

Chapter 1

Outside the medcenter viewport, a ragged crescent of white twinkles known as the Drall's Hat drooped across the violet sky, its lower tip slashing through the Ronto to touch a red star named the Eye of the Pirate. The constellations above Corellia had not changed since Han Solo was a child, when he had spent his nights contemplating the galactic depths and dreaming of life as a starship captain. He had believed then that stars never changed, that they always kept the same company and migrated each year across the same slice of sky. Now he knew better. Like everything in the galaxy, stars were born, grew old, and died. They swelled into red giants or withered into white dwarfs, exploded into novas and supernovas, vanished into black holes.

All too often, they changed hands.

It had been nearly three weeks since the fall of the Duro system, and Han still found it hard to believe that the Yuuzhan Vong had a stronghold in the Core. From there, the invaders could strike at Commenor, Balmorra, Kuat, and—first in line—Corellia. Even Coruscant was no longer safe, lying as it did at the opposite end of the Corellian Trade Spine.

Harder to accept than Duro's loss—though easier to believe—was the enthusiasm with which the cowards of the galaxy had embraced the enemy's offer of peace in exchange for Jedi. Already a lynch mob on Ando had killed Dorsk 82, and on Cujicor the Peace Brigade had captured Swilja Fenn. Han's own son Jacen was the most hunted Jedi in the galaxy, and his wife and other children, Anakin and Jaina, were sought almost as eagerly. If it were up to him, the Jedi would leave the collaborators to their fate and go find a safe refuge somewhere in the Unknown Regions. But the decision was not his, and Luke Skywalker was not listening.

A raspy murmur sounded from the lift station, shattering the electronic silence of the monitoring post outside Leia's door. Han opaqued the transparisteel viewport, then stepped around the bed where his wife lay in a therapeutic coma, her eyelids rimmed by purple circles and her flesh as pallid as wampa fur. Though he had been assured Leia would survive, his heart still ached whenever he looked at her. He had almost lost her during the fall of Duro, and a stubborn series of necrotic infections continued to threaten her mangled legs. Even more in doubt was their future together. She had greeted him warmly enough after they found each other again, but Chewbacca's death had changed too much for their marriage to continue as before. Han felt brittle now, older and less sure of his place in the galaxy. And in the few hours she had been coherent enough to talk, Leia had seemed hesitant, more tentative and reluctant to speak her mind around him.

At the door, Han peered out of the darkened room to find four human orderlies outside flanking the MD droid at the monitoring post. Though they had a covered repulsor gurney and fresh white scrubs, they were not wearing the masks and sterile gloves standard for visitors to the isolation ward.

"... don't look like orderlies to me," the MD droid was saying. "Your fingernails are absolute bacterial beds."

"We've been cleaning disposal chutes," said the group's leader, a slash-eyed woman with black hair and the jagged snarl of a hungry rancor. "But don't worry, we came through decon."

As she spoke, one of the men with her was sliding across the counter behind the droid. Han drew back

into the room and retrieved his blaster from a satchel beneath Leia's bed. Though he had been dreading this moment for three weeks, now that it had come, he felt almost relieved. The enemy had not arrived when he was sleeping or out of the room, and there were only four.

Han returned to the door to find the MD droid standing with darkened photoreceptors, his vocabulator slumped against his chest. The orderly behind the counter was scowling down at the data display.

"Don't see her on the register, Roxi," he said to the woman.

"Of course not," Roxi growled. "Slug, do you think a Jedi would use her own name? Look for a human female with amphistaff wounds."

Slug, a moonfaced man with a bald head and a week's worth of stubble on his face, scrolled down the screen and began to read symptoms off the display. "Parietal swelling . . . thoracic lacerations . . . double severed sartorius . . ." He stopped and looked up. "You understand this stuff?"

Roxi glared at the man as though the question were a challenge, then asked, "What was that second one?"

Slug glanced back at the display. "Thoracic lacerations?"

"That *could* be it," Roxi glanced at her other companions and, seeing that they had no better idea what *thoracic* meant than she did, continued, "Well, lacerations sounds right. What room?"

Slug gave her the number, and the four impostors started down the opposite corridor. Han allowed them a few moments to clear the area, then slipped into the monitoring post and used the controls to seal his wife's room with a quarantine code. The thought of leaving her alone made his stomach queasy, but he had to handle this problem quietly and by himself. Though a Jedi-friendly doctor had admitted Leia under a false name and Han had sent the famous Solo children home with Luke and Mara, the alias would not withstand a CorSec incident investigation. And with a new Yuuzhan Vong base rising at the edge of the sector, no one associated with the Jedi would dare trust Corellia's always erratic government for protection. Had Leia's condition not forced them to divert soon after escaping Duro, this was the last place Han would have stopped.

He peered around the corner of the monitoring post and, in the night-shift twilight, saw the impostors disappearing into a bacta tank parlor about halfway down the corridor. Taking a datapad from the recharger on the counter and a breath mask, hygienic cap, gloves, and lab coat from the supply locker, he did his best to disguise himself as someone official and followed.

The intruders were gathered around tank number three in the parlor's far corner, studying a slender human with a trio of freshly stitched lacerations angling down across her chest. Like Leia's wounds, the cuts were atypically inflamed and almost black at the edges, a sign that some toxin was proving a challenge for the bacta. The only other occupied tank contained a Selonian female whose severed tail stump was covered by a graft of unfurred hide.

"The contract said she'd shaved her head," Roxi complained, staring at the long hair of the patient in tank three. "Even in bacta, I don't think it would grow back this fast."

"Maybe not, but they *are* amphistaff cuts," Slug said. He was standing next to a deactivated attendant droid, reading from a data display. "And no one's saying how she got them."

Roxi lifted her brow and thought for a moment, then said, “We’d better bring her along. Start the tank draining. We’ll pick her up after we’ve checked the other rooms.”

Han drew back and tucked the blaster under his lab coat, then made sure his breath mask was secure and waited. When he heard the impostors coming, he turned the corner with the datapad before him. He ran headlong into the burliest of the impostors and was nearly knocked off his feet.

“Uh, sorry,” Han said, looking up. “Entirely my . . .” He let the sentence dangle off, then gasped, “You’re not wearing a breather!”

The burly impostor frowned. “What breather?”

“Your safety mask.” Han tapped the breath mask on his face, then looked from one impostor to the other. “None of you are. Didn’t you check the hazard indicator?”

“Hazard indicator?” Roxi asked, pushing her way to the front. “I didn’t see any indicator.”

“In the decontamination lock,” Han said. “Red means no entry. Orange means full biosuit. Yellow means breath masks and gloves. The light was yellow. We’ve had a leuma outbreak.”

“Leuma?” Slug asked.

“You’ll be all right,” Han said, striking just the right note of insincere reassurance. He waved Roxi toward the monitoring post. “But we’ve got to get you some breath masks. Then you’ll need inoculations—”

Roxi made no move to leave the bacta parlor. “I’ve never heard of any disease called leuma.”

“Airborne virus,” Han said. “A new one—or maybe it’s a spore. We really don’t know yet, but there’s talk of it being a Yuuzhan Vong weapon.”

That was enough to bring Slug and the burly impostor out into the corridor.

“Hold up, you two!” Roxi snapped.

The pair stopped, then Slug frowned and said, “But we need those breath masks.”

“And soon,” Han pressed, turning his attention to Slug. “You can still be saved, but the chances are going down with every breath you take.”

Three of the impostors—the three men—clamped their mouths shut. Roxi only glared at Han.

“You know this *how* ?” She stepped into the door and stood nose-to-chin with him. “Because you’re a doctor?”

Han’s stomach sank. “That’s right.” He had to resist an urge to check his appearance. “Senior xenoepidemiologist, to be exact.” He pretended to scrutinize her white scrubs. “And you are?”

“Wondering why the senior xenoepidemiologist would make his rounds in patient slippers.” Roxi glanced at his feet. “Without socks.”

She flexed her fingers, and a hold-out blaster dropped out of a sleeve holster. Han cursed and brought the datapad down on her wrist. Her weapon clattered to the floor, and he kicked it away, then retreated, fumbling for his own blaster. Roxi withdrew into the parlor, shrieking orders and pushing her companions at the door. Only Slug went. He ignored Han and ran up the corridor.

“Slug!” Roxi screamed.

“M-masks!” Slug called. “Gotta get—”

Han found his blaster and planted a stun bolt between Slug’s shoulder blades. The impostor thumped to the floor.

Weapon flashes sprayed from the bacta parlor. Han dived behind a low half wall in the small waiting area opposite. His attackers continued to fire, and the thin plasteel started to smoke and disintegrate. He thumbed his own power to high, then stuck the blaster through a melt hole and returned fire.

The bolt storm quieted. Han dropped to his belly and peered around the corner. The impostors were nowhere to be seen, but their repulsor gurney remained at the back of the parlor. The woman in tank three had opened her eyes and was looking around. Considering that she was caught in the middle of a firefight, her expression seemed surprisingly calm. Maybe she was too sedated to comprehend what was happening. Han hoped so. If she didn’t use the microphone in her breathing mask to call for help, there was still a chance—a slim chance—that he could take care of this without CorSec connecting the incident to Leia’s room.

The woman’s gaze shifted, then Roxi’s voice cried, “Go!”

The male impostors leaped into view and began to lay suppression fire. Han burned a hole through one man’s chest. Roxi pulled something long from beneath the gurney sheet, and when Han switched targets, she took cover behind tank three. He stopped firing. The woman in the bacta seemed to smile her thanks.

“On two, Dex,” Roxi called. “One—”

Roxi stepped into view, and “two” was lost to the shrieking cacophony of the repeating blaster in her hands. Han concentrated fire on her. A faint hiss sounded somewhere deep in the parlor, and Dex’s blaster fell quiet.

Roxi’s bolts stitched their way across the floor toward Han’s head. He drew back and popped up in the corner, blaster trained on the parlor entrance. She poured fire into the corridor, but stayed out of sight until she appeared at the door and began to chew through his flimsy cover.

Han fired back, but to little effect. There was no sign of Dex, and that worried him, too. Seeing that his angle was hopeless, he stopped firing and looked to the back of the parlor.

“Now!” he yelled.

Nothing happened, except that Roxi glanced away long enough for Han to hurl himself across the waiting room. She adjusted her aim and began to burn more holes through the half wall. Han returned fire. Now that his angle was better, at least he was making her cringe.

Then the repulsor gurney glided into view, moving sideways, no one pushing. Han’s jaw must have

dropped. Roxi sneered, shook her head, and, not one to be fooled twice, nearly burned his head off.

The gurney caught her in the hip. Her weapon stitched craters across the ceiling, and she stumbled into the doorway. Han blasted her chest and shoulder, spinning her around so that she fell over the gurney. The repeating blaster clattered to the floor inside the bacta parlor, where Dex could get at it. Cursing his luck, Han poured fire through the door and charged.

Dex lay dead between tanks one and two, the last wisps of smoke rising from a round hole in his chest. It was too small and perfect to be a blaster wound, at least an ordinary one. Han glanced around the room, searching for the source of his mysterious help.

The woman in tank three was watching him.

“You?” he asked.

The gurney moved again—it might have been settling on its repulsor, but Han didn’t think so.

Out by the monitoring station, the decontamination lock hissed open, and the sound of booted feet began to rumble down the corridor. Han ignored the clamor and gestured at the impostor on the floor.

“Him, too?”

The woman’s eyes fluttered closed, opened again, then fell shut and remained that way.

“Okay—must have been a ricochet.” Han was not sure he believed that, but it was what he intended to tell the CorSec investigators. “I owe you—whoever you are.”

Then the security squad was rushing down the corridor, yelling at Han to drop his weapon and hit the floor. He placed his blaster on the gurney and turned to find a pair of ruddy-cheeked boys poking Imperial-era blaster rifles in his face.

“Hey, take it easy.” Han reluctantly raised his hands. “I can explain.”

Chapter 2

Temples aching, world spinning, stomach . . . churning. Leia returned. Someone yelling. Han, of course.

Head pounding.

Quiet!

Han continued to yell, and someone snapped back. Leia opened her eyes and found herself staring into a sun. Which one, she did not know, but it was blinding and blue, and it moved from one eye to the other.

A gentle voice—a man’s—said she was coming to. To what?

There were silhouettes around her. A man standing at her side, the blue disk of a headlamp affixed to his brow. A woman behind a tray of medical instruments. Han and someone in a bulky jumpsuit still arguing over by the viewport. Another man by the closet in the corner of the room, turned half away, pawing through a shape Leia recognized as her travel satchel.

“Oo thurr . . .” Even to Leia, the words were weak and incoherent. “Thopp.”

“It’s okay, Leia,” said the man with the headlamp. “I’m Dr. Nimbi. You’ll feel better soon.”

“I thel fie.” Leia tried to point, but her arm felt as heavy as a durasteel beam. “Thopp thath theet.”

The headlamp went out, revealing a gray-eyed face with laugh lines and a familiar smile. “Better?”

Leia could see now that the man wore a doctor’s lab coat with jasper nimbi embroidered on the lapel. His assistant, a plump woman old enough to be the doctor’s mother, was dressed in a well-worn nurse’s uniform. The man poking through her satchel had the patches of a Corellian Security agent on his jumpsuit, as did the officer with whom Han was arguing.

“. . . released him?” Han was demanding. “He’s a killer!”

“The only deaths here are the ones you caused, Solo,” the officer replied. “And *his* identification has been confirmed as authentic. If we need to question Gad Sluggins again, we’ll know where to find him.”

“So would I,” Han retorted. “In the nearest Peace Brigade safehouse.”

“Political affiliations are no longer a crime on Corellia, Solo.”

In the corner, the agent at the closet removed a datapad from Leia’s satchel, glanced around at the others in the room, then slipped it into his jumpsuit pocket. Leia tried again to point. This time, the effort ended in a metallic clatter as her arm, strapped in place and connected to a tangle of intravenous drip lines, rattled the bed’s safety rail. She settled for lifting her head to glare in the thief’s direction.

“Shtop.” The word was almost recognizable. “Thief!”

Han immediately stopped arguing with the CorSec officer and came to her side. With hollow cheeks and bags under his eyes, he looked exhausted.

“You’re awake,” he said, perhaps overstating the case. “How do you feel?”

“Terrible,” Leia said. Everything ached, and it felt like she had a hot power-feed around her legs. “That agent is stealing.”

She extended a finger toward the culprit, but the man’s officer had stepped to the foot of the bed, and it looked like she was pointing at him. Han and the others exchanged glances and appeared concerned.

“Pharmaceutical illusion,” Dr. Nimbi said. “Her perceptions will clear within the hour.”

“I *amnot* having delusions.” Leia continued to shake her finger toward the unseen closet. “The other one. Going through my bag.”

The officer pivoted around to look, exposing the now closed closet and an innocent-looking subordinate.

Han squeezed her shoulder. “Forget it, Leia. We’ve got more important things to worry about than someone digging through your underwear.”

“She doesn’t need to hear that *now*, Han,” the doctor said. He turned back to Leia with a comforting smile. “How do the legs feel? Any better?”

Leia ignored the question and demanded, “What things, Han?”

Han seemed baffled. He glanced at Dr. Nimbi, then said, “Nothing I can’t handle. Don’t worry.”

“When you tell me not to worry, that’s when I worry,” Leia said. Han had always been one of those men who navigated life more by instinct than by chart—it was one of the things she most loved about him—but his instincts since Chewbacca’s death had been carrying him into some very dangerous areas. Or perhaps the territory only seemed dangerous, lying as it did always farther from Leia. “What’s wrong?”

Han still seemed worried, but at least he had the sense to ignore Dr. Nimbi’s admonishing shake of the head. “Well,” he began, “you *do* remember where we are?”

Leia glanced at the emblems on the CorSec officer’s jumpsuit. “How could I forget?”

And then it hit her. The Corellians were calling them by their correct names. There were two CorSec agents standing in her hospital room, and Dr. Nimbi—a Jedi sympathizer with enough experience in such matters not to slip—was calling Leia by her real name. Their cover had been blown.

Something started to beep on the equipment behind the bed.

Dr. Nimbi held a scanner over Leia’s heart. “Leia, you need to calm yourself. Stress only reduces the chance of your body overcoming the infection.”

The beeping continued, and the nurse took a spray hypo off her tray. “Shall I prepare a—”

“That won’t be necessary.” Leia reached out with the Force and nudged the hypo—clumsily, but enough to make her point. “Clear?”

The astonished nurse dropped the hypo on the tray and huffed something about pushy Jedi witches, then raised her nose and started for the door—where she was met by a rising din of excited voices. The MD droid was threatening to notify security and protesting that the media were not permitted in the isolation ward, but the intruders were paying no attention. A sudden glow poured through the door as a holocrew’s lights illuminated the corridor outside, and the flustered nurse came stumbling back into the room.

“Great,” Han muttered. “Thrackan.”

