean? Luke wasn't a Jedi, although he carried a lightsaber, and he couldn't see how he could become a Jedi now Ben Kenobi was dead. Besides Han had forbidden him to wear the 'saber during the trip afraid it would draw attention to them. Could the boy possibly know of the events on board the Death Star? If so, how did he come by the information? The Empire, during the last few days had covered up the loss of their battle station, had even denied it had ever existed, putting the story down to the fanatical rebels having over active imaginations. As for Alderaan - that had been a natural disaster.

The only way Rogan could know of Luke and the events on board the Death star was if the boy was an Imperial. If that was the case, then why did he try to save

both himself and Leia from the Stormtrooper patrols, and why was he not locked up in some cell next to Leia, or dead? Perhaps his earlier assumption that Rogan was a bounty hunter was the correct one?

Luke rose from the settee and stretched and yawned. He glanced over at the window but decided against staring out at the street's day time activities: he had already spent several hours sitting on the sill staring at the crystal towers in the distance. The day beyond the room looked bright and warm, a sharp contrast to the previous day's rain.

The door behind him slid open.

Startled, Luke turned on his heels and saw an armed Rogan D'anti enter his musty prison. The boy was dressed in the black uniform of Imperial Security. That was one question answered.

The door closed behind the youth. "You don't look too surprised," Rogan told him, as he crossed the room to the sofa and sat down.

"I've had plenty of time to figure out what you were," Luke told him watching the boy's pistol, his mouth more than a little dry, wondering how dangerous his situation really was. "I just don't understand why you saved me from your own people."

Rogan smiled pleasantly at Luke. "You, my friend, are our security. We really wanted the Princess, but you'll do for our purposes."

"Security for what?" Luke asked, more perplexed than ever. "You already have Leia!"

"No, we don't have your Princess. Security has her..."

"But you..." Luke began gesturing at the boy's dress.

Rogan grimaced, it was the first childish action Luke had seen from the youth. "My father insists I wear this. I have to follow the family tradition and..." He stopped abruptly, realizing he was telling his prisoner more than he wanted. He sneered with self sarcasm and placed his hand into his pocket. He drew out a small carton of water and threw it to Luke, who caught it. "We don't know how long we'll have to keep you here," he told him. "And we don't want you drying out. He rose to leave.

"Wait!" Luke called.

Rogan turned and it was then Luke felt the most peculiar sensation. It seemed to undulate through him in chilled waves, his skin tingled and goose bumps rose on his arms. His head began to ache and nausea rose in his throat.

"What?" Rogan barked impatiently.

Luke was confused for a moment. He stared at the boy, past him, then at the door, and the feeling began to fade. Whatever had been there, it was passing, though it left a dull throb in his temples. He found his voice. "Security for what?"

"A little deal we have going with a certain smuggler turned Rebel," Rogan answered. Apparently he hadn't noticed Luke's momentary illness and confusion. He enjoyed the look of surprise which spread over Luke's features. "You are our insurance that the deal will go as planned."

"And Leia?" Luke asked. "Where is she?"

Rogan shrugged. "My father has her." He stared at Luke appearing to consider something. "The meet's been re-scheduled for tomorrow." He told Luke, then he knocked on the door and the portal opened.

Luke glimpsed shadows in the corridor beyond, and that same strange feeling flooded him. He felt the nausea build as Rogan left him alone once more. The door closed and the sickness receded. He glanced at the water carton in his hand and his stomach tumbled.

He sat on the windowsill, peeled open the carton and took a drink, savouring the sweetness of the liquid on his tongue as he pondered his situation and that sudden sick feeling which had come and gone so quickly. Had it been a physical manifestation of his fear? If so, why had it corresponded so strongly with the opening and closing of the door?

Someone was out there, Luke.

The thought came from no-where. He had been trying to think rationally, trying to explain the sensation away with the logical reasoning of a farmer, but he had been wrong and had corrected himself. Someone had been there, someone who had triggered his barely realised Force talents and he was suddenly reminded of Ben and his death only a few short days ago. Reminded that Ben had told him so little, had shown him so little, had left him with so little, save a few kind words of encouragement. Rogan had called him a Jedi Knight... how wrong the boy was.

Who was this other 'person'? Was this the one for whom Rogan was working? Why had he stayed hidden, lurking in the shadows of the corridor? Was he still out there somewhere watching this room? And then came another thought: even if the deal went in Rogan's favour, would he be released? Rogan had shown

himself to be with Imperial Security, but was obviously working for some shady dealer. If Luke was to be freed, Rogan and his mysterious companion may view him as a liability, a threat to their double dealing.

With an awful awareness Luke realised his fate was already sealed; he was an expendable pawn to these people, his life meant nothing, the money Han was given by the Alliance meant everything. His throat clogged with the thought and he set aside the water carton, scanning the room in another futile effort to find a means of escape.

"Think!" He told himself firmly, desperately. "Think."

* * *

"You see, Itael? He poses no threat to you." Major Yavaire cheerfully told the creature. "Skywalker is an untrained child." The officer glanced at Rogan as the boy closed the door behind them. They were in a room across the hall from Luke's prison in the shabby building they used as a base. "Why," Yavaire continued. "Even young D'anti here could best him."

"He knew I was there," Itael told the major, his scales shifting hues with his unease.

"Nonsense!" Yavaire barked, tiring of Itael's complaints. The creature was unsettled by their captive. He did not fear the Rebel, but was merely disgusted by his existence. The Jedi offended the being's sensibilities. Itael viewed them as aberrations of nature, a threat to his existence; the Jedi were, he claimed, the only beings who could sense the Y'iami. Yavaire chuckled silently to himself, he knew of many who would view the few remaining Y'iami in a similar light.

"He must die, Yavaire," Itael warned the Imperial.

"We need him," Yavaire responded, dismissing Itael's Jedi-phobia.

"I should get back," Rogan broke in before Itael could continue. "My father will be expecting me."

The Major smiled at the youth. "Of course, daddy is waiting." There was sarcasm in his voice, then distrust. "What does he know of these events, Rogan?"

"Nothing," Rogan assured him.

"He has the Princess Leia Organa in his detention centre and he suspects nothing? I find that hard to believe. "

Rogan took a step back as his spine bristled. "I meant he doesn't know about you or the deal. But he's asking questions, and it's getting difficult keeping him off." It was getting difficult to keep Yavaire off, too.

Itael put himself between Rogan and the door as the Major stepped closer to the boy.

"Keep him off, Rogan." Yavaire warned. "Too much is riding on this deal for your father to sniff us out."

"I know," D'anti answered, glancing at Itael behind him and at Yavaire. "I know what's at stake here."

Itael placed a hand on his shoulder and squeezed lightly. Rogan winced as the creature's claws pierced the cloth of his uniform. "You have already altered our intentions, Rogan. Do not make any more mistakes." The being reminded him, digging deeper.

