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## Corellian Fantasy

by [Marcia Brin](#)

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Those of you familiar with my stories know that I've never used, as a main character, someone who is not in or at least mentioned (like Bail Organa), in the Saga. However, I finally decided I should have one story in which I had some of the fun, too! None of that namby-pamby hiding behind someone with a name like Mary Sue Tough Cookies for me, though; if I was going to be in this, I was going to be in it.

And since it's my fantasy, if I want to be tall and skinny, I'll be tall and skinny. And I'll get anyone I want, too! So there, George.

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Let's see. where do I start? I suppose I should put the story down--not that I'm going to let anyone see it, of course. Han's off fixing something-- the Falcon always seems to need it--and Chewie's trying to beat the computer at holochess, so this is as good a time as any.

Actually, it all began with a decision, which is somewhat unusual for me, since I'm lousy at decisions. You know, trying to decide whether I should get off the L.I.E. for the service road, I usually dither until it's too late. And, I tend to be unlucky. Somehow, the line I'm in never seems to move.

I suppose I should tell you that I've been a STAR WARS fan for some time. Something I probably didn't have to point out, but it might have been what made me act. I almost said "galvanized," but it's hard to apply that term to me. Or rather, it used to be.

The day started pretty much like any other. Up at seven to make it to work--I can't tell you how much I loved my job: thousands of files, most of which end up on my desk, half-assed investigations by support departments, and a file unit that can't distinguish between "drop" and "pull." I told you I couldn't tell you how much I loved my job--which is no fun. I'm not a morning person.

After nobly refusing to go back to sleep, I staggered around until it was time to begin the Drive To The office. Gods, rush hour on the L.I.E.! I remember years ago, reading an issue of MAD magazine. You know the way it does spoofs of magazine types? Well, this time it was doing a magazine for disaster lovers, with an Ask-Somebody-or-Other column. The question: "Where is the best place to see a disaster?" And the answer? "Four p.m. any Friday on the Long Island Expressway."

Yep, a few rush hours, especially in bad weather, and you're ready for any-thing the Empire can throw at you.

Nothing special when I got to work, either. No unexplained feeling of foreboding or raising of hackles. Just the same boring and/or frustrating stuff as usual. By the way, did I mention that this was before RETURN OF THE JEDI opened? Well, it was. Kind of a shame I won't ever see Lucas' version. He was right about a lot of things. Of course, there was at least one thing about which George was very wrong. As you'll see.

Anyhow, the day continued to plod along, until lunchtime. I usually eat early; it gives me some time to read in quiet before people start piling in.

I had just toddled in and placed my sandwich in the microwave when everything happened. There was a sudden glow that suffused through the room. Startled, I turned to locate the source--and found myself staring into a ... window that had opened in the middle of the lunchroom.

On the other side was another room. The first thing that caught my eye, probably because it was closest, was a table on which lay a weapon, smaller than a rifle, but considerably larger than a handgun. It didn't quite look like any gun I'd ever seen--except in science fiction films. Then I noticed, behind the table, a console, jammed with blinking lights.

This panel curved away to my left, out of sight, past the edge of the "doorway." I looked right and my eye slid past a tall, silver block--before zooming back. I'd seen that before.

In fact, I'd stood next to it. In the JEDI room at ChiCon. Someone working in the room remarked on how she'd played with the buttons and "probably killed him." This one was in better proportion--unlike the film version, where the head and

hands (HF's) were too large for the body, whoever it was, even though it belonged to a tall man (Our boy Harry must be a sizable fellow!).

There was no doubt in my mind, though that this was it. The gen-u-ine article. Han Solo in the flesh. Figuratively speaking. After I lifted my jaw off the floor, I tried to figure out what was going on.

My musings were interrupted by the arrival of a new figure; this one was moving. And one not precisely unknown to me, either. Baby Fatt in person. Looking larger and somehow meaner than in TESB, even with his helmet on.

What happened next? Well, that's easy. Why did it happen? Too many viewings of TESB, I suppose. Does something to your brain, just the way the Jerry Falwell-types warn. Short, tubby, indecisive me suddenly got decisive...

And found out that there has always been a tall, thin me inside. Or, at least, that's what showed up after I dove through the opening and grabbed for the gun on the table. My antagonist whirled with incredible speed--great reflexes on that turkey--and started to raise an arm. Some sort of hidden gun, I suppose.

The Force was with me (hey, doesn't that have a nice sound?)--if you believe in that sort of thing. Didn't any of you guys ever go to... Okay, okay, just kidding.

Well, Force or not, I fired first. Part of me was curious as to how I knew how to work the damn thing, but the rest of me did not believe in looking a gift horse in the mouth. The blast caught him just below his chest armor, and did it make a mess. To my surprise, it didn't bother me. This new me was definitely something else.

I let him have one more, just for good measure, though I think it was unnecessary; he never moved again. I glanced around my surroundings. It appeared that I was now the proud possessor of the Slave 1--and its cargo, one thoroughly carbon-frozen Corellian.

Before I did anything else, I stopped to admire my new lines. Very snazzy. At a rough estimate, I was standing about 5'9" in a pair of those very flat, cavalry-type boots Han Solo always wore. I had definitely lost a little--okay, a lot of--weight. The pants, with the distinctive yellow piping, fit very nicely, indeed, while the jacket was similar to Han's in EMPIRE. Except my coordinator had a better sense of color: both jacket and pants were brown--the trousers being the lighter of the two--as opposed to Han's blue-brown combination. The Corellian has many extraordinary qualities; a sense of haute couture is not one of them. On the other hand, he looks so good in anything--or out of everything--that it really doesn't matter.

Overall, the attire itself would not have drawn any special attention on the streets of New York; on the other hand, the enormous blaster hanging by my side in a hand-tooled holster, might have. Funny thing was, it felt ... right and comfortable, like the presence of an old friend.

As I turned, it watched my reflection on the shiny metal console, distorted as it was, along with me. There was an air of unreality to all of this; I wasn't sure that I wouldn't wake on the floor of the lunchroom, a victim of the microwave.

I decided to tackle the problem directly; I sat down. After a few minutes, the silence became oppressive, the tapping of my fingers taking on the aspect of gun shots. I began to experience a growing sensation of being watched.

"All right," I addressed the empty air, "anybody feel like speaking up?" Nothing happened right away. Then I became aware of a sort of shimmering haze lurking on the outer edges of my peripheral vision. I couldn't catch it, though; no matter how swiftly or suddenly I turned my head, the haze was always faster.

I was beginning to get a headache, not to mention annoyed, when a soft voice spoke, coming from nowhere and everywhere at the same time. It had a slightly fuzzy quality as if several people were trying to speak at once.

"Your pardon if we have inconvenienced you."

I'd given up trying to see them. "Who are you?"

"We are..." the voice (voices?) hesitated. "There does not seem to be a way to properly explain Us." (Somehow I knew the word was capitalized.) "Let us just say that we have passed on to a higher plane--several higher planes, actually." There seemed to be a note of smugness in the voice.