A bearded man who—except for his gray hair—looked more like Han than Han did came bursting into the room, leaving a small swarm of assistants and holojournalists in the corridor outside. The man, Han’s cousin Thrackan Sal-Solo, glanced around briefly, saw that he was standing between Leia and the door, then moved forward so the holocams would have a view of her face. She slid down and tried to hide

behind Dr. Nimbi, who recognized what she was doing and quietly positioned himself in front of her.

Sal-Solo scowled at the doctor, then looked Han and Leia over and nodded to the CorSec officer. "That's them. Well done, Captain."

"Thank you, Governor-General."

"Governor-General?" Han repeated, trying not to scoff and, to Leia's ear at least, failing. "You've come up in the galaxy, cousin."

"The Five Brothers reward those who protect them," Sal-Solo said.

"Yes—it seems reekcats always land on their feet," Leia said.

Less than a decade earlier, Sal-Solo had held her family hostage in a failed attempt to establish an independent Corellian sector. More recently, he had inadvertently destroyed an entire Hapan battle fleet by using an ancient alien artifact called Centerpoint Station to attack a hostile force of Yuuzhan Vong. Given that Leia had been responsible for bringing the Hapans into the war, she was probably the only person in the galaxy who despised Han's cousin more than Han did. And it did not help matters that Sal-Solo had been hailed as a hero for his foolish actions and, eventually, elected governor-general of the entire Corellian sector.

"What's next?" Leia continued to glare at Sal-Solo. Han winced and drew his finger across his throat, but she ignored him. "Lose the war and become the New Republic Chief of State?"

Sal-Solo half turned toward the holocam outside the door. "My allegiance is to the Corellian system alone." His voice was stiff and self-conscious. "And you'd be smart to curb that lightsaber tongue of yours, Princess Leia. An insult to the man is an insult to the office."

"Really?" Leia propped herself up on her free elbow until the holocam lights warmed her face. "In this case, I should think it is the man himself who is the insult."

Sal-Solo glared at her in disbelief, then stormed over to the door and stuck his head into the corridor. "Clear the hall! Can't you see this is an isolation ward?"

The holocam illuminated his face briefly before he palmed the activation panel and the door closed. He stood facing the wall until the corridor was finally empty, then turned to Leia with eyes as dark as black holes.

"You must have a death wish," he said.

"You're the one who wanted to play this out in the media," Leia said. "Don't blame me if you can't handle it. Wouldn't it have been easier to keep things quiet and ignore us?"

"Nothing would have suited me more—except maybe sending you off with a squad of Yuuzhan Vong infiltrators," Sal-Solo said. "Unfortunately, the choice wasn't mine. I didn't know either of you was here until I saw on a newsvid that Han Solo had just killed three Corellian citizens."

"Sorry about that," Han said, not appearing sorry at all.

Sal-Solo gave him a dark look, then looked back to Leia. "There won't be any charges, provided

you—”

“Charges?” Han exclaimed. Even Leia could not tell whether he was angry or surprised; they been apart so long—and gone through so much alone—that she felt like she did not know him now. “For killing a bunch of Peace Brigaders?”

“They weren’t in the Peace Brigade,” Sal-Solo said. “CorSec Intelligence says they were local.”

“That doesn’t mean they weren’t Peace Brigade,” Han said.

“But they weren’t,” Sal-Solo said. “Roxi Barl is an independent contractor. She didn’t like orders, which rules out the Peace Brigade or anyone associated with the Yuuzhan Vong. Or so Intelligence tells me.”

“Then *whowas* she working for?” Han demanded.

Thrackan shrugged. “That’s a good question. Fortunately, it’s also one that, as of an hour from now, will no longer concern me.”

Han scowled. “No?”

“Because you’ll be gone by then,” Thrackan said.

“Gone?” Han shook his head. “We’re not going anywhere until Leia can walk.”

Leia frowned. Their faces had been on newsvids all over the system, and he was talking about staying until she could *walk*. What kind of rocket juice had he been drinking while they were apart?

“Han,” Leia said gently. “We talked this over. You know I may never—”

Han whirled on her. “Until you *walk*, Leia.”

Leia recoiled, and Han hovered over the bed, staring into her eyes, not blinking, not breathing, not wavering, as though he could change what had happened on Duro—maybe even what had happened before that—through sheer force of will.

“Han, we can’t,” she said at last. “By now, bounty hunters and Peace Brigaders from all over the system will be converging on the medcenter. And even if Thrackan wanted to protect us, he couldn’t. It would give the Yuuzhan Vong too much reason to come see if Centerpoint is still operational.”

“And he’s just sending us on our way?” Han scoffed. “Straight into a Yuuzhan Vong patrol, that’s where he’s sending us.”

“He can’t, Han,” Leia said. “He can’t take the chance we’d break under torture and tell them Centerpoint isn’t working.”

Han considered this, then glanced at his cousin.

“If it makes you feel better, I could always have you killed,” Sal-Solo offered amicably. “That works for me.”

“And how do you think Anakin would like that?” Leia retorted. Their son Anakin was the only one who

had ever been able to fully activate Centerpoint Station, and his absence was one reason the ancient superweapon wasn't working now. "He doesn't care for you much as it is, Thrackan. I doubt he'd be very helpful if you arranged the death of his parents."

Sal-Solo's eyes narrowed, but he nodded. "As long as we're agreed, then. You'll leave within the hour."

"Han," Dr. Nimbi said helpfully, "she can handle the journey if you stop at bacta parlors along the way." He hesitated a moment, then added, "Leia will be fine. It's your, uh, friend I'm worried about."

Han seemed confused. "Friend?"

"In tank three," Dr. Nimbi said. "I don't think you should leave her behind, not with all those bounty hunters and Peace Brigaders on the way."

"Oh—right. Our *friend* ." Han glanced at Leia, and something roguish came to his eye, something sly and fun and conspiratorial that had not been there since before Chewbacca's death. He looked back to Sal-Solo and sighed. "Look, I don't mean to be difficult, but we can't go without Jaina."

"Jaina? *Jaina's* here?"

Leia thought she had been the one to blurt the question, but realized that was not so when all eyes turned to Sal-Solo. At least she understood why Han had been acting so strangely. She had a vague memory of a deep-space rendezvous with the *Jade Shadow* , of kissing her brother and each of her children good-bye and telling them she would see them again on Coruscant. Something must have happened. Perhaps Han had needed Jaina to help him fly the *Falcon* , or perhaps Mara and Luke had run into trouble and been forced to divert. Maybe all of her children were on Corellia. She hoped not. She hoped Jacen and Anakin were safe on Coruscant . . . but it *would* be good to see them, too. So good.

". . . Anakin?" Sal-Solo was asking. "Is he here, too?"

"Just Jaina," Han said firmly. "Anakin and Jacen are on Coruscant."

"Of course, you *would* say that." Sal-Solo was thinking aloud. If he could force Anakin to reactivate Centerpoint, he would have no worries from the Yuuzhan Vong or the New Republic. He could use it to isolate the whole Corellian system and run the place as his personal empire. "But I can find out. I have my ways."

"Yeah—you could comm them on Coruscant," Han said. "Feel free to reverse the HoloNet charges—I know how strapped things are here in Corellia."

"Wait—what was that about tank three?" Leia demanded, not paying much attention to the exchange between Han and Sal-Solo. "Jaina's in a bacta tank? What happened?"

"You remember." Again, Han gave her a strange glare. "That hit on Duro turned out to be worse than we thought."

The stress alarm behind the bed started to beep again.

"Will you *please* disconnect that thing?" Leia demanded. Whatever had happened—whatever Han was trying to tell her—she did not want a machine giving them away. "And get me a repulsor chair. I want to

see my daughter.”

“Yes.” Sal-Solo was scowling and studying Han, obviously wondering why Leia seemed so surprised. “Why don’t we all go?”

Dr. Nimbi arranged for a repulsor chair, then unstrapped Leia’s arm from the safety rail, hung the necessary IV lines on the bag hook attached to the chair, and helped her out of bed.

Leia’s legs were no sooner lowered than they began to ache with a pain a hundred times worse than childbirth. It was unlike anything she had ever experienced, a bursting, throbbing, burning kind of anguish that made her wish the Yuuzhan Vong had finished the job and cut them all the way off. She caught Sal-Solo staring and looked down to see two huge Hutt-like things sticking out where her legs should have been.

“If you’re going to gape,” Leia said, “I wish you wouldn’t smile.”

Sal-Solo covered his mouth, which was not actually smiling, and turned away. Accompanied by the CorSec agents, Sal-Solo, and even the nurse, Dr. Nimbi led them past the droid’s monitoring post down the opposite corridor. Leia’s heart began to pound immediately. The door of the bacta parlor was ringed by black blossoms of soot. Opposite, the ruins of the waiting room were set off by the jagged remains of a small half wall. They had been determined, these bounty hunters, and it made Leia shudder to think how close they must have come to capturing her only daughter.

As they reached the bacta parlor, Leia noticed an anvil-headed Arcona sitting in one of the few undamaged chairs. He met her gaze long enough to nod, then went back to staring at his feet. She steered her chair into the bacta parlor behind Han, the nurse, and the others.

They stopped in front of tank three, where a badly wounded woman of at least thirty years of age was floating inside. She was several centimeters taller than Leia and well muscled, and though there was something vaguely familiar about her face, she bore no resemblance at all to either Han or Leia. Most telling of all, her head was surrounded by a cloud of silky hair; like Leia, Jaina had left hers in a decontamination lock on Duro.

Leia craned her neck, checking the other tanks for an occupant that could be her daughter. There was none; only a Selonian with an amputated tail.

“This is Jaina?” Sal-Solo asked, clearly as doubtful as Leia herself. “She’s a little old to be your daughter, Han.”

“She’s been flying for Rogue Squadron,” Han said. “You’d be surprised how space combat ages a girl.”

And Leia finally understood. For some reason she did not yet know, Han and Dr. Nimbi were trying to get this woman off Corellia. Jaina was not there at all; none of her children were. Leia should have been relieved, but instead she felt let down and desperately alone.

“... that right, Leia?” Han was asking.

“Yes, of course,” Leia answered, with no idea whatsoever what she was agreeing to. “That’s true.”

Han nodded assertively. “You see?”

“Does space combat also change eye color?” the nurse asked, studying the data display attached to the mystery woman’s tank. “I seem to recall that Jaina’s eyes are brown, like her mother’s. This patient’s are listed as green.”

“Cosmetic tinting,” Leia explained. Even if her heart was not in it, she knew what Han needed from her. “To make her harder to identify.”

Sal-Solo looked doubtful. “What are you trying to pull, cousin? This woman can’t be your daughter.”

“I could confirm her identity with a simple genetic test,” Dr. Nimbi suggested. “We could have the results in, oh, two days.”

Sal-Solo glowered at the doctor, then turned to the nurse. “Check the admission data. Who’s the responsible party?”

Han had not changed so much in his time away that Leia could no longer see through his sabacc face. He awaited the nurse’s response with a feigned air of disinterest, but his eyes were fixed behind her, where a reflection on the surface of tank two showed the data scrolling up the display. When the screen finally stopped rolling, its reflection showed several blank data fields. Han’s gaze shifted quickly back to the nurse.

“She was admitted anonymously.” He stated it as though he knew it for a fact. “No name, no contact information.”

The nurse’s jaw fell, but she nodded. “Not even notes about the receiving circumstances.”

Han turned to Sal-Solo with a smirk. “That’s all the proof you need, Governor-General.” He pressed a finger to the bacta tank, and the green eyes of the woman inside fluttered open. “She leaves with us—or I inform every media station in the system that you’re holding our daughter against our will.”

Sal-Solo glared at him. “I could prove that you’re lying.”

“True,” Han said. “But could you prove it to the Yuuzhan Vong?”

Sal-Solo’s face grew even stormier, and he turned to the doctor. “Can she be moved—now?”

“We can lend them a temporary bacta tank,” Dr. Nimbi said. “As long as they change the fluid each time they stop for Leia, this patient should be fine as well.”

Sal-Solo studied the tank, no doubt trying as feverishly as Leia to puzzle out what the woman inside had to do with the Solos—and of what interest she might be to whoever had sent Roxi Barl. Finally, a full minute after Leia had given up on the riddle, he made a sour face and turned to Dr. Nimbi.

“I think *Ido* see a certain family resemblance,” Sal-Solo said. “But you’ll sell the tank to them, not lend. I don’t want anyone coming to return it.”

Chapter 3

The security hatch finally irised open, revealing the cavernous interior of the public berthing facility where the Solos had hidden the *Millennium Falcon* in plain sight. On any other planet, they would have rented a private bay in some very discreet luxury dock. But on security-obsessed Corellia, such measures inevitably drew more attention than they avoided. Leia and Han spent a moment studying the activity on the docking bay's floor, then exited the cramped access lock.

The hatch whispered shut behind them, and finally they were someplace where they could talk. Putting her growing fatigue out of mind, Leia caught Han's arm and pulled him around to face her.

"Han, what's going on?" A muffled clamor sounded inside the access lock as their CorSec escorts entered with their "daughter" and her portable bacta tank. "Who is that woman, and why did Nimbi want us to remove her from a medcenter she seems very much in need of?"

"Because she may be in as much danger as you are." Han squatted on his haunches in front of Leia, placing himself at eye level—and turning his back to any spymikes that might be aimed at them from the facility's depths. "She did some things to help me during the firefight. I think she's a Jedi."

"A Jedi?" Leia did not ask for details or reasons. The CorSec agents would be in the access lock only a few moments, just long enough for the security computers to scan their faces and confirm their identities. "We may not be doing her any favors. Whoever sent Barl is still on our trail."

Han glanced over his shoulder. "Where?"

"Behind us, in the access lock," Leia said. "You remember when I said that CorSec agent was stealing?"

Han's brow furrowed. "Yeah?"

"I wasn't hallucinating. My datapad is gone."

Now he looked angry. "That Ranat!"

"Han, don't say anything about it. The money was well spent." The device had only been a cheap replacement for the one she'd lost on Duro, and there was nothing on it but a few half-finished—probably incoherent—letters to family and friends. "He also took two datachits and the recording rod."

"That's money well spent?"

"It is when you realize he didn't touch my credit case," Leia said. "Or the credit chips you left on the dresser."

"He's a spy," Han said.

Leia nodded. "Not a very good one, but I think so. Probably working for the same people who sent Roxi Barl."

The hatch behind Leia began to hiss. Han glanced over her shoulder, then asked in a low voice, "What about the others?"

“Only the one,” Leia whispered. She was fairly certain of what she said; the agent had been working as hard to hide his thefts from his officer as from them.

The hatch stopped hissing, and two CorSec security men emerged with the mystery woman and her portable bacta tank. The guards were the spy and the same officer who had been in Leia’s room when she was awakened. She let her chin drop, less feigning exhaustion than allowing it to show. Despite the stim-shots and painkillers Dr. Nimbi had pressed on her, the effort of sitting upright was taking its toll.

The hatch closed, and the officer said, “Go on, Solo. The rest of the detail will stay behind to hold the media back.”

“Thank you,” Leia said, and she meant it. Without a wall of CorSec agents to keep the holocrews at bay, she felt fairly certain the journalists would have followed them aboard the *Falcon*. “I thought we were going to have stowaways.”

“No need to worry about that,” the spy said. “We’ll do a search.”

Han muttered something that sounded suspiciously like “over your dead body,” then led the way around the perimeter of the floor—no experienced spacer ever cut across a public docking bay—toward a shadowy disk resting between the blockier forms of two ancient transports. Though Leia had never been a fan of the *Falcon*’s new matte-black finish, she had to admit that it did as much to reduce the famous ship’s public profile as it did to hide the hull blemishes acquired over so many decades of rough use. Now, even when someone did happen to notice the vessel sitting in the murk, it would hardly draw a second glance.

She wondered if that was what Han had intended when he chose the new color, or if it had just been a way of expressing his grief over Chewbacca’s loss. She might never know; they were no longer close enough that she could guess, and she was not comfortable asking. How sad was that, after defeating the Empire and having three children together?

As they approached the *Falcon*, an anvil-headed silhouette with glittering yellow eyes emerged from between the landing struts, thin arms held casually out to the sides to show that his three-fingered hands were empty.

“Captain Solo,” he rasped. “Glad to make your acquaintance.”

“Not so fast, Twinkle-eyes,” Han said. “Just step away from the ship and go. We’re not giving interviews.”

“Interviews?”

The figure laughed coarsely and stepped into the light, revealing the salt-addicted Arcona who had exchanged glances with Leia in the hospital. He had a flat reptilian face with skin the color of durasteel and a cockeyed mouth that made him look half salted; over his threadbare tunic, he now wore a shabby flight tabard lined with dozens of fastclose cargo pockets.

“I’m no holojournalist,” the Arcona said. “All I’m looking for is a ride off this mudball.”

Leaving the portable bacta tank hovering on its repulsor gurney, the CorSec agents drew their blasters and moved up. “Do as Solo says,” the officer ordered. “And give me your identichip.”

The Arcona reached for a pocket as though to obey, then fluttered his fingers in the agents' direction. "I'm not Corellian," he said. "I don't need an identichip."