Rogan nodded in swift agreement, feeling blood swell from his shoulder. "I won't."

"Let the boy go, Itael. He hasn't failed us yet."

Itael released Rogan and moved back from the door. With his hand moving to his shoulder Rogan glanced at Yavaire, his eyes pained, his face flushed. Without saying more, the boy left the room.

"That was unnecessary," Yavaire told his companion.

Itael laughed, it was a rough, unpleasant sound. "You don't see him do you? He needed to be reminded. "

Rogan's body sagged in the corridor as the pain from his shoulder shot through his left arm. Itael's claws had bitten deep into his flesh; the wounds they had left would provide scars to remind Rogan of the agreement he had with Yavaire and the Y'iami. That had been the creature's intention. Did Itael suspect? Did the creature have some way of telling what he was doing, of the plans he had made, of the freedom he sought from both his father's and Yavaire's services?

He had absconded from his father's care the previous year, had fled from the man's authority and principles. But he had found that life on the run, life on the streets of a large city was hazardous and frightening. Yet, he watched and learned. He picked up pilfering skills and for five months he lived on his wits and for the moment.

However, he had been caught as he attempted to lift the fat purse of a tourist and was turned over to Yavaire's care. He was not taken into custody, instead he was taken to a shabby, dilapidated building and locked into a room with only a collapsing sofa to sleep upon. There he learned of the Major's arms trading, there he had learned of the major's delight at finding "D'anti's little turn-coat," there he was offered freedom from his father and had accepted almost immediately; the seeds of escape already planted.

"Your father is searching the entire region for you." Yavaire told the tired, dirty youth who sat forlornly on the broken sofa. "He must care very deeply for you."

There was a coarse, hollow laugh from the creature who accompanied the major.

Rogan shivered at the sound and at the major's sarcasm. He said nothing.

Yavaire smiled, enjoying himself at Rogan's expense. "But then, the general's never been one for the weaker emotions," he paused, seeming to weigh up the boy's strengths and vulnerabilities. "I could give you back, and enjoy D'anti's thanks. Or I could have more fun and offer you a position along with Itael on my staff."

Rogan glanced at Yavaire's companion as the creature hissed his displeasure.

"I don't need a child, Yavaire," Itael's voice was a warning. "He will complicate matters."

"Nonsense!" the Imperial countered. "Rogan here could be of benefit to us, and we could be of benefit to him." He turned back to the frightened youth. "Think it over, little turncoat. Your father, or me."

Rogan chose neither, but allowed Yavaire to believe otherwise. He was taught further skills, introduced to Yavaire's many street contacts, given as much freedom as his new master would allow. He learned swiftly and earned trust - only Itael seemed to doubt him, and seemed to watch him closely. Rogan knew, when the time came, he would have to find a way to distract the Y'iami.

Once Yavaire was satisfied Rogan had learned sufficiently he sent the boy home.

* * *

Leia was ushered into the plushly furnished office by her two escorts. Before her was an antique wooden desk with leather surface, a top of the line computer system was discreetly built into the wood. There was the obligatory drinks cabinet holding only the most expensive brands, an area set aside with comfortable chairs and holo-system for relaxation. Pieces of art littered the room

in no clear arrangement or order. Leia concluded they had been placed in the office more for effect than appreciation.

The room was bright, lit by the wide window which took up most of the opposite wall. The view was spectacular. The city's crystal towers, though several miles away, were huge, thrusting up from the city into the clear blue sky. The sunlight, reflected from the crystal surfaces, cast wild colours which played over city's structures.

The office looked as though it belonged to a successful business man and not a military officer. However, at the drinks cabinet, pouring himself a tumbler full, stood a black uniform clad Lieutenant-General. He sipped at his glass and turned to regard his prisoner.

Leia took the opportunity to do likewise. He was of medium build, though stocky. His military styled black hair was touched with a sprinkling of grey. His blue eyes were hard, his jaw line firm. Combining his physical appearance with the opulence in the office, Leia surmised he was either born into riches or used his position to satisfy his materialistic yearnings.

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your Highness." His voice was refined, cultured, but Leia detected a subtle edge to his accent which spoke of a lower class. This man surrounded himself with riches, had worked hard to hide his origins; that made him ambitious and dangerous. "Won't you please take a seat?" He waved away the two guards who had accompanied Leia.

"You have me at a loss, General, " Leia responded as she lowered herself into the chair he indicated. He sat himself opposite.

"D'anti," he answered, easily. "Imperial Security."

Leia smiled without humour. "Secret Police."

D'anti chuckled. "Call it what you will." He took another drink, staring at the princess over the rim of his glass. He placed the glass down before he spoke. "Your young friend is also in Imperial care."

Leia started. He could only mean Luke.

"Alas," he continued smiling, enjoying Leia's reaction. "He is not in my care. Though, if I understand his situation, his life is in more danger with Major Yavaire, than yours is with me."

"I'm not sure I understand you, General, " Leia spoke evenly, carefully, trying to assess what D'anti was after.

"He is a pawn, Princess. His life is held to ransom. If Yavaire does not get what he wants, the boy dies. "He was watching Leia closely.

"What does he want?" Leia asked, wondering all the while what D'anti himself wanted.

"His life. His freedom. And the means to an easy life. "

He lifted his glass once more and turned it in his hands, watching the clear ochre spirit swirl around. He looked lost to his own thoughts. "I mean to deprive him of all three."

"What has this to do with me?"

Leia's question seemed to startle him. He glanced up then threw the remaining liquid down his throat. "Tell me about your Corellian, tell me about the deal. What is Yavaire offering?"

And Leia suddenly realized this Imperial knew more about the arms deal than she did. If what D'anti was saying was correct then Han's contact was an Imperial soldier! Not wishing the general to know he had an advantage on her, she answered, "I can't."

D'anti smiled, then laughed softly. "Of course you can't. You need to protect your Rebel Alliance. "He rose and returned to the drinks cabinet. There was a brief pause as he poured himself another drink. He glanced over at the Princess and lifted the decanter. "May I tempt you with a measure, Your Highness?"

Leia shook her head. "No, thank you, General."

He replaced the crystal container and returned to his chair. "Suppose I told you I wasn't interested in you, or Skywalker?"

"I wouldn't believe you." Leia answered easily.

D'anti chuckled once more. "You are so suspicious, you cannot see passed your Alliance, can you? You simply cannot believe a soldier of the Empire may not be interested in your petty attempt to usurp the Emperor. "A hint of anger tinged his words.

Leia studied the man closely, choosing her words before she spoke. "You would consider freeing Luke and myself for information about the deal?"

"I said I wasn't interested. I didn't say I was an idiot." D'anti smiled at her. "I'm afraid I couldn't free you. You are too important and I have witnessed Lord Vader's anger. I value my life. However, I am willing to allow Skywalker and Solo

to walk. But, only if you tell me what Yavaire is offering and what the Corellian is authorized to pay."