Not all that high, I thought snidely. Then a horrible idea struck me. Not those silver people from BATTLESTAR GALACTICA? I mean, I already had WARS; why not GALACTICA, too?

The speaker(s) were continuing. "we don't usually interfere--" I breathed a sigh of relief. I think that let Edward Mulhare and his crew out-- "--however, in passing, one of us picked up on your craving for change. Since we had heard, we decided to offer assistance."

"It's kind of sudden, though, isn't it?" I asked.

I could feel their "heads" nod in agreement. "That is why you do not have to make the final choice yet. Stay a while, then decide. We will return for your answer."

Seemed fair, so I agreed to the terms. The annoying, uncatchable haze disappeared immediately, but a soft voice lingered, fading slowly away. "You will be able to deal with this world," it whispered, before leaving entirely.

Well, that was a comfort. It meant I could handle that blaster I wore and fly this ship and speak the lingo. Better than wandering around totally helpless. I didn't think I'd get time to learn all I needed to know. Time for some action. I got briskly to my feet--which felt pretty good, since my former persona had not wallowed in "brisk"--and began to pace, working out the problem verbally. That I was good at. STAR WARS fans learn to talk to themselves; no one else would listen.

Let's see, I couldn't find the Alliance because I didn't know where it was. Even if I successfully released Han, that wouldn't help. He only knew about the rendezvous point and the rebels had probably already moved on. And what if some-thing went wrong and he needed a doctor? While I'd been left with knowledge of how to make my way around here --- plus the info George Lucas had given us--I really had no idea where, even if I had the time, -we could take him for medical treatment. And it would have to be someplace where he would be safe, where the people would not turn him over either to the Empire or to Jabba.

Nope, he would have to stay in carbon-freeze until I could find help, which probably meant Chewbacca and Lando Calrissian. Only thing was, they were probably on Tatooine. Jabba-country. And the Hutt would surely recognize the SLAVE 1.

As Yul Brynner once said, "Is a puzzlement!"

A new idea was taking shape--one I was resisting vigorously. I mean, me? I should take Jabba out? There's such a thing as getting carried away with enthusiasm. Let's face it, Dirty Harry I wasn't.

Still, the voice had said I'd be able to get along. Maybe I was tougher than I realized--or, at least, than I used to be. Hell, a chocolate éclair was tougher than I used to be! Decision made, I took a moment to give a reassuring pat to the life-sized dice cube. Even in a mess, he looked like a cutie. Oops. Control. You must learn control. He's spoken for. From my now lofty height, I suddenly decided she was too short for him. It could never work.

Right?

Open a Webster's to the definition of the word "boring" and you'll find a picture of Tatooine. Even Lawrence of Arabia would fall asleep. What can you say about a world whose main lifeform is sand?

And let us not forget heat. Outside the Slave 1, according to the ship's computer, the temperature read a nifty 101 degrees. And I think it was winter!

My arrival--or rather, the presumed arrival of Baby Fett--created a bit of a stir. I was waiting for a message from Jabba, but I had no intention of going to his stronghold. He would have to come to me. Made the odds better.

Strangely enough, I was almost preternaturally calm. This new me took things a whole lot better than the old me had. It didn't bother me in the slightest the Fett was a-moldering in the back room. In fact, he might still come in handy. A double-murder. No honor among thieves, I'm afraid.

Jabba would be arriving momentarily. His messenger had not sounded happy over the 'com when I'd told him that no one was leaving the Slave 1; if the Hutt wanted his prize, he'd have to bestir himself and come and get it. From the tone of the courier's voice, I could imagine the reception this was going to get back at the stronghold. Jabba was obviously one of those Greek myth kill-the-bearer-of-bad-tidings types. Angry or not, Jabba had decided to come. A commotion out in the docking bay announced his arrival. I could hear it over the 'com and I flipped on the vid-screen. There were figures scurrying around, followed by the exalted personage of the Great, uh, Being, himself (herself? itself?).

Yuck. A very large-sized creepy crawly. Interestingly enough, I wasn't getting hysterical. Used to be that one spider got my whole house if it wanted it; I was more than happy to leave. Now though, all those insectoid--and/or unnameable types--surrounding El Sluggo didn't phase me in the slightest.

There was a soft beep on the 'com and I flipped it on. A metallic voice(probably a droid's) could be heard. "The Exalted Jabba desires to speak with the Hunter. You will come out, please." "No, but he can come in. He and his second-in-command. No one else," I added, "since a translator is not necessary."

I could hear the droid translating. I understood everything; apparently, a fluency in a number of different languages came with the package. The droid's voice was followed by a roar, the sound of metal being struck and a disconcerted squawk from the translator as it hit the ground. Jabba did not seem pleased A new voice entered the conversation. "Jabba the Supreme will honor you with his presence. Open the hatch."

"Not," I replied firmly, "until I see everyone but you two pull back."

The Hutt waved an arm and his people scattered back toward the bay entrance. I carefully manipulated the outer camera to take in the whole area. Seemed clear enough, so I hit the ramp button and let Mr. Nice Guy in.

There was no way he was moving under his own steam. Instead, he floated in on a settee-like construction, kept floating by anti-gravs (working overtime, no doubt!). With him was a real beauty. I supposed this was the Bib Fortuna mentioned in STARLOG in reference to a pre-production painting by Ralph

McQuarrie. Didn't look too much like the figure in the painting, but then, George doesn't like to give too much away.

As soon as they had cleared the ramp, I closed and locked it. I was ready when they entered the control room. Jabba looked surprised at not seeing Fett.

It was the last expression that crossed his face. I'd found a high-powered laser rifle in the weapons cabinet and I used it on the Hutt.

And I'd thought Fett had made a mess! Oh, brother! You know what it's like if you accidentally step on a slug? Well, magnify that about 1,000 percent. Ugh!

Still, I wasn't going to let a little thing like that stop me, was I? I swung the rifle toward Fortuna who had gotten even paler than his normal nonexistent coloring. I waved him to sit down.

"Why don't we have a bit of a business discussion? This might turn out to be mutually profitable."

He didn't look as if he understood, but he definitely appeared interested. "How so, tir?" (The latter is an honorific applied to all women over the age of majority, whether married or not.)

I settled myself on the console. "Well, what is the greatest ambition of all seconds-in-command? To be first, n'est-ce pas?"

"Nest pah?"

"Skip it. Now, Boba Fett has a reputation for not being a nice guy, and everyone knows how nasty Jabba is. We can use this to our advantage, since both are dead." I jerked my head toward the back room. "Fett's in there, doing a great imitation of a corpse. We just spread the word that Fett shot Jabba, and you shot him. What could be more natural than for you to take control, to straighten things out? You are the being on the spot, after all, and you did take out Fett."

He looked very interested. There was a distinctly avaricious gleam in his eyes. I stooped and picked up the five 20,000-credit notes Jabba had dropped and tucked them into a jacket pocket.

