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Breakdown in Communications

by [Martie Benedict O'Brien](#)

Drifting, cruising on the fringes of a galactic culture, moving itinerantly from place to place as a man must when his business is the transferring of things from here to there, Han Solo, owner, ace and navigator of the cargo hauler Millennium Falcon had scant patience with bureaucrats and their manner of doing business in time-consuming triplicate.

He was therefore understandably annoyed when informed at the Port Master's office in Cahardenum on Lissick that his freight could not be unloaded until he secured a Request for Entry signed by an agent of the purchaser, in this case the Federal Bureau of Communications.

Solo ran an impatient hand through his sun-touched hair and eyed the clerk skeptically. "You mean I have to scare up someone to sign this before I can even get the stuff off my ship?" he asked.

The clerk was impassive. His evening shift just begun and his poise was equitable. "That's right," he replied. "Civil Code 73-14; section B17 clearly states-"

"Spare me," Solo interrupted. "Where's your office?"

"About mid-town. Any hire car can take you there, but no one will be around til morning to sign."

"I'll take the chance," said Han. "I plan on being somewhere else in the morning."

"Suit yourself." The clerk shrugged. "Bring me back that signed RFE and you can be on your way."

Solo shook his head slowly, a faint sneer shaping his eloquently expressive features. "You really like to make it hard for a guy to earn a living, don't you?" he asked rhetorically and turned on his heel.

"Just doing our job," came the clerk's reply, the last word of which was obscured by the slam of the door behind Solo as he stalked out of the office and down the corridor.

With a lithe stride he emerged onto the open concourse painted with the soft shades of dusk. Shirt open to the summer heat and sleeves rolled to the elbow, his right hip weighted heavily with a custom gun trick, Solo stood irresolute for a moment, weighing the possibilities and options of the present situation.

The day had been one headache after another. From the screw up in the bill of lading on Quogash where he'd taken on the computers bound for Lissick, to the glitch in the hyper drive which cost him precious hours of space-time to repair, to this latest obstacle in the path of his plans, it had been just troublesome enough that the Corellian starship captain felt justified in inconveniencing some one else for a change.

He had a mind to spend as much of the night as possible on Urango in the company of a certain saloon keeper and free-lance adventurer of his acquaintance and if it meant hauling some bureaucrat away from his dinner, that was just too bad. Solo felt no compunction at all.

He headed in the direction of the Rent-a-Ride parking area.

The Federal Bureau of Communications was housed in an edifice of imposing masonry, the sort of building which Solo by nature avoided. He paused on the pavement before its governmental ponderousness and accepted the closed and locked look of it. Undaunted, he took steps two at a time in the fading light, scanned the facade rapidly, and was rewarded with a night bell.

The Corellian smiled slightly. Persistence, his preferred word for stubbornness, had a way of paying off when he applied it. After a moment, a voice replied to his ring over the intercom. "We're closed for the night," it said.

"That's obvious, lady," Han observed, "I have an emergency here that needs taking care of."

"Emergency?"

"Affirmative. I've got your computers from Quogosh and I need a signature on a..." he drew the slip of paper out of his vest pocket, glanced at it, "... an RFE form."

"Come back in the morning."

"I'm not gonna BE here in the morning. Look..."

"This is no emergency. Good night."

"Wait!" Solo gestured palm out at the speaker grid. "Listen, I've got to be on Urango tonight for...medical treatments." Chance give a great back rub, he thought. "Could you just tell me where to go to get this signed? Please?" The spacer unfolded the word in the most ingratiating tone he had.

There was a moment of silence, then, "All right. Wait there. I'll let you in and sign. it's against Policy, but ...". Perhaps she had something further to say and thought better of it. There was, at any rate, a sigh of resignation and then the communicator cut off.

Han leaned against the doorway and waited, swatting occasionally at some breed of large insect that buzzed about in the twilight.

Presently the elaborate locking mechanism whirred into life and the great double doors opened just enough for a slender woman to emerge.

"Hi," she said. "Technically, I'm just the tech on duty," and she smiled, "but I can go ahead and sign your RFE. We'll get the freight with our regular port pick up tomorrow."

Han was pleased and relieved. "Thanks, thanks very much." He returned her smile. She was a pleasant looking woman who had retained of her youthful attractiveness well into middle-age.

Han handed her the form and she motioned him to turn so she might write against his back. As he did so, a voice behind them snarled, 'Don't anyone move!'

Solo's insides tightened up and he froze into sense-heightened immobility . The woman began, 'Oh! Who... ?' then gasped, and Han accurately pictured the muzzle of a blaster being jammed against her spine.

"Inside, both of you!" commanded the voice.

Hands well in sight, and making to sudden moves, Han was unceremoniously ushered into shadowy foyer of the FBC building. He could hear the woman

breathing lightly, rapidly behind him and he was angry at the ambush perhaps more for her sake than his own. He was no stranger to the employment of weaponry as a means of persuasion, but he guessed his accommodating companion was not.

Han heard several persons filing through the open doorway. Then the group's spokesman posted a guard at the entrance and ordered his captives to turn around.

Solo and the frightened woman slowly faced their captors. A motley bunch, the Corellian fought with disdain, but they definitely meant business: three laser-rifles and the leader's blaster were pointed straight at the pair.

"You are prisoners of the People's Army of Retribution," he informed them. "only the first of many more who will fall before the might of our--"

"Raul," admonished a compatriot. Raul nodded and reluctantly cut short his harangue. "You imperialist pig prisoners," he continued, "will now take us to the main control center--"

In the dim light filtering in from the street, Han saw the woman beside him edging away toward the wall.

Raul moved his gun muzzle to cover her. "You! Be still!"

"I... I feel faint," she whimpered. "Please, let me lean against the ... " She'd made it to the wall and put out her hand, groping for support along the narrow ledge, but Han thought he could see her fingers busily searching the ledge's underside. She halted, panting.

Raul stepped forward and grasped her wrist, jerking her to him.

Three guns bore down on Solo as he reflexively started forward to the woman's defense.

"Enough! Fascist pig minion! Dupes of the imperialist rulers!" shouted Raul. "Woman," he continued, "take us--NOW--to the main control center where we will broadcast under silent scramble the orders to the generals of the People's Army of Retribution that the glorious war of independence which will crush the imperialist-pig usurpers under the heavy foot of the proud--"

"Raul!" insisted the admonisher.

The terrorist leader pouted, eyeing his captives sullenly. "You will know soon enough," he told them.

Suddenly, at the doorway, the fourth revolutionary called out, "The law! It's the law! They're coming!"

Han tensed, his body singing with adrenaline. The woman tech looked wildly around at the terrorists.

Booted feet came clattering up the steps beyond the door as Raul did a strange thing. He thrust his hand into a pocket, then withdrew it and slapped it firmly against the tech's right breast. She gasped with indignation and fear, but he assaulted her no further, for at once the doors swung wide and police leapt in, weapons at the ready and the terrorists opened fire.

Raul shoved the woman at Solo, and as she collided hard against his chest, he clasped her to him and threw them both down on the floor, covering her body with his and trying to present as unworthy a target as possible to the fire streaking over their heads.