"He's not Corellian," the subordinate said.

"He doesn't need an identichip," the officer added.

Leia's jaw was already hanging open, but Han was not so easily impressed.

"Cute trick. Now move along—and take your buddies." He jerked his thumb at the two CorSec agents. "We're not taking riders."

The Arcona showed a row of crooked fangs in what was probably a smile. "I'm willing to earn my keep, Captain." He glanced in Leia's direction, then his tabard fluttered open to show her the lightsaber hanging on his belt, and she felt something warm slither over her in the Force. "I'm a first-class YT-1300 copilot. Have one of my own, if I can ever get back to the blasted thing."

"Han." Leia grabbed her husband's arm. "I think—"

Han pulled away. "In a minute." He continued to glare at the Arcona. "I don't care if you fly Star Destroyers, you're not getting on my ship."

"Han!" Leia snapped. "Yes, he is."

Han started to argue, then seemed to see something in Leia's eyes that made him think better of it. "He is?"

Thankful she could still reach him, Leia nodded. "I think you should give him a chance," she said. "I'm certainly not going to be much of a copilot."

The fact of the matter was that C-3PO, still hiding aboard the *Falcon*, could help with most of the copilot's chores, but Han seemed to realize Leia was trying to tell him something else. He turned to the Arcona and studied him from top to bottom, contemplating his ashen complexion, threadbare clothes, and listing features.

"Well, you look like a pilot," Han said. "What's the sequence for an emergency ion drive engagement?"

"Warm circuits, actuate, power up," the Arcona answered.

Han raised his brow. "Emergency shutdown?"

"Power down, *then* disengage."

"And where's the vortex stabilizer found?"

The Arcona's flat head folded slightly inward at the center, then he raised his three-fingered hand and said, "You already know where the vortex stabilizer—"

Han slapped the hand down. "Don't try that stuff with me. Who do you think you're dealing with?"

The Arcona shrugged, then complained, "How should I know where the vortex stabilizer is? That's not a

crew-serviceable part.”

Han actually smiled, then slapped the Arcona on the shoulder. “You’ll do.”

“Thanks, Captain.” The Arcona did not seem all that relieved. He pushed between the CorSec agents toward the portable bacta tank. “I’ll take it from here, fellas.”

The officer stepped aside, but the subordinate stood fast. “Our orders are to load the patient ourselves.”

“That was before we had help,” Leia said. “And your orders were to see us off. No one said anything about snooping around on the *Falcon* .”

She cast a pointed glare at the pocket containing her datapad. The subordinate’s face turned bright red, and he stepped aside so quickly he nearly fell.

“Hmmm.” The Arcona smiled and, out of the corner of his tilted mouth, whispered, “Interesting technique.”

He retrieved the repulsor gurney, then the agents returned Han’s blaster, and the group boarded together. C-3PO was waiting for them atop the ramp.

“Oh, thank the maker you’re back!” he said, arms pumping madly. “I can’t tell you how many times I was forced to lower the retractable blaster—”

“Not now, Threepio,” Han said, brushing past and starting for the cockpit. “Secure yourself for launch.”

“But Captain Solo, you and Princess Leia have been all over the newsvids. They’re saying you killed three people, and quite a few of the commentators seem to think there should be some sort of legal inquiry—”

“See-Threepio, we know,” Leia said, guiding her chair into the access ring. “This is . . .”

She turned to the Arcona.

“A friend of your doctor’s.” He plucked an eavesdropping device off the portable bacta tank and crushed it under his boot, then added, “There are more.”

Leia nodded and turned back to C-3PO. “Help our guest secure the gurney for launch.”

Seeing that her chair would prevent the bulky bacta tank from entering the access ring, Leia moved ahead. She was feeling terribly tired and weak, and her first instinct was to turn toward the main deck and stay out of the way. But she had been alone too much over the last year, and the thought of sitting by herself while Han and his new copilot solved their problems was more than she could bear. She needed to be with her husband—even if she was no longer quite sure he wanted her.

The repulsor chair was fairly compact, and once she had lowered the telescoping pole on which the IV bags hung, there was no trouble guiding it up the outrigger corridor. But the cockpit itself already had four seats, so she had to settle for magnocamping her chair in place just outside the door. To his credit, Han did not ask what she was doing there. He was so busy toggling switches and checking dials that Leia was not even sure he knew.

The Arcona squeezed past and, taking the copilot's seat, slipped into the start-up routine so smoothly that it was obvious he had been telling the truth about flying his own YT-1300. There were a few glitches as he encountered some of the *Falcon*'s modifications, but Leia could tell by Han's patience how impressed he was. She tried not to be jealous.

They were within thirty seconds of launch when the inevitable glitch finally came.

"The ramp light's still on." Han pointed at a panel on the Arcona's side of the cockpit. "That should have been checked off a minute ago."

"I thought I had."

The Arcona hit the reset. The light blinked off, then instantly relit.

Han cursed, then activated the intercom. "Threepio, I think the ramp's stuck again. Give it a check."

No acknowledgment came.

"Threepio?"

Han cursed. Leia began to unclamp her chair.

"No, I'll go." The Arcona unbuckled his harness and rose. "You shouldn't be back there alone. This could be trouble."

"Thanks." Han unbuckled his crash webbing and loosened his blaster, then turned to Leia and said, "I'm glad you're up here."

Leia smiled. "Me, too."

They waited in silence for nearly a minute before the ramp light finally went out and the Arcona returned.

"It was just stuck," he said. "I banged the control panel, and it came up the rest of the way."

"Always works for me," Han said, starting the repulsor drives.

"What about Threepio?" Leia asked. She had an uneasy feeling—not danger sense, but of something that was not quite right. "Why didn't he answer?"

"I think he crossed some feeds connecting the bacta tank to the medical bank." The Arcona slipped smoothly back into his seat. "His circuit breaker was tripped. I reset it."

"That's a new one." Han shook his head, then opened a channel to the spaceport traffic center. "Control, this is *Shadow Bird* requesting launch clearance."

Shadow Bird was the name under which they had berthed the *Falcon*.

"Negative, *Shadow Bird*," came the reply. "Stand by."

Han closed the channel. "What now?"

He activated the external security monitors, and they all waited in tense silence, expecting to see a CorSec boarding party or mob of bounty hunters come rushing out of the access locks.

A few moments later, Control's voice crackled over the speaker. "Corellian Security informs us there is no such vessel as *Shadow Bird* ." The message came over an open channel. "However, the *Millennium Falcon* is cleared for immediate departure."

"Acknowledged." Han wasted no time engaging the repulsor drives and leaving the docking bay; someone had just made certain that every ship within a hundred thousand kilometers would know which vessel they were. "And check that CorSec agent's pockets. I saw him stealing a datapad. *Falcon* out."

Chapter 4

The park-checkered city of Coronet had barely receded beneath the *Falcon* 's tail when Han swung south over the sea and slammed the ion throttles full forward, beginning a long arcing climb that would carry them over the pole to the opposite side of the planet. The comm speaker quickly erupted into vitriolic curses as Corellian Control protested both the unlawful trajectory and the over-city shock wave, but Han ignored the impoundment threats and disengaged the nacelle melt-safeties. After the send-off CorSec had given them, flying a standard launch pattern would be about as safe as jumping into a Sarlacc's pit.

The Arcona's golden eyes remained fixed on the temperature readouts. "I thought you had experience at this sort of thing." Because of the difficulty his compound eyes had making out distinct shapes, he was wearing a small optical scanner that read the display data and fed it into an earpiece in auditory form. "Every rookie smuggler in the galaxy knows you can't outrun a ship in orbit. They'll cut you off every time."

"You don't say?" Han tried to look surprised. "Because of the gravity drag?"

"And air friction and accumulated velocity and things like that." The Arcona glanced over his shoulder at Leia. "This is Han Solo, isn't it? *The* Han Solo?"

Han glanced over his shoulder and saw Leia shrug.

"You know, I've been wondering myself." Her eyes drooped and Han thought she might be falling asleep, then she added, "But when I checked, that's what his identichip read."

"One of them, anyway," Han said, glad to hear an echo—no matter how faint—of Leia's sharp wit.

They reached the other side of the planet. Han pulled back on the yoke, nosing the *Falcon* straight up. The nacelle temperatures shot off the gauges as the ion drives struggled to maintain velocity, and the Arcona's slanted mouth fell open.

"Y-you're at a hundred and t-t-twenty percent spec," he stammered.

"You don't say," Han replied. "Bring up the tactical display and let's see how things look."

The Arcona kept his scanner fixed on the temperature gauges. “One twenty-seven.”

“Military alloys,” Leia explained. “We can go to one forty, or so Han tells me.”

“Maybe more, if I wanted to push,” Han bragged.

“Don’t,” the Arcona said. “I’m impressed enough.”

The Arcona brought up the tactical display, revealing a drop-shaped swarm of blips streaming around the planet in pursuit. He plotted intercept vectors. A web of flashing lines appeared on-screen, all intersecting well behind the dotted outline showing the *Falcon*’s projected position.

“I guess rookie smugglers don’t know everything,” Han said with a smirk. “Plot a course for Commenor.”

He waited a few seconds to be certain none of the *Falcon*’s pursuers had any tricks up its own drive nacelles, then diverted power for the rear shields and kept an eye out for surprises. Though he had plenty of questions for his new copilot, he stayed quiet and watched him work. Han had certainly seen more gifted navigators, but the Arcona’s approach was sound, and he used redundant routines to avoid mistakes.

After a few moments, he transferred the coordinates to Han’s display. “Want to double-check?”

“No need,” Han said. “I trust you.”

“Yeah?” The high corner of the Arcona’s mouth rose a little more. “Same here.”

The Arcona validated the coordinates, and Han initiated the hyperdrive. There was the usual inexplicable hesitation—Han had been trying for the last year to run down the cause—and his alarmed copilot looked over. Han raised a finger to signal patience, then the stars stretched into lines.

They spent a few moments checking systems before settling in for the ride to Commenor, then Han had time to consider his temporary copilot. He had not missed the lightsaber hanging inside the Arcona’s ragged flight tabard, nor the significance of the mind game he had played on CorSec agents. Still, while there were now enough Jedi in the galaxy that Han no longer knew them all by name, he would have heard about an Arcona Jedi—especially a salt-addicted Arcona.

“So,” Han asked. “Who are you?”

“Izal Waz.” The Arcona turned and, smiling crookedly, extended his three-fingered hand. “Thanks for taking me aboard.”

“Waz? Izal Waz?” Han shook the hand. “Your name sounds familiar.”

Izal’s gaze flickered downward, and he released Han’s hand. “Anything’s possible, but we haven’t met.”

“But *Ido* know the name,” Han said. “What about you, Leia?”

He turned to look and found her chin slumped against her chest. Though her eyes were closed, her brow was creased and her hands were twitching, and it made Han’s heart ache to see her suffer so even in her

sleep.

“Looks like I better put our patient to bed.” Han unbuckled his crash webbing. “We’ll talk more in a few minutes.”

“Good,” Izal Waz said. “I’ve always been curious about your years in the Corporate Sector.”

That was hardly the discussion Han had in mind, but he left the pilot’s chair and took Leia back to the first-aid bay. She did not stir, even when he lifted her into the bunk and connected her to the medical data banks. He knew she needed her rest, but he wished she would open her eyes just for a minute and give him a smile, some indication that she would recover—that *they* would. He had needed to mourn Chewbacca’s death, he knew that, and maybe he had even needed to crisscross the galaxy helping Droma search for his clan. But only now was Han beginning to see how he had surrendered to his grief, or to understand that there had been a cost.

“Get well, Princess.” He kissed Leia on the brow. “Don’t give up on me yet.”

The monitors showed no indication that she heard.

Han buckled the last safety strap across her chest and magnoclamped the repulsor chair to the deck beside her bunk, then went aft to check on the other patient aboard the *Falcon*. Her gurney was clamped to the floor of the crew quarters, a pair of data umbilicals connecting the portable bacta tank to an auxiliary medical socket. C-3PO stood in a corner, his photoreceptors darkened and his metallic head canted slightly forward in his shutdown posture. The covers on the three bunks were rumpled.

Han did a quick check to make certain the bacta tank was still functioning, then reached behind C-3PO’s head and reset his primary circuit breaker.

The droid’s head rose. “. . . can’t leave her in the middle of . . .” The sentence trailed off as his photoreceptors blinked to life. “Captain Solo! What happened?”

“Good question.” Han glanced around. “I thought Izal turned you back on.”

“If you are referring to that salt-happy Arcona whom Mistress Leia asked you to bring aboard, absolutely not!” He gestured at the portable bacta tank. “I was instructing him where to secure the gurney when . . . well, someone must have tripped my breaker.”

“You didn’t cross the medical bank data feeds?”

“Captain Solo, you know I don’t relish memory wipes,” C-3PO said. “And I assure you, I know the proper way to access a data feed. I wasn’t even near it.”

“That’s what I was afraid of.”

Han stepped over to a bunk and found what looked like a large black toenail on the covers. There were similar flakes on the other bunks, and, on the third, a pair of disassembled transmitters—the really small kind, such as a CorSec agent might hide on a portable bacta tank. Han placed his hand in the center of the rumpled covers. The bed was still warm.

“Go to the first-aid bay and stay with Leia.” Han folded the flakes and transmitters into his hand, then started for the door. “Don’t let anyone near her.”

“Of course, Captain Solo.” C-3PO clanged into the ring corridor behind him. “But how am I to stop them?”

“*Comme* .”

Han was already crossing the main hold toward the cockpit access tunnel. He was not at all surprised to discover that CorSec or the spy or maybe both had planted eavesdropping devices on the bacta tank—he had intended to check for them himself—but *someone* had disassembled the transmitters. That in itself did not mean Izal Waz had sneaked stowaways aboard, or even if he had, that they were Peace Brigade collaborators or bounty hunters or agents hired by whoever had sent Roxi Barl. But it did raise a few questions.

Doing his best to appear nonchalant, Han stepped onto the flight deck and paused to glance at the navicomputer. According to the display, they remained on course to Commenor, so any hidden diversions the Arcona might have sneaked past Han had not yet occurred.

Han slipped into the pilot’s chair. “Everything okay up here?”

“What could go wrong in ten minutes?” Izal continued to stare out the viewport, his color-hungry Arconan eyes mesmerized by the gray void of hyperspace. “You seem distressed.”

“Distressed?” Han checked their position, reached up, and disengaged the hyperdrive. Then, as the sudden dazzle of starlight disoriented Izal, he drew his blaster and swiveled around to face the Arcona. “I’m not distressed. I’m mad. Furious, even.”

Izal did not even seem all that surprised. He merely blinked the blindness from his eyes and gestured at the blaster. “That’s not necessary. I can explain.”

“You’d better hope so.” Han opened his other hand and laid the black flakes and disassembled transmitters on a console between their seats. “When it comes to protecting my wife, I have a short temper.”

Izal grinned and did not look at the items. “So I noticed in the isolation ward.”

“You were the one in the bacta parlor?”

Izal nodded eagerly. “I helped.”

When Han did not lower the blaster, a furrow appeared in Izal’s brow, and he flicked his hand almost casually. Had Han been just any freighter captain concerned he was about to be hijacked by a rogue Jedi and his stowaway partners, the trick might have worked. As it was, Han had fought at Luke Skywalker’s side often enough to anticipate such maneuvers, and his free hand was already clamped over the barrel, holding the weapon in his grasp.

“If it’s going to come down to using it or losing it,” Han warned, “I’ll use it.”

The blaster settled back into Han’s hand.

“You’re as short on gratitude as you are on temper,” the Arcona complained. “Or maybe you just don’t know how to trust.”

“I’ll trust you when I know who you are.” Han set the blaster to stun, less to spare Izal than to avoid burning a hole through a crucial circuit board. “You own a lightsaber and you know a few Force tricks, but so did Darth Vader. As far as I’m concerned, you still look more like a bounty hunter than a Jedi Knight.”

Izal sank into the copilot’s seat like he had been punched.

“It’s the salt habit, isn’t it?” he asked. “You think no real Jedi would let himself come to this.”

“If you’re looking for sympathy, you’re on the wrong ship,” Han said. The truth was he felt a certain empathy for the troubled Arcona, but now was not the time to share shortcomings. “You must know I’m no stranger to the Jedi. If you were a Jedi, I’d know you.”

“You do.” Izal’s gaze slipped away from Han’s, and his face darkened to charcoal. “There’s a reason you recognized my name, I had some trouble at the academy. One bite of Kenth’s nerfloaf—”

“Of course,” Han said, recalling the incident. A three-month supply of salt had vanished in the space of a few days, and then so had the student who choked it all down. “But you were only there a few months.”

Han cast a meaningful glance at Izal’s belt.

Izal nodded. “Hardly long enough to build my lightsaber,” he said. “Eventually, I found a Master who taught me to accept my weakness—and who helped me find my strength.”

Han raised his brow.

“And I’m sure you don’t know *her*,” Izal said.