"For expenses--not to mention clean-up." I eyed him boldly. "The bounty on Solo is withdrawn; spread the word. Or I can do for your second what I did for Jabba's. And this," I patted the pocket holding the vouchers, "will buy a lot of bounty hunters."

Fortuna shrugged. "Solo's quarrel was with Jabba, not me." He gestured at Jabba. "Consider all debts paid. I will have someone come to remove the bodies

and--" his breathing tube (if that's what it was) seemed to crinkle in distaste-- "the mess."

Fortuna had been as good as his word; everything was taken care of in a jiffy. Now I needed information, a medical facility to which I could take Han. Chewbacca and Lando had not arrived on Tatooine, and I had no idea when they would be coming. I hadn't been sure whether I should wait or take him someplace myself. Unfortunately, I didn't know how much time I had. I had no idea how long someone could last in carbon-freeze. What if some sort of deterioration set in? And even in hibernation, he would be cannibalizing his body stores. How long could he stay in without doing irreparable damage?

So, I decided not to wait. Late that night I closed up the Slave I after checking my cargo, which still seemed to be holding up all right, and headed for the cantinas of Mos Eisley. I was hoping to find someone there who had been, if not a friend, at least an "unenemy," enough so as to help.

Of course, I doubted that I could just walk in and announce my needs. Since most of them would undoubtedly know about this afternoon's incident, and my resultant sole possession of a certain Corellian, I was hoping someone would approach me.

There were several cantinas in town; unfortunately, none of them bore the sign "STAR WARS was filmed here," so I ducked into one that looked disreputable enough. I was wearing the gun I'd had after I jumped through the opening, and carrying one of Fett's--now my--laser rifles. The bounty hunter had kept a treasure-trove of nasty little devices, and I was packing a whole bunch of them, some openly and some not. There was a knife in my boot and another in my belt.

All in all, I could have been featured in an article on "Fashions for the Well-Dressed Terrorist." I wasn't sure I was actually moving up in life. The cantina was worse than anyone could have imagined. I suppose it was ethnocentric of me to feel that way, but I was new to this society, and my nose had not yet adjusted to the various smells of seemingly countless alien species. Lordy, what a stench! My most fervent desire was for a can of Glade.

Striving to keep my heaving stomach in check, I moved to the bar as casually as I could. The key was to try to look as if I'd come to places like this all my life. I could feel the eyes following me, confirming my belief that most everyone would know about the Jabba incident--and me. Well, that was all to the good.

Maybe some friend of Han's (first name basis, of course) would come over to bargain for him. I nodded at the barkeep, then pointed to a glass and threw a credit chip on the bar. Grabbing the now-filled tankard, I sauntered to an empty table and settled in to "nurse" my drink. Ignore it was more likely. Back in the old

U. S. of A., I was a confirmed teetotaler, and Carrie Nation only knew what this stuff was. Still, it helped provide a necessary image.

It did not take me long to start wondering what the attraction in barhopping might be. I suppose if you are slowly (or quickly, as the case may be) getting blotto, everything improves. Sober, it was damned boring. Worse still, it appeared to be entirely unproductive. No nibbles. Nothing. I was debating calling it a night when a shadow fell across the table. A large shadow. Looking up, the shadow resolved itself into three individuals, a humanoid female, a humanoid (though less so) male, and a member of the batrachian class, five-foot tall variety, whose features bore an unfortunate resemblance to Richard Nixon. They were armed to the teeth and looked decidedly grim.

I gestured for them to sit down and they did, though it was a tight fit.

Each side of the table eyed the other warily for a moment, then the female leaned forward. "I'm Loya Wandsir, navigator on the Delta's Luck. These are crewmates, Lon Jando," she jerked her thumb in the direction of the humanoid male, "and"--at this, letters fail me. Suffice it to say that it had a lot of "rls," croaks and glottal stops. I could understand when Kermie--as I'd decided to refer to him in my mind--spoke, but I could not get my tongue around the words. Wandsir continued. "We heard about the fight at the docking bay this after-noon." I shrugged. "A minor altercation at most."

\*Minor for you,\* Kermie rumbled with the suspicion of a laugh, \*but I doubt that Fett or the Hutt view it that way.\*

I grinned at that. He (she?) had a point. Severity was definitely in the eye of the beholder. Nodding at him, I inquired politely if they had a reason for stopping by.

Wandsir appeared to be spokeswoman for the group. "Fett had something we would like to obtain, and we're willing to deal for it. A certain Corellian."

I admired my fingernails for a moment and then settled back, with the aspect of carefully considering her statement. "Why?" I finally said.

They seemed taken aback and glanced at each other. "Why do we want him, do you mean, or why should you deal?" Jando asked after a moment. "As to the latter, well, we're willing to pay well. And," he leaned forward, his face earnest, "you've lost your prime buyer."

"And as to the former?" I prompted.

Again they glanced at each other, apparently debating how honest they should be. Finally, Wandsir shrugged and Jando, taking that as a go ahead, began again. "We're old friends of Han's. In fact, we shipped with him for a while. And

we aren't alone; we've been in touch with a number of people Han's known. They'll all kick in."

How very interesting, I mused. For all he liked to play at being a mercenary individual, Han Solo had, it appeared, deeply touched a lot of lives. This would probably embarrass the hell out of him.

I shook my head. "Solo's not for sale." A sudden grimness had settled over their features and I decided, for reasons of health, to take them into my confidence. "Look, you may not believe this, but I'm really trying to help Han. I came here trying to get information about a doctor sufficiently...reliable to go to for assistance." They glanced at each other, not totally convinced.

"Hey, if I were trying to make money off of Solo's bones, why shouldn't I sell him to you? Nobody else wants him now."

Well, I didn't have to tell them everything.

It took some more verbal footwork, but I finally impressed them with my sincerity. They supplied me with the name and location (planet-wise, that is) of a medical-technical-mechanical--What-Have-You facility with a very select clientele, and promised to tell Chewbacca and Lando Calrissian where we had gone.

And, hopefully, convince one undoubtedly worried--probably shedding--Wookiee that I was a good guy.

Twenty-eight hours later, I entered the atmosphere of a small planet. It had a desolate look to it. And dry. Tatooine seemed a rain forest by comparison. At least there, you could find some vegetation here and there. Here, I was almost sure, nothing lived on the surface.

That included the complex I had come to visit. As I dropped lower, I could see no trace of a building. There probably was some kind of radar equipment peeking above the surface, but it had been carefully hidden. I headed for the ground coordinates I had been given by Han's friends. My ship's radio remained quiet; no one asked for an I.D. or warned me off. Apparently, the Slave I was readily recognized and it appeared that Boba Fett, like that four hundred pound gorilla, sat down wherever he wanted to.

As the ship settled on the spot indicated by the coordinates, the ground trembled and began to drop slowly. After a few minutes of steady descent, we halted with nary a jar.