Leia considered his words, taking her time to think them through. She didn't trust this D'anti, she didn't believe him when he said he would allow Luke and Han to escape. But he already knew so much about the deal, it may be useful to know how much he knew and how he came by the information. Perhaps a little co-operation would not go amiss in this situation; perhaps she could turn something to her advantage; it was a long shot but the deal was all she had to work with.

"Captain Solo has five hundred thousand to work with," Leia told D'anti, watching him for a reaction.

His face remained poker straight, though his eyes gained a sparkle of surprise. There was a slight pause before he responded. "I was told you were tough to crack."

Leia smiled as pleasantly as she could. "Everyone responds to some give and take, not to mention a little respect. You have given me that, General. "

"Indeed," D'anti agreed, nodding. "What is Yavaire offering?"

"A field Cannon, two crates of rifles and charge packs, same number of pistols, and ten medical field packs. Han has instructions to barter for more medical supplies and rifles. "

"And you're Corellian?"

"Brash, cocky, and self-motivated." She smiled to herself remembering her brief exchange with Han on the Falcon and his words about being ' in it for the money '. He was wrong of course, but would never admit it to anyone, least of all himself. "But he's also intelligent and dangerous."

D'anti considered her words. "Will he yield to their demands when he learns they have Skywalker?"

"Unlikely," Leia told him, trying to sound convincing as she lied. "As I said, he is self-motivated."

"So Skywalker's life is forfeit?"

There was a tone to D'anti's voice that chilled her, a glint to his eyes which scared her and she abruptly realised how manipulative this officer was, and then it dawned on her. She rose in her seat, horror spreading coldly through her. "*You* have Luke!"

D'anti laughed and rose from his chair, he returned to his desk and the console. Switching on the com he gave an order. "Send Rogan in." He turned back to the Princess. "You, my dear girl, are a liar." His voice was pleasant.

The door to the office swept open and a young man entered. He stood just inside the portal. Leia noticed that he looked pale and nervous. His left shoulder was bloodied.

"I don't have Skywalker." D'anti continued at the Princess. "Yavaire has him, but I control what will happen to him." He turned to the youth. "What happened to your shoulder?"

"They're getting suspicious," the youth explained to his parent. He remained standing, his back straight. One hand was curled into a fist, the other, the left, hung loose. Leia guessed that to ball that hand would send pain through the damaged shoulder. "Itael gave me a warning."

The elder D'anti took in the boy's words, pursed his lips and nodded. He had to admit he was becoming suspicious of Rogan himself. "And what of the Corellian?"

"Solo has re-scheduled the deal for tomorrow at fifteen hundred hours, in the same Cantina." As he spoke he turned to the princess. "Skywalker remains well."

Leia stared at him and finally recognised him. "The pickpocket."

"My son, "D'anti explained." has had a turbulent adolescence. His rebellious stage included petty offences. I have since discovered his talents and street contacts have their uses. They were able to tell us of the deal and who was coming; giving us time to check your two friends' backgrounds. The incident on board the Death Star made interesting reading. "D'anti smiled, and continued." Rogan's friends were able to gain entry to the Corellian's ship and glean information from the log. Rogan then changed venues for the Wookiee co-pilot using that information, thus delaying the meet. "

Rogan allowed himself an inner smile. His father believed he had only learned of the venues after the ship was breached. It felt good to have something his father didn't own, even if it was only a little information.

The Princess turned to D'anti. "And he managed to separate Luke and myself, ensuring our capture."

D'anti shrugged, enjoying the exchange, enjoying the explanation of his plans. "Not quite. You were actually intended for Yavaire's uses, Skywalker for mine. I thought the boy would be easier to break. But, "another shrug and a smile." An

unexpected patrol passed and recognised you as Rogan took your money. We had to improvise. "

"It's not just Yavaire you're after, is it? You want it all! You want us, and the money!" The Princess couldn't hold her burst of words.

D'anti laughed, delighted with the princess' response. He turned to his son. "Oh, she's very perceptive!" Rogan remained sombre as his father continued. "Let Yavaire use Skywalker against the Corellian, if the princess' perceptions of Solo are correct then the boy should suffice. However, if Solo pushes, tell Yavaire you may be able to provide her, too."

Rogan briskly saluted his father with his good arm, and left the room as the General turned back to his captive.

Rogan thanked the medic for his administrations and hopped down from the pallet. Gently he pulled on a clean shirt over his carefully bandaged shoulder, before leaving the medical centre. He walked slowly through the Security Headquarters, returning to the rooms provided for him. His thoughts were of the coming deal, of the ties which bound him to seeing these events through, and of the future he desired for himself; freedom from his father, freedom from Yavaire and Itael.

When he had returned to his father, he discovered the Lieutenant-General's anger and punishment were as swift and severe as ever, though he discovered his time on the streets had given him a certain strength. He had cried and begged as his father had expected, but inside he grew with the pain, turning it into a reservoir from which to draw courage.

He had told his father about Yavaire. He told him of the contacts he had made and of the skills he had learned. And, as he lay on the floor of his father's office sobbing empty tears, D'anti had perched upon the desk and stared at Rogan considering his information. Then he had smiled, and fallen into his off-spring's designs.

"You're going back onto the streets."

Rogan's battered body trembled with hope. He pushed himself up with one hand and wiped at his eyes with the other, he sniffled, concealing his growing excitement.

D'anti continued. "There, you will be my contact, my little informer." He paused briefly. "If you attempt to abscond again, or disappoint me, then I will not be so

lenient. There are ways of dealing with rebels, teenage or otherwise. Now pick yourself up and get out. "

Rogan entered his room and opened his closet. From the back he drew out a bag and pulled down a change of clothes. He stuffed the outfit into the bag, closed it and slung the strap over his good shoulder. He glanced around the room, at its emptiness, at its coldness and felt no loss, no remorse or regret. He was leaving.

He entered the corridor, heading out of Security Headquarters, his thoughts returning to the last year.

On returning to Yavaire and the streets he had told the major some of what had occurred with his father. As both D'anti and Yavaire saw a use for Rogan, so the boy had seen a use for them. He was working for them both transferring information from one to the other; though he chose which items to pass on and which to keep to himself. Each knew he also worked for the other, a double agent, and over the year they had begun to trust him; he had never passed on any information which had later proven false, he had never failed them. However, they didn't guess at Rogan's determination, his desire to end his servitude to both. Using Yavaire's arms trade as bait he lured the Alliance to Xalan and, utilizing the information he received from them on Solo and his friends, Rogan had crafted the deal and manipulated the participants towards his own goals.

He smiled as he entered the city streets and headed towards the older section of town. The Rebels had delivered a prize into his hands when they told him who their negotiators were. Both D'anti and Yavaire were delighted at the Rebel contact, and so each began their planning; Yavaire and Itael saw a way to gain more riches, a way to buythemselves off Xalan by holding the princess captive. His father saw an end to Yavaire and a promotion once he had the major and the Rebels behind bars. Rogan had cunningly used his master's desires against them.

