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Diamond Of The First Water

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He was a hell of a pilot. Which had saved his butt on more than one occasion, since he was also cocky, egotistical and notoriously poor at following orders. Still, as he had always managed to pull it off -- because, after all, he **was** a hell of a pilot -- he had also been able to sweet-talk his way out of any potential punishment.

Unfortunately, this time he had had the misfortune to pull his latest cavalier disregard of instructions from superior officers under the baleful regard of Admiral Han Solo, Commander-in-Chief of the Combined Forces of the New Republic, who was not amused. The lieutenant found himself shifting uncomfortably before a pair of angry hazel eyes.

"...and it is my belief, sir, that there are times when an order must be disobeyed."

"Bull!" Solo surged to his feet. "Nobody wants a mindless idiot blindly obeying orders, but get this straight: the time to exercise individual discretion is when you're the only one out there, the circumstances have changed and you have to make a choice. Not exactly the situation here, was it? You were **surrounded** by top brass -- hell, you could have been blinded by the combined reflection from their medals! What's more, your little escapade almost screwed everything up. Doesn't exactly qualify as saving a deteriorating situation, does it?"

The lieutenant began to believe he might actually be in a spot of trouble. "Sir, if you would permit me --"

"Can it!" The Admiral moved around the desk and stood nose-to-nose with the young lieutenant. "Listen up. I've forgotten more ways to thumb your

nose at authority than you'll ever know. And if you think that I'm going to let you do to me what I used to do to everyone else, you're a few cards short of a full sabacc deck!"

The younger man opened his mouth as if to speak, then, deciding that discretion was the better part of valor, he shut it again quickly. Admiral Solo ignored him. "You're grounded. Three months doing every kind of shit job they can find for you. Then another three months probation." He started for the door, then turned back to face the now-stunned lieutenant. "All the skill in the galaxy won't make a damned bit of difference without good judgment. Contrary to all those stories about me, I was **never** reckless. I was a gambler with my skill -- **when** I had to be. Not just for the hell of it, and not to show off. You're no good to me if you can't learn self-discipline. I'm giving you half a year to do it."

After he disappeared out the door, a shaky lieutenant hesitantly stepped outside and gave a startled yelp as a hand came down on his shoulder. A sympathetic smile in a friendly face. Exactly what he needed.

"You don't have the brains you were born with," his roommate pointed out cheerfully. "It would have been bad enough to play those games in front of him any time, but especially now."

"Why? Is it that time of the month?"

"His wife's dragging him off to some diplomatic to-do on Trantos for a week. He hates that sort of stuff."

"Well, why doesn't he just refuse to go- instead of taking it out on poor, misunderstood lieutenants?"

"Are there any of those in the room? And his wife, in case you forgot, just happens to be the President. That means she outranks him. Besides," his roomie added as they left the deck, "I hear she has a great right hook."

* * *

"...so I grounded him."

"Really, Han, don't you think that was a bit severe?" Leia affixed an earring to one lobe.

"No," came the curt reply from somewhere below even Leia's eye level, and on the other side of the bed. "Stupidity deserves what it gets."

"Boy, no wonder they call you Old Ironpants."

"What?" Han's head came up abruptly over the edge of the bed. "Who calls me that?"

"Everybody."

Han appeared stunned. "Old Ironpants? *Old* Ironpants?" He emphasized the first word.

Leia, who had been studying the mirror carefully as she brushed on some powdered kohl, grimaced as she realized her comment had been a serious mistake. She turned to find a forlorn expression on Han's face. *So that was where Bail got it from,* she noted wryly, thinking of their three-year-old.

"Old?" he repeated.

"Han, be reasonable. Have you ever heard a commanding officer be referred to as *Young* anything?" A slight smile flickered across his face. *Ten years ago that probably wouldn't have bothered him. We're all getting a tad more sensitive about the passing minutes!* She smiled back. "I notice that the Ironpants part doesn't bother you."

"Nope." He ducked down again behind the bed. "I *earned* that."

Leia leaned forward, curiosity fully aroused now. "If you don't mind my asking, flyboy, why are you crawling around on the floor?"