It was almost over before it had begun. Two terrorists lay dead, or wounded, in the foyer while Raul and a heavysset dark woman, the admonisher, were securely manacled and led away. Han released the shaken tech and helped her to her feet. "You okay?" he asked.

"I guess so." She seemed genuinely surprised to be alive. "I guess I am. Thank you." She smiled, a trifle unsteady but delighted all the same.

"Names?" A businesslike law officer approached with a faxboard and stylus. "Names please, and state your business."

Han looked at the woman. She took a moment to marshall her thoughts, hand to forehead. "I'm Vandis, officer, Vandis Accord," she said, looking up, "and I am ... uh ... evening shift comp supervisor here at FBC. This gentleman..."

"Let him tell it," suggested the officer.

"Han Solo, ship's captain. Here." Solo fished about in a vest pocket and handed the policeman a worn leather flip which contained his authentic credentials. The officer looked him over and compared what he saw with Han's description on the official document.

"Urangan registry?" The cop looked like a needler, a picker of nits and a bastard to boot. Solo, who wanted nothing but to unload his freight, get a cash voucher for it and be away in the shortest time possible, merely nodded.

"He was on his way to Urango tonight--for medical treatment," Vandis put in, looking from one man to the other.

The cop grunted, handed Solo back his flip. "All right, you're free to go." He gestured brusquely and directed his attention to the woman.

"Ah ... there's a small matter of an unsigned RFE... " Han said pleasantly.

The lawman turned with exaggerated patience. "I said you're free to go. I suggest you do that before I change my mind."

"Okay, okay. No problem. I'm going."

"You got a license for that gun, buddy?" the cop challenged, staring pointedly at Han's blaster.

I knew it, thought Han. A bastard to boot. "Yeah," he answered, as evenly as his escalating temper would allow. "You want to see it?"

"Beat it," said the cop.

Han wheeled and exited the building, breathing hard. "One of these really rotten days," he muttered, descending the steps. He crossed the street, moving into the shadow of a building opposite the FBC where he settled in to pass the time until the law left. Perseveringly determined to get a signed RFE, Han swatted away large, buzzing insects and waited.

Vandis jumped about a foot when Solo emerged from the shadows.

"Relax, miss Accord. it's only me with the computers to unload," he reassured her.

She put a hand to her chest, catching her breath. "It's Mrs., I'm a widow, and I've had enough starts for one day." she complained. Then with a frown she moved her hand slightly and began to scratch her right shoulder. "Damn zeedles," she said.

"I still have the RFE," he offered. Getting the thing signed had become an obsession with Solo, the difficulty of the task generating growing excitement in him so that once the signature did appear on the little slip of paper, he imagined himself bounding off down the street yelling, "Yahoo! and waving it about in a fit of ebullience.

"Captain, I am sorry about all this," she said, looking directly at him. "Those idiots with their guns, and the police were so rude to you. I'm really very sorry you've had to come in for all this." She scratched some more.

Han smiled and nodded, handing her the crumpled form. "How true, how true," he said in self-commiseration. "Now if you'll just sign this ... " His feet were practically doing a tap-dance.

"Of course." Smiling, the slender woman reached for the paper Solo held out just as a needle beam sliced between them. The RFE flared briefly and ceased to exist.

Vandis squealed and put her knuckles in her teeth, eyes wide, and Solo reeled under the impact of a double shock: someone was trying to kill him and his Request for Entry was gone.

He whipped his KR 460 free of its holster and elbowed the woman behind him, flattening them both against the wall. "Is everybody on your planet trigger-happy, or is it something I said?" the Corellian muttered.

Another beam zipped past them and Han returned fire. Vandis huddled behind his shoulder, whimpering in fright. She continued to rub reflexively at a spot on the right of her chest.

Han fired again down the shadowy street in the general direction from which the attack had come. Then he fumbled for the woman's hand and pulled her with him as he turned and took off at a run.

More light sizzled past them as they turned a corner.

"What ... where?" The older woman panted alongside him, clutching at his hand as if it were the only reality in a world suddenly gone mad.

"Just keep moving," Solo advised grimly. "I'm gonna try and get us back to the port. Let 'em take a crack at the Falcon's guns."

"Who are they?" Vandis gasped.

"Friends of our buddy, Raul, maybe?"

Behind them Han could hear the staccato sound of boots on pavement as their pursuers turned the corner. He wheeled, flinging Vandis out of the line of fire, and dropped low, bent knees resilient, as he fired two-handed at the on-comers.

There came a shriek of pain and much cursing from the pursuers' midst, along with more needle beams.

Solo fired again, locked the trigger and raked the street. Then he scooped the woman up by one arm, righted her and took off once more, in a whiplash motion that left her shaken and hopelessly disoriented.

"I can't run anymore!" she cried.

"You gotta run some more!" Solo told her. They turned another corner onto a better lit, and happily, more heavily traveled thoroughfare. "But maybe not too much further." A cab sailed past them.

Han didn't know if they were still being followed, but he was a man whose survival often depended on giving his enemies' tenacity the benefit of the doubt. At a run he dragged the stumbling tech up to a parked cab, pushed her in and followed with alacrity.

"Go!" he suggested urgently, and the cab obediently rose and headed for the high level.

Looking down, the Corellian could see a gang of a half dozen or so come charging around the corner and halt, milling about in confusion. He smiled.

Suddenly one pointed up, directly at their cab and gestured wildly. Solo stopped smiling. "City port," he directed the cab. "Shipmaster's entrance and make it quick." The cab picked up speed.

What the hell, he thought. Were they telepaths?

Han turned from the window to the woman who lay slumped in the corner, panting. Her long brown hair, which had been neatly plaited in a single braid over one shoulder, was in disarray and her shirtwaist was untucked. Preposterously, she had lost a shoe. She was scratching her right shoulder listlessly.

His thoughts, recently accelerated and directed toward survival, began to slow down and form the beginning of a pattern.

"Vandis," Han said curiously, "let me see that zeedle bite of yours."

"Captain," she replied, "You may be the best date in seven systems, but I've had all the excitement I can take this evening."

Solo shook his head impatiently. "I'm not getting funny with you. I just have a suspicion."

"Which is?" She sat up straighter, watching him with wary interest.

"Just let me see your bite. Promise. I'll keep my hands behind me."

"Oh, I was being silly. We'll look at my bite if you think it has any bearing on the attack. I don't flatter myself you're interested in me in any other way, Captain Solo."

Han gave her a non-committal smile. Don't sell yourself short, he thought, watching while she flipped open her shirt, exposing a small angry bump high on the modest curve of her right breast.

His mind leapt back to the scene in the Bureau foyer. Raul slapping a hand to Vandis' chest, thrusting her toward him, as the police burst in. The police, who would be sure to thoroughly search their captives, even scan them for subcutaneous implants...

"It LOOKS like a zeedle bite." Vandis peered down at the bump.

"Suppose," Han said slowly, "suppose the plans they were going to broadcast to their generals were on a microdot. They're paranoid, like most revolutionaries are, and they only have the one copy of the plans. Now suppose they had a fail-safe plan if things went wrong."

Vandis watched him carefully, comprehension growing in her wide gray eyes.