He had led D'anti to believe the ship had been breached early, and told his father who the Alliance was sending. This had hastened the General's hand in organizing the patrols that Skywalker and Organa had run into. Organa was captured, as Rogan planned. He wanted Skywalker for Itael, he wanted the creature to be unnerved and vulnerable and only a Jedi could have that effect.

A tight tense smile curved his lips as he turned into the slums. If this didn't work, it was quite possible they would all die.

* * *

Han checked his chronometer before ducking into the cantina door. It was precisely fifteen hundred hours and, as his eyes adjusted to the dim interior light of the place, he saw the reserved table was taken. Sitting sipping at their glasses

were the same two Imperial officers, and with them sat a young boy, clad in a Security uniform. Han glanced over to Chewbacca, who had once more positioned himself at the bar. The Wookiee nodded at Solo; acknowledging that so far all appeared well. Behind the counter he spotted Taset nervously watching the proceedings.

Han took his seat opposite the Imperials, his back to the bar's patrons and Chewbacca. Immediately a service droid scuttled over and requested his order. "Ka'abin Beer." The Corellian told it shortly.

"We have lost time to make up for, Captain Solo. Perhaps we can now proceed. "It was the Major who spoke.

Not surprised that they knew his identity, Han nodded. "Nothing that I'd like better Gentlemen." His drink arrived and he took a sip. "What have you to offer?"

Yavaire glanced to his companions before answering. " Our precise thoughts, but since you asked first; we have two cannons, two crates of rifles and pistols, plus power packs, a quarter tonne of quemquet explosive and charges. "

Han shook his head. It wasn't enough, it wasn't what the Alliance had been told was on offer. "We were told there were medical supplies, bacta tanks, field packs, micro-laser techn..."

Yavaire waved him off. "I'm sure we can arrange something, Captain." His voice sounded tired and bored. "We're anxious to get to the price, so..."

There's one more thing, "Han told him, leaning closer across the table." The Princess Leia - we'd like her back. "

The two officers exchanged glances, but the boy continued to watch Han.

Yavaire answered. "We don't have her Captain. She is in Security's hands. I have no authority with them. "

Han looked at the boy. "Then why is he here?"

Yavaire glanced over at Rogan D'anti. "An interested party, an apprentice learning the tricks of the trade. He is not an officer, Captain, merely a child born into a privileged position. He has no authority either. "

Han didn't believe him. He remembered Chewie's words about the kid who knew their ' all clear ' signal, the kid who sent the Wookiee on a wild goose chase. Han was sure this was the boy. He looked back to Yavaire. "I'm sure a man of your intelligence could figure something out."

"The Princess Leia is not an option here, Captain. We have a price to discuss.
"Yavaire told him with an edge of anger to his voice.

"Listen pal..."

Yavaire ignore him. "Let us say five hundred thousand and you can have some medical supplies thrown in."

"Five hundred?!" Despite his concern for the Princess, Han could not believe the man's asking price. The Rebels had given him that exact amount, but he was supposed to barter with them and gain a better deal. "You got that from my log."

It was the Lieutenant who answered. "No, actually it was from your droid."

Han ignored him, directing his words only to Yavaire. "Four hundred, with the medical supplies."

The Major smiled. "Not enough, Captain, not nearly enough considering the risks, considering your friend's life.'

Han was blank for a moment. At first he didn't register the Major's words, didn't have a clue as to whom the Major referred. At first he assumed it was the princess, but the major said she was with security and...and understanding trickled in as Yavaire continued.

"A young man, blond. Goes by the name of Skywalker? He's currently in my custody. "

Han picked up his glass and swirled the liquid around. He took a long draught trying to buy some time, aware of the silence, of the seconds ticking by. Now he knew where Luke had gotten too. A perfectly perfect situation!

At the bar, Chewbacca straightened on his stool, noticing Han's indecision. Something was wrong. He rumbled, low in his throat. Taset glanced at him briefly, then moved away toward the rear exit not wishing to be near the Wookiee should the situation grow ugly.

Han placed his glass down. His thoughts a .bit more organized.

Yavaire continued. "Let's say five hundred again for the arms, medical supplies and your friend."

"Four hundred," Han pressed, attempting to exert more control on the proceedings.

Yavaire looked to his companions as he spoke. "We checked up on Skywalker, and found several recent charges against him. He has some rather important people angry at him. I'm sure Security would be most interested in him. Knowing General D'anti, some use would be found for the boy. He might even be used against the princess, if you take my meaning.

Han began to feel the whole situation slipping away. Indeed he did catch Yavaire's meaning, could see Luke screaming on the rack as the questions were put to the distraught princess. But how to get them out? "Okay," he found his voice, hiding none of his venomous anger. "Five hundred."

Yavaire laughed in delight. "Excellent!"

"Plus the Princess." Han added.

There was silence at the table.

That got 'em, Han thought.

"I've already told you, Organa is not part of the deal." It was Yavaire's turn again to express his anger. "We are merely wasting time now!"

"And I'm telling you; the supplies, the kid *and* the princess or no deal!"

Yavaire shook his head, while re-appraising his image of Solo. "You would gamble with your friends' lives, all for the sake of a deal?"

"Yes," Han replied, trying to sound nonchalant, hoping his gamble would pay off. "The arms are the important items here Major, but we can go else where for those. If you kill Luke and the princess, they'll become martyrs and heroes, just the titles the Rebels like. "

"I think you're bluffing."

"Suit yourself," Han rose from his seat.

"Wait!"

The call came from Rogan D'anti. He had been listening closely to the discussions, had watched as the power had shifted from one to the other, until it firmly established itself with Solo. This is what Rogan had hoped; Solo was pushing for the princess and only he could deliver her. If he could provide her, surely Yavaire's trust in him could only be reinforced; giving Rogan more room to manoeuvre.

Yavaire frowned and leaned closer to the boy and the two engaged in a quickly whispered argument.

At last Yavaire sat upright. "Please sit down, Solo." He shot a glance to the youth; to Han its message was along the lines of ' You'd better be right about this'.

Han seated himself once more and waited for the Imperial to continue.

"We'd need a little time to secure the Princess, and perhaps a little more incentive."

Han had been counting on the man's greed. "I'll give you an extra fifty for the Princess."

Yavaire nodded. "Agreed."

"Fine," Han responded, feeling much more positive, much more in control. "Now for the when and where."

"Lieutenant." Yavaire instructed, relaxing back in his seat and picking up his glass, leaving the mundane arrangements to his lackey.

The other officer responded. "The Shanquar mountain range. There is a plateau..."

"I know it," Han interrupted.

"Tomorrow evening, sixteen hundred hours."

Han mentally noted it as the three Imperials rose from their seats.