There were more than a few surprised faces as I sauntered down the Slave I's ramp, looking not a bit like Boba Fett. Word of the Tatooinian version of HIGH NOON apparently had not preceded me. I was getting somewhat tired of the

news myself, but I offered the for-publication story in response to an inquiry posed more casually than the speaker's eyes indicated she really felt.

A short time after, I was heading toward the medical facility, all the while keeping a sharp eye on the two men maneuvering the bulky object down a series of corridors; they had demonstrated a disconcerting tendency to hit corners with it, sort of adding injury to injury. It was amazing how interested everyone had become in "poor" Han's health when I had crossed their palms with a shekel or two.

The medcenter was spanking new, a definite contrast to the hanger area, which had looked noticeably grubby. There were three droids not at all like Threepio or Artoo--I later learned they were surgeon-droids, Two-Onebee-One, Two-Onebee-Two, and Two-One-E--and a rather cheerfully avuncular-looking humanoid, who identified himself as the Surgeon Leader. He made continuous clucking noises over the read-outs of the tests the droids were conducting.

"Really rather abominable treatment for a smuggler of his caliber," he declared at last.

Perfectly acceptable treatment, I suppose, if you were less adept. The proper punishment for incompetence. "Based on these read-outs, I think we'll have to stand this up," he continued. "It doesn't look as if the entire framework will melt away, and it will help to have gravity working for us. That way we don't have to jerk him around too much."

He opened the door and called out two names, that turned out to belong to the overeager moving men of before, and had them carefully raise the frozen block and stand it against the wall. Then he positioned them before it with instructions not to let Han hit the ground. Stepping around to the side, he peered carefully at the controls.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" I asked.

He shrugged. "We'll find out, won't we?" It was not reassuring.

I couldn't see what he was doing, but the carbonate block began to hum, then melt. First red, then white. I was reminded of the Id Monster burning through the door of Morbius' laboratory in FORBIDDEN PLANET. Except, of course, that Han was cuter. With surprising speed, there was created a man-sized opening and the Corellian fell through, to be caught by the two standing guards. He looked as if he had been pulled out of a bath, soaked from head to boot tops, and he was very pale and limp. There was something else I noticed about him.

"Hey, he's not breathing!" The figure was ominously still. "Do something!"

They were stretching him out on one of the beds even before I'd finished panicking. Surgeon Leader--there was a name somewhere, I suppose--waved Two-Onebee-One (to be honest, it might have been Two-Onebee-Two), who was holding an oxygen mask, over and began to massage Han's chest. The Corellian gave a shuddering cough before I'd reached my fourth nail. He gasped a few more times, then began to breathe steadily, though his whole body shivered continuously. Another instant and his eyes had opened. There was a fuzzy look to them. Surgeon Leader patted him on the shoulder. "Easy, now," he said soothingly. "Don't try to rush it."

Han's mouth worked, but for a moment, there was no sound. Then he croaked out a "Who ... ?" He didn't wait for an answer. Brushing his eyes, he tried to focus on us. "Blurry."

Surgeon Leader nodded. "Understandable. You're lucky you weren't in longer. It could have been much worse. You'll be all right in a day or two."

The reassurances fell on deaf ears. Han was out like a light. Funny how young and innocent (hah!) he looked.

I'd been a Leia fan since ANH, but I had to admit, I was beginning to actively dislike her!

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"So you blew away both Jabba and Boba Fett? I'm impressed." This last was said between mouthfuls of sandwich.

I was watching in awe as, for the second time that day, he consumed prodigious amounts of food. In incredible combinations, too. The man had a cast iron stomach. I'd questioned the Surgeon Leader after an enormous breakfast--concerned that it was a sign of a problem--and had been cheerfully told that Solo had the most amazing metabolism he had ever seen, something akin to the fuel consumption of a runaway cruiser. He had to eat like that just to maintain a level weight. Boy, I wish I'd had that problem in the old days!

I accepted his approbation with an appropriately modest expression and he grinned. "Very nicely done," he said approvingly. "Just enough shy modesty. You have to work on an air of innocence, though."

"Right. I'll have to study your technique."

He laughed and looked around for something more to eat. "There's always your blanket," I suggested helpfully.

There was the hint of a glare and then he smiled sheepishly and shrugged. "I'm a growing boy." "up or out?"

One of his pillows came sailing in my direction and I snared it. "Needs a little more wrist action."

Laughing again, he changed the subject. "What about Chewie?"

"Well, George has been pretty accurate so far--"

"Who's George?" I airily waved the question away. "You don't know him. Anyway, the last I heard, he indicated Chewie was going to find you, along with Lando."

"Lando?" He was thoroughly indignant. "Has that Wookiee landed on his head recently?"

"Be reasonable. He didn't have much of a choice. What would you do if Darth Vader and the whole Imperial fleet landed in your backyard? He had a city to look after, you know."

There was a moment's silence, then he sighed. "You're right. I knew it then, too. I was just so worried about Leia and Chewie and Luke--okay, and myself--that I wasn't worrying about his problems. I guess he's trying to make up for it, and everyone is entitled to that."

I hid a smile. Not so self-centered as he made out, was he? Carrie Fisher was right: the mercenary pirate with the cream-filling. Actually, I amended, smuggler, not pirate. There's a big difference, not the least of which is that pirates tend to be mass murderers--hardly candidates for Cream-Filling of the Year awards.

"What did you have in mind to do next?" It took me a moment to realize he had continued talking.

"I suppose wait for Chewie and Lando. They, at least, should be able to find the Alliance. My guess would be that the fleet did not wait around the rendezvous point too long. At least not if they were using their heads."

He nodded, but there was a strange gleam in his eyes. Or perhaps I had imagined it; it was gone as quickly as it had come. Then I found myself staring at a prodigious yawn, and the look--if it had been there at all--was forgotten.

"You still need some rest," I commented, getting to my feet. "I'll stop by again later. Maybe Chewie and Lando will arrive today."

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Three days later, there had still been no sign of them. Han was getting decidedly restless. Having improved steadily, he was clearly ready for release from the medcenter and we were strolling down a corridor, heading (where else?) for the dining area. After all, he hadn't eaten in, oh, at least two or three hours!

"Okay," I said, "what if they don't show soon?"

"We'll have to look on our own. Dump the Slave I." There was noticeable distaste in his voice. "With the price we'll get for that, we can buy our own ship."

I couldn't resist the opening. "Yeah, but who's gonna fly it, kid? You?" He began to laugh, then stopped dead. "Hey, how did you know that?"

"George told me--sort of." "Who's George?" His voice had taken on a touch of an edge.

"I can't explain. He, um, gets around, though."

He didn't say anything, just flashed that strange look again, then started once more for the cafeteria. This time I was sure it had been there; only wished I knew what it meant.

I forgot the problem the instant we entered the dining area. Everyone was hovering around someone we couldn't see. Curiosity killed the cat, but this apparently never bothered Corellians. He shouldered his way through the crowd, with me trailing along in his wake.