"My sock. I *know* there were two of them, I put them on the bed myself. What happened is, I've probably lost it in the glare of the ninety-seven chandeliers hanging in this room alone." He smiled at her brightly. "Loved the tour of the palace this afternoon. Each room more mind-boggling than the last. You know, I've seen better taste in --"

"Han!"

-- uh, local establishments --"

Leia fixed him with a steely eye.

-- that, of course, I *never* frequented," he finished hastily.

"How do you know about the decor then?" his wife inquired sweetly.

"Chewie." Han willingly threw his friend to the dire-wolves. "I often had to speak firmly to him about his loose morals."

Leia gave up. Laughing, she threw a wadded-up tissue at him. "Isn't it wonderful that you have friends willing to sacrifice their characters and good names on your behalf? By the way, could that be your sock?"

"Damn. How did it get over there?"

"Do you want my considered opinion?"

"Not really."

"Well, if you insist...personally, I think you hate these bashes so much that you are subconsciously attempting to sabotage it."

Han glared at her. "Tell me, is this fascinating insight the result of many years of study in the psychological sciences, or did you just pick it up perusing one of the weekly holotabloids?"

Leia shook her head sadly. "Amazing how some people simply resist the truth." Then she grinned broadly. "Well, too bad, hotshot. You're going anyway!"

* * *

It was even worse than he could have possibly imagined. Half the people in the room would need a heavy shot of k'rith juice just to be labeled boring, and the other half were so vicious, in the smiling polite way taught to the rich from birth, that Han would have been afraid to be confined in a small room with them if there weren't plenty of food around.

However, he knew that this trip was important to Leia. Trantos was an independent world with two colonies, ruled by an absolute monarch called the Oligarch. The Republic needed an ore mined in one of the Trantosian mountain ranges, and that meant a treaty. Since it involved a first meeting with the head of an independent government, Leia had decided to lead the Republic delegation herself.

Which meant that hubby went along as well. Leia wanted the Republic's chief military officer present to evaluate any military provisions the Oligarch may wish to place into the treaty. While Han protested vigorously, there was, in fact, no way he was going to let her go off to something like this alone. Too many people would profit if the tough-minded Madam President were to have a fatal accident, and unallied territory would be an excellent place for such an attack since it would not embarrass a friendly government. Han trusted his own instincts best in situations like that.

He dragged his thoughts back to current events just in time to catch a dagger glare from his wife. The reason was approaching -- the Oligarch himself. A smallish man with a sharp thin face, he had hooded gray eyes that promised secrecy and a petulant mouth that signaled self-indulgence. Han took an instant dislike to him.

Deos d'Kos greeted them effusively. The honor was all his, that the President and the Commander-in-Chief of the New Republic should visit his poor and humble world. Considerably more in the same vein passed his lips before the speech ended. He and Leia then exchanged empty pleasantries. The central reason for the visit was not even hinted at, much less addressed directly.

Han soon found his attention wandering; he had little patience with diplomatic niceties. It did not go unnoticed by his host. "Ah, Admiral, you have no fondness for diplomacy?" the Oligarch inquired.

He knew he risked permanent foot injury from his wife's three-inch heels, but he couldn't resist. "But I do. Cruiser diplomacy."

"I see." d'Kos gave a tigerish smile. "You and the President disagree on the solution to problems, then?"

"Not at all. We both believe that problems should be eliminated. What we disagree on is how to *define* the problem. See, Leia thinks that it's the *issue* in dispute. You eliminate that by negotiating it away. Now I, on the other hand," Han's smile matched the Oligarch's, "I think the problem is the guy sitting on the other side of the table *putting* the issue into dispute. *That* problem you eliminate with the business end of a blaster."

Leia gave a long-suffering sigh and the Oligarch appeared taken aback. He studied Han closely for a moment before deciding that the Admiral was both deadly serious and a dangerous lunatic. Murmuring soothingly, he excused himself with a thousand apologies, but there were *so* many people he must talk to and surely they would understand?

They did. As d'Kos left, Han risked a glance at his wife and then gave a mental sigh of relief. Leia was struggling not to laugh, but she spared a glare for her husband when she caught him watching her. "Was that necessary?" she hissed.