"Good day Captain."

The last was from Yavaire, but Han ignored him as he finished his drink. Chewbacca slid into the booth as the contacts left the bar, immediately rumbling out his observations and several questions.

"Yeah, I figured it was the same kid." Han told him. "It's goin' down tomorrow in the Shanquar." He rose from his seat. "Come on, I'll tell you on the way back to the Falcon." He headed for the door. "By the way, we're broke again."

The Wookiee's howled question, and Han's explanation, were cut off as the Cantina door closed.

* * *

Passively Leia allowed the detention centre guards bind her wrists and lead her from the cell. In the corridor she was some what bemused to find Rogan D'anti. She smiled at him.

"I take it Captain Solo pushed."

"He was supposed too." Rogan responded shortly. He turned from her and started down the corridor. Leia's guards pushed her forward and they followed the General's son out of the detention block, and into a waiting troop transporter.

* * *

Luke had been keeping an eye on the sun's movements since dawn, knowing that a couple of hours after noon he would discover if Rogan D'anti would exchange him for a successful deal or, as he feared, would write him off as a liability. So it was without surprise when, shortly after the sun had reached its zenith, he noted a troop transporter turning into the street and stopping before the shoddy building which housed his prison.

Within moments he had been bound, removed from the room by Rogan and two troopers, and lead into the street. Entering the vehicle he found he had the company of another prisoner.

"Leia!" He greeted the Princess with some surprise and pleasure.

"No talking." The order came from one of the soldiers.

Luke seated himself beside Leia, feeling a little better for her presence, gaining strength from her composure.

Rogan and the troopers took the seats opposite as the engine powered up and the tail gate closed, shutting out the afternoon sun.

* * *

Han crouched down in the corridor of the Falcon and hooked his fingers under the floor panel. He lifted it up and leaned it against the wall. He looked down into the secret hold, looked down at the money he had received in payment for rescuing the Princess, the money he would soon be using to buy back her freedom. He had to admit there was a touch of irony there.

He turned at the muted, growled sentence from behind. Chewie had been watching him.

"Yeah, I know this was for Jabba." Han jumped into the hold and heaved up a box. He glanced up at Chewie. "You gonna stand there and watch?"

The Wookiee crouched down and helped lift the boxes. He had another question for Han.

"Jabba'll have to wait," Han told him shortly, lifting up another case. "I couldn't work this any other way. 'Sides I expect double from the Rebs for this little effort." He looked up the corridor, towards the cockpit. "Where're the droids?"

Chewie jerked his thumb over his shoulder and rumbled out his reply.

"Yeah, suppose that's okay, as long as Threepio remembers what he's gotta do." Han remembered his argument with the droid clearly, remembered actually having to make a promise to the machine. He only hoped Threepio would perform as requested.

Han hoisted himself out of the hold and replaced the floor section. With regret he looked at the stacked cases full of his reward resting next to the Rebel's money. "That's it then. Let's get this over with." He turned on his heels and strode quickly to the cockpit.

* * *

Snow, caught up in the prevailing winds, flurried and drifted across the empty plateau. The Shanquar mountain range towered above this elevated area, cold and hostile guardians from which many would-be conquerors failed to return. Winter never left these mountains, this plateau, jealously gripping its prize in a blanket of ice and snow.

Luke stared bleakly at the scene beyond the open tailgate of the troop carrier. He shivered violently as a chilled gust of wind fluttered around the interior of the transport and moved closer to Leia as Rogan pulled on heavy weather boots and coat. The boy peered out into the blizzard as the muted sounds of a labouring engine reached them.

Young D'anti turned to the troopers. "Stay with them," he ordered, then disappeared into the winter landscape.

Luke once had dreams about seeing and experiencing his first encounter with snow after learning about the phenomenon from a holo-vid. He had seen himself marvelling at its beauty, tasting delicate flakes as they melted on his tongue, at making snow balls and throwing them at friends. As he grew up he had realized this was an unrealistic dream, a naïve fantasy, but he had held onto it, nurtured it along with his other ambitions and wishes. Never had he imagined this white wasteland, this ferocious coldness, this dangerous and potential killer. Never had he imagined his first encounter would be as a prisoner of the Empire.

"Can you see Han?" Leia asked from beside him, her voice trembling with the seeping chill.

Luke shook his head and shivered again. "I can't see anything!"

"No talking." The order came again, and Luke had the fleeting thought that those words were the only ones the lead stormtrooper knew.

Rogan approached the now silent landspeeder and the canopy popped open releasing its warmth to the elements. Major Yavaire, dressed in his own cold weather clothing, extracted himself from the vehicle. The Lieutenant, who had been driving followed.

"You have the Princess?" The Major asked of Rogan as he glanced over at the waiting troop carrier.

"Yes." Rogan replied.

"And your father?"

"Is unaware," Rogan lied, squinting in the snow, searching the sky for a glimpse of the Corellian's ship. He had given his father the wrong time, thus delaying him, giving everyone else involved the opportunity to conclude the proceedings.

"Excellent." Yavaire also glanced to the sky. "Let us hope our Corellian friend turns up."

"Where's Itael?" Rogan asked, concerned at the Y'iami's absence.

As the throbbing sounds of a starship approached and the Millennium Falcon broke through the snow clouds, Yavaire answered: "He's around."

The Falcon settled gently into the snow and the ramp lowered. The three Imperials moved forward, eager for the conclusion of the deal.

Before Han left the confines of the ship he released the safety strap of his holster. Drawing on a heavy coat he set down the ramp with Chewbacca carrying a case of money at his back. He was met a few yards from the ship by Yavaire and Rogan, as Chewbacca returned to the Falcon to continue unloading the cases.

"Welcome Captain!" Yavaire raised his voice above the growing howl of the wind.

"Where are the princess and the kid?" Han demanded, wincing as the cold whipped at his exposed face.

"The Princess and the boy will be released once we have exchanged the money for the arms, Captain." Yavaire answered quickly. "However, as a gesture of good will, we will bring them forward." He nodded at Rogan, who briefly spoke into his comlink.

Through the snow Han spotted his two friends, hunched over against the cold and bound, being lead towards them by two troopers. Luke briefly smiled at him, then seemed to grow a little green. He retched and quickly glanced around. The Princess leaned closer to him seeming concerned. Han, although a little worried that Luke may be ill, was relieved to see them both still alive.

"Satisfied, Captain?" Yavaire asked.

Han turned to the boxes Chewie had piled at his back. The Wookiee was placing down the final case. "There's your cash, Major. Now, where are the goods? "

Yavaire smiled. "They will be here shortly. I had to be sure you had brought the cash." He motioned to the lieutenant behind him. "Check it out."

Han and Chewbacca remained still, but attentive, as the officer moved forward and checked through the boxes the Wookiee had set down.

The Imperial turned to his superior. "It's there."