“Your story is smelling more like a Gamorrean kitchen every minute,” Han warned. He gestured at the flakes and disassembled transmitters. “And you still haven’t explained these.”

“Oh . . . those.” Izal’s slanted smile might have been one of relief or anxiety. “That’s easy.”

“So explain.”

“First, I wasn’t keeping this a secret,” Izal said. “I was going to tell you when things settled down.”

“Quit stalling,” Han ordered.

Izal swallowed hard, which was quite a sight given the Arcona’s long neck. “All right.” He picked up one of the black flakes. “This scale—”

The proximity alarm broke into a shriek. Han glanced at his tactical display and found a wall of blips taking form behind the *Falcon*.

“Nice trick,” Han said. He hit the reset, but the alarm resumed its screeching half a second later. The tactical display returned with even more blips. “Now cut it out. You’re testing my patient nature.”

“You think this is a Force trick?” Izal’s eyes were fixed on the tactical display, and there was enough panic in his voice that Han almost believed him. “I’m not that good.”

“So they’re real?” Han was starting to worry. There were no transponder codes beneath the blips, and vessels without transponder codes tended to be pirates—or worse. “What are they doing here?”

“I don’t know.” Izal began the ion engine warm-start procedure. “I must have missed a homing beacon.”

“Or planted one,” Han said. Homing beacons could not be used to track a ship through hyperspace, only to locate it once it returned to realspace. For a flotilla to arrive so quickly, it had to have been lying somewhere outside the Corellian system, ready to depart as soon as it learned the *Falcon*’s position. “This seems way too handy.”

“Or desperate.” Izal brought the ion drives on-line. “I’m not the one trying to snatch your wife.”

“I’d like to believe you.” Han fired a stun bolt into the Arcona’s ribs. “But I just can’t take the chance.”

Leaving Izal to slump over the side of his chair, Han holstered his blaster and hit the throttles. The ambushers’ rate of closure began to slow. Some of the leaders started to fire, but Han did not even raise the *Falcon*’s power-hungry energy shields. The ship’s sensor array computer had identified the newcomers as a motley mix of Y-wings and old T-65 X-wings, and neither of those could fire effectively at such long range.

C-3PO’s voice came over the intercom. “Captain Solo?”

“Have the stowaways got Leia?” Han asked. There was a time when his thoughts wouldn’t have leapt instantly to the worst scenario, but a lot had changed in the galaxy since then—and in him. “If they’ve got Leia, you tell them—”

“Mistress Leia is well and quite alone,” C-3PO said. “Aside from me, of course.”

“Keep it that way.” Han activated the navicomputer and began to punch coordinates; though the course to Commenor remained the same, transit times would have to be recalculated from the new entry point. “And don’t bother me unless that changes.”

“Of course, Captain Solo.” A distant streak of red flashed above the cockpit canopy as a cannon bolt reached maximum range and faded away. “But—”

“Threepio, not now!”

The starfighters, especially the X-wings, were still closing. Han plotted a course projection and saw what he had known intuitively: they would reach effective firing range only a few seconds before the *Falcon* entered hyperspace.

Han slammed his palm against the yoke. “Sith spit!”

He changed the tactical display to a larger scale. Sitting dead ahead, well beyond the range of anything less sensitive than the *Falcon*’s reconnaissance-grade sensor suite, was a fast-freight of 250 meters. Not large, but large enough to carry a tractor beam that would prevent the *Falcon* from jumping to hyperspace.

Han cursed again and canceled the calculations. He brought the *Falcon* around hard, and the starfighters angled to cut him off. Daggers of light began to slice the darkness to his right. Han brought the energy

shields up, then felt a shudder as both sets of the *Falcon* 's powerful quad laser cannons began to fire.

“Leia?” he gasped. “Threepio?”

“We’re still here, Captain Solo,” the droid replied. “In the first-aid bay as you instructed.”

Han glanced over the fire-control computer to see if Izal had left the quad lasers on automatic. He hadn’t. “Then who’s on the guns?”

“Captain Solo, that’s what I was—”

A rhythmic hissing sounded from the seat behind the pilot’s, and then all Han could hear was his own scream. Paying no attention as the first pirate shots blossomed against the energy shields, he leapt up and reached for his blaster.

A clawed hand pushed him down. “Sit,” rasped a deep voice. “This one shall replace Jedi Waz.”

The claw removed itself, and Han glanced over to see a huge scaled figure in a brown Jedi robe. The newcomer lifted Izal Waz out of the copilot’s seat with one hand, then tossed him to the rear of the flight deck and slipped into his place. A thick tail flopped over the arm of the chair, and beneath the robe’s cowl, Han glimpsed a reptilian face with slit-pupiled eyes and upward-jutting fangs. An adult Barabel.

A sheet of crimson light flashed along the *Falcon* 's starboard side. Han’s attention remained fixed on the Barabel. With scales as black as space and a tail that forced him to perch on the edge of the seat, his jagged features made him look as dangerous as his robe did mysterious. Han only hoped the Jedi apparel was evidence of a more patient nature than most Barabels possessed.

The Barabel pointed a claw at Han’s hand, still resting on his holstered weapon. “This one will let you blast him later. For now, perhapz you fly the ship.”

“Whatever you want.” Aware that even without the Force, the Barabel could have taken the blaster—and probably the arm holding it—anytime he wanted, Han grabbed the yoke with both hands. “Where we going?”

“You are the pilot, Han Solo.” He waved a claw at the tactical display, which showed a flight of X-wings streaking in to cut them off. “Though this one thinkz we should turn burnerz and run.”

“Can’t.” Han pointed to the fast-freight’s symbol, now giving chase in the upper left corner of the tactical display. “She’ll snag us with a tractor beam. Old pirate trap.”

The *Falcon* 's cannons lashed out in rapid-fire sequence. The lead starfighter dissolved into static, mirrored in the darkness outside by a distant orange bloom. Han whistled, awed as much by the timing of the attack as by its accuracy. The other three X-wings swung into a front oblique attack. Again, the *Falcon* 's laser cannons flashed. Again, an X-wing burst into a ball of superheated gas.

When the fireball died this time, it was replaced by a pair of white dots. They were a little larger than stars and a whole lot brighter.

The white dots swelled to white disks.

“Concussion missiles?” the Barabel asked.

“Not that lucky,” Han didn’t even bother to check the tactical display for propellant trails. He had seen plenty of those expanding white dots—though usually from the bridge of a Super Star Destroyer. “Proton torpedoes.”

The white disks swelled into white circles.

Han nosed the *Falcon* down into a wild corkscrewing evasive pattern. Somehow, the mysterious gunners remained accurate, crippling two starfighters as the main body of the pirate fleet reached effective range. The first proton torpedo arced past so close that the canopy went white.

The Barabel sissed. “Someone wantz you dead. Really wantz you dead.”

Han blinked his vision clear and saw a Y-wing zip past the cockpit, a crazy line of laserfire chasing it along. Another X-wing came in firing, and he had to turn head-on to force it to pull up. When he could finally check the tactical display, he found a dozen starfighters circling the *Falcon*, with another dozen hanging back to cut off escape. The good news was that the second proton torpedo had already passed by, its propellant trail tracing a long arc away from the *Falcon*’s tail.

“They don’t want us dead,” Han said. The torpedoes had been fired with disabled homing beacons. “They’re forcing our hand.”

A pair of battered X-wings streaked into view, the *Falcon*’s cannon bolts warming their shields. They collided in front of the cockpit, and a pair of rhythmic hisses, the first sounds Han had heard from the turrets, sounded over the intercom. Then pirates were all over the *Falcon*, coming in close and battering its shields from every angle. Depletion warnings and overload signals beeped and buzzed.

The Barabel studied the instrument panel in helpless confusion. “Where is the load balancer?”

“I’ll handle the shields.” Han jerked a thumb at the navicomputer. “Can you use that?”

The Barabel bristled his scales. “We are good pilots.”

“Okay—I didn’t mean anything by it,” Han said. “Plot a course to Commenor.”

He pulled the *Falcon* out of its evasive pattern and turned toward the fast-freight. The cockpit shuddered and the lights dimmed as the starfighters landed a devastating volley, and a damage-control buzzer announced a hull breach in the number two cargo hold. Two more X-wings vanished from the tactical display. Han sealed the breached hold. Then, finally, the pirates began to stand off, keeping the pressure on but now concentrating on avoiding the deadly streams of light pouring from the *Falcon*’s cannon turrets.

Han shifted more power to the rear shields and looked over to check on the Barabel’s progress. The calculations were almost finished, but the final coordinates lay closer to Corellia than Commenor. Han pretended not to notice, but cursed inside and searched his memory for some hint as to who Izal Waz and his Barabel friends could be working for. Not the Yuuzhan Vong, at least not directly; the Yuuzhan Vong hated Jedi. And certainly not for whoever had hired the pirates; they had killed too many. Maybe a hidden cabal of Dark Jedi, hoping to use Leia to somehow turn the war to their advantage.

Han shifted the tactical scale so it would display only what a standard sensor suite might reveal, and the fast-freight vanished off the screen. Trying to make it appear that he was fine-tuning the data filters, Han

quietly opened his own input to the navicomputer and began calculations for the trip to Commenor.

The Barabel looked over. “They will know from our initial course we are going to Commenor.” He completed his calculations and sent them to Han’s display for verification. “This rendezvous is safer.”

“Safer for you.”

“For you,” the Barabel insisted. “They are not after *us* .”

The fast-freight appeared on the tactical display. Han pushed the *Falcon* into what he hoped would look like an evasive climb. The starfighters closed, hammering his shields, trying to drive him back toward the freighter. Han held his turn, trying to convince the enemy pilots he really had been surprised. The turret gunners made it look good by dispersing their fire to slow pursuit.

Something popped in the life-support control panel, and an acrid stench filled the air. The Barabel pulled off the cover and smothered a burning circuit board with his bare palm, then looked over wide-eyed.

“You are trying to get us killed?”

“This needs to look good,” Han said.

The *Falcon* bucked as the fast-freight, still too distant to see with the naked eye, locked on with its tractor beam. Han spun them perpendicular to the direction of pull—then cut back the throttles to avoid escaping. He did not have to ease off much; the tractor beam was a powerful one.

The *Falcon*’s cannon turrets spun to attack their captor.

“No!” Han ordered on the intercom. “Keep the fighters away.”

There was a short silence, then a voice rasped, “Tesar?”

The Barabel—Tesar—studied Han, then said nothing and started to tend damage alarms.

“Listen,” Han began, “I’m the—”

The turrets spun back toward the starfighters. Another pirate vanished from the tactical display, and the rest began to stand off again. They continued to pour fire at the *Falcon*, though they seemed more interested in keeping the deadly laser cannons occupied than approaching close enough to cause damage. The *Falcon* continued to slip toward the fast-freight.

Han returned to his calculations. Tesar watched for a moment, then tapped a claw on his own coordinates.

“This is better,” he said. “Trust me.”

Han did not even look up. “Where have I heard that before?”

“Your enemies are well organized. Even if we escape this—”

“I have a plan,” Han assured him.

“—they will have someone waiting on Commenor.”

“Better the enemy I know than one I don’t,” Han retorted.

The *Falcon* slipped faster toward the freighter. Han added power, but the slide continued to accelerate.

“We are not your enemy, Han Solo,” Tesar said.

“Quiet.” Han was still struggling to finish the calculations. “And kill those alarms. I’m working here.”

Tesar made no move to obey. “Why do you not trust us? We are Jedi Knightz.”

“I said quiet!”

Thinking he just might be quick enough if he caught the Barabel by surprise, he reached for his blaster—then Tesar extended a hand, and Han was nearly jerked from his chair as weapon and holster tore free of his belt.

The Barabel caught the blaster and tucked it inside his robe. “This one said you could blast him *later* .”

Rubbing his thigh where the holster thong had snapped, Han said, “Look, Luke Skywalker is my brother-in-law. *I know* the Jedi, and you’re not one of them.”

The scales rose on Tesar’s face, and his pupils narrowed to angry slits. He studied Han, his nostrils flaring and his long tongue flicking his lips, then he turned his face away.

“We are still young, but *we are* Jedi.” His reflection in the canopy was twisted into a snarling mask. “If you know the Jedi, then you must know Master Eelysa.”

“Of course,” Han said. Eelysa had been one of Luke’s earliest pupils, a girl born on Coruscant soon after the Emperor’s death. Taken to the academy on Yavin 4 as a child, she had matured into one of Luke’s most trusted Jedi Knights and now spent most of her time on complicated, years-long missions. “But I haven’t seen her in—well, since she was a teenager younger than Jaina.”

“Yes, you have.” When Tesar looked back, his face was more composed. “Eelysa is the one we are guarding. She is the Master of our Master.”

“The Master of your Master?”

“She taught my mother on Barab I,” Tesar said. “When we learned she had been injured, we were sent to Corellia to guard her.”

Han felt instantly sick and foolish. Now that Tesar had mentioned Eelysa’s name, the woman from the bacta tank *did* look familiar. And spying on Corellia was exactly the kind of high-risk, long-term mission in which she specialized. If anyone was going to train Jedi Knights he had never heard of, it would be Eelysa.

“Look, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything by what I said.”

The Barabel looked confused. “Then why did you say it?”

Before Han could explain, another Barabel voice rasped over the intercom, “Captain, can we shoot the frigate yet?”

“Frigate?”

The tactical display now showed the starfighters standing completely off, and the generic fast-freight tag had been changed to KDY frigate, *Lancer* -class.

“Uh, hold your fire for a minute, fellas.”

“Fellas?” a voice rasped. “We are amused, Captain Solo.”

This brought a long round of sissing, which Han did his best to ignore as he interrogated the sensor computer for more details.

“They are not fellas,” Tesar confided quietly. “They are sisters. We are all hatchmates.”

“Hatchmates?” Han echoed, his attention fixed on the details scrolling down his display. “Like wives?”

“Wives!” Tesar broke into an uncontrollable fit of hissing and slapped his chair arm so hard he nearly broke it. “Now is no time for off-color jokes, Captain.”

From what the mass meters and infrared analyzers were showing, the frigate was one of the stripped-down versions that had been converted to planetary customs use. It would have an advanced sensor suite, overpowered tractor beam, and huge hangar bay—but only six cannon towers and civilian-class shields. And while most pirates would have loved to get their hands on such a ship, it was hardly likely. They would have had to steal it from a planetary government.

Han opened a comm channel. “Anonymous customs frigate, this is the *Millennium Falcon* .” The ship came into a view, a tiny sliver of light glowing against the starry backdrop of empty space. “Explain your actions.”

There was a moment’s pause, then a haughty Kuati voice said, “Our actions speak for themselves. Prepare for capture and boarding, and you will be treated fairly.”

Han started to make a rude reply, then thought better of it. “Do we have another choice?”

“Not if you wish to live. Frigate out.”

The channel had barely closed before Tesar growled, “You would surrender your mate?”

“It was a lie, Tesar. You’ve been spending too much time with Selonians.”

Han lowered the energy shields and powered down the ion drives, then swung the *Falcon* ’s nose around as though surrendering to the inevitable. The frigate began to grow rapidly larger, in the space of few breaths swelling from the size of a sliver to that of a finger.

“Okay, uh, ladies, when we get to the hangar bay—”

“We understand what to do, Captain,” came the reply.

“You know where—”

“The projector *and* the backup,” rasped the other sister. “And both at once, or the generatorz will reverse and send us tumbling out of control. We have studied our schematicz.”

Han checked the systems display and saw that the sisters had already turned the *Falcon*’s cannon turrets away in a gesture of submission. Thinking his plan just might work, he turned to finish his calculations. The new Commenor coordinates were already glowing on the display, along with those for the rendezvous Tesar had recommended instead.

“Both setz are accurate,” the Barabel assured him. “The choice is yourz.”

“Thanks.”

The frigate was as long as his forearm now, and so brightly lit Han could see the cannon turrets mounted along its spine and belly. He transferred the Commenor coordinates to the navicomputer. Tesar’s pupils narrowed, but he managed to keep his tongue from flicking—too much.

“Look, I trust you,” Han said. “But we’d just lead them straight to your rendezvous. There’s a homing beacon somewhere on this bird, and we can’t look for it until we land someplace.”

Tesar turned away, as though he was convinced Han was making excuses. “The beacon will be in something you brought aboard. We removed the one the docking officer planted in the strut.”

Han raised his brow. “You’ve been watching the *Falcon*?”

“Yes, since Jedi Waz realized who you were.” As he spoke, Tesar continued to look out the side of the canopy. “We, uh, *discussed* whether to tell you, but our Master’s instructionz were to remain hidden. She is not going to be pleased, especially when we miss the rendezvous.”

“Sorry to cause you trouble,” Han said. As large as a hovercar, the frigate filled the forward viewport. All six weapons turrets were turned in the *Falcon*’s direction, the barrels of their deadly laser cannons slowly depressing as their target drew near. “But I need to get Leia to a bacta tank. Eelysa, too; we only have a little while before that portable tank starts to pollute itself.”

Tesar turned from the canopy. “That is not an excuse?”