"And suppose," he continued, "that the fail-safe had to do with a pore-entry implant which could be stuck onto any innocent bystander, so the authorities wouldn't find it, in case they were captured. With me so far?" Han asked.

She nodded, eyes very large.

"Now imagine that there's a homing device on the implant, so that the bystander can be tracked by the rest of the revolutionaries. They get their microdot back and try again."

"And what ... what happens to the bystander in your little story?"

Han was eloquently silent. Vandis stared in horror at her small red bump.

"But ... but I'm just a tech! I'm nobody! I'm a grandmother, for gods' sake!"

"Wrong," Han said as kindly as he knew how. "You're the lady with the plans for the planetary takeover under her skin."

"What am I going to do?" She looked around the cab wildly. "I've got to get this-- thing off me!"

Solo leaned forward and spoke seriously. "There's a big risk, Vandis. Listen. It's possible they wired it somehow. Any attempt to remove it might," he paused, not knowing how to explain so nefarious a device to this gentle lady, "it might harm you."

He leaned back with a frown and eyed the woman speculatively. She looked utterly forlorn.

"They're following us right now," he said, watching her reactions to assess her strengths. The cab sped toward the spaceport.

Vandis folded her hands in her lap and stared at them. "All my life," she said quietly, "has been dull. A plain life. A husband, but he's gone. A couple of kids who have lives of their own. Nothing special. I always wanted something to happen to me. Something exciting." She looked up, a trace of a smile quirking her lips. "I guess this is it," she said.

Han laughed in spite of himself. "That's one way of looking at it," he said. "So. There's no place on this planet you're going to be safe as long as you carry the implant. I'm gonna get you off-planet. I don't know if they can track us in hyperspace or not but I'll try to get us to some friends of mine on Urango who can maybe help out. My guess is they won't try wholesale destruction until they're desperate. Right now they just want you and what you've got. They don't want to... blow you up."

"What a comfort," Vandis said dryly, then, "Captain Solo, why are you doing this? Why are you risking your life for me-- I'm sorry that sounds melodramatic--but why?"

"Simple." Han grinned. "I need you to sign my RFE."

Han Solo and his passenger of necessity reached the comparative safety of the Millennium Falcon without further skirmish, but that instinct for survival which had stood him in good stead before assured him that he was still being followed.

Chewbacca responded to Solo's "Hey, buddy! open up!" with a growl transmitted through a hull speaker.

"What'd'ya mean, 'password,' you jerk! I've got a scared lady with me and the People's Army of Something or Other on my tail, so move it!"

Chewie mumbled something that Solo translated as 'so, what's new?' The Corellian smiled sourly at Vandis who stood beside him. "Always full of jokes, my first mate. Real kidder. You cold?" This last in reference to the woman's teeth, which were chattering.

"I'm scared as hell," she whispered. "I've got to go to the bathroom."

"Well, we can fix you up on one count quick. Chewie!"

The Wookiee shot the hatch and Solo and Vandis entered the starship.

"Oh, my ... " The computer tech didn't know what to make of Chewbacca's seven foot, russet-furred form.

"Vandis Accord, meet Chewie. Strange, but usually harmless. Don't play holochess with him."

"Umm ... my pleasure, Chewie," Vandis offered, to which the Wookiee replied, "Hoorooog."

Well, thought Solo, the fuzzball must like her--the greeting wasn't obscene. He could remember a time or two when his copilot used an almost galaxy-wide ignorance of guttural language to make some rather pithy comments on the ancestry and predilection Solo's acquaintances. The small slender woman with the wide eyes must have met his obscure Wookiee standard for "good people."

"I want to get off the ground fast," Solo told his first mate. "Never mind the freight." He was walking swiftly toward the cockpit, throwing words over his shoulder at the Wookiee who shuffled in his wake.

"Captain, I've got to..." Vandis protested. "Soon."

They'd reached the forward control compartment. Han pushed the woman gently into the navigator's seat and strapped her in.

The high gravity lift, the Hauler that boosted the Millennium Falcon free of the atmosphere, began to hum under Chewie's manipulations. Han sidled into his accustomed seat and worked quickly and efficiently at his share of the lift-off tasks.

"Get me lift control." He nodded at the Wookiee who flipped switches.

Vandis wriggled in her seat.

"Control, this is Millennium Falcon O-niner-six, tella rex, out of Urango, requesting lift clearance," Solo intoned.

"Millennium Falcon, you are clear for vector north 2 and 2 by--"

Suddenly a priority override signal jammed the transmission from lift control and the launch coordinates were lost in a jumble of static. Amid the crackle and hiss, Solo heard a voice snarling, "... and we will hunt you down, wherever you run. You'll never escape the long arm of our..."

"Shit," commented Han. "Shut that off."

Chewie made interrogative noises.

"I told you. A blasted revolutionary army. But they didn't figure their girl had offplanet transportation. Give 'em a run for their trouble. What did control say? North 2 and 2? We'll fake it!" Solo spoke quickly, his eyes darting across the board registering readouts.

"Okay, go!" he ordered, and Chewbacca fed a surge of power to the Hauler. At once the Falcon soared skyward, with breath-stopping speed, landing gear disappearing beneath her.

Fortunately, midnight traffic above Cahardenum was light. Still, Han had to dice with a dozen out-going freighters and a ponderous passenger liner before he cleared the atmosphere.

"Stay sharp!" he yelled to the Wookiee, throwing the nimble freighter on her side to avoid the cyclopean storage turrets of a grain barge.

Behind him, Vandis closed her eyes and hung on, teeth chattering.

"Are they behind us?" the Corellian asked, wondering what lift control thought of the way he was following their instructions. He smiled.

The Wookiee scanned, listened and replied with a brusque nod of his shaggy head.

"I was afraid of that. But They're not shooting ... yet. They're homing on you Vandis," he said over his shoulder. "But if we get to Urango, I've got an idea."

"Captain Solo, I really have to..."

"Hold on," he said, "jump time." Leaning back, arm extended past her head, the Corellian adjusted his navi-computer. "Still itch?" he said conversationally.

"All over," his passenger replied.

Solo finished his data entry and rounded on the board once more, his hand closed over the warp drive lever and pulled it down.

Space-time drew in on itself, compressing its enormity into a glowing silvery tunnel into which the Falcon plunged. She became one with the shining mystery, merged with the void and disappeared.

While their passenger refreshed herself, Han briefed his partner on the events of the past several hours.

The Wookiee was disgruntled at the difficulty they were encountering getting rid of their cargo of computers, but he had to admit there was nothing else Solo could have done.

"No," Han agreed, "I couldn't have just stood there and let them shoot her."

Chewie cocked his head aft and asked a brief, discreet question to which his partner replied with a shake of his head and a grin.

"Nah," he said, "nothing like that. She's a classic lady in distress is all. We get her out of the mess she's in, won't have to do anything but head back to Lissick, get her signature on that damn form and we're gone. Probably be glad to see the last of us," he added thoughtfully. "She doesn't strike me as the adventurous type. No gundark rider."