Luke tried to quell his growing nausea and panic. His head throbbed sending waves of sickness through him. The feeling was stronger than before, more concentrated than when he had first experienced it at his shoddy prison. His knees buckled and he would have fallen if the Princess had not caught him.

"What is it Luke?" She question quickly, trying to keep abreast of Han and Yavaire's conversation while watching Rogan D'anti. Her own stomach twisted in sympathy with Luke's.

"Something... I don't know." He glanced at her fighting not to retch again. "There's something here!" He looked over at Han, over at Rogan, over at the speeder and back at Han. "Behind Han, behind the Falcon! "

And Leia turned her attention back to the conversation as the sounds of another ship's engine split through the blizzard.

A small, atmosphere bound, cargo vessel descended toward the plateau.

Yavaire smiled. "Your goods have arrived, Captain."

The cargo carrier exploded.

Han was among the first to rise from the snow after the shower of burning debris had ceased. There was the sudden terrible familiar screech of T.I.E fighters, and Han glanced up in horror as another burst of laser fire destroyed the transport that had carried Luke and Leia to the scene. Two Imperial fighters pulled up from the plateau and circled the area. Then fury found Han; it had been a set-up! They had been lured here to be robbed and murdered. He pulled his blaster from its holster.

"Chewie! ' he bellowed, peering in the smoke and blizzard hoping to see Luke or Leia. " Get to the ship! Shields up! Give me cover! "He didn't hear the Wookiee's reply as he stumbled forward in the snow, ducking down at the abrupt reports from a blaster. He hurried on and came upon an extraordinary scene, one which took him sometime to assimilate.

Luke and Leia were on their knees, hands still bound, and struggling with one of their trooper guards. Luke was trying to wrestle the soldier's blaster from his grip, while Leia sat astride the man trying to hold him down. There was a dead trooper sprawled close by, and the teenager, Rogan, was curled in the snow clutching a side wound. There was no sign of Yavaire or the speeder driver.

He started toward his friends when Luke suddenly looked in his direction, his eyes wild. "No, Han!" he yelled. "It's behind you!"

Han turned in surprise and was immediately bowled over by a streak of silver that threw itself at him with a vicious snarl. He lost his grip on his blaster as he tumbled through the snow. Then the creature was gone. He glanced up, looking for his attacker, his blaster and saw the strangest being he had ever encountered. It was tall and covered with fish-like scales which, in the poor light of the snow storm, appeared silver white. Its blue lips pulled back and it hissed as it circled the defenceless smuggler. Han scrambled back in a vain attempt to locate his weapon as the creature threw itself at him again. They rolled together in the deep snow, the being's taloned fingers closing around the Corellian's throat.

With a fierce burst of strength, Luke yanked the blaster from the trooper's hands. He pointed the muzzle at the man's head and the Imperial ceased his struggling. Luke swallowed with difficulty, forcing down the bitter gall that rose in his throat. Leia ran to the other soldier's body and lifted his weapon. She turned, going to Han's aid.

Rogan D'anti clutched at his side and hissed with pain. When the cargo carrier had exploded he had taken his chance with Yavaire and drawn his weapon. He managed to shoot one trooper before turning his gun on Yavaire himself. However the Major's aide was quicker and before Rogan could pull off another shot he had cried with sudden pain, the victim of the Lieutenant's weapon. As Skywalker and the Princess jumped the second trooper, Yavaire and his aide

had disappeared into the smoke and blizzard. They were his father's TIEs; General D'anti had lost his trust in his son, had just turned the events around, and Rogan knew his father's forces would be upon them in moments.

Rogan lifted his head and saw Luke guarding the sprawled trooper and saw Leia run toward two struggling figures.

"Enough!" Leia cried.

The creature hesitated and turned his head toward the woman, and saw readied gun. He hissed at her. Then turned to regard Rogan lying nearby. "You have betrayed Yavaire!" His voice undulated with tense anger.

Rogan shivered remembering the claws piercing his shoulder and winced as the ripples brought renewed pain to his blaster wound.

"Get up!" Leia ordered, gesturing with the blaster, motioning for the creature to move aside. Again her stomach rebelled and her head began to pound; she dismissed the symptoms as an adrenalin rush.

As Itael's fingers loosened their grasp on his neck, Han drew in a great whooping breath and coughed, spitting blood from his mouth. The creature stood and moved to the side watching Leia closely; there was surprise on his features as though he had suddenly realized something and he glanced over at Luke and smiled tightly.

Han scrambled to his feet and lifted his blaster. He searched the area, blinking in the falling snow and smoke, looking for Yavaire and his lackey.

Luke, blaster still trained upon the fallen soldier, watched Itael surrender and waited for a sign to move from either Han or the princess, conscious that they were not yet out of danger. He frowned as he glanced from the princess to Han; the Corellian's figure was obscure, his outline hazy in Luke's eyes, almost as though Han was standing in shadows. He glanced at Leia, the Princess was unaffected. The spacer took a step back from the creature and the haziness vanished.

Before Luke could ponder on this a gust of wind blew dense smoke over him, stinging his eyes and blocking his vision with sudden tears. He coughed and blinked as the trooper also started coughing. He didn't dare raise his bound hands to wipe at his eyes as this would remove the gun from the soldier. He blinked frantically trying to clear his vision and was suddenly aware of someone standing at his back. He whipped his head around and was dealt a quick blow to his skull. He fell back into the snow, and as his vision abruptly cleared, he saw Yavaire standing above him. He winced as pain vibrated through his head but managed to retain his consciousness.

Yavaire turned to the trooper. "On your feet, and bring him along." The Major turned in Han and Leia's direction as the stormtrooper hauled Luke to his feet.

Solo rubbed at his throat as he peered into the blizzard. "Can you see anything?" He asked of Leia. "Where'd Luke disappear to?"

"I'm here." Luke called.

Han turned as his friend emerged from behind the burning troop carrier. At his back was Yavaire and his lackeys. "Watch him, Princess." He told Leia, meaning the Y'iami, and stepped forward to confront the Imperial major.

Yavaire took hold of Luke and pushed him to his knees. He placed his blaster against the back of the youth's head. Above them the TIE fighters made another swoop, though their cannons remained silent. Yavaire smiled at the group, at Rogan in particular. "Well done, boy. Your father's pilots are as accurate as ever." Then he turned to Han. "We don't have much time, Captain." He gestured at their guns. "Drop your weapons and tell your Wookiee to leave the ship and join you out here." His eyes focused on the cases of money behind the Corellian.

"Not likely." Han replied, his voice hoarse, his throat sore. He wasn't going to deliver them all into Imperial hands, besides Chewie was more useful on the ship.

"I will kill the boy." Yavaire warned.

Han glanced at Luke, feeling almost light and silly as he answered. "Go ahead." He blinked as a snow flake landed on his eye lashes.