The individual seated in the center of the gathering looked pretty well battered. He was humanoid, with emphasis on the "oid." The Sex Pistols probably would have taken him right in.

He was leaning against the back of his chair, breathing painfully, his eyes half closed. Treck Lortay, whose installation it was (and who made a pretty penny offering services--not to mention refuge--to those who tended to shun more legal establishments), was impatiently waiting for the Surgeon Leader to finish some hasty first aid.

"Bothan, unless I miss my guess," Han said over his shoulder.

I shook my head. It wasn't any name I remembered from WARS or EMPIRE.

"Okay, okay," Lortay snapped, unable to wait any longer. "I want to find out why the bastard crashed into my installation. Ruined part of the lift, damaged portions of the ceiling structure; hell, the list is endless."

The Surgeon Leader glared up at him. "I hardly think he did it by choice."

The ship wasn't in any better shape, even before it hit the ground. Fortunately, the ship kept enough power to avoid a deadfall and the cocoon gave him enough protection. Otherwise..." he shrugged.

The object of the discussion stirred and opened his eyes. A ghost of a smile flitted across his face. "Your pardon, honorable Lortay, for my ... thoughtless landing... I am able ... to pay for...the damage."

The effect was astonishing. Lortay's scowl vanished immediately, to be replaced by a reasonable facsimile of concern. "Well, well, we certainly did not mean to imply you were not welcome." He whirled abruptly and gesticulated at the crowd. "What is this? An Imperial holiday? There are repairs to be made."

The room cleared rapidly, leaving behind the Bothan, Surgeon Leader, Han, and myself. Han eyed the Bothan curiously. "I've always believed Bothans were very communal; I've never heard of one traveling alone."

For a moment there was no reply, then the Bothan eyed Han squarely. "It is true that no one here--and nothing said--can ever be reported to the Empire?"

"Or any other authority," Han said. "This is a safe haven. Anyone who broke that rule would find breathing difficult."

The Bothan nodded. "it is as I thought. Then I will tell you. Perhaps, in some way, you can help. I am with the Rebel Alliance."

I could see Han tense and realized that none of the people here--or probably any of his old acquaintances--knew of his association with the Alliance. Except me, of course--and I was beginning to get an inkling of what that strange look was all about. He was having doubts about my party affiliation.

Right now he was leaning forward and speaking softly. "Maybe I can help you. I'm Han Solo." "I believe I have heard the name," replied the Bothan noncommittally. "you were involved in the Paradeen confrontation."

Han grinned. "Nice try, but I've never been to Paradeen. I had a hand in the destruction of the Death Star and the evacuation of Yavin. Then I stayed with the unit commanded by Leia Organa and General Rieekan, up through the evacuation of Hoth."

The Bothan relaxed. "Ah, yes, quite correct. You must pardon my faulty memory." His eyes caught and held Han's, both pairs reflecting sardonic amusement. Then he began to cough badly and the Surgeon Leader angrily waved us away, but his patient shook his head. "A moment, Surgeon Leader. One more moment. I'll be all right until then." He turned to Han again. "They said you were not really part of the Alliance."

The Corellian was silent for a moment, then he smiled ruefully and gave a slight shake of his head. "'They' were wrong. I am." I could hear a note of disbelief in his voice as he realized the truth of what he had said. "I guess," he continued, "I have been for some time."

"Then mayhap you can help. There is a holochip containing information vital to the Alliance. There is to be a new Death Star." He ignored our surprised expressions and went on in muted tones, a distant look in his cobalt eyes. "Many of my people sacrificed their lives to obtain this. Unfortunately, as the result of a series of events too lengthy to detail, the chip had to be hidden. I was wounded and barely got away. All that is really needed is someone to retrieve the chip and carry it to the Alliance headquarters. They are presently located at--"

Han held up a hand. "When we get the chip, we'll come back and pick you up. You can tell us then." I wondered if his caution was directed at me.

A thought struck him and he grinned sheepishly (actually, rather adorably I thought!). "By the way, where is the chip?"

"Rondori."

Han's lower jaw hit the floor with a thud. "Rondori? The Rondori? The whole planet is an Imperial garrison, and we're supposed to get in and out?"

These cavalier assumptions he was making were beginning to get to me. "What do you mean 'we,' paleface?" I snarled.

"Paleface?"

"Never mind," I sighed. "The least you could do was ask. Maybe I don't want to go to an Imperial garrison."

The strange look was back, but I didn't have a clue this time as to its meaning. Then he nodded. "Consider yourself asked." A grin broke out. "Or would you prefer me to get down on one knee?"

"Why not? Grovelling at my feet is only appropriate," I replied airily.

"What I really want to know is, is this whole planet really an Imperial garrison?"

"No, but it does seem that way. There's a major research and development center on the planet and it's heavily guarded, which makes life rough for the civilian population, not to mention anyone who tries to land."

"They let ships come in?"

"They have to; the planet isn't self-sufficient. The population was there first. It was because of the ryllium mines--Rondori's main export--that they put the center there in the first place. The agricultural complexes stayed to feed civilians and military. Other goods have to be imported. They just do it under very careful guard."

"Great. Nothing like making it sound easy."

The Bothan interrupted us. "You don't have to steal it, just obtain it from where I left it."

"And where was that?"

He grinned. "There's a sign in front of the development center, announcing the Director's name. Well, the chip is stuck on the first 'R' in Director. After all, it's only this big," he added, using two of his six fingers to indicate something about the size of a large birthmark.

"Uh huh. And you don't think that the guards will be even a teensy-weensy suspicious when we whip out our magnifying glasses and stand around examining the first 'R' in Director?"

Han's "magnifying glass?" was lost in the Bothan's laughter. "You won't have to. The chip has been treated with a chemical." He handed me something that looked like a small purple pencil. "All you need do is point it--the light it emits will be invisible--and the chip will emit a green glow."

"Well, that solves all our problems, doesn't it?" There was a touch of sarcasm. "Except how to land in the first place."

"No problem," replied Han. "Lortay provides his guests with many services. We'll whip up a cargo and all the appropriate papers." He stood up and headed for the door. I followed shaking my head.

"Somehow, I don't think this is the way George is going."

Han threw me an exasperated glance over his shoulder. "Who's George?"

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The flight to Rondori was relatively uneventful. At least, as far as imperials were concerned.

Han was tense. He seemed worried about a lot of things, not the least of which was me. I had saved him and, so far, I hadn't done anything wrong, but he couldn't be positive and, if our mission were successful (hey! What do I mean

"if"? When. It has a much better sound.), the time for making a decision could not be put off any longer. As for me, I couldn't decide whether to tell him the truth; I was not sure being thought crazy was better than being thought a spy!

I was exploring our freighter. I had not been interested in doing that on the Slave 1. It had a nasty feel to it, and, besides, I was too worried about Han. Lortay, though, had been thrilled to get ownership of Fett's ship. The Slave I was exchanged for a freighter in reasonably decent condition, a cargo to carry, appropriate I.D., a gun and holster for Han (who was definitely suffering from the medical condition known as Blaster Deprivation!), and some extra credits. For bribes, I suppose!