But a moment later when Vandis joined them in the cockpit Han noticed something very akin to enjoyment in her expression. No longer the distraught, disheveled woman who had protested things didn't happen to grandmothers, she appeared composed and actually rather pleased with herself. There was a demure sort of exuberance to her first question: 'What next?'

"Well," Han replied, giving the controls a final check. Satisfied all was as it should be, he turned to Vandis and continued, "First I want to scan you for a couple of things, all right? Then we'll know better what we're dealing with."

Solo led the way down the cockpit access tube and ushered Vandis into the main hold where he rummaged about in a small tool locker. "Have a seat," he suggested over his shoulder, tossing spanners and what-not around in the ordered confusion that was his customary system of storage.

"Got it," he exclaimed, and turned to discover that his passenger had perched on the edge of the gaming table, half shod feet dangling.

"Some grandmother you make," Han commented. "You look about twelve."

Vandis grinned. "I feel about twelve, Captain. I should be terrified, or at least a lot more worried than I am."

"Nothing to worry about," the Corellian assured her automatically. "Now, let's see your 'bug bite' again."

Training the scanner on the woman's right breast, Solo watched the data screen with interest. Sure enough, a microscopic subcutaneous implant was registering.

He changed bands slightly and the readout favored him with the fact that the implant was indeed broadcasting a signal of some sort.

He looked up from under his brows. "I was right, I'm afraid. A homing device." He looked back to his scanner, adjusted the band again. "But no sign of any detonator ... wait. This is funny."

"Funny ha-ha, or funny as in I should start worrying again?" Vandis wanted to know.

Solo shook his head. "Weird. Probably just a malfunction in the scanner," he replied, and, as a man will do with obstinate machinery, he gave the box a sharp rap and checked the readout once more.

"What is it?" the woman asked.

"Well, look. I'm right on you." Han demonstrated by pressing the scanner directly onto Vandis' naked shoulder. "Now," and he pulled the box back from her, "the signal gets stronger the further away I get."

"But no sign of a detonator?"

Solo gave her a quick grin. "No sign. That doesn't mean there isn't one, though." He put the box down, leaned one hand on the table and fixed on a point somewhere over and beyond Vandis' head. "We need a doctor. A micro tech .." He thought about it some more, unaware that the woman beside him had closed her eyes surreptitiously and was smiling to herself in a little rush of surprised joy; unaware that the cause of her inner delight was her reaction to his scent and the very nearness of him, his unconsciously graceful masculinity, the life that seemed to emanate from him like an aura.

When Han looked down, she was smiling at him, simply and openly.

"You're taking all this a lot better than I thought you would," he told her. "You look like someone just told you a joke."

"No joke," Vandis said, slipping off the table and buttoning her shirt. She stretch and shrugged. "I had forgotten," she said, "just how nice life can be."

"Hold the shields hard astern," the Falcon's captain directed his co-pilot. "My guess is they'll be a light or two behind us when we come out, but they'll be on our ass in the atmosphere."

The Wookiee nodded.

"And get me Chance on the comms as soon we're in range," he added. "Okay... " He watched a chronometer. "Shields on; cut drive; and ... space normal switchover." He articulated each action as he performed the task of flying a four-man ship with half a crew calling for greater than usual concentration on the part of her captain and co-pilot. Necessary as well were mental agility, speedy reflexes and large amounts of luck, all attributes possessed, happily, by those same two.

Vandis watched fascinated as the Millennium Falcon burst free of warp-compressed space generated by the hyperdrive field. Sudden star-sparkled dark was everywhere, and a green brown sphere floated in tantalizing proximity beyond the cockpit canopy.

"Wow," she commented

Han banked the starship, decelerating to cleave the atmosphere envelope of Urango, then cut in the third of her drive systems, the high gravity propulsor. At something above -2 speed of sound, her lithe ellipsis cut a trailing arc through the upper skies, an earsplitting shock wave thundering before her.

Ignoring his passenger for the moment, Solo concentrated on an approach vector while Chewbacca kept a weather eye astern for any of the determined revolutionaries. It wasn't long before he growled unpleasantly, and sparing a moment to check the aft view screen, the Falcon's captain saw two quasi-military gunships glowing friction-red as they dove through the upper atmospheric layers.

"Open a channel," he said. When Chewie complied, Solo hailed the pursuers. "Identify yourselves and your intentions," he warned, "or expect trouble."

The ships behind were obstinately silent. Han switched off.

"Guess Raul didn't make it this trip," he shrugged.

He cut his speed slightly, and the Wookiee woofed a question.

"I had this idea," he said, shaping the words with the beginning of a smile, "ever since Chance told us about it."

Vandis leaned forward, caught up in the spirit of the pursuit, so eager to hear Solo's plans for a finely finessed escape that it took her a moment to isolate and identify the emotion pulling at her. When she did, her eyes widened for perhaps the 100th time in the past several hours: she was having FUN.

"Remember the scum bunny?" Han was saying. "I've always had this urge to see if it's really there, you know? I want to see it."

The Wookiee barked a laugh, having a good idea what his partner was up to.

"See it; see what it can really do. In the line of scientific inquiry," Solo continued musingly. "Yeah, I think this is just the time to go visit the scum bunny." He chuckled.

"Where are we going?" asked Vandis. She leaned farther forward still.

"To Pandeale. My friend Chance runs a bar there. Big place, the Setting Sun, she calls it. You can get lost in it," he said pointedly. "But first, a little detour to the swamp region."

"This is incredible," the Lissikan grandmother whispered, settling back in the chair and shaking her head happily. "I'll never get to work tomorrow. I don't even know what time it is. Warp lag." She giggled.

Han and Chewie traded amused glances. "Outside, a bright Urangan afternoon whipped by.

The Moornwop Swamp south of the port city of Pandeale was as dismal as its name suggested, a vast region of fens and tightly knotted waterways brooded over by tall fungus trees that pushed their way through an ever-present pall of fog.

Ascertaining that the two ships full of rebels were still following doggedly, Han cut speed again and headed directly for the unappetizing steams and mists looming on the horizon.

He made a few adjustments, tested the remote for the belly turret, and switched over to projectile option. Then he cut speed even further as the Falcon passed through the outlying trailers of Moornwop's miasma.

Chewie informed him their pursuers were closing fast.

"Good, good," Solo responded. "Nice, stubborn terrorists."

He flew in low over a great expanse of weed-choked water, a lake within the swamp proper. It lay sluggishly beneath its green carpet. Solo reached up to grasp the remote fire lever, making private calculations, the nature of which Chewie and Vandis could only guess at, but when he was satisfied the time was right, the Corellian sent a peppering of scatter-shot straight into the quiet green. He repeated the operation several times at brief intervals.

"Wake up, scum bunny," he said and Chewie laughed.

"What? What?" Vandis asked.

"I think our friends back there are about to run into an obstacle," Solo declared. "Watch the aft screen."

Vandis craned around his shoulder and peered at the projection.

Beneath the scummy surface of the lake, something huge began to stir.

As she watched, the gunships broke the fog behind them, lasers firing now in an attempt to wound the starship and bring her down.

"Keep the shields up," Han cautioned.