Han adopted an injured air. "But, sweetheart, you wouldn't have wanted me to tell the Oligarch it was none of his business, would you?"

"Well, you didn't have to give him the impression that you were missing a vital computer chip!"

"To our advantage, love. He might think twice about giving us a hard time if he believes a maniac with a loaded gun is running the Republic military. What's more --" He broke off abruptly. "Good gods!"

Leia followed his startled gaze. A middle-aged woman with hennaed hair that clashed with her gown, which appeared to be yards of puce shimmersilk, entered the ballroom. What held the eye, however, was the diamond that hung around her neck.

"Well, it certainly fits right in with the decor of the Palace," Han commented. "Tastelessly ostentatious. That thing must be the size of my fist."

"You exaggerate. More like the size of **my** fist."

"I stand corrected. That, of course, makes it taste**fully** ostentatious."

Leia glanced over at him. "Are you telling me, flyboy, that you would not have sold your grandmother, back in your less-than-respectable days, for that bauble?"

"I didn't say it wasn't worth a fortune, just that I wouldn't wear it."

"I certainly hope not. It would occasion some nasty comments about your tendencies!"

"Only if I wore the gown, too."

Leia bit back her retort as the vision in puce was clearly making a beeline for them. "Your Highness," the woman gushed, attempting a slight curtsy. Han shut his eyes, unwilling to see the resulting disaster if she toppled over.

Apparently, she made it safely because she continued a rapid-fire patter, and Han ventured a peek. He blinked at the light bouncing back from the diamond and wondered briefly if diamond blindness was a treatable condition.

"We are so honored to have you here, Your Highness." Then, apparently struck by the thought that she might have offended a certified Hero of the Great Rebellion of the Republic, she added, "And you, too, Admiral."

Han had no objections to being an afterthought, so long as it meant that their newfound friend would confine her attentions to Leia, a position

which he cheerfully admitted to himself was thoroughly cowardly. He might be willing to sacrifice his life for Leia, but one had to draw the line *somewhere*. He toyed with the idea of edging away, but his wife, who seemed to have added mind-reading to her already not-inconsiderable talents, applied a none-too-gentle pressure to his toes that clearly advised him to forget it. With a sigh, he pasted a patently insincere smile on his face and stayed where he was.

Insincerity rapidly gave way to tedium as the monologue continued. She was, it seemed, the wife of one of the owners of a mine consortium. *Ah,* thought Han, *that explains whence cometh the wherewithal to purchase that -tiny- diamond.*

She was prattling on about the bauble itself. "Oh, yes, dear Maervin purchased this for me last year. Fabulous, isn't it? A diamond of the first water."

Han had never understood that expression. Why a diamond of the first water? Why not a spaceship of the first tree? They had as much in common.

His thoughts were cut off abruptly as the room was suddenly plunged into total darkness. The heavy drapes drawn over the floor-to-ceiling windows kept even a glimmer of moonlight from entering. There was a shocked silence, then voices, owners unseen, were raised in incoherent babble, though an undercurrent of panic could be felt.

Han's first concern was for his wife. "Leia?" he called quietly, and was reassured by her equally quiet "here." He reached out toward the voice until his hand came in contact with a begowned person. "Is that you?"

"I hope so," came Leia's dry reply. "Otherwise, I'll have to ask you to kill whoever's grabbing that particular part of my anatomy."

"Thought it felt familiar," Han said cheerfully.

Around them, the chorus of voices continued, punctuated by curses and exclamations of pain as people walked into various pieces of furniture. The loudest voice belonged to their companion in puce, who kept up a steady stream of terrified chatter, underlined by queries as to where her dear Maervin was. *Probably in another solar system if he's got any brains,* Han thought disgustedly.

She suddenly gave a strangled gasp and shrieked, "Help! Someone's grabbed my throat!"

"That's one way to shut her up," Leia muttered. Han suppressed an answering laugh.

Silence followed for several minutes, then, as suddenly as they had gone off, the lights came back on and a second shriek rent the air. "It's gone! It's gone!"

It most certainly *was* gone. Nothing remotely resembling a diamond lay any longer across that voluminous bosom. Han glanced down, in case the necklace had merely broken, but there was nothing there, and the diamond in question could hardly be overlooked.