I was enjoying poking around. Space travel was still more than a little new. It was hard to believe I was actually here, in space. The final frontier, and all that. This had been a dream since I picked up my first SF book as a child. Truth was, I was as excited as your average child at a circus, but it wouldn't do to show that. This was supposed to be old hat to me.

As I came back into the main room, a familiar object caught my eye. A holo chessboard! I'd always loved the game in WARS and I wandered over and crouched down, trying to figure out how the images were created.

"You play?"

I jumped a foot and managed to bang my head on the table, which seemed to amuse him no end, the sadistic bastard. Amazing how quietly someone in boots can walk on a metal floor when he's trying to sneak up on you. I really wanted to blast him in various vital portions of his anatomy, but I contented myself with a glare--and a mental sigh. Even standing there, smugly amused, the man was damnably attractive. But not available.

I answered his question. "Not a whit. How does it work?"

He sat down and waved me to a seat on the opposite side of the board and began to lay out the rules. He was an excellent teacher, clear, precise and patient. Unfortunately, my mind does not seem to lean toward games of strategy. I'm Douglas Fairbanks, not Bobby Fisher. My moves, when we began playing, undoubtedly violated every rule, but they certainly had flair and dash! In the true tradition of beginner's luck, I played him to a draw, probably because the zaniness of my plays left him too stunned to think straight!

He shook his head. "I've never seen moves like that," he said in awe.

"You never will again, either. I'm going out a winner--or, at least, a drawer. Besides, they'll never fool you again. Next time, you'll clobber me."

"Probably." Then he grinned. "Well, hopefully, anyway." He touched a button and the figures winked out. A very easy game to put away. Standing up, he began to clear away the traces left in the room by two people eating there and generally settling in. To my great surprise--and contrary to many a fan story--he was a very tidy person (boy, were we compatible! My room at home would have made Oscar Madison blanch!). I suppose you really have to be if you've had to live out of a small, self-contained area. And you have to be clean, too. It may not be next to godliness, but it probably is very noticeable on a small freighter!

Since neatness makes me shudder, I wandered into the control room and stood staring out the window. All my life have I wanted to go into space. I devoured SF books, especially those written as textbooks, rather than novels. I loved the feel they gave me of really being there. Astronomical art was a substitute for tourist photos. But hyper space was disappointing.

Not the concept, mind you, though I didn't know precisely how it worked. The idea of gobbling distance at the rate we were doing it was mind-boggling.

But there were no stars. Hyperspace was all gray, endless, endless reams of it. My eye craved infinite blackness and glittering diamonds.

This time I heard--or felt--him approach. I was getting better at this. He eyed me curiously, then glanced out the window. "Something wrong?"

"No. Just not what I wanted."

"What?"

"It's too long to explain, but I never thought I'd ever get out into space. No," I said, cutting off his query, "I really didn't, and it was a justified belief. Thinking about it always gave me a great sense of loss. At night, I would just stand outside, staring up, searching out stars and constellations. I always especially loved those nights that were very clear, where I had the feeling that there were many more stars up there that I could not quite see, but that if I looked fast enough, I would catch them." I waved at the window. "No stars."

He sat silent for a moment, then spoke softly. "I know what you mean. At first, I just wanted to be like the birds, to soar on wind-columns. But as I got older, I knew it was space I wanted most. Funny thing, but most spacers don't like space; they just can't seem to stay earthbound. Me, I don't trust it, but I love it. Vast and ageless and uncaring and awesome." He stopped suddenly, as if embarrassed by the emotion that had crept into his voice.

I pretended not to notice, all the time wondering how many sides to Han Solo there really were. And if, in ROTJ, George would be telling us--telling us?

Would I be there to see it? At this point, I wasn't sure--about this more poetic side.

„ it's a shame this isn't the Falcon," he said brightly, in an obvious attempt to change the subject. "We could have some music."

"Don't tell me; you kept your collection of 45's."

He started to open his mouth, then held up his hand. "I know, I know.'Never mind,'" he mimicked. "No, that wasn't right. I forgot the airy wave of the hand."

I was relieved he seemed to be taking the 'I can't tell you' routine fairly well--at least for now. How long that was going to last, I had no idea. Corellian temper, and all that.

"Well," he continued, "I may have nothing to play, but I can teach you some space chanties you probably haven't heard, since you seem to be new to this."

Oh, Lord, I was sure my delicate puritanical ears were in for a beating--and I was right! Not exactly pieces to be sung in your average Victorian drawing room. On the other hand, they were funny. Then, without missing a beat, he shifted into songs more serious, songs of space and vastness and danger. Songs of the people who wandered in its blackness and who loved it.

They were moving pieces, and he sung them marvelously, in a voice rich and expressive, exposing emotions he normally kept more deeply buried. A man of many talents and great complexity was our Han Solo. This fantasy was becoming increasing: troublesome. I had to keep reminding myself that he might have been male and twenty-one, but he was not free. And I seemed to have increasing difficulty in deciding where my loyalties lay.

Boy, this was really turning into a fun trip.

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Rondori was ugly. Period. End of paragraph. It might have been pretty once, but the Empire had left its mark. Whole areas had been leveled and strip-mined. Maybe a large part of the feeling of ugliness was atmosphere. A gray pall seemed to hang over everything.

There had been an almost interminable wait before we had been permitted to land. They had asked the same questions over and over--to see if we gave the same response, I suppose. Then, when down, it took almost an hour more before we got clearance. The inspector studied our I.D., and questioned us about cargo and destination endlessly, then grudgingly let us pass with admonitions not to wander our listed destination was one Nayongo, a merchant originally from

Kando, who had a shop here. In addition to being "one of us," showing enormous devotion to duty, I might add, to have stayed on Rondori, he was propitiously located, in that we would have to pass the all-important sign (and main entrance to the complex) in order to get there.

We strolled along, past dingy-looking stores and open-air displays of wares, trying to look nonchalant. Or, at least, I was trying; it seemed to come naturally to the hotshot, who sauntered along as if his conscience was as clear as a baby's. The street we were on opened up into a vast square. On the other side was the main entrance and THE sign. It was a lot of ground to cover and it left me feeling exposed. My whispered comment to that effect was greeted with a quizzical expression. He stepped back, eyed me up and down with a serious expression, then shook his head. "Nope. Unfortunately." His reflexes really are quite good; I just missed his toe. unfortunately.

We halted at the edge of the square. There was more guard activity than there should have been and we pretended interest in a booth displaying electronic goods. The merchant was pleased with potential customers, so I asked about various items, while Han surreptitiously studied the gathering at the far side of the square. They really were clever gadgets, providing a variety of services, including advanced versions of those handy-dandy scare-off-a-burgler devices that turn your lights on and off. These ranged from elaborate controls that could be hooked into your entire electric system, to these really cute palm-sized portable buggers that could be attached magnetically to a single electric device and timed to turn it on and off. The poor man had been showing me everything so enthusiastically that I took pity on him and bought one of the portable doo-hickeys.