"Oh, look!" Vandis cried, pointing. She gasped as the weed carpet heaved up behind the Falcon, higher and higher like a vast mountain of dripping, unwholesome vegetation, then began to slither and drop away reveal a nightmare Of slimy gray scales and huge waving antennae.

It reared up as high as the fungus treetops. As The Falcon sped away, the view angled wider so that they could see the first of the rebel gunships swerve wildly to avoid the menace, only to be caught in the metal-rending grasp of a huge pincer that flashed out from under the surface. The scum bunny's antennae, thick as Baric cable, waved madly.

Its Pincer, bearing the hapless gunship, began to curve in an ominous arc toward what the onlookers supposed with a grisly thrill must be its mouth.

She broke radio silence then, her occupants trying to outdo one another in volume as they exhorted their companion ship to open fire on the monster.

"It looks like they can communicate after all," Solo observed. "What can you see, Vandis?"

"Aren't you watching?" The woman was astonished. "This big... thing, it came up out of the water and it grabbed one of the ships and was going to EAT it... God!"

"Oh, that. Yeah, I caught that part. But are we still being followed? I got a ship to fly, can't check everything at once."

Over Vandis' head, Chewbacca hand-signaled "no followers." Solo nodded.

"I don't think They're following, Captain," said the woman, watching as the fast-receding image carefully.

"No, they'll probably be ...occupied for a while," Solo decided, "and that gives us a little lead time." He thought a minute, then directed the Wookiee to get the Setting Sun on the line. When Chance asked him what he wanted, Solo told her specifically:

"A micro tech, a surgeon, and a pair women's shoes, Size...?"

"Sandals," Vandis whispered. "Size 4."

"Size 4 sandals, honey, with lots of straps and buckles," Solo said into the mic, then grinned at the reply coming over the headset. "I'll explain everything when I get there. For now, just do it, okay?"

He switched off. "Out of the swamp," he said with an enigmatic smile, "and into the sauna."

They cleared the fog. At once, Han lay the Falcon back over, gunned her propulsor drive and with all the exuberance of a model skimmer on a summer's day, he flew into Pandeale just as the sun was going down.

"You landed on my roof? You landed your starship on my roof?" The proprietress of the Setting Sun Saloon, resplendent in a long tunic of gold satina, was indignant.

Solo spread his hands eloquently. "I didn't want to draw any attention, honey. Besides," he said, "I had to get here as fast possible."

"I'm sure NO ONE will notice a mega-ton star freighter on my roof." Chance put hands on hips and looked up at the ceiling as though expecting it to give way. Then she regarded the Corellian through narrowed eyes. "You are hopeless, you know that," she told him.

"I'm a desperate man, Chance," Solo said heavily. "Desperate men do desperate things."

The willowy young woman with floor length auburn braids and bright burgundy eyes stared straight at the tall Corellian for a long moment, then her firmly set lips began to twitch and in another several seconds she was unsuccessfully choking back a fit of giggles.

"Desperate," Han emphasized, and Chance gave in to the inevitable, laughing helplessly. "You ass!" she said between breaths.

Solo smiled self-deprecatingly. "Yeah, I know. But you love me anyway."

"Of course I do, idiot!" Chance threw her arms around him and squeezed with perhaps a shade more intensity than her teasing friendliness might have warranted.

Vandis looked from the snuggling reunion of old friends to Chewie, who hooted something she didn't comprehend on a verbal level. But the Wookiee's good natured ribaldry came through clearly.

Presently, Han and his lady untangled. "All that shuck over the comm about surgeons and sandals," she said, standing back and look- at the three newcomers assessingly. "You in some kind of trouble again?"

"Trouble follows me," Solo admitted. "But this time it's following her." He took Vandis by the hand. "Vandis Accord, meet Chance. Her name's longer than my.. arm, but part of it's Lee. Chance Lee. The sandals and the surgeon and the micro tech are for her," he told the saloon keeper.

A buzzer sounded. "That's either your sandals or your surgeon now," Chance said and moved aside to answer the door. In a moment, she stood back to admit a stranger who entered carrying an instrument case, and pair of ankle- high buskins. He wore a most puzzled expression as well.

He was tall, elderly, and might have looked distinguished, even in his simple dark cover-alls and unpolished boots, except that he needed a shave and his hair was a good deal shaggier than most reputable physicians Han had seen.

"You get both," said Chance, taking his arm. "Everyone, this in Jinx, high tech micro surgeon of great renown, although his license is permanently on ice," and she introduced the others. "These," she said, handing the shoes to Vandis, "are your sandals. Now what the hell is going on?"

"You tell her," said Vandis to Solo, and sat down to put on her new foot gear while he explained the present predicament.

The micro surgeon, Jinx, listened with growing interest. "Implant with a homer. And a possible detonator, hum?" he said when Han had finished. "Doesn't sound too difficult. Shall we have a look?"

Vandis obliged by unbuttoning her shirt once more as they all gathered round to watch.

"I'm getting positively blasé about this," she said to Han around Jinx' shoulder.

The surgeon looked closer. "That," he said at last, "is a zeedle bite."

"Can't be," Han informed him. "I gave her a quick scan and the implant registered."

"A pore-entry implant leaves a little mark, Captain," Jinx replied. "I've seen many of them. Now, she may still have an implant somewhere on her, of course. You may button your shirt, my dear," he told Vandis. "Chance, get my scanner."

They all waited anxiously while Jinx ran a quick scan on Vandis' chest area. He frowned, tapped the scanning device, tried again.

"Same problem I had!" Solo exclaimed. "It gets fainter the closer you get. What the hell is it?"

"Damned if I know. I'm getting an implant and it's homing all right, but the signal gets stronger the further away I get."

Vandis began to look worried again. "Look out," she said, just as Jinx backed into Han.

"Oh, sorry." He glanced up then back to his readout, eyes widening. "I'm getting a maximum signal here! It's damn near off the scale."

Suddenly he swung the small box up against Solo's chest. "Captain!" he said. "The implant's in you."

"But how... ?" the Corellian began.

"Oh, no!" cried Vandis. "Remember when Raul shoved me at you? Your shirt was open. I went smack into you, hard. The material of my shirt must have slowed it just enough..."

She trailed off, remembering and Solo finished for her, "Just enough so that when I grabbed you, it transferred to me. Real nice. All along it's been me they're following, not you."

"But they don't know that, right?" Chance put in.

"No reason they should." Han frowned.

Chewie commented gutturally and his partner agreed. "No, I don't see how it simplifies things either. But there might be an angle somewhere. Might give us an edge." The Wookiee watched the Falcon's captain, confident that if there were a strategic angle, the wily one would find and use it.

Into the momentary lull, Chance asked, "It's probably a stupid question, but what did you all have in mind to DO, assuming the implant was on Vandis here, instead of you? Seems like you could still do it, whatever it is."

Han shrugged. "Get Jinx to remove the implant, go back to Lissick and unload the blasted computers, I guess."

"Did it ever occur to you," Chance said slowly, "that Vandis can't go back until the law rounds up these governmental-over-throw types? Even without the implant, they'd probably try to kill her just for revenge, or maybe just the fun of it."

Vandis looked from one to the other. She appeared shaken, as though a cold truth had begun to take shape in her mind. "Chance's right," she said to Han. "It's been so fast, so fun till now. But how can I go back to work at the FBC?"