Luke stared wildly at Han in shock, his throat and mouth suddenly dry. His head ached from the thump he'd received and from the presence of the strange being. The Corellian was playing with his life! He shifted his gaze, looking to the others for some kind of succour, and found Itael. The creature stared at him. Luke could feel the dislike, the revulsion from the being, but he didn't understand it. But, there was something else, something he couldn't fully grasp; his knowledge of the force was still so limited. The creature didn't share the same aura as other living beings, he didn't create the warmth of life Luke had begun to recognise - instead he reflected it, cast it back in undulating waves at those who generated it, and it seemed to be this which had sent Luke's senses reeling, which had thrown his balance askew and upset his internal systems. Luke maintained the creature's stare, fighting his sickness and fear, and everything else faded into the background, as he willed Itael to glance away first.

Yavaire tightened his grip on his blaster surprised, at first, by the spacer's words. Then he understood and recalled Han's words from their meeting about death being martyrdom to these rebels; if he killed Skywalker, the way would be open

for Solo to gun him down and the boy would become a heroic symbol for the Alliance. This Corellian was devious and dangerous. Thinking quickly he addressed Han once more. "An exchange then, the boy for the money."

Rogan watched the snow filled sky, listened for any sounds above those of the wind and fires. He was growing restless, wondering why his father had not yet made his appearance. He was also growing weak from his wound, from the cold.

Leia watched the exchange carefully, praying Han knew what he was doing. She glanced at Rogan as he lay bleeding in the snow; he was watching the sky. She glanced at Itael and saw him staring at Luke with an intense concentration. Looking over at Luke she noticed the same concentration. He appeared no longer to notice his precarious situation.

Luke maintained the eye contact, feeling his own energy being repelled back at him and he pushed harder, put all his effort into forcing Itael back, but it seemed the Force could not penetrate the creature's shield. His body trembled with his exertion and with the cold.

There was an abrupt rumble of heavy engines, the whine of laser fire and the snow between Han and Yavaire erupted into plumes of white. The Falcon's guns also opened fire. Itael fell back, his hoarse cry of surprise drowned by the fighter's screech. He broke off his stare with Luke, and took the attack as a chance to escape. He dashed across the snow field towards Rogan. The Corellian fell back, grabbed hold of Leia and pushed her toward the Falcon. "Forget him," he told her. "I could use you in the gun turret." Then he too ran, but he headed for Yavaire's.

Rogan's heart pounded as Itael broke contact with the Jedi and headed in his direction. Yavaire's pet had been unsettled by Skywalker, the creature had not provided the cover Yavaire relied on, instead he had attacked immediately at the first sign of a threat, and he had been held, almost entranced, by the presence of the Rebel. Now though, that spell was broken and Itael was free to seek his revenge for betrayal. A scream was torn from the teenager as the creature bore down.

The Princess turned at the sound of the scream and pulled off a shot at the creature. The blast missed the beast but was enough to divert him. The Y'iami changed direction and headed for Yavaire. Leia ran to Rogan. The boy may have caused all their problems, but she couldn't leave him to die here; besides, she had a fair idea of who he was. She took him by the arms and dragged him back to the Falcon as Chewbacca opened up the guns.

Rogan grimaced with pain as the Rebel princess grabbed hold of him. "What..?" He started.

"Later," she told him and she pulled him up.

He slung an arm over her shoulder, and they staggered to the ship as the fighters opened fire once more. Leia turned for a quick glance as two more troop carriers appeared out of the blizzard. She couldn't see either Luke or Han and the odds were rising against them.

"My father," Rogan tried to explain to her.

"Later," Leia told him again as she dumped him down in the safety of the ship's corridor next to the steps to the gun emplacements. Turning quickly she climbed into the turret.

"Your Highness!"

She looked down in surprise to find Threepio in the belly bubble. "Threepio?!" Surely Han hadn't altered the robots behavioural inhibitors to enable the droid to kill?

"Your Highness, I..."

The ship shook under a barrage of blaster fire. Leia took hold of the guns and, noticing the lieutenant and remaining trooper head after Han, she pulled off a couple of shots, halting them both. They sprawled into the snow and lay still.

Yavaire hauled Luke back toward his speeder, fighting against the youth's struggles. He threw the boy against the body of the vehicle and glanced back, looking for his aide, looking for the trooper, watching for the Corellian and saw the nearing troop carriers. "D'anti!" He muttered, not surprised at the appearance of more soldiers. Rogan must have been stringing him along the whole time and the Imperial couldn't help but admire his ingenuity. He bent to grab Luke by the scruff of the neck.

"Kill the Jedi, Yavaire."

Yavaire turned around to face Itael as Skywalker groaned and vomited into the snow. "He'll be of use to us." Yavaire explained. "He's wanted by Vader. We can bargain with him. Perhaps get away from this fiasco with our lives."

Itael glanced at Skywalker, seeing that Yavaire's words had shaken the boy-knight, horrified him. Giving this child to the Dark Lord, joining this child with another wizard, increasing their power, was not what Itael wished. That would pose an even greater threat to the Y'iami, they would be swallowed by the Force, wiped from the galaxy. "No," he told the major. "It is better if he dies!" The youth was strong - he might not be trained, but his instincts were keen; Skywalker

might not be aware of it, but he had turned Itael's reflections back at him, forced him to break their contact and he had badly shaken the Y'iami.

"Dies?!" Yavaire almost shrieked, the prospects of losing the last hope of retrieving something from the deal, pushing him to the edge. He grabbed hold of Luke and thrust him toward the being. "Here! You take him then! You kill him!"

Itael staggered back from Luke and shuddered. Luke himself felt his head spin, his stomach took another dive as the reflected energy sent his senses reeling again.

"You can't, can you? You can't kill something you need!" Yavaire raised his blaster intent on killing Itael, and was cut down by a sudden laser blast.

Luke glanced up and was relieved to see Solo standing behind them. Han advanced carefully, keeping the Y'iami covered with his weapon.

"You okay, kid? " The Corellian questioned.

"Yeah," Luke sounded breathless and weak.

"Some shopping trip, huh?"

The Falcon's guns opened fire on the advancing troop carrier, it slewed across the snow, but continued its pace. Above them, the fighters roared in for another strafing run.

"Come on!" Han took hold of Luke's arm.

"You should not live." Luke turned at the quiet sentence, shaken by the events. Itael held his gaze. "You are not meant to be. Your existence endangers us all."

Frightened and sick with the Y'iami's close proximity, Luke could find no words for the creature, he merely turned with Han and started toward the ship. He only caught the first few words of Itael's parting sentence.

"You are...." The rest was carried away by the steady battery of fire from the Falcon, "...not alone." Itael finished to himself.

Luke and Han ran toward the waiting freighter dodging laser bursts as the troop carrier came to a stop and spilled out its occupants. The stormtroopers headed straight for them. Han pushed Luke up the ramp and pulled off a few shots before he too ducked into the ship.