Han gave a slight jerk of his head, so I collected my purchase and joined him. "What is all that?" I whispered.

"Looks like a delivery--and if I'm reading those tanks right, it's T-juice."

"T-juice?"

He grinned. "It stands for tri-something-or-other, something-or-other. You could choke on the syllables. But it's a powerhouse fuel. Unfortunately, it's also as volatile as hell. That's why it's only used under very controlled circumstances, and only when you need intense heat." He nodded at the tanks. "It probably got a little shaken up in transit, so they're letting it settle before moving it inside. Better," he grinned again, "that it should blow up out here than in there!"

I glanced up. "Won't the sun bother it?"

"See those coils underneath? Refrigeration. It'll stay cool enough."

"Oh, good. We can tell the Winston Man it's safe to smoke."

"Smoke?" He looked puzzled. "As in fire?"

"As in cigarettes. Something you light up, put in your mouth and smoke. You know, like cigars. Cigarillos. Tar. Nicotine."

That word he knew. "Nicotine? You put nicotine in your system?"

"Well, not me, but there are those who do where I come from."

"That's a disgusting habit. Which reminds me, where do you come from?"

"Oh, you wouldn't know it," I said dismissively.

"Just like George, huh?"

"Uh huh. Just like George."

"Right." There was more--much more--than a hint of annoyance in that one word, and he stomped off across the square, while I trotted along behind, trying to catch up. I reached him after he had covered about one-quarter of the way and, though he didn't look at me, he slowed his pace to mine.

I touched his arm. "Hey, I really will tell you; I promise. It's just that..." I made a frustrated gesture, "it needs a lot of explaining. We don't have the time now."

"I hope so," he grumbled, then strode out once more. I wasn't sure, but I thought I heard drifting back, "I'm beginning to like you."

Yep. Uh huh. This was all getting complicated. I was certainly beginning to like him. Control, remember?

Fortunately, the situation around me precluded a lengthy hand-wringing.

Like Scarlett O'Hara, I'd worry about it tomorrow. Right now I wasn't sure what our odds were on just getting through today.

I really couldn't believe, we were going to hoist the chip off the sign right under the noses of a whole bunch of mean-looking people, but the closer we got, the more chipper Han got. He might be damned attractive, but I was also pretty sure he was totally crazy!

We stopped in front of the sign to gawk in tourist fashion at the installation. Han, waving the purple pencil around carelessly, kept up a steady chatter about how impressive it was. As the front of the pencil played across the sign, there was a

brief flare of a green dot. Bingo! On the ship, Han had slipped a flesh-colored, thin pad over his left palm. If he could just touch the holochip, it would transfer itself to the pad. While Han nattered cheerily, I eyed the research facility. I hated it on sight. It had a Nazi-type experimentation feel to it. Something grim and relentless, an air of death. I really wanted to do something to, well, at least let it know I objected to its presence.

Han turned as if to leave, then stumbled and fell forward. I almost started to reach to help him, before I realized it was planned. As he "slipped," he threw his hands out to stop himself against the sign. His left palm slapped neatly over the object of our quest, then he pushed himself away and straightened up, throwing me a sheepish grin. I was appropriately admonishing him for being a klutz, when the guards arrived. They did not appreciate sudden moves on their doorstep.

As they suspiciously questioned Han, I backed away. A sudden inspiration had struck. It must be close association with a certain Corellian. I didn't know how much damage to the entire installation it would do, but it had to mess up something.

Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out the tiny gizmo. It really was small, and metal-colored. Why, they would never even notice it on the cooling unit. I hoped.

We had agreed that, in order to avoid arousing suspicion on this rigidly-controlled world, we would proceed to meet our merchant contact, as if everything were normal. Presumably, it would not take us more than an hour, including get-ting back to the ship. I palmed the whatsit and glanced at it surreptitiously. It was simplicity itself to set. One hour-and-one-half. That should give us enough time to get completely out of here. I didn't know whether the T-juice became upset in normal temperatures, but I was hoping something that volatile needed to be kept exceptionally cool at all times.

I strolled over to the tanks with as much nonchalance as I could muster. No guards had stood too closely, undoubtedly on the assumption that no sane person would come anywhere near. Probably a sound assumption. Right now, though, they were all focused on Han.

I put a bovine expression on my face and pretended interest in the writing on the tanks--warnings of every description--over the refrigeration unit. As I leaned over and "peered" intently at the words, a guard, turning around caught sight of me.

"Hey," he said, hurrying over, "get away from there."

I played dumb. "What's the matter? I was just reading this stuff."

"Yeah. Well, that 'stuff' could blow you up--and us, too! That's T-juice."

Dumb. "Huh?"

"Listen, just move it. Now!"

Making a face, I straightened up and turned, permitting my right hand to touch the unit control box. There was one more teeny piece of electronic equipment on the tank when I left. And, hopefully, a message for Palpatine.

"When you're racing with the clock" is how the line goes in the song from PAJAMA GAME. That's how I felt. I kept glancing at my watch. Things had not gone swimmingly at our merchant's establishment. The place had been filled with customers and we had had to wait to speak with our contact. All the time, the minutes ticked away, but I could hardly make a general announcement under the circumstances. The thingummy had been set to turn the refrigeration unit off one and a half hours after I started it, and I had no idea how long it would take the T-juice to reach ka-boom point.

It was almost the moment for the coils to be turned off by the time we left the merchant's establishment. We had a good twenty-minute walk back to our ship, barring unforeseen circumstances. I still didn't tell Han. The last thing we needed now was to be stopped dead, even by his disbelief.

We almost made it to the ship--we had just entered the port proper--when everything blew. Even I gaped at the force of the explosion. The very ground beneath my feet rocked. Even at this distance, I could see parts of the complex heading skyward. Another even more violent explosion sent me stumbling into Han and we both went down. All I could think of was Krakatoa, blowing itself off the face of the earth. Maybe I'd overdone it just a little.

The Imperials reacted swiftly. An announcement blared across the port, declaring it closed. All ships would prepare to be searched. Stormtroopers scurried to various points in the port, while long lines of them raced out into the streets of the town. This was definitely getting sticky. I had the feeling getting the short distance to our ship would be tough.

Han was on his knees, watching the stormtroopers charge by. He hesitated an instant longer, then he jumped to his feet. "Come on; it's only going to get harder to reach the ship. We've got to move."

I didn't argue, but raced after him. Fortunately, for all concerned, I was slower than he (though I would have left my "old" self in the dust. Of course, a tortoise would have done that also). As he ran past a shadowed bay, a stormtrooper, obviously acting under the conviction that he who runneth must flee-eth some dastardly deed, stepped out of the gloom and took aim on one Corellian back. He didn't see me, still behind him. I had a vision of pieces of Han Solo being

scattered across the port. I think I yelled something like "Hit the deck!" Worry does strange things to your brain.