"You can stay here," Chance said generously. "I need a confidential secretary."

Han looked perplexed. "There's gotta be a way around this. Vandis, would you want..?"

But the matter of Vandis' desires became at once academic as an alarm began to wail and whoop.

"Great dragons! It's a full scale security alert!" Chance gasped. "What the hell kind of enemies did you make, anyway?" She flashed a challenging glance at Solo, whose perplexity had dropped away at the first sound of danger. He looked resolute, tough and angry.

"They're getting on my nerves, Chance," he said, drawing his blaster and motioning Chewie to a covering position at the door. "They're making me mad."

Vandis moved closer to Jinx and he put a protective arm around her shoulders. Over the siren's wail, Chance called out, "Sounds like your homing signal's strong as ever, Ace! You really ought to have something done about that."

"NO!" He stabbed a finger in her direction, "You really ought to grow tougher scum bunnies!" The saloon keeper laughed. "And I want an apology for all that crap you gave me about landing on your roof, too. Looks like that's the only way out of here right now!"

"My bouncers are the meanest bastards in two galaxies," she retorted. "Your little friends won't make it past the casino."

But a sudden clamor beyond the door to Chance's penthouse took the cheerful smirk off her face and she made a mental note to arrange further unarmed

combat matches among her bouncers when the crisis was over. "Of course, you've got a whole army after you," she reminded him.

"Through the sauna and up to the roof garden," Solo ordered. "Same way as we came in. Go!" He gestured to Vandis and Jinx who hurried to obey, the micro surgeon looking a bit bewildered but determined. Beside him, Vandis whispered, "Isn't this exciting?"

Solo pulled his lady to him and gave her a quick kiss. "Chance, honey, I'm sorry as hell about all this."

"Oh, I'm insured," she said.

Chewbacca roared that they were phase beaming the door seals. Even through he heavily shielded and sound-damped panels, Han could hear the boring hysterics of terrorist rhetoric.

"Get moving, Chewie," he called. "Cut and run, one more time." He took Chance's hand then and headed for the roof.

As they passed through the opulent sauna he said wistfully, "You will never know what I had planned for us before things got complicated back on Lissick." Chance squeezed his hand. "I bet I'll find out when all this shuck is over."

He grinned and winked. "I approve of an optimist."

Behind them the door to the apartment gave out. Above the hatchway which opened at the top of the stairs against the sauna's far wall, Chewie crouched urging them on to greater speed. He reached down a huge paw and pulled Chance through the trap door. Solo halted near the top, one booted foot poised beneath him, one leg extended for balance, and waited until the leading terrorists clattered into the sauna. Then he let loose a trigger-lock laser burst that blew four of them back into the midst of their compatriots.

"One for the scum bunny," he muttered, and felt Chewie's furry paw grip him under the left arm. If he'd had any intention of staying to trade more fire with their pursuers it was thwarted by his partner's decisiveness. Solo was hauled through the hatch and severely reprimanded for his imprudence in noisy Wookiee fashion.

"You worry too much, fuzzball," he said as they ran toward the Falcon, reposing now among beds of flowers and several pieces of shattered statuary, and charged up her ramp.

Han automatically reached out and hit the switch that shotlocked the hatch before racing down the cockpit access and swinging into the pilot's seat.

"Everyone in and strapped down!" he yelled. "Hope so," he added to himself, brow creasing in concentration, deep eyes keenly registering the telemetrics necessary to get them airborne. His hands flew over the controls with a competent grace.

Off to their right, the terrorists burst through the sauna's trap-door onto the roof garden.

Han made a Wookiee-like sound, something primal deep in his throat, and hauled the belly turret around to bear on them. He jerked the firing level and several more terrorists fell back, smoking.

"We're gone," he told his co-pilot, and as energy danced harmlessly about her shields, the Falcon shot skyward, disappearing quickly into the evening sky.

The Millennium Falcon's drive field warped existence in her mediate vicinity and enfolded herself and her passengers in the anonymous embrace of hyperspace. Solo left his co-pilot to shut down the board while he strode aft for a parley with his growing-number of unwilling passengers.

Chance met him at the accessway, full of questions and Han made sensible, placating gestures, ushering her back into the main hold. She sat down again on the acceleration couch and looked expectantly at him, as did Jinx and Vandis.

Han, leaning both palms against the gaming table and looking from one to the other had an antic urge to remark, "You're probably wondering why I called you all together." Instead, he said, "We're on our way back to Lissick."

Three voices raised in chorus. "Lissick?"

Solo held up a hand for silence. "It's the last place they'll expect us to go, for one thing," he explained. "And for another, in the forward Three hold, I've got a load computers that belong to the Federal Bureau of communications on Lissick and I'm dammed if I'm gonna eat the freight. I'm not going to break even on this trip anyway," he complained. "Those computers are going to be delivered. And third, I don't like being jerked around." The spacer drew himself up, hands on hips. "These bastards have messed up my plans once too often. it's get-even time."

"I've just got to ask," Chance said. "Exactly what you think you're going to do?"

Han gave her a superior smile, then addressed Jinx. "Doc, can you extract the data on the implant without removing it?"

"Probably, but why not let me remove the whole thing?"

"We're not sure about the detonator, right?"

Jinx had to admit there was a chance the device was rigged to self-destruct and kill its host if tampered with.

"So, I'm willing to leave it for the time being until we find out for sure." Han ran an abstracted hand across his chest. "Meanwhile, I want what-ever data is on this implant transferred to an audio disc. Vandis, I'm going to need your help, too."

In a moment Chewbacca joined them and over a quick meal they made some plans.

By night, as they came in from the upper dark, the Federal Bureau of Communications Building looked large and empty. Han piloted the Falcon in a swift descent then braked hard and let her down gently on the atmospheric craft landing area.

"Wish I'd thought of one of these instead of a garden," Chance commented to Solo. "You smashed a lot of love you know."

The Captain, though he kept ward on the controls, smiled. "I'll see if can't make it up to you," he promised. "I've got some business to transact here. Are they still behind us?"

The Wookiee replied with resignation that, indeed, the tenacious rebels were following them, in a single space vehicle, continuing their pursuit from Urango. They were some minutes behind, however, and Han took the brief lull to go over their plan with his small band of counter-revolutionaries.

As he entered the main hold, Vandis had just completed the unplaiting of her hair. She was combing it out with her fingers, while Chance combined her two braids into one.

He surveyed their clothing with a critical eye. The transformation would certainly not fool anyone who knew either woman -- Vandis lacked Chance's showgirl poise in the lavish satina gown and Chance looked frankly annoyed to be sporting the shirtwaist and jeans of a nightshift computer technician--but Han wasn't depending on a close scrutiny for his plan, his very seat of the pants plan, to work.

To one side, Chewbacca leaned against bulkhead, his bowcaster cradled in an arm. He seemed the least nervous of any of them, Han decided the Wookiee simply didn't take the People's Army of Retribution very seriously. And his

partner's competence with certain electrical equipment they thought to find inside the building matched his casual confidence with regard to terrorists.