“Now, Captain?” interrupted one of the sisters. “Can we shoot now?”

There was nothing ahead but frigate, its massive hangar bay yawning open in the middle of the micropitted hull. A conical tractor beam projector hung down from the ceiling in obvious sight, but its ready backup was still tucked against the ceiling and barely visible.

“You can make both shots?” Han asked. “At once?”

“Of course,” the other sister said. “We are Jedi.”

Han checked the frigate’s weapons turrets—the two that he could still see—and found the cannon barrels still trained on the *Falcon*, not quite at maximum depression.

“Not yet.” He placed one hand on the throttles. “I’ll let you know.”

“The bacta tankz?” There was a rising note of urgency in Tesar’s voice. “They are the only reason, Han Solo?”

Han thought for a moment. Though it would have been more in a Barabel’s nature to demand—and demand only once—before simply taking control of the ship, Tesar had never even mentioned the possibility, not even as an argument proving his own trustworthiness. That was *very* Jedi.

Han nodded. “Yeah, the bacta tanks are the only reason.”

“Good.” Tesar was almost whispering now. “Then this one will tell you something else his Master would not wish. There will be bacta tankz at the rendezvous—and a safe place to use them.”

The frigate’s laser cannons reached their maximum depression, then disappeared out of sight behind the curve of the ship’s hull.

“Now, Captain?” a sister asked.

Han ignored her and asked Tesar, “*How safe?*”

“As safe as a nest in a ferrocrete den.”

They reached the entrance to the hangar bay. The lights outside the cockpit rippled as the frigate’s shields were lowered to admit the *Falcon*. Han hit the directional thrusters, and the ship began to tremble as it struggled to pivot in the tractor beam’s grasp. The cockpit passed into the bay.

“Now, ladies!”

The sisters were already bringing their turrets around. Given the vibrating ship, the precision timing, and the swift targeting, the shot would have been impossible for any typical pair of gunners. The two Barabels were not typical. In the same second, two volleys of laser bolts streaked out . . . and scorched holes through the opposite side of the bay.

Then the *Falcon* was pulled completely inside the frigate, and Han saw two little Vigilance starfighters—one hiding in each of the near corners—swinging their weapons in his direction. He brought the shields up, then another volley lashed out from his own laser cannons and hit the tractor beam projectors.

The bay walls spun past in a blur. Sheets of red flame washed over the cockpit canopy. Han thought the sisters had missed their timing, that the *Falcon* was tumbling out of control. A familiar *whumpf* reverberated through the cockpit, and blazing streaks of light lanced out from the cannon turrets to blossom against the walls in disks of fire. Han tipped the yoke against the spin and slowed the revolutions, then saw laser bolts stabbing starry darkness ahead and jammed the throttles.

He knew they had escaped by the laserfire suddenly webbing the darkness around them. Not bothering to check the tactical display—he *knew* the Y-wings and X-wings were coming—Han pushed the nose down and, corkscrewing wildly, transferred shield power aft.

“Okay, Tesar, give me our heading.”

The Barabel read off a set of familiar-sounding coordinates.

“Not those.” Han cleared the navicomputer and called up the second set. “The new ones. A ferrocrete den sounds good right now.”

The Barabel smiled, baring a set of teeth that could have stripped a rancor to the bone. “You will not regret this, Captain.”

The *Falcon* began to shake beneath the volleys of the frigate’s belly cannons.

“I won’t have time if you don’t hurry.”

Tesar gave him the new coordinates, and Han swung the *Falcon* onto the bearing. He was just about to make the jump to lightspeed when Leia’s voice came over the intercom.

“Han? Han I—”

“I’m sorry, Captain Solo,” C-3PO interrupted. “But she’s just awakened and insists she must speak with you this instant.”

“Han?” Leia’s voice was raspy and weak, and she sounded confused. “Han, I’m so thirsty. Could you bring me some water?”

Chapter 5

Though contaminants had long since fouled the monitoring electrodes and the bacta had turned so murky and green Eelysa could hardly be seen, Leia knew the Jedi Master had awakened. She could feel Eelysa inside the cramped tank, a strong presence in the Force, isolated from those around her, aware of her danger and curious about it, yet patient and calm and utterly at peace with her helplessness. Leia filled her heart with reassurance and reached out through the Force, and she felt the Barabels—Tesar Sebatyne and the Hara sisters, Bela and Krasov—do the same.

Eelysa held the contact for what might have been seconds or minutes, filling the Force with a sense of gratitude and love, then continued to embrace them as she sank into a Jedi healing trance. Leia and the Barabels remained with her until her thoughts and emotions grew as quiet as a pond on a windless day, then, one by one, gently withdrew.

When they were done, Leia was surprised to find that she herself felt stronger and more at peace than she had in a long time. It was by far the most intimate Force touch she had ever experienced, not because the Barabels were stronger than other Jedi, but because they shared themselves so freely and innocently. She saw now why Eelysa had taken it upon herself to train their Master—Tesar’s mother, Saba Sebatyne—even when doing so had endangered her and her mission on Barab I.

“Leia?” Han asked. “You all right?”

“Fine, Han.” She did not look at him as she answered, though only because he was changing her bandages and the last thing she wanted to see—even to glimpse—was the blackened, oozing mass that

was her legs. “But Eelysa . . . we have to do something.”

“Haven’t I been saying that?” Han grumbled.

They had arrived at the rendezvous point almost a full day earlier, then began a monotonous waiting game that had Han ready to push their passengers out an air lock. Though Izal Waz and the Barabels were at a loss to explain the delay, they kept assuring Han they would know if the meeting were canceled. It did not help matters that when Han asked *how* they would know, Izal always looked to the Barabels, and the Barabels just shrugged and said they would know.

Leia looked to Bela—or maybe it was Krasov—and said, “We need to comm your Master.” Though it was hard to envision ordering a Barabel to do anything, she spoke in the voice of command that she had used to such good effect during her tenure as the New Republic Chief of State. “Give us the transceiver address.”

The two sisters looked from each other to Tesar, then they simply seemed to come to an agreement.

“As you wish,” Krasov—or maybe Bela—said. “But if you use it, the rendezvous will be canceled. Master Saba has learned to be careful about Peace Brigade eavesdropperz.”

Tesar—who was both larger and darker than the females—shrugged. “But do what you think is best. She is already going to be displeased with us.”

“A lot of that going around,” Han said darkly.

Tesar’s shoulders sagged. “This one apologizes for his advice. You may blast him anytime.”

“Don’t tempt—”

Leia laid a silencing hand on her husband’s shoulder. “I’m sure Tesar is as worried about Eelysa as we are. She *is* his mother’s Master.”

The hardness that came to Han’s eyes was as surprising as it was subtle, but he nodded curtly and, without looking up, used synthflesh to secure the edge of a bactabandage. The adhesive wasn’t supposed to hurt, but it felt like fire against Leia’s inflamed skin.

Han lowered her foot onto the footrest, then gathered up the discarded bandages and stood. “Forget trying to reach Tesar’s mother.”

“Master Saba,” Krasov corrected.

Han ignored her and continued, “If it stops her from coming, that only makes our situation worse.” He turned to Tesar. “How do you know your mother—Master Saba—is still coming?”

“Because we have not felt otherwise,” Bela answered.

Han turned to Bela. “What does that mean, ‘felt otherwise’?”

“Your mate understandz,” Tesar replied, looking to Leia. “Through the Force.”

“Then she must be very near,” Leia said, unsure whether to be confused or impressed. “I know of only a

few Jedi who can feel what others are doing, and even then they must be near one another.”

Krasov shook her head. “Not like hatchmates.”

“We feel nothing has happened to her,” Bela added.

“I see.” Leia’s head was beginning to spin from the way the conversational thread roamed from one Barabel to another. “So you’re saying you haven’t felt her die?”

“And that’s how you know the rendezvous is still on?” Han demanded. “Because Master Saba isn’t dead yet?”

Tesar smiled broadly. “Exactly! If Master Saba isn’t dead yet, she will be here.”

Han’s face grew stormy—alarmingly so, at least to Leia. “That’s it.” He stared at the floor for a moment, then turned to Leia. “We’re going to Talfaglio.”

“Talfaglio?” Leia waited for one of the Barabels to object. When none did, she asked, “Are you serious?”

“As a hungry Hutt,” Han replied. “We can’t risk waiting around here for bacta that might be coming someday.”

He threw the soiled bandages down the disposal chute and started to leave. Leia’s repulsor chair barely turned fast enough to keep him in view.

“Han, wait!” Leia made a point of staying where she was; once she started moving, she would find herself following him clear into the cockpit. “Let’s think this through.”

Han turned in the door. “What’s to think through?” There was that hard look again—hardly unknown, but oddly out of place. “We need bacta.”

“We do,” Leia admitted. “But how long will it take to reach Talfaglio?”

“Ten and a half hours,” Han said confidently. “I had Izal plot the course.”

Leia glanced toward the portable tank. “We don’t have ten hours. Eelysa will be dead in half that time.”

“And you in twenty.”

“We don’t know that.”

“Well, I’m not taking chances.” Han turned and vanished through the door.

Leia hastened after him, but her chair was no match for his angry stride. He was already disappearing around the curve of the corridor as she floated out of the crew quarters, and by then she finally understood the hard look in his eye.

“Han!”

Han stopped, but did not turn.

“We can’t go.” Leia wondered if she still knew this man at all, if he could have been so hardened by Chewbacca’s death and the treachery of the Duros that he had truly become the selfish cynic he had fancied himself when they met. “We have to wait . . . and hope.”

“We have to get *you* to a bacta tank.” Han turned, his eyes filled with tears he refused to shed. “If we don’t, you may not walk again.”

“Then at least I won’t be walking on corpses.” Leia started her chair down the corridor. “Han, have you forgotten who I am? Do you think I want to walk at the cost of someone else’s life? Would you *want* me to?”

Han shook his head weakly. Then tears began to escape his eyes, and he hurried up the corridor. Leia did not follow. She still understood him well enough to know when to leave him alone. He could face no more loss, and Leia was coming to comprehend—or was it fear?—that when he looked at her in the repulsor chair, he saw another loss, something else taken by the Yuuzhan Vong.

And, Leia was astonished to realize, she saw the same thing in him. After Chewbacca’s death, he had shut himself off from his family and disappeared into the galaxy to grieve alone. She had believed he just needed room, and she had given it to him. But now she realized he had left for another reason as well, to shield her and the children from a fury he could not control. Would he have gone, she wondered, if she had tried harder to reach him, just kept pushing and weathered the storm when he finally unleashed his anger? Would he still feel like such a stranger now?

Deciding only a fool makes the same mistake twice, Leia started up the corridor. This time, she would not let him suffer in private.

“Ship incoming,” Izal Waz announced.

A vast sense of relief came over Leia, and not only because she knew the bacta had arrived. She steered her chair quickly into the main hold and was overtaken by the three Barabels, the two Hara sisters rushing for the cannon turrets and Tesar for the cockpit. She paused at the engineering station to send C-3PO to watch over Eelysa, then went to her new post behind the flight deck bulkhead. Han and Izal were already sitting in their chairs. Tesar loomed behind their seats, blocking Leia’s view of almost everything.

“The transponder’s on,” Han said. “That’s a good sign.”

“The *Star Roamer*,” Izal Waz reported. “Damorian medium freighter, armed. Registered to CorDuro Shipping.”

“Out here?” Han asked. The rendezvous was taking place at the edge of the Corellian sector, in a never-to-be-surveyed system consisting of little more than a few asteroids, a dust ring, and the core of a collapsed star. “What’s CorDuro doing in a place like this?”

“They are the ones we have been waiting for,” Tesar explained. “That is where we are getting our bacta tankz.”

“From CorDuro?” Leia asked, disappointed. At the least, CorDuro Shipping was guilty of appropriating supplies intended for refugees. “Master Saba has an arrangement with *them*?”

“Yes, but CorDuro does not know it yet.” Tesar turned to face her, and a pinhead of crimson brightness—the collapsed star as seen from inside its dust ring—appeared outside the cockpit. “They will learn soon.”

“Are you guys spacesick?” Han demanded. He looked from Tesar to Izal Waz. “You can’t buy bacta tanks from CorDuro! They’re collaborators. They might even be a front for the Peace Brigade.”

Izal Waz shared a grin with Tesar, then asked, “Does anyone have proof of that?”

“Jacen sent a report to New Republic Intelligence,” Leia said. “But it outlined a circumstantial case. There isn’t anything solid.”

Tesar sissed, then said, “There will be soon.”

As Leia puzzled over the Barabel’s remark, the CorDuro freighter slowed and entered an unconcealed orbit in the dust ring. A few minutes later, the proximity alarm sounded. Han silenced it and frowned at his display, but Izal merely activated the *Falcon*’s data recorders.

“I’m getting nothing but mass readings.” Han buckled his crash webbing. “That new ship’s Yuuzhan Vong!”

Tesar sissed again, then looked back at Leia. “Not long now, this one thinkz.”

He moved aside to give her a better view of the displays. Leia smiled her thanks and started to palm her hold-out blaster—this could still be a trap—then decided against it and left the weapon in her sleeve. The Barabels’ insistence on total comm silence had prevented her from confirming even a small part of their story with Luke, but the feelings they had shared in the crew quarters had contained no hint of deception.

Han and Izal Waz quickly identified the Yuuzhan Vong vessel as a corvette-analog picket ship, then they all waited while the *Star Roamer* maneuvered into docking range.

“The Yuuzhan Vong want to know about bacta,” Tesar explained. “Before Master Eelysa was injured, she told Master Saba about this rendezvous.”

“And Master Saba decided you need a set of your own bacta tanks,” Han finished.

Tesar bared his fangs in a smile. “It seemed fair.”

“What if something goes wrong?” The worry in Han’s voice was so foreign to the Han Solo that Leia remembered that she thought for a moment someone else was speaking. “Eelysa’s the one who will pay the price.”

“And Leia, too, you’re thinking,” Izal Waz said.

“The thought had crossed my mind,” Han admitted.

Tesar covered Han’s shoulder with a black-scaled claw. “Han Solo, you worry too much. What could go wrong?”

Leia had to smile. “At least Jacen will feel better,” she said, trying to take Han’s mind off all the things that *could* go wrong. “His report was going nowhere without solid . . .”

Leia let the sentence trail off, for her thoughts were whirling through her mind like hawk-bats above a thermal exhaust vent. Why would someone contract an assassin to kill her? Why bribe a CorSec guard to steal her datapad? Why send an entire combat flotilla to prevent her from returning home?

“Proof!” she gasped. “Someone thinks I have proof.”

“Proof?” Han turned in the pilot’s seat. “Of CorSec’s collaboration?”

Leia nodded. “That’s what they’re afraid of.”

“It makes sense,” Han said. “Hard to be sure, though.”

“What else have I been doing over the last year?” Leia asked. “And no one was trying to kill me *before* Jacen’s report—at least no one on our side.”

“CorDuro’s not exactly on our side either, dear.”

Han opened a tactical feed to the navicomputer display so Leia could watch events unfold from her seat behind the bulkhead. A minute or so after the corvette and freighter had merged into a single blip, Izal Waz opened a subspace channel and announced the coordinates of the rendezvous.

“I thought we had to maintain comm silence,” Han said.

“Close enough,” Tesar said.

A few seconds later, a nervous voice came from the *Star Roamer*. “Who was that?” When no one answered, it said again, “Unidentified transmitter, respond and explain yourself.”

They did not, of course. A minute later, the electronics began to hiss and spit as the freighter went to active sensors and probed in their direction. Leia felt confident the *Falcon* would remain hidden. The asteroid they sat upon was only a few times larger than the ship itself, but Han had set them down beside a ten-meter pressure ridge where standard sensors would find it impossible to distinguish the ship’s silhouette.

The hissing faded away, and another minute passed. The tactical display went briefly blank as the asteroid’s rotation hid the two ships from view, then it turned to static as the sensors pointed toward the tiny sun. When the static cleared, the *Roamer* and the Yuuzhan Vong corvette were separate blips again.

Tesar hissed in frustration. “They will get—”

He was interrupted by the shriek of proximity alarms. A new handful of blips appeared on the display, streaking in from five sides, already firing laser bolts and even a couple of long-range proton torpedoes. The Yuuzhan Vong turned to meet the assault, as Yuuzhan Vong ships nearly always did. The *Roamer* ran in the only direction left to it, toward the *Falcon*.

Han and Izal began a warm start-up, while Leia occupied herself trying to guess whether they would intercept the freighter before it jumped to hyperspace. Identifiers began to appear beneath the blips on the tactical display, revealing a motley assortment of old T-65 X-wings, even older Y-wings, and a pair of Skipray blastboats. Some of the newcomers’ transponder codes were already blinking to show damage, and the Yuuzhan Vong had not even fired.

“That’s the saddest pirate band I’ve seen in some time,” Leia said. “Who did Master Saba hire for this assignment?”

“No one. That is our squadron, the Wild Knightz.” Tesar smiled proudly. “I fly a very fine Y-wing.”