Everyone had heard her hysterical cries, and they were all staring at the three of them. Even the Oligarch was paying attention and, a moment later, he headed in their direction. A sharp glance apprised him of the situation and he patted the woman's shoulder mechanically.

"There, there, madam, we shall get to the bottom of this." He turned to a hovering aide. "Seal the palace and the grounds. No one is to enter or leave save Chief Inspector d'Reyfus. And advise the Chief Inspector that I expect him here at once."

* * *

It took the Chief Inspector about one-half hour to arrive. He was a large man, with a bluff, hearty manner that, Han suspected, masked a shrewd mind. He spoke somewhat apologetically as he indicated that, while, of course, no one suspected such distinguished individuals of being involved, they did understand that, having been closest to the scene of the crime, well, he was sure they could see...

"You want to search us, Chief Inspector?" Han asked pleasantly.

The latter eyed Leia's gown and managed to refrain from mentioning that there would be no point, as one probably could not hide anything larger than a pimple under it. Han could appreciate the obvious direction of the Chief Inspector's thoughts.

"Uh, actually, I had more in mind a search of your quarters."

"Why, of course, Chief Inspector," Leia said sweetly. "You won't mind if the Admiral and I are present? While I'm sure that this will turn out to be nothing more than a simple theft, there is always the possibility that some unscrupulous person or persons, in an effort to disrupt diplomatic

relations between your people and the Republic or to influence the treaty in some way, might plant such an item in our quarters." Such persons as the planetary security forces under the orders of the Oligarch. Leia left the punchline hanging unspoken, but the Chief Inspector got the point anyway and looked at her with sudden respect. The Trantosians tended to think of women as ornaments and, though he had been told she was the President of the New Republic, he had not in fact given that much credence. He was beginning to reassess his position.

The search was brief but thorough and done with a minimum of disruption to the rooms. "Well, now, as I said, a mere formality, Gentles."

"You will be continuing your investigation, then?"

"Of course, Madam President."

"Marvelous! Give us just a few minutes to change and we'll come along with you."

Chief Inspector d'Reyfus blinked. "What?"

Han nodded in agreement. "Maybe we can help."

The Chief Inspector managed admirably to contain his elation at that last remark. In fact, a casual observer might have believed mistakenly undoubtedly -- that a somewhat stunned expression had flickered across his face.

True to their word, Han and Leia changed into less formal attire quickly and joined the Chief Inspector in the corridor. A moment later, a breathless herald announced the arrival of the Oligarch, who turned the corner a step behind his servant.

"Ah, there you are, my honored guests. I apologize for any inconvenience you have suffered thus far as a result of this unfortunate incident."

Leia inclined her head graciously. "The Chief Inspector has carried out his duty thoroughly, but with great courtesy."

The Oligarch fell into step beside them. "You do understand my need to seal off the grounds, I trust?"

"Of course, Oligarch -- for the next six days, that is."

The Oligarch looked over at them both. Han remained silent, waiting to see what tack Leia was going to take. "You must understand," she

continued regretfully, "that we have our share of hotheads in the Republic. I'm sure you must have the same problem here. My own brother, for example," Leia added, throwing Luke's good name to the winds, "has quite a ferocious temper. If we were to be detained beyond our scheduled departure date..." Her voice trailed off dramatically.

"And you know the military mind," Han cut in smoothly. "Shoot first -- it's easier to negotiate with a corpse."

"Not that we would approve of such actions, but if we were here and unable to contact them, well, you *can* see the problem."

The Oligarch glanced at them sharply, but their faces remained bland and amiable. He was no fool, however, and he knew a threat when he heard one. He gave a smile as insincere as their expressions of regret. "Why, my dears, there never was any question of holding you here. You are treasured guests, not prisoners! No one could possibly even suggest that you or any of your people could have been involved. I will leave that good Inspector to his task. We will discuss the treaty soon," he added vaguely. He swept them a small bow and hastened on his way.

They waited until the Oligarch was well out of sight before exchanging broad grins, Han's especially wide. He suspected that the Oligarch, in line with the prevailing chauvinism on Trantos, had not given Leia her due. That would probably change.