"All right," the Corellian said at last, "Everyone know what we're doing? Jinx? Sure you want to come along? You're strictly a non-combatant in all this."

"I'll stick with Vandis."

Solo nodded, satisfied. "You," he said to the tech in her fancy dress, "just do your thing with the disc. And don't worry--no one'll be after either of you."

"Chewie, Chance," he gestured, palms up in casual invitation, "let's do it. And be careful," he added as an afterthought. Warily, they headed down the ramp.

Like thunder and lightening, a ship descended on them, her flares bright as suns and braking thrusters howling.

They were halfway across the landing area when she rushed down on them out of the sky, her needle beam lasers whistling and dancing among them.

"Run!" Solo shouted over the pandemonium, and they did, tripping, staggering, dodging and somehow managing to find the relative safety of an entry alcove where they halted, panting.

The big ship, a Urangan military vessel by the look of her, set down next to the Falcon. Her guns were momentarily silent.

Han peered out cautiously. "Goddamn!" he exclaimed. "What ARE these crazies? That's a fleet patroller!"

"Determined, maybe?" Jinx offered.

The ship's hatch opened and para-militaries began to spill out. They scattered, taking up positions all around the alcove and covering it with businesslike hand weapons.

Han grunted, ducked back inside. 'Chance, Chewie,' he whispered, "Cover us while I blast the door.'

The Wookiee and the saloon keeper edged toward the alcove's arch. Chance palmed a small power pistol she kept strapped along the underside of her slender fore-arm, a custom Solo found delightfully feral in so otherwise feminine a lady.

Meanwhile, the Corellian tested the door to the FCB building with his blaster and found to his frustration that the alachrome fittings could withstand more firepower than his KlettsRushak was capable of delivering, and still stay sedately sealed.

"I think we've got a problem,' he muttered.

Suddenly a voice hailed them from beyond the alcove. "You in there!" it shouted. "Who are you?"

"I'm the admiral of the People's Revolutionary Space Navy, buddy!" Han hollered back. "What's it to you?"

"The WHAT?"

Despite the danger, Chance giggled at the wary suspicion in the man's voice. Behind them Vandis cried, "Wait!"

"We're not going anywhere, honey," Han told her. "What is it?"

"I've got ... Chance has got ... a key! I forgot. it's in my, well, Chance's back pocket. It'll open any of the doors. It's a master key."

Solo gave her one of his biggest, sunniest grins and Chance whooped as he grabbed her around the hips and assaulted the back pocket of her jeans. Inside was a metallic ring bearing a group of keys. He tossed them to Vandis, who quickly fitted her master to the lock.

Quietly, they backed down the alcove and through the open door, the three weapons among them trained on the archway.

"The People's Revolutionary WHAT?" yelled the voice.

It was quiet and dark inside.

Han, blaster in hand, glanced quickly around to get his bearings. "Here's where we split up," he told them. You," he indicated Jinx and Vandis, "ignore whatever you hear Just get to the communication center. They'll be following the homer, so the, rest of us will. draw them off as far as we can. Move!"

He watched a second while the Lissikan grandmother and the micro surgeon, a most unlikely but surprisingly game pair, hurried off toward the building's interior.

The sound of heavy lase-fire challenging the alachrome reached them from the doorway to the roof.

"Come on," the Corellian commanded. He backed a few steps, covering their retreat then turned on the run and headed down the long corridor illuminated sparingly by glow spots set at intervals along the walls.

They had not gone far before they heard the roof door collapse and the sound of terrorist soldiery filled the echoing upper floor of the building.

Han heard someone behind him shout, "Follow the signal," and he smiled grimly.

"Any idea where we're going?" Chance asked, breathing hard.

"In a manner of speaking," Solo replied. "I know what I'm looking for, anyway. A broadcast studio. Someplace where they holograph things. Should be..."

The Wookiee snarled in pain as one of the pursuers nicked his shoulder with a needle beam. He turned and fired a charge-tipped quarrel back down the hallway. As it connected fatally with one of the terrorists, the explosive flash for a moment illuminated the general vicinity and Han thought he saw what he wanted, not far ahead.

He dropped to a defensive crouch and swept the corridor behind them with his blaster, taking down a few in the front ranks.

"Kill them!" yelled a hysterical voice in the rebels' midst.

As the trio turned and fled once more another voice cautioned, "Not the girl! WE still need her alive. No blasters!"

Solo strained his eyes to pierce the gloom ahead. "Chewie, those double doors," he panted. "If we can get inside and rig the --"

"Han!" I'm ready to drop!" Chance gasped.

"Honey, hang on! Chewie, get in there. I'll hold them here as long as I can. Just gaff the..."

The Wookiee growled comprehension and assent and ducked inside the studio. Solo hoped to hell his partner had gotten the idea through his out-of-breath attempts to explain.

He pulled a thoroughly winded woman in front of him and threw an arm about her throat, holding her at gunpoint in the deep shadows before the door. "Trust me," he whispered.

The leading terrorists came into view, faintly illuminated perhaps 20 paces away.

"Hold it right there!" the Corellian ordered. Though they could possibly pinpoint him by the homing device, he was fairly sure they couldn't see him clearly. Still, he held Chance back against his chest, in a mock hostage position.

"Always did like to catch me sleeping on my tummy," she murmured.

"In a little while I'll show you exactly what I like," he answered in the same voice, then shouted so that she cringed, "No one come any closer or she dies.'

The terrorists halted uncertainly.

"You stand in the way of the People's Army of Retribution!" their leader informed him

"Damn right I do!"

"Who ARE you?"

"I told you out on the roof, pal. We're gonna have to come to some understanding about this girl and the stuff she's got on her."

"How could you know about ... that?"

"Give me a break." Han sounded disgusted. "You suppose we don't keep tabs on you? But I think maybe we can make a deal, you know?"

Someone in the group interjected anxiously, "The time! The time's running out."

"We've still got time," the leader snarled. Then back to Han, "What kind of deal?" He started moving forward.

Solo began to shove the big studio doors back on their glides and retreat step by step into the cavernous empty dark behind him.

"Let's say I give you the girl and in return you cut in our people for a percentage. Say a fiftieth, 2 percent right off the top of the treasury when the revolution succeeds.

"And why should we?"

"Because in just a minute I'm gonna put a laser-bolt right through her back and make zuk food out of her pretty chest. That's why."

Chance wriggled and kicked, whimpering pitifully.

The leader thought a minute. "We kill you now. You've hindered us long enough," he threatened. "What do you hope to get out of this?" he asked.

Han grinned. "Money," he said.

"He's lying," the cautionary one spoke up. "Ask him why they came back. Ask him."

As far as Solo could tell all the were now within the studio.

"Well?" the leader demanded. "Answer! Why did you come back here?"

Mentally invoking all the good-luck he'd ever heard of Solo yelled, "Because I had a BRIGHT idea!" and dove sideways, pulling Chance out and down as Chewie threw the main switch and the interior of the studio was suddenly filled with lights, lights, swirling holographic images and more lights.

The terrorists cried out in startled dismay, assaulted by eye-searing psychedelia and Chewie cranked up the candle power even further.