Any need to apologize was forestalled by a proximity alarm. Another vessel, this one a fast-freight tagged the *Jolly Man* , emerged from hyperspace to block the *Roamer* ’s line of escape. The CorDuro ship continued on course and began to fire, lacing the darkness outside with tiny needles of light. A trio of ancient Z-95 Headhunters dropped out of the *Jolly Man* ’s belly and moved to meet it. The *Roamer* started to turn away—then suddenly changed its mind and ran toward the tiny sun.

“He’s going down the gravity well! On a white dwarf!” Han engaged the ion drives—still a little cold—and launched the *Falcon* . “He must be crazy.”

“No,” Tesar said. “He is frightened.”

The reason grew apparent an instant later, when a blip in hot pursuit emerged from behind an asteroid. A tag naming the vessel the *Sureshot* appeared, along with a legend identifying it as a CEC YT-1300 stock light freighter—the same ship as the *Falcon* .

“She’s not as fast as the *Falcon* ,” Izal Waz said proudly. “But . . . well, she still flies.”

The *Roamer* quickly started to pull away from the *Sureshot* , but its abrupt change of direction had given the *Jolly Man* ’s Headhunters time to catch up. They took a few passes, taking out the energy shields and forcing the captain to waste time maneuvering or have a hole burned through his bridge. Finally, the *Sureshot* activated its tractor beam and caught hold of the target.

The *Roamer* stopped maneuvering and continued to accelerate, firing at the *Sureshot* and dragging the smaller freighter after it. The Headhunters took care of the cannon fire in two passes, but they could not target the drive nacelles without getting caught in the tractor beam. The *Sureshot* turned ninety degrees in an attempt to change vector, but the course did not vary noticeably. Its engines could not match the combination of the larger freighter’s power and the white dwarf’s gravity.

“Smart,” Leia said. “He’s giving the *Sureshot* a choice—release or be dragged into the sun.”

“Tesar,” Han said, “how long before they reach the point of no return?”

Tesar had already done the calculations. “Ten minutes,” he said. “We will reach tractor range in five.”

Han opened a comm channel. “Hold tight, *Sureshot* . Help’s on the way.”

“Just don’t be all day about it,” came the reply.

Leia spent the next few minutes scarcely breathing as the *Falcon* closed. The Headhunters continued to harry the *Roamer* , though it was just harassment and everyone knew it. On Leia’s recommendation, they opened a channel to the captain and promised to broker a lenient sentence in return for cooperating with New Republic Intelligence. The captain responded by promising not to drag the *Sureshot* into the sun in return for shutting off the tractor beam, then closed the channel. Izal Waz suggested offering the crew freedom in exchange for the bacta tanks, but Leia overruled that idea. If the captain knew what they were really after, there was a good chance he would destroy the tanks out of vindictiveness.

So they waited and watched on the tactical display as the other two flights of Wild Knights used the Yuuzhan Vong picket ship for target practice. Though the vessel was hurling an amazing amount of plasma and magma into space, the ancient starfighters always seemed to be where the enemy attacks weren't, or to angle their shields at just the right time, or to take the Yuuzhan Vong gunners by surprise. The corvette analog disintegrated bit by bit, slowly at first, then more rapidly, and finally it simply flew apart and became indistinguishable from the dust ring.

Han whistled. "Where were they when the Yuuzhan Vong attacked Ithor? The New Republic could use a few more pilots like those."

"This one does not think Master Luke would have approved," Tesar said. "We are given to understand he does not want the Jedi to hunt as soldierz."

"You're all Jedi?" Leia asked.

"All of the pilotz, yes."

The blocky silhouette of a Damorian freighter eclipsed the tiny sun ahead, its glowing ion drives sliding across the cockpit canopy as Han brought the *Falcon* in behind it. The smaller disk of a YT-1300 appeared below them and a little off to one side, its back painted in a patternless kaleidoscope of the primary colors so favored by the Arcona. The Headhunters were barely visible, a trio of tiny black crosses chasing the bolts of their laser cannons up the *Roamer*'s half-kilometer hull.

Han spoke over the intercom. "Ladies, we're counting on you to take out the drive nacelles. Izal, why don't you handle the tractor beam?"

"On my way."

The Arcona unbuckled his harness and rose. The mere sight of the massive hull ahead was enough to convince Leia they could not change its vector in time.

"Han," she said, "this isn't the way to do it."

Han half turned in his seat. "I'm listening."

"Won't there be an escape hatch above the bridge?"

"Yeah—locked from the inside," Han said.

"Doesn't matter," Leia said. "We have Jedi."

Han frowned. "The CorDuro crew will be waiting."

"So?" Tesar asked. "We have Jedi."

For some reason even Izal Waz did not seem to understand; this sent Tesar into a fit of sissing. Leia waved the back of her fingers at Han.

"We have five minutes," she said. "I can handle the cofferdam."

“Four and a half minutes,” Izal Waz corrected, stepping to the back of the flight deck.

“Two will do.” Tesar began to hiss again. “We have Jedi.”

“Right.” Han drew his blaster and passed it to Leia. “I just hope we still have Jedi when this is done.”

Leia led the way to the port docking ring, where Bela and Krasov were already waiting in their brown Jedi robes. They were a terrifying contrast to Izal Waz, who if the truth was told, looked rather comical in his ragged flight tabard.

Han set the *Falcon* on edge and brought it into position over the docking ring. The *Roamer* attempted to slide out from under them, but Han was too good a pilot to let such a cumbersome ship outmaneuver him. Leia put the cofferdam over the docking ring on the third try, then activated the magnetic clamp and pressurized the passage.

“Three minutes,” Han warned. “If you can’t—”

Tesar opened the hatch—and promptly hissed as a blaster bolt caught him in the shoulder. From her chair, Leia glimpsed a charging crew member in a CorDuro uniform and squeezed off two shots, then the two Hara sisters were leaping through door with lit lightsabers. The human gurgled and thumped to the floor. A pair of blaster rifles opened up from the opposite hatch. The tunnel filled with flashes and hums and zings for about two seconds, then the sounds began to recede as the Barabels carried the battle into the *Roamer*.

Izal Waz followed, stepping over two bodies in the cofferdam and kicking another out of the way as he boarded the freighter. Tesar was slower to react, pulling the cloth away from his shoulder to reveal the smoking hole and scorched scales beneath.

Leia moved her chair forward. “Tesar, how bad?”

“Bad,” he growled. “My best robe.” He stuck a claw through the hole. “This really burnz me.”

Then, sissing with hilarity, he leapt through the hatch and followed his companions into the *Star Roamer*.

Leia stared after him in dumbfounded silence. When the hatch at the other end of the cofferdam closed, she sealed the *Falcon*’s hatch and withdrew the cofferdam, then checked her chronometer.

Two minutes.

She activated the intercom. “Han, we’re clear. Maybe we can buy a little time if we use the—”

“Don’t need to,” Han replied. “The *Roamer* has cut her throttles and is turning outbound.”

“They’re surrendering?” Leia asked. “Good. Maybe now we can find out who wants me dead.”

“Uh, maybe not,” Han said. “They’re not exactly surrendering.”

“Not exactly surrendering?” Leia double-checked the hatch seal, then started for the main hold. “What are you talking about?”

“Sensors are showing two escape pod deployments.”

“Here?”

Leia reached the main hold and went straight to the engineering station, where she saw the image of two escape pods arcing away from the *Star Roamer*. At escape pod speeds, it would have taken them over three years to reach the nearest habitable environment. But that was not going to be a problem. From the way it looked to Leia, both pods were already well down the white dwarf’s gravity well.

Izal Waz’s breathless voice came over the speaker. “*Star Roamer* secure,” he said. “With enough bacta to fill a lake.”

“Izal,” Leia asked, patching through the intercom. “What about the crew?”

“You mean survivors?”

“Yes, survivors,” Leia said.

There was a moment of silence, then Izal Waz’s voice fell to a whisper. “Well, what would *you* do if you saw three angry Barabels coming your way?”

Chapter 6

Impossible as it was to ignore the stunning cascade of liquid metal outside the transparisteel walls of the Cinnabar Moon Retreat, Han tried. He sat in the natatorium of the abandoned spa the Wild Knights were using as a base, trying to concentrate on the two datapads before him, listening to Leia’s leg braces whir and clunk as she walked circuits around the empty pool. C-3PO was standing behind the covered bar, using a portable HoloNet hookup to access databases across the galaxy and add yet more entries to the catalog Han was studying. It was maddening work, if only because CorDuro had so many employees, and so many of them had at one time or another been affiliated with illicit organizations. Han wondered what his own dossier would have looked like in this light, or even Leia’s. Smugglers, insurrectionists, Hutt-killers . . .

The name of a woman who had once served as a clerk in Thrackan Sal-Solo’s Human League appeared on a display. Han transferred it to the scrutiny list on the second datapad, then used a electronic stylus to bring up the next entry. Somewhere on this list he would find someone who knew Roxi Barl, and that would give him a thread he could follow to the person who wanted his wife dead. Or so he hoped. In the week since their capture of the *Star Roamer*, it was the best plan they had devised, and time was running out to develop a new one. The Wild Knights had spotted a mysterious task force sniffing around a nearby system; like the flotilla that had jumped the *Falcon* outside Corellia, this one operated with deactivated transponders and included *Lancer*-class customs frigates.

Leia’s clunking grew louder. Han looked up to see her approaching, arms swinging wide to balance the cybernetic exercise braces that kept her legs from collapsing.

“That’s all.” She stopped in front of her repulsor chair and turned her back toward it, arms extended for Han to take when he lowered her into the seat. “These braces still aren’t adjusted. I can’t even cock my

ankle.”

“Give it some time.” Han did not rise. Leia had only completed six of the twenty-five laps that Cilghal—the Jedi’s most accomplished healer—had prescribed, and today was the first day she had gone beyond four laps. “You just need to get used to them.”

“Thanks for your opinion, Dr. Solo,” Leia said dryly. She continued to stand with her arms out. “Now, would you please help me into my chair and take these things off?”

Han slapped the stylus on the table. “Sure.”

Though thrice-daily bacta treatments had finally chased the infection from Leia’s legs, it seemed to Han another infection had been festering in a place bacta could not reach. There was a sadness in her that had been growing since Corellia. Any effort to encourage her invariably met a sharp-tongued riposte, any bid to urge her on only resulted in a sullen retreat. This was not the Leia he had married all those years ago, before . . . well, before he had gone crazy and shut her out. She had Leia’s face and voice and body and even her wit, but she held herself apart now; it was as though the Yuuzhan Vong had taken Leia away from him without even killing her, and now he wanted her back.

“Han?” Leia was suspended halfway above the seat of the repulsor chair, her arms still clasped in his grasp. “Are you going to keep me hanging here?”

“No.” Han hauled her to her feet, then took her arm and pulled her two steps toward the pool. “Let’s do a couple of circuits together. If something’s out of alignment, maybe I’ll see it.”

“If, Han?” Leia pulled her arm free. “Wouldn’t I be the one who could tell?”

Han sighed. “Look, maybe they’re uncomfortable, but there are only so many adjustments. I’ve tried them all.”

Leia narrowed her eyes. “So I don’t know what I’m talking about?”

“I’m saying give them more time.” Han took her arm again. “Come on, just a couple more circuits.”

“Are you listening?” Leia refused to move her feet, and Han had to stop pulling or drag her over. “It hurts. I can’t do any more today.”

C-3PO looked up at the sound of Leia’s sharp voice and started to say something, then wisely decided his assistance was not needed.

“You mean won’t,” Han said.

“All right, won’t.” Leia clunked the two steps back to her chair. “What’s the difference? Either way, you’re helping me into that chair and out of these braces. If you can’t do that—”

“That I can do,” Han said, surrendering to his exasperation. “I can put you in and out of this chair for the rest of your life, if that’s what you want. What *I can’t* do is make those braces comfortable, so you’ll just have to take the pain and keep going. When that task force of killers finally finds us—and they *will* find us—it might be nice if you could actually run for cover.”

“That’s fine advice, coming from you,” Leia said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You can figure it out,” Leia said. “After Chewbacca died, *you* certainly ran. And you kept running, farther and farther—”

Leia stopped and looked away, and Han finally understood that they weren’t arguing about cybernetic braces, or how many circuits Leia made of the pool, or even how much she really wanted to walk again.

Leia shook her head. “This won’t get us anywhere. Let’s just drop it.”

“No, go ahead,” Han replied. “It’s time you said it.”

Leia continued to look away. “I didn’t mean anything—”

“Yes, you did.” Han spoke with a humility hard-earned over the last year. “The truth is, I might have a made a few mistakes in the way I handled things.”

Now Leia looked at him, her eyes as round as sensor dishes. “I suppose you might have,” she said cautiously. “But you needed to grieve.”

“Yeah, and maybe I even needed to go help Droma find his clan. What *I didn’t* need to do was concussion-bomb our family.” Han was quiet for a moment, then—forcing himself not to look away—he said, “Leia, I’m sorry.”

Leia’s eyes brightened with tears. She held his gaze for a moment, then clunked forward. Han reached for her hands, but she surprised him by wrapping her arms around his waist and pressing her cheek against his chest.

“Me, too,” she said. “I’m sorry, too. All these years, I’ve devoted myself to the New Republic and asked you and the children to sacrifice so much.”

“Hey, this is *my* apology.” Han took her by shoulders. “And what you did for the New Republic is important.”

“It is—but I had a part in letting this happen,” Leia said. “Without you around, it became very clear that I haven’t exactly been the glue that holds this family together.”

“Your hands were pretty full trying to hold the galaxy together.” Han did not like where this was going; blaming herself for their family problems was not going to make Leia work harder in her braces. “I couldn’t have picked a worse time to leave you on your own.”

“Haven’t my hands always been full? That’s the point. All these years, I think I’ve been trying to rebuild what I lost when Alderaan was destroyed.” Leia placed her fingers over his heart. “I couldn’t see that I already had it—here with you and the children.”

Han was speechless. These days, even his apologies ricocheted.

“If we hadn’t found each other on Duro when we did,” Leia continued, “I would have died alone—a stranger to my own family.”

Han wanted to say that wasn't true, or she couldn't know what might have happened, or that the Force had brought them back to each other. But all that sounded somehow hollow and not what Leia needed to hear. He needed to give her a jolt, to make her see that they *had* come through it, if only she would open her heart and eyes and see it.

"You know who you remind me of?" he asked. "Borsk Fey'lya, claiming all the credit for himself."

Leia's jaw dropped. "Borsk Fey'lya! How dare . . ." She must have seen the mischief in Han's face, because she let the sentence trail off and scowled. A hint of the old spark returned to her eye, and she gave him a sideways look. "Borsk! Not really?"

Han half smiled. "Really. You're taking way too much of this on yourself. You'd have had to chase me across half the galaxy—and drag me out of a thousand tapcafs."

Leia pondered this, then said, "You know, I *am* being too hard on myself." She seemed to shed two years of worry lines in as many seconds, then added, "As you say, you're the one who shut me out. What was I supposed to do, slap a set of stun cuffs on you and borrow an interrogator droid from NRI?"

"Of course not," Han said, beginning to wonder who was toying with whom. "But like you said, we both played our parts—"

"No, when you're right you're right. I'm not going to argue." Leia's smile—not quite a victory smirk—turned as hard as durasteel. "But you're never doing that again, Han. The next time you need help, you won't escape."

Han felt like the spa's supplemental gravity inducers had reset themselves. He had flutters in his stomach and bells in his ears, and he even felt a little weak in the knees. *This* was the Leia he remembered. She took his shirt collar and, unable to rise on her toes, began to pull him down so she could kiss him.

"Not so fast." Han disengaged himself and retreated to the edge of the empty pool. "If you want to do that, you come over here."

Leia raised her brow. "You're going to make me work for this?" She looked him up and down, then finally clanked after him. "It had better be good."

Han gave her his finest smirk. "Oh, it'll be good." He waited until she was almost to him, then began to retreat along the pool's edge toward C-3PO. "Just the way you remember."

"The way I remember?" Leia echoed. "Taking a lot for granted, aren't you?"

They were interrupted by an excited cry from C-3PO. "I've found something!" He transferred an entry to one of the datapads Han was using, then said, "CorDuro's vice president of fleets is related to Roxi Barl by marriage, and he has a substantial equity interest in the Kuat Drive Yards corporation."

Han rushed toward the table—then heard Leia struggling to keep up and went back to walk with her.

"How substantial?" Leia asked.

"Almost a thousandth of a percent," C-3PO reported. "Current value well over a hundred million credits."

Han whistled and picked up the datapad, turning it so both he and Leia could see. They made it almost to the end of the first screen before the problem grew apparent. The vice president of fleets had died several months earlier under mysterious circumstances, shortly after he petitioned to divorce Roxi's sister.

"Oh dear," C-3PO said. "I don't see how it could be him."