"Chewie!" The Corellian roared and he punched the hatch control, sealing them off from the elements. "Threepio, now!"

"Oh, dear, " the golden droid muttered to himself. He looked to the gun's scanners and sighted them on the cases of money. The Corellian had kept his promise; there was no living being near the boxes. He drew off one shot.

Lieutenant-General D'anti stood amid the dwindling blizzard, the roar and throb of the Millennium Falcon's engines still rolled across the plateau. Yavaire was dead, several stormtroopers lost, the rebels escaped, the money destroyed. He had lost everything he hoped to gain. He turned to his subordinate. "My son?"

"There's no sign of him, sir." The captain reported.

D'anti nodded with angry resignation and an unexpected feeling of loss. Rogan had rejected everything his father believe and had escaped him. At the final moment Rogan had delayed D'anti, had fed him the wrong time for the meet, had given himself time to make good his flight. It was only good fortune that a passing patrol had spotted the meeting.

"Clever boy," D'anti muttered, with a touch of admiration and pride. His son had bested him, his son had orchestrated and pulled off an elaborate escape. Then he squinted in the fading evening light. He was sure he had seen a flash of silver in the distance. He watched carefully, but the movement was not repeated. He turned his back on the snow plain, turned his back on his son, and walked slowly back to the waiting transport.

* * *

Rogan D'anti lay back on the bunk and allowed the painkiller the Princess had administered to soothe his wounds. He smiled as fatigued drifted over him, teasing him with the pleasures of a deep sleep. He was free, he was safe, he had escaped. The Rebels would have many questions for him, would not automatically trust him, but at that moment, he didn't care: the bunk was comfortable, the cabin warm, his relief overwhelming, his father light years away. He closed his eyes and slept.

Luke watched as Leia placed a clean dressing over Rogan's wound and pulled up the blanket, covering the sleeping boy. "Will he be all right?" he asked, feeling his own strength return as the Falcon carried him farther away from Xalan.

"I think so," Leia replied, stepping back from the med bunk. She took his arm. "Come on, let's see your head."

They sat by the game board. Luke turned his head, allowing Leia to study the lump. He winced when she touched it. "Who do you think he is?"

"The son of the Xalan section Commander," Leia told him, "I think he was also the Rebel contact who set up the deal. Though we'll have to wait until he wakes

to find out for sure. But that's my guess. Do you have any dizziness or nausea?
"She questioned.

Luke briefly recalled the strange creature he had encountered. "None." His stomach had settled.

Leia sat back as the two droids entered the compartment. "I don't think you need anything for this. But we'll have you checked by the med-techs back at the base." She glanced at the droids. "That was a good shot, Threepio," she commented with a smile.

Threepio stiffly nodded. "Thank you, your Highness. Though Captain Solo seems rather upset about it. "Artoo agreed with a tooted whistle."

"Upset?" Luke asked. "Why?"

The droid seemed surprised at the question. "Because he lost the money."

"It wasn't his fault," Leia told the machine. "The Alliance will understand."

Artoo let loose with a babble of noise. "What's he saying?" Leia queried.

Threepio looked rather hesitant, but complied. "Captain Solo and Chewbacca also lost the money the Alliance gave them for aiding in your rescue, Your Highness."

Leia and Luke exchanged surprised glances. Then Leia rose and made her way to the cockpit.

"If you will excuse me, Master Luke. I believe I should re-align my internal functions, the whole episode has rather upset my behavioural balance. "Threepio prattled at an inattentive Luke as he and Artoo disappeared aft.

Luke relaxed back into the recliner allowing his aching muscles to loosen. He was tired, but his mind remained active, turning to the events of the previous few hours. What was that creature? Why did he reflect and not create the Force? Were his scales a natural barrier to the Force, a mirror of sorts? Luke was sure Itael was not evil, there had been no feeling of twistedness, only that unsettling ricochet of power. But, why did Luke pose a threat to him? Why did he wish Luke dead?

"You can't kill something you need!"

The Major's words returned to him, but what did he mean? Luke shook his head and rubbed at his tired, stinging eyes. Again he was left only with questions. He knew so little, had so much to learn and no-one to teach him.

Those thoughts brought forth other words uttered by the desperate Major.

"He's wanted by Vader."

He was wanted by his father's murderer, Ben's killer, and that scared him more than Itael's plea for his death. Vader had been Jedi. Could Vader teach him?

Shivering, he quickly dismissed the sudden, frightening thought. Luke rose from the recliner and walked over to the acceleration chair and picked up his lightsaber. His father's sword. He turned it in his hands for a moment recalling the moment Ben had given it to him, remembering the feel and vibration of the sword when he activated it and he silently wondered what Obi-Wan had awakened in him, and if it was this which the creature on Xalan had feared. He replaced the weapon onto his belt clip, taking some comfort from its weight and, pushing Itael and Vader from his mind, he turned and disappeared into the cabin Han had assigned to him. He lay down on his bunk, seeking the same sleep and rest as Rogan D'anti.

It was sometime before slumber found him.

"No," Han was firmly telling his co-pilot as Leia entered the cockpit. "No, absolutely not"

"Problems?" Leia asked, looking over the pilot's shoulder.

"Nan!" Han assured her. "A little damage to the shield when we took a shot to the aft before we made light speed. Nothing we can't fix. "

Leia seated herself behind him in the navigator's chair. "I came to thank you, both." She included Chewbacca.

Chewbacca rose from his seat and grumbled out something at Han, placing a paw on the princess's shoulder as he passed.

"What did he say?"

Han glanced at his charts. "He's going to check out aft, put the droids to work. Says he can feel a private discussion growing. "A hand went to his neck and he gently rubbed his bruised throat.

Leia smiled and moved to Chewbacca's chair. "I know about the money. Threepio told me. "

"Figured as much." Han replied and frowned, he pointed to the charts. "Is Yavin...?"

"Han," Leia pressed.

He turned to her, looked at her tired features, her dishevelled hair.

" Thank you. "

Solo merely nodded his acknowledgement and turned soundlessly back to his controls.

He slouched back into his chair when the Princess departed and stared at the twisting lights of hyperspace beyond the cockpit. He'd lost it all, he'd let it burn and for what? For selfish reasons; if he could not have it, then no-one could? Or for the lives of a Rebel princess and a kid? He certainly had paid a high price for them this time. No money to pay Jabba, no money to pay for repairs. In total - no money and all the problems he had thought resolved only a day or two ago remained.

He turned and looked at Chewbacca's chair where the Princess had sat. There was more though, and he fought it. Fought the strange thoughts which crept unwanted into his mind, the questions which demanded to be answered; why had he agreed to take this mission? Why had he taken Luke and Leia along? Why had he given up his hard earned reward? Why had he given up his freedom to these idealist Rebels?

A high price, indeed. Han chose not to answer the questions. He turned, instead, back to the controls of the Falcon and to the stars ahead.

END.

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