Han, keeping his back to the brilliant display, managed to incapacitate not a few of his antagonists, and Chance wielded her power pistol against the aimless, automatic barrage.

But the element of surprise gave them only a momentary edge, and too soon the Corellian and his lady found themselves pinned down behind a video projector, lase-fire streaking past them and splashing dangerously close against the wall behind.

Chewie, from a vantage point high up in the light gaffing, opened up with explosive charges making the rebels take cover and giving Solo and Chance a respite. But it looked to be a Raxerian standoff at best or at worst, a terrorist victory as the three unwilling counter-revolutionaries slowly ran out of fire power.

"Han," said Chance over the whine of energy weapons, "Han, tell me what you had in mind for us back in the sauna on Urango."

"Now?" Solo leaned out to fire twice, then ducked back behind the projector and favored her with a puzzled frown. "Now?" he repeated.

"Yeah," Chance shrank away from a particularly vicious salvo that tore off part of the projector's focusing controls. "we may not get out of this , and I want to be able to at least think about it in my final moment."

"Ha!!!" The Corellian laughed with mirthless satisfaction as he scored on an incautious terrorist, then retreated once more behind their wholly inadequate

fortress. "you're being melodramatic," he told the woman. "We'll get out of this, just keep stalling them until --"

Solo broke off and moved back, poised as a great burst of static filled the room from overhead speakers. "This is it," he whispered.

And suddenly, over all the speakers in the building, and on emergency priority override, over all the receiving devices in the city of Cahardenum and, on Condition Extreme Planetary Alert Channel 70, over every receiver on the entire world of Lissick, over children's remote control toys, doctors' pages and not a few pieces of bridgework came a voice that could only be Raul's:

"Generals of the People's Army of Retribution," it bombasted. "The time of our glorious revolution is at hand! The first blow against the imperialist regime will be struck at Kalkisport, where Alman will move against the usurpers. The assassination of the territorial governor will take place at..." The lase fire whined to a halt. For a moment there was no sound but the magnified voice of Raul telling each of his generals exactly what to do and when to do it. Then the terrorists began, literally, to scream with fury.

"The control center!" Their leader yelled above the broadcast. "We have to stop it!"

"I'm getting it over my wristchrono!" another wailed in anguish.

And they charged for the open doors -- directly into the squad of heavily armed cops Vandis had thoughtfully summoned.

In a moment, Solo and Chance ventured out from behind the wrecked holo projector, and Chewie swung down from his perch on the ceiling grid.

"Aren't you glad now I didn't tell you my sauna plans?" Han said sideways to his companion as they strolled over to the crowded doorway. "Now I can take you by surprise."

Chance regarded the tall, lithe Corellian at her side with a quick sweep that took in several of his more appealing attributes, including one very suggestive smirk, and answered, "You usually do."

It took some fancy verbal footwork to explain what a starship captain, a Wookiee and two anomalous Urangans were doing shooting it out and otherwise making mayhem in the small hours at the FBC. But Vandis was identified and cleared quickly and she told her story with such charming sincerity, all facts verifiable by

interstellar comm and the evidence at hand, including the captured terrorists, that within several hours the authorities had finished with them.

Han had ventured only one question before the rebels were lead away: "How come you didn't put an automatic destruct on the implant?" he asked. "It didn't blow when we took it out."

"Never figured she'd know it was on her," was the sullen reply.

The Corellian beamed happily.

Then Chewie got a signed RFE from Vandis, the FBC got their shipment of computers, and Han got a ticket for illegally docking an interstellar craft on the roof landing area. By dawn, the wary but amiable group was able to board the Falcon and make orbit.

"Captain," said Jinx over a cup of coffee, "shall we get rid to that pesky implant now? Just take a second."

Solo yawned. "Could wait till we get back to Urango, I guess. But..nah. get rid of it now." He opened his shirt to the waist and leaned back.

Jinx pulled a few items from his case, then settled in next to Han on the acceleration couch. "This won't hurt a bit,"he assured, sliding a small metallic cube over the captain's chest until he found the spot he wanted "Right over the heart," he muttered.

The microsurgeon adjusted his cube and depressed an inset button. There was a barely audible hum.

"Ah!" he exclaimed with satisfaction. "You're all clear of it." He set the cube down on the gaming table, "The homing device is still operating, of course, but you can space it, trash it, keep it for a souvenir if you --"

There was a terrific explosion.

All five occupants of the compartment were blown back by the concussion, sprawling and ducking for cover.

Han was the first to raise his eyes. The small metal cube containing the implant was no more. Its twisted metal shell lay smoking on the edge of the table, witness to a savage burst of energy form within its confines.

"Oh, Ghana..."the Corellian began.

Jinx straightened and stood unsteadily. The two men looked at each other in elaborate silence.

Finally Jinx said, "Not an automatic destruct..."

"A timed destruct," Solo finished for him. They both directed their gaze to the burnt out wreckage of the extractor, which had moments before removed the implant an inch away from the Corellian's heart.

Chewie helped Vandis to her feet, and Chance dropped onto the couch to stare in amazement at the tiny bomb. "You had maybe ten seconds, Ace," she said quietly.

Solo nodded, frowning. "I feel cold all over," he told them with interest. "Feet, knees, my fingers are cold. My nose is cold."

Chance put an arm around his shoulders and snuggled up. "What you need is a hot bath, a bottle of brandy and some good company."

"I need a vacation," he agreed. Chewie growled something into the momentary pause.

"What? Oh..." Han shook his head to clear it. "Right. Business. Vandis?" he addressed the subtly altered grandmother and computer tech. "Where heading back to Urango. Can we drop you anywhere?"

The effects of shock were wearing off slowly. Han felt as though his brain had turned to ice as well and was only now beginning to thaw sufficiently to allow his thoughts to move around. "Take you somewhere? Friends? Family?" It seemed awkward to simply say goodbye after all they'd been through together. He looked at her inquiringly and Chance giggled.

"Slow on the uptake, aren't you?" she commented.

"Huh?"

"Captain," Vandis replied, "I want to take Chance up on her offer of a job." She glanced at Jinx, then returned to Han. "I can't go back to baby-sitting comps now. I'd be itchy for the rest of my life, wondering what I was missing."

Comprehension began to dawn on Solo as his brain thawed a little more. "Oh, yeah, yeah, that makes sense." he decided.

Chance planted a warm, wet kiss behind his ear. "You're getting the idea now.'

"I have a feeling," he drawled, "That by the time we get back, I'll be full of ideas.
"Such as?"

"Such as first getting out of parking orbit, and on our way. Chewie?"

While his co-pilot shuffled off in the direction of the cockpit, the Falcon's captain rose and stretched. "Close call, huh?" he said, looking at the destroyed extractor.

"Yeah, close call," Chance replied.

He regarded the object a moment more, then shook his head. "Weird," he said softly. He looked up, ran a hand through his hair.

"Well, strap in, friends, and we'll get outta here." Han headed for the accessway, the lazy cant of his hips accentuating his carefully calculated air of nonchalance.

"They'll never get you, Ace," Chance called after him.

Solo laughed freely and happily, as he turned the corner. "I know that," he called back, "but they don't and that's what makes life interesting!"

end

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