"I don't think it ever could have been," Leia said. "We have an entire task force hunting us. This guy didn't have the resources to buy that kind of influence. We need somebody with government pull on a world that uses those *Lancer*-class customs frigates—a lot of pull. You don't send an anonymous task force after the *Millennium Falcon* on a flotilla commander's say-so."

"Or maybe you need somebody *in* the government," Han said. He sat down and began an associates search. "Threepio, get everything you can on Viki Shesh. I think we've been coming at this from the wrong end."

"*Senator Viki Shesh*?" Leia didn't sound all that surprised, just cautious. "What makes you think of her?"

"*Lancer*-class frigates and A-9 Vigilances," Han said. "They're manufactured on Kuat, and that first frigate captain had a Kuati accent."

"Interesting," Leia said. "And we know she has ties to CorDuro. But that doesn't mean she's the one."

"Maybe it doesn't," Han said. "But I know what would."

He began to compose a message to Luke.

Leia stood behind him and laid a hand on his shoulder. "No, don't ask if Viki has been making inquiries about my whereabouts. Ask if *anyone* has."

Han finished the message, coded it, and transferred it to C-3PO for transmission. They received a reply three days later, informing them that there was an inquiry, but it didn't come from Shesh. Her chief of staff had been trying to track down Leia's whereabouts since the fall of Duro, haranguing New Republic Intelligence and SELCORE both on the pretense of being concerned for her safety. He had even shown up at their apartment—where he had learned absolutely nothing from the two Noghri bodyguards who had arrived to replace the pair killed on Duro. It was not quite a smoking blaster, but close enough that both Solos felt sure they had identified the person behind the assaults.

Given the evidence they had already recorded showing CorDuro's treason, Han and C-3PO spent the next few days trying in vain to establish a solid link between Viki Shesh and the corporation. The most they could prove, at least from the data banks accessible over the HoloNet, was that she had had the bad judgment to assign all SELCORE shipping to a collaborationist corporation.

Leia contributed what she could—mostly ideas—but spent her time either in bacta tanks or clanging around the empty pool in her cybernetic exercise braces. By the end of the week, she could do fifty circuits, but her legs ached constantly, and she was no closer to making them obey. When she sent a message to Cilghal reporting uncontrollable tremors, a reply came back telling Leia to find a nervesplicer as quickly as possible. The interruption in her bacta therapy had likely caused the nerves to regrow incorrectly, and every day she delayed in having the damage repaired increased the likelihood she would never walk properly again.

Leia and Han were in their quarters researching worlds with good nervesplicers—so far just Balmorra, Kuat, and Coruscant itself—when the door chime rang. It took C-3PO a full half a standard minute to circle the gurgling fountain in the center of the room and open the door.

“Mistress Eelysa, what a pleasant surprise!” he said.

Leia turned her repulsor chair to see Eelysa’s slender figure emerging from the opulent foyer, her dark hair hanging loosely over the shoulders of her jumpsuit. In her hand, she held one of the saber-toothed rodents that seemed to have taken over the spa since its abandonment—at least judging by the number of the creatures the Solos kept finding outside their suite. Though both Leia and Han had seen Eelysa many times since she emerged from the bacta tank, this was the first time she had visited them in their quarters, and her green eyes roamed over the milkstone walls, magnificent archways, and soaring cupola above the fountain.

“And I thought my room was nice,” Eelysa said.

“Apparently, Izal felt we would be more at home in the bridal suite,” Leia explained. She gestured at the carcass in Eelysa’s hand. “See-Threepio will dispose of that. We keep finding them in the hall.”

C-3PO reached for the rodent, but Eelysa pulled it away and tried—unsuccessfully—to keep from smiling as she used the Force to close the door.

“Actually, that’s one of the reasons I came.” She went into the kitchen and, talking over her shoulder, called, “The Barabels are starting to complain about your ingratitude.”

Han frowned. “Our ingratitude?”

Eelysa emerged from the kitchen drying her hands. “The carcasses are honor-gifts from Tesar and the Hara sisters,” she explained. “But don’t thank them, or they’ll think you want more.”

She pulled a holocube from her pocket. “This message came in over the HoloNet. Saba asked me to give it to you before I go.”

“You’re part of the advance team?” Leia asked. The mysterious task force had begun to sniff around the adjacent system, so the Wild Knights would be changing bases as soon as she and Han departed. “Are you ready for that?”

Eelysa thumped her chest. “As good as new, but I’m not going to the new base. I’m on my way back to Corellia.”

Han looked concerned—he looked that way a lot these days. “Will you be safe?”

“As safe there as anyplace,” Eelysa answered. “And somebody needs to keep an eye on the Centerpoint Party. If they find some way to get the station going again, there’s no telling what Thrackan will blow up.”

“Himself, if we’re lucky,” Han said. He stood and reached out to shake her hand. “Watch yourself.”

Eelysa ignored the hand and embraced him. “Thanks again. I don’t know that Izal and the Barabels would have gotten me out of there without you.”

“Without me, I don’t know that they would’ve needed to,” Han said, sitting back down. “But it was good seeing you again.”

Eelysa bent down to hug Leia as well. “I’ll be thinking of you. Get better.”

“I already am,” Leia said. “Be careful. Don’t take foolish risks.”

“Me?” Eelysa jerked a thumb at Han. “*You’re* the one flying with Han Solo.”

Leia waited until C-3PO had shown Eelysa out, then activated the holocube. It played a brief vidnews item describing a new movement in the Senate pushing for an Appeasement Vote to outlaw the Jedi and accept the truce terms put forward by Warmaster Tsavong Lah. Though the sponsors were identified as a coalition of Senators from uncaptured Core worlds, Luke’s image appeared after the report to say that the leader was Viki Shesh. She had already struck a deal with Borsk Fey’lya to call a vote the following week, so Luke was asking them to send him any information they could about her dealings with CorDuro. He also warned them that Shesh’s chief of staff had quietly arranged to be notified the instant NRI learned their location.

Luke was still signing off when Leia threw the cube into the wall. “That woman is poison. Killing me isn’t enough—now she has to go after all the Jedi!”

Han looked from Leia to the shattered cube. “She’s murder on holocubes, that’s for sure—not that we’ve got anything worth putting on one.”

“She’s corrupt. We know it,” Leia said. “The only question is *how* corrupt.”

“Does it matter?” Han asked. “We can’t prove it. Short of assassination, there’s no way we’re going to stop her from calling the Appeasement Vote.”

“Assassination?” Leia leaned across the arm of her chair and kissed him. They had been doing a lot of that lately. “Han, you’re a genius.”

Han looked worried. “Maybe . . . do you really think we could pull it off?”

“Not physical assassination,” Leia said. “*Political* assassination. We’re going to attack her character.”

Now Han merely looked confused. “Leia, she’s from *Kuat* . Nobody expects her to have any character.”

“Which is why this will work,” Leia said. “And it’s time we carried the hunt to Viki Shesh for a change. It’s the only way we’re going to win this thing.”

“I’m all for winning,” Han agreed. “But with what we’ve got so far, I don’t see it happening anytime soon.”

“Then, my dear, you need to broaden your definition of winning.” Leia patted his cheek, then turned to C-3PO, who was already approaching the shattered cube with a sweeper, and said, “Bring me a datapad. And get me the transceiver address for Senator Kvarm Jia. I need him to convene a corruption panel.”

“Without good evidence?” A knavish smile came to Han’s lips. “I didn’t think you played dirty.”

“I’ll make an exception,” Leia said. “This woman’s trying to outlaw my *children* .”

Chapter 7

The black drop of a battered CEC YT-1300 light freighter swung into view outside the viewport, the efflux from its dilapidated ion drives flickering uncertainly against the dazzle of Coruscant’s night side. Though hardly the steady blue blast of his own ship’s overpowered sublight engines, Han doubted the wavering would give them away. The *Falcon*’s temperamental nature was too well known—and the possibility that she had taken battle damage on the journey home too high—for the contrast to draw more than a passing curiosity about what was wrong this time.

The cannon turrets were another story. Fabricated on the Cinnabar Moon from a pair of abandoned escape pods, they were not going to fool anyone who took a good look—especially if that person expected the support posts serving as cannon barrels to swivel around and start firing.

Han looked toward the front of the *Jolly Man*’s spacious crew deck, where Izal Waz sat at a communications station using a slave unit to fly the *Sureshot* onto Coruscant. “You’re sure you want to do this?”

“You suddenly think of a better way to spring their trap?” the Arcona asked.

Han shook his head. “There isn’t one.”

“Then stop asking.” Izal kept his attention focused on the systems display ahead of him, relying on computer keys and a pressure pad to control his battered ship. “She’s a piece of Jawa bait anyway.”

The faint scent of ammonia permeated the air, and one of the milky bubbles that served Arcona as tears appeared in the corner of Izal’s eye. Leia, magnoclamped to the deck next to Han’s seat, cocked a brow and thumbed her fingers as though activating a credit chip. Han shook his head no. A wreck like the *Sureshot* wasn’t worth much, but there were some things no amount of money could replace.

“Thanks, Izal,” Han said. “If you ever need anything from us, let us know.”

“You’re doing it,” Izal said. “Just stop this Shesh woman and her Appeasement Vote.”

A pair of Rendili light cruisers—on-station in Coruscant’s innermost patrol perimeter—drifted past the viewport, then the *Jolly Man* entered a controlled-access area and had to slow as inbound vessels were herded into narrow approach bands. Above and below these bands, dozens of New Republic frigates were lacing the darkness with rocket fire as they set a shell of orbiting space mines.

As the traffic flow coagulated, Han and the three Barabels—crouched on the edges of their seats rasping in awe at Coruscant’s scintillating brightness—kept a close watch. If Shesh’s assassins were going to take the bait, this would be the logical place to stage an accident, but the *Sureshot*—flying under the *Falcon* alias *Shadow Bird*—passed through the mine shell unmolested. A few minutes later, crescents of

sunlight started to reflect off the bottoms of orbital gun platforms. The traffic began to disperse as vessels fanned out toward their docking facilities.

The *Sureshot* and *Jolly Man* descended into low orbit. The *Sureshot* began to drift across Han's viewport as it turned toward the Eastport Docking Facility, where the Solos kept a berth under an assumed name.

Finally, a collision alarm sounded from Izal Waz's slave controls.

"Izal?" Han asked. He kept his gaze fixed out the viewport, but could see nothing moving toward the *Sureshot*. "I don't see anything."

"Something small." Izal punched a button to activate the *Sureshot*'s distress alarm, and the electronic tones of an all-channels emergency beacon drifted down from the bridge speakers. "I think it came from—"

The *Sureshot* became an orange ball, hurling oddly shaped silhouettes and still-glowing drive nacelles in all directions. Even the Barabels gasped, and the comm channels erupted into inquiries and exclamations. Han turned toward Izal Waz and found the Arcona pushed back from his station, wiping the bubbles from his eyes.

"A rescue ship," Izal said. "It came underneath and ejected something."

A wedge of broken sensor dish glanced off the particle shields outside Han's viewport, drawing an involuntary recoil—and a chorus of sissing from the Barabels.

"Very funny," Han said. "I'll bet you guys wouldn't flinch in a meteor storm."

More debris began bouncing off the *Jolly Man*'s shields, and the freighter started to slow. The captain patched a comm channel through the intercom.

". . . mine spill," an official voice was saying. "Cut speed to dead stop, and we'll tractor you out. Repeat, dead stop."

"In a Sarlacc's eye," Leia scoffed. She turned to Han. "Could they have seen through our decoy?"

Han shook his head. "The mine would've hit us," he said. "They're just trying to figure the *Jolly Man*. They might have been watching for a while, or maybe they picked up some of Izal's signal traffic."

"What do you think?" the *Jolly Man*'s captain asked over the intercom. "Should I call in our backup?"

"No, we don't want Viki to know her assassins failed." Leia looked over at Han, then added, "We can still pull this off."

Han raised his brow, then rose and, waving Leia toward the back of the ship, told the captain, "Just keep your launching bay in the *Jolly*'s sensor shadow."

The Barabels' slit pupils widened to diamonds, and Izal Waz gasped, "You two are getting *outhere*?"

In the *Jolly Man*'s makeshift docking bay, the freighter's normal complement of primitive starfighters had been replaced by two dozen twin-pod cloud cars. Long ago converted for civilian tours on the

Cinnabar Moon, they were a cargo far less likely to draw unwanted attention from Coruscant customs. Han opened the canopy of the vehicle he would fly. The backseat had already been removed, so Tesar used the Force to deposit Leia—chair and all—in the passenger compartment facing aft.

C-3PO came clunking into the hold. “Captain Solo, Mistress Leia, wait! You’re forgetting me!”

“Sorry, Threepio,” Leia said. “You’ll have to stay with Izal and the Barabels until they can send you home.”

“Stay?” C-3PO regarded the Barabels for a moment, then asked, “Are you quite sure there’s no room?”

“You’re a little large for the trunk,” Han said.

He floated the cloud car out into the launching bay and shut down all non-life-support systems to lower their sensor profile. Then, with Izal and the Barabels waving good-bye through the observation port, he and Leia watched nervously as the outer hatch opened.

The cloud car lurched sharply as one of the Jedi used the Force to launch it from the bay. There was just enough time to be overwhelmed by the immensity of space compared to the tiny cockpit—and to wonder how much more vast the darkness must have seemed to Jaina when she went EV at Kalarba—before one of the Barabels reached out again. The cloud car began to tumble like an ordinary piece of space flotsam.

“Oh—nice touch,” Leia said. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

Fighting to keep his gaze fixed on the *Jolly Man* —and his own stomach down—Han alternated between trying not to watch Coruscant’s sparkling surface slide by and trying not to notice the stars swirling past in ever-widening spirals. Tails of ion efflux appeared and disappeared at random. Once, the tiny halo of an approaching vessel swelled into the backlit silhouette of a New Republic frigate. It vanished beneath the floor of the spinning cloud car and reappeared an instant later, less than a kilometer overhead and veering sharply away.

At last, the *Jolly Man* ’s blocky silhouette disappeared over Coruscant’s horizon. Han waited a few more minutes, then fired the attitude thrusters to stabilize their tumble. Shaken by their close call with the frigate—and all too aware that being bounced off a particle shield would demolish their little craft—he activated the transponder next, and then the navigation systems.

It was at about that time Leia asked, “Why do I doubt those rescue launches are coming to help?”

Not waiting for the traffic display to come on-line, Han pushed their nose down and fired the cloud car’s little ion drive. They streaked out of orbit like a meteor and began to buck and burn in the thickening atmosphere. Finally, he had time to glance at the jiggling screen. A pair of rescue launch symbols sat almost atop their own. Farther away, the *Jolly Man* was turning away from Coruscant, a quartet of Cinnabar Moon cloud cars rushing back to its launching bay. Behind them tumbled the blinking codes of nearly a dozen damaged rescue launches. The rescue ship itself was nowhere to be seen.

Han opened a private channel to the *Jolly Man* . “You guys okay back there?”

“Of course,” sissed a Barabel—Han thought it was Bela. “But one of those spilled mines changed course and struck the rescue ship, and the debris field has been very hard on her launch. Only two

escaped.”

“No need to worry about those,” Leia said. “We have them in sight. Have a safe journey home.”

“We will,” Izal Waz said. “We’re clear of danger now. May the . . . well, you know.”

“We do, and the same to you,” Leia said. “Thank you again, and send C-3PO back when you get a chance.”

Han continued to accelerate until the hull temperature warning light came on—then went faster. The first towers appeared far below, their spires jutting through the clouds like spikes through a bed. The rescue launches began to drift back. Han thought they might be losing nerve—until they brought their tractor beams on-line. He began to juke and jink like a fighter pilot.

The voice of a startled approach-control officer came over the comm speaker. “Cinnabar Moon cloud car five-three, what is the nature of your damage?”

“Damage?” Han said.

“From the mine spill,” Leia whispered over the seat. “He thinks we were hit.”

“Uh, no damage,” Han commed. “We’re fine.”

“Then *slow down* !”

Han checked the traffic display. “Negative, Control.”

There was a puzzled silence, then a disbelieving supervisor growled, “Negative?”

“This is an emergency,” Han said. “My wife is, uh, having a baby.”

“*Whaaaaaat?*” Leia managed to modulate her startled outburst into something resembling a scream. “It’s coming!”

“We can confirm that.” The voice was so gravelly it might have been human or Aqualish. “We been escortin’ ’em.”

“Very well, cloud car,” the supervisor said. “We’ll clear a direct lane to Lamoramora Medcenter. Please follow the beacon on your traffic display . . . and slow down. You have the time to arrive in one piece.”

“Like *you’d* know!” Leia snapped, playing her role. “Ronto brain!”

A deep chuckle came over the channel. A winking safety beacon flashed past as they reached the tovertops and dived into the clouds. Han shifted to instrument-flying and found himself plummeting through a canyon of display lines. A blue bar illuminated the route to Lamoramora, but the hoverlane was too narrow for maneuvering. Han swung into a broader skylane and circled an ancient cylindrical tower he could see only on his screen.

“Not going to lose them that way,” Leia reported. “If I can see them, they can see us.”