Fortunately, Han got the intended message. He really does have great reflexes. Throwing himself to the left, he hit the ground rolling. The blast whistled harmlessly over his head and he bounced to his feet. The trooper didn't get a second chance; I let him have it with both barrels (so to speak).

Han grinned at me and gave me what, I assumed, was the rebel equivalent of the high sign. Then he resumed his rapid progress toward our ship. That sucker could really move. I was getting tired of this Female-Runs-One-Step-Behind routine, but I didn't quite see what I could do about it. Actually, I was just pleased I wasn't gasping for breath as I scooted up the ramp. The New and improved Me!

The problem now was how we would get off planet without getting our backsides burned. I solved it by getting hysterical. In my best Basil Fawlty imitation I informed the port authority that my pilot had started up the vessel just before the first explosion occurred. The ship had rocked violently and he had been thrown, head first, against the console. The next thing I knew, he was unconscious and the ship was lifting on some kind of autopilot (Han had already lifted the freighter off the ground and was slowly heading spaceward).

The controller was terribly concerned; he gave me a militaristic equivalent of "Tough," though he promised to order the cruisers overhead not to fire on us (Han chortled softly). After all, he continued, either the ship would just continue tooting along in normal space or it would automatically jump into hyper-Nothing to worry about. Eventually, my imaginary pilot would wake up. And if he didn't... I could hear the shrug. Lovely people, these Imperials.

I warned him I would report this to my uncle, Vito Corleone, which distressed him not at all (nor surprisingly, the poor fool). Tiring of my threats and hysterics, he cut off my transmission at his end, which was just fine with me. Both Han and I sank back into our seats with a sigh of relief, then we burst into laughter.

"Hey," I said, between gasps of glee, "you'd better duck down 'til we're past the cruisers. You're supposed to be unconscious. Don't worry; I can handle the coordinates back to Lortay's place."

He made a face, but obediently slid down in his seat. We zoomed unimpeded past imperial cruisers; the controller had kept his promise. Flicking on a rearscreen, I was afforded a view of the world we were leaving. Thick, dark gray smoke over the location of the research center was clearly visible. I felt a twinge of guilt. What if there had been innocent people there? I had not stopped to ask, the feel of the place had upset me so.

"Uh, that was a military installation, wasn't it?" I asked Han, who was watching rising smoke with a combination of disbelief and awe.

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Definitely. Staffed by purely military personnel. And I don't think anything nice has ever come out of there."

Better. Much better. Blowing up the center now took on the emotional satisfaction of demolishing Berchtesgarden. Han was shaking his head.

"What I can't figure out," he said, "is why it happened in the first place."

I tried to look innocent, then gave it up. "Actually, you might say I had something to do with it." His expression clearly said Sure. Tell me another one, so I plunged ahead. "You remember that little dufus I bought to keep the booth vendor happy? Well, I slipped it onto the refrigeration coils while the guards were all gathering around you. It was set to turn the coils off in an hour-and-one-half. I just hoped the T-juice would go boom-boom at room temperature. And it did."

He just stared at me for a moment, then-let out a crack of laughter. "Beautiful! I couldn't have done it better myself."

"I suppose," I replied, "that that is the ultimate compliment."

I wouldn't have believed anyone could look that smug. My fingers were itching to get ahold of something to throw at him. Then he grinned. "I'm glad you didn't turn out to be an Imperial spy," he commented. "That complex would be too valuable to waste for virtually any reason, including nailing one more rebel base. Maybe if it were the last base, but otherwise..."

"I'm glad, too. It probably would have put a crimp in our relationship."

There was a feral gleam in his eyes. "To be sure." The gleam dissolved into a roguish glint. "Do we have a 'relationship'?"

Whoa, girl, he's spoken for. Damn it. "I suppose Her Royalness will be happy to see you."

A puzzled frown settled between his eyes. "I suppose so, too; we don't dislike each other nearly as much as we pretend to." He cocked his head. "Why did you single her out?"

"Uh ... well, um ... aren't the two of you--I mean ... you know. A hot item?"

He never looked so young as at that moment, his eyes opened their widest in a sterling imitation of a three-year-old confronting something strange and fascinating. "What? Where did you get that idea?"

"Well, George said...on Bespin--" I halted in confusion.

"How do you like that? George--whoever he may be--finally blew one! Sure, Leia was distressed on Bespin. I've already told you; we really do like each other, but that, fortunately, is as far as it goes. I could never live with someone that gung ho; it's too tiring. She lives to slay dragons!" He grinned wickedly.

"Sometimes I think she should start with herself!"

You know, this place was starting to look much better to me. I didn't say so, though. "She and Luke, huh?"

"Nope. Luke's got his eye on a barmaid on Talos IV."

A barmaid? "Uh, she's got great Force potential?" I hazarded.

"What she's got is a great set of gazongas. They kept that kid on the farm too long!" He leaned back and placed one booted foot on the console. "Actually, Leia was engaged before we met her and it turned out he hadn't been on Alderaan when it blew. It really helped her when she learned that." There was considerably more than a hint of compassion in his eyes. The big softie.

He asked it so casually, I almost missed the question. "What are you planning on doing now? You know, you're pretty handy to have around. You can stay with us--Chewie and me--if you want to."

Well, it wasn't precisely an impassioned declaration of love, but it was a start. Providing those annoying bastards I couldn't see didn't mess things up.

Looking suddenly uncomfortable, he mumbled something about checking the galley (after all, the poor starved boy had gone almost three whole hours without a bite!) and disappeared into the corridors of the ship. Almost immediately, I knew they were back and I could "hear" their voices, in synch as before.

"Well. What do you wish to do?"

"You mean, I get to choose whether I stay here or return to my old"--I didn't know what to call it--"dimension?"

"Yes." There was a note of impatience in the voices.

I studied the doorway through which Han had exited. There were dangers here (though it was not an entirely unknown place; George Lucas hadn't been doing too badly, so far), but there appeared to be worthwhile rewards. If I went back, I'd be short, dumpy, indecisive me (a line from one of the stories in Simak's CITY

came to mind: "And they'll turn me back into a man."). And one sexy Corellian would be on this side of the fence.

Well, some fledglings fall further from the tree than others. "I'll stay."

They didn't even wait to say goodbye, winking out like a blown fuse. Their departure was followed by the arrival of Captain Solo, munching contentedly on a sandwich. He had made me one also, the thoughtful cutie.

He handed it to me silently and studied my face. "Well?" he finally demanded.

I took my time--no point in seeming too eager--and savored a mouthful of sandwich. "Oh, I think I'll take you up on your offer," I said offhandedly. I indicated the sandwich. "It's hard to find a man who can cook."

His lips twitched and there was noticeable warmth in his smile. Boy, was I glad I'd read all those Regency novels, so that I could identify racing pulses when I stumbled across them!

Leaning forward he whispered in my ear, "What do you think George will have to say about all this?"

I smiled at him brightly. "George who?"

***THE END***

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