“You can see them in *this*?” Han did not dare glance up from his instruments, but he suspected he could

not have seen five meters beyond the cloud car's nose. "How close are they?"

"Close." Leia's voice assumed the eerie calm that meant things were really bad. "Close enough to—"

Lines of blaster bolts started to flash past.

Control's angry voice squawked over the comm channel. Han slapped the unit off, then dropped out of the clouds through a crowded hoverlane, tipped the cloud car on its side, and ducked around a corner into oncoming traffic. Hovercars went everywhere. Han picked his way up to an emergency access level.

"Are the launches still back—"

The crackle of melting canopy told him they were.

"You all right?"

"Define *all right* ." Leia had to yell to make herself heard over the rush of air. "I'm staring down the barrels of two blaster rifles, and I've got nothing but spit to fight back with."

Han dived for the dark underlevels, buying enough time to pull his blaster. He pushed it over the seat into Leia's hands, then the launches were on them again. Another bolt hit the canopy. The plasteel shattered. The wind filled Han's eyes with tears, and his blaster began to screech.

"Han, do something." That calm voice again.

"Can't see!"

Han squinted and thought he saw a bridge below. No, a roof! He leveled off and shot along a few meters above its surface, weaving through exhaust stacks and intake vents, then the roof dropped away and the cloud car was over a black abyss again.

Something pinged in the rear of the vehicle.

"Smoke!"

"Good," he said. "Maybe it'll blind 'em."

Han widened his eyes and saw a pair of dark bars ahead. Two bridges, stacked. He'd have to shoot through a hoverlane, but not a congested one. Wherever they were, this part of the city was not exactly prosperous.

The cloud car chugged. Han thought at first a tractor beam had snagged them, but the whine of the little ion engine began to fall in pitch, not rise. The dark bars ahead started to assume shape and depth. Half a kilometer away, maybe, with about the same distance separating them vertically.

"Leia, activate your chair's repulsors," Han said. "And be ready to shut off the magnoclamp."

She saw what he was thinking. "Han, if you think I'm leaving this car without—"

"You're not going anywhere without me."

The cloud car chugged and lost speed, and a blaster bolt shattered the main display. No need for that anyway. There were figures on the lower bridge, watching the battle race toward them. Han angled for the far support girder, and the figures ran for cover. The bridge swelled. Another blaster bolt melted the small comm unit.

They passed under the bridge, and Han stopped weaving. The cloud car chugged again—this time caught in a rescue launches' tractor beam. Han pulled back on the stick, and the cloud car went into a steep climb, passing beneath the far support girder so closely he had to duck—and yell for Leia to do the same.

The launch could not cut its tractor beam in time. It hit the girder and disintegrated, freeing the cloud car to continue skyward. Leia poured blasterfire down into the smoke.

Han spun the car around and saw a two-person rescue launch shoot out of the fumes beneath them, a line of blaster holes burned along the roof of its casualty compartment. The pilot took it into an inside loop, and two snarling Aqualish glared out the ceiling of their blaster-scorched canopy. Leia and the passenger exchanged fire, but at that range even rifle bolts dissipated harmlessly.

The rescue launch leveled off and approached inverted. Han kept waiting for it to roll upright, but the pilot was too good to maneuver into a blind spot. The passenger continued to fire. Instead of wasting precious thrust maneuvering, Han spun the top of the cloud car away from the launch and continued to climb. The upper bridge wasn't far, maybe a hundred meters.

Blaster bolts hammered the bottom of the hull. One burned through, then another.

"Han?" Leia asked. "You *do* know I can't fire back?"

"I know."

The enemy blasterfire stopped, then the rescue launch roared past just meters above and abruptly dived to avoid the high bridge.

Han eased off the throttle. "Ready to get off this tub?"

"Never been readier to get off anything," Leia said. "Since Jabba's sail barge, anyway."

The cloud car chugged . . . rose level with the bridge . . . chugged again . . .

Han swung the nose over the edge and leveled off.

The cloud car chugged in relief and shot onto the bridge.

"Now!"

Han unbuckled his crash webbing and twisted around to clasp Leia's arm, then allowed her to pull him free as the repulsor chair rose out of the passenger compartment. The cloud car slid out from beneath them and continued out over the hoverlane. They had barely touched down—Leia settling gently onto her chair's repulsors and Han falling gracelessly to his side—before the rescue launch came up and stitched a fresh line of blaster holes in the cloud car's bottom. The battered vehicle dropped its nose and began a smoky descent, the launch close behind, pouring blaster bolts into its ion drives.

Han rose and, seeing that Leia was all right, looked along the bridge in both directions. If there was anyone around, they were staying out of sight.

“So,” he asked, “any idea where we’re at?”

Leia shook her head. “Not really, but I think Lamoramora is over by the Troglodyte Park.”

“Great—the wrong side of the world,” Han said. “It’ll take us all day to get back.”

A distant explosion rumbled up from the depths of the hoverlane. Han glanced briefly toward the sound, then took Leia’s hand and started toward the nearest building.

Leia jerked him back. “Not so fast, flyboy,” she said, smiling. “You’re the one who got us lost in the first place. *I’ll* find the way home.”

Chapter 8

The Senate Inquiry Room door slid aside to reveal a solid wall of newsvid light. By the squall of hushed voices, Leia could sense that the chamber was packed beyond capacity. But it was not until her eyes grew accustomed to the novalike glare that she began to see the faces behind the whispers. The room was crammed horn-to-eyestalk with the media of a thousand different worlds, all murmuring quietly into their microphones as they reported that Leia Organa Solo, for some reason still dressed in a travel-worn flight suit, had arrived at the Corruption Panel’s meeting exactly on time.

Han leaned close to Leia’s ear. “Looks like we win already,” he whispered. “Even if the charges won’t stick, Viqi will be too busy ducking holocrews to line up support for the vote.”

Leia started to remind him to be careful of the microphones, then caught herself and simply nodded. Even if he had never cared for it, Han was as experienced at this game as she was.

“What I want to know is how you’re going to get to the accuser’s table,” Jaina whispered. All Leia’s children were there, along with Luke, several more Jedi, and Leia’s new Noghri bodyguards. “We’ll have to float you!”

“We’ll clear the aisle, Mom,” Anakin said, nodding to Jacen.

Leia caught him by the arm.

“Now isn’t the time for the Jedi to seem arrogant,” she said. “I’ll walk.”

“Walk?” Han asked. “How?”

“With a little help from my family.” Leia looked to Jaina—Jaina who had been so angry with her and felt so abandoned by her on Duro—and asked, “Would you mind?”

The smile that came to Jaina’s face was almost as lopsided as Han’s. “Trust me?”

Leia felt her daughter reach out in the Force, then felt herself rise into a standing position. Her legs started to move, by Jaina's will instead of her own, but in a reasonable imitation of walking. The room erupted into a fresh round of murmurs as the vidcasters commented on what they were broadcasting. Luke and the others took protective positions around Leia, and they started forward.

If Shesh had assassins lurking in the crowd, they had the good sense to realize an attempt now would be hopeless. Leia reached the front of the room and took her seat at the accuser's table, with Han at her side and her children and the others behind her. As was proper for a formal proceeding of this nature, she did not acknowledge Kvarm Jia or any of her other friends behind the high consoles.

Given the importance of punctuality in such matters, Leia was somewhat surprised to note that Viki Shesh was not at the respondent's table. There was only her chief of staff, a beady-eyed little man who could not help glancing at the accuser's table as though seeing a ghost. Leia caught his gaze and nodded, her lips just hinting at a hard smile. He paled, but returned the gesture and refused to look away.

Han leaned over and whispered, "Where's Viki?"

"Where do you think?" Leia asked. Their plan had backfired; Shesh had been so confident of their deaths she had not even bothered to attend the Corruption Panel's meeting. "She's rounding up support for the Appeasement Vote."

Han's face fell.

At exactly the appropriate moment, the head of the panel, a Bith female named E'noro, thumbed the signal chime to call the meeting to order. Without preamble, she turned to the respondent's table and addressed Shesh's beady-eyed chief of staff.

"Staff Chief Pomt, I see that Senator Shesh is not present today. Is this panel to take it she has fled the planet?"

This drew a nervous laugh from the gallery—which was promptly silenced by a thumb on the signal chime. Pomt waited a moment for the disturbance to die away, then stood.

"Of course not. Senator Shesh has no wish to show any disrespect to the panel. But as you know, a crucial vote on the Jedi question is coming to the floor next week, and she refuses to let a cynical ploy by the very subjects of that vote to interfere with her preparation. If it pleases the panel, she requests that the inquiry be postponed until after the Peace Vote." Pomt cast a sidelong glance in Leia's direction. "At which time, Senator Shesh will be happy to answer any and all complaints still lodged against her—no matter how groundless they may be."

"I see." E'noro turned to Leia. "The timing of the complaint does seem convenient, Princess Leia. Would the Jedi have an objection to such a postponement?"

"The Jedi would not," Leia said. "But *I* would. Forgive me for not standing, but I'm sure the panel has heard of my injuries. Let me start by saying that I am here on my own behalf, to complain against a corrupt Senator who has already tried to have me killed in an attempt to conceal her wrongdoings."

Pomt was on his feet instantly, his voice carrying over the tumult of the crowd only by dint of the android hovering near his mouth. "These accusations are outrageous slander!"

“I have proof of my charges.” Leia could feel Luke’s astonishment, and that of all the other Jedi. The strategy they had agreed upon had been far more conservative, designed to neutralize Shesh by occupying her time and resources—but it was clear they had to move more boldly. “I am ready to present my proof, and I maintain that any delay greatly enhances the danger not only to my own life, but to the New Republic as well.”

E’noro thumbed the signal chime until the chamber quieted. “Another outburst, and I will bar spectators.” The room quickly went silent, and she turned to Leia. “Princess Leia, what is the substance of your claim?”

Leia summarized what she and Han had discovered about CorDuro Shipping’s treason, then accused Shesh of taking bribes and outlined the attempts on their lives.

“Madam, I really must object—”

E’noro silenced Pomt with a finger wag, then asked Leia, “And the nature of your evidence?”

“Data recordings and witnesses,” Leia said. She could provide enough of each to justify her statement, though the only guilt she could actually *prove* was CorDuro’s. “The record will speak for itself.”

“Records can be distorted,” Pomt said. “Especially when the subject of an inquiry is not present to defend herself.”

“That is Senator Shesh’s doing, not Princess Leia’s,” E’noro replied harshly.

Leia continued, “I should also mention that Staff Chief Pomt is not innocent in this, Madam. My presence in the panel room today came as something of a shock to him. Both he and Senator Shesh had reason to believe that my husband and I had been killed in an assassination attempt. In fact, the staff chief is the one who provided my location to the original assassins.”

“That’s a lie!”

“I have witnesses.” Leia glanced over her shoulder at her Noghri bodyguards. “You don’t remember going to my apartment to ask my whereabouts?”

Pomt’s face fell.

“Well, Staff Chief?” E’noro asked.

“It had nothing to do with assassins,” Pomt said. “We were, um, concerned about her safety.”

“Yes, *Ido* believe that has been established. Staff Chief Pomt, you may consider yourself relieved of office pending investigation.” E’noro motioned a pair of guards toward him. “These gentlebeings will escort you from the panel room.”

The chamber almost erupted into a tumult—until E’noro thumbed the signal chime. She turned to Leia.

“As for the charges against Senator Shesh . . .”

E’noro activated a comlink, and, save for the sound of her voice, the panel room fell silent. Leia and everyone else listened patiently as E’noro threatened her way through several layers of assistants, then

was finally connected to Shesh.

“I don’t care who you were with, Senator Shesh,” E’noro said into the comlink. “You were expected in my panel room . . . Now, why should that surprise you? We confirmed the schedule three days ago . . . I see. No, I hadn’t heard anything about that, but I assure you she’s fine. She’s sitting right here—and saying some rather unpleasant things about you, I might add . . . Of course we can reschedule . . . A month from now?”

Leia started to object, but E’noro raised her finger and continued to speak into the comlink.

“Consider it done . . . You’re welcome, Senator. But I do want to mention that the panel will be taking a vote today . . .” She paused to glance in both directions down the console; when she received only nods, she said, “And your Senatorial membership will be suspended until the matter is cleared—”

The crackle that came from the comlink was loud enough to hear in the back of the room. E’noro held the device at arm’s length, then shook her head in dismay and thumbed the signal chime.

“It seems,” she said, “this meeting is adjourned.”

A week later, Leia was lying in her bed in the nervesplicing ward of the Orowood Medcenter with both legs elevated on pillows. Han was standing next to her, Anakin and the twins were perched on the edges of the only chairs in the room, and Luke, Mara, and half a dozen other Jedi were gathered around the head of her bed. They were all staring at the vidscreen hanging high on the opposite wall.

“How long can it take to count the vote?” Han demanded. “It’s computerized.”

“Actually, Captain Solo, the organic element slows things considerably,” C-3PO said. He had lasted only one day on the *Jolly Man* before Izal Waz had dropped him off on Balmorra and personally paid to ship him back to Coruscant. “The computations themselves are done in milliseconds.”

Han reached behind the droid’s head and tripped the main circuit breaker.

“Thank you,” Leia said.

For the first time in weeks, her legs did not ache or throb or burn, but she was barely aware of that fact. She was too interested in watching Borsk Fey’lya’s face on the vidscreen, looking for a beard tug or brow twitch that would tell her which way the Appeasement Vote was going.

Leia’s doctor, a distracted-looking human with a permanent squint and perpetually mussed hair, came into the room. If he noticed the Noghri bodyguards flanking him, or was impressed by the sight of so many famous Jedi in one place, he hid it well. He simply began to prod, poke, and tickle Leia’s legs, issuing quiet instructions to move this or wiggle that.

The nervesplicer said something about normal sensation and improving motor control. But Fey’lya raised his brow just then, and Leia missed whatever it was the doctor said next.

“Did you see that?” Han asked. “He’s surprised.”

“That can’t be good,” Jaina said.

“It’s hard to know.” Leia reached out and found Han’s hand. “Nobody has been able to tell what Borsk thinks will happen.”

The doctor stepped into Leia’s line of sight. “Princess Leia, I have some news.”

“In a minute.”

Leia cast an appealing glance at her daughter, who quietly used the Force to slide the doctor out of the way.

Fey’lya was looking directly into the cam now, his fangs bared in a politician’s meaningless smile.

“It is my duty to announce that the Peace Vote—or the Appeasement Vote, as it has become known in some circles—has failed by a two-to-one ratio.”

“Not even close!” Anakin cried. “How about that?”

The room—and much of the corridor outside—erupted into a chorus of cheering.

The nervesplicer stepped to Leia’s side, his face twisted into a frown. “Princess, are you listening? The repair was fully successful. You can start walking later today. Your legs are going to be fine.”

“I know, Doctor.” Leia pulled the nervesplicer’s face down to hers and kissed his cheek—she had no idea why, other than because she was so happy—then said, “Thank you.”

“Uh, my pleasure.”

The nervesplicer rubbed his cheek, then scowled and retreated. As he departed, Leia sensed that not everyone in the room was completely at ease. She turned to see her brother staring out the transparisteel viewport, his brow furrowed and his jaw clenched, seeming older and wearier than she ever remembered seeing him.

Leia nudged her sister-in-law. “Is Luke seeing something?”

Though Mara would not necessarily share in Luke’s Force-vision—if that was what was happening—the two of them were close enough that she could tell if it was anything to be concerned about.

“We can clear everyone out,” Han volunteered.

Mara shook her head. “He’s been doing this a lot, lately.” She took Luke’s hand. “I’m pretty sure he just falls into thinking and forgets where he is.”

“Yeah.” Han flashed a concerned look in Leia’s direction. “Happens to me all the time.”

“Han, it’s nothing to worry about.” Luke flashed a smile, then turned to Leia and the others. “Jedi Masters don’t crack up—they just get eccentric.”

“That’s a comfort,” Han said.

Luke laughed, then said, "Seriously, I was thinking about where the Jedi go from here. We know this situation has to get worse before it gets better."

Leia nodded. "With Pomt gone, there's no way to make those charges stick," she said. The chief of staff had been found dead with a recorded statement blaming himself for all of the troubles in Shesh's office. "Nobody believes she's innocent, but proving it's another matter."

"There's Viki—and too many like her," Luke agreed. "The Appeasement Vote failed by a two-to-one margin—"

"But that means a third of the Senate voted against us," Mara finished. "The next time, a corruption panel isn't going to save us."

"That's right," Luke said. "The Jedi are going to need a quiet way to move around the galaxy, a great river that can carry them wherever they need to go."

Leia saw where this was going. "And you're thinking Han and I would be a good team to set up this great river?"

"*You do* have the skills," Luke said. "A smuggler and a diplomat."

Han did not even hesitate. He simply took one glance at their children, got a hard look in his eye, then set his jaw and turned to Leia. "What do you think, partner? Want to wander around the galaxy together?"

"Sure." Leia pulled him onto the bed and twined her fingers into his. "But I'm navigating."

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