Turning to the security chief, Han suggested that they not waste any more time in continuing the investigation. Having just seen them face down the absolute ruler of his world, d'Reyfus was disinclined to argue with them. "Quite so. The longer it takes, the less likely that we will find the diamond."

"I'm sure, Chief Inspector, that the possibility has occurred to you that dear Maervin -- what *is* his last name, anyway?"

"k'Rass."

"Thank you. Anyway, that he might have planned insurance fraud?"

"Yes, indeed, Madam President, it has. While your quarters were being searched, I had certain matters checked out. It seems that the stone was only insured for 6,000,000 rous."

Han stared at him. "3,000,000 credits? That diamond is worth twenty times that amount, if not more!"

"Very true, sir. But, as the diamond itself was irreplaceable and because Mistress k'Rass liked to wear it all the time rather than keep it secured, the carrying charges per year for full valuation would have been something like 8,000,000 rous. Master k'Rass decided to insure it merely for an amount sufficient to cover the search for another such unique item, should the diamond itself be stolen."

"And his financial condition?"

"An excellent question, Madam President. According to the major brokerage house here in the city -- whose CEO was not thrilled at being awakened at this hour, I must admit! -- his finances seem solid. At least, those they know about. I had his quarters searched anyway; nothing was found. Ah, here we are." He knocked. "Master k'Rass, it is Chief Inspector d'Reyfus. If I may speak with you?"

The door swung wide. "Of course, Chief Inspector, of course. Please do come in. Ah, these are assistants of yours, then? As you might imagine, my poor wife is most distraught. She's lying down, and I'd rather not disturb her. You know, it's quite amazing, but dear Laatia had a premonition that something would go wrong. Why, she was saying to me just before, 'Maervin,' she said, 'I just don't feel right.' Astonishing, isn't it?"

"I'll say," murmured Han. Listening to the non-stop inane dialogue, he couldn't believe a married couple could be so well-matched -- until he caught k'Rass' eyes. Hard, cold and dangerous, and totally at odds with his outward manner. Han knew a sharkelin when he saw one and he unconsciously moved closer to Leia, even as he acknowledged that being a success in business required the same ruthlessness of temperament that being a success in crime did.

k'Rass drew a deep breath and the Chief Inspector, taking advantage of the momentary lull, jumped in before the motor could start again. "Sir, have there been any previous attempts, that you know of, to steal the diamond?"

The abrupt change in direction seemed to throw k'Rass for a moment, then he regained momentum. "None whatsoever to my knowledge."

"Who would know that you would be bringing the diamond with you?"

"Why, everyone. Laatia **always** wore it at any major function."

The Chief Inspector sighed. "I was rather afraid of that." He chewed his lip. "From whom did you purchase the gem?"

"Well, actually, Chief Inspector, it was purchased privately from someone known to a business contact of mine. In the Republic."

"Ah." Leia smiled politely. "You do business in the Republic? Do you travel there, or is it simply a long-distance connection?"

k'Rass looked at them squarely for the first time. His eyes narrowed in concentration, then widened in surprise. He recovered smoothly. "Madam President," he said with a flourish, "you must forgive me. I suppose it only proves the truth of that old saying that you tend to see what you expect to see."

Leia was equally diplomatic. "Think nothing of it, Master k'Rass. We are hardly here in any official capacity. The Admiral and I are simply great fans of mystery holovids --" Han never ceased to marvel at his straight-as-an-arrow wife's ability to tell the tallest tales in a voice dripping with sincerity "-- and we thought we would find the Chief Inspector's investigation interesting."

"Of course. Well, then, in answer to your query, I have never actually been to the Republic myself. It's all conducted through various contacts."

Chief Inspector d'Reyfus cleared his throat. "One last question, sir, if you don't mind? Can you think of anyone who might have a grudge against you?"

k'Rass gave a short laugh. "Chief Inspector, I am a wealthy businessman. I think that answers your question. If that is all..."

The security chief nodded and the three of them left the room. Leia had a thoughtful expression on her face and Han poked her as they headed down the corridor. "Okay, sweetheart, what's bothering you?"

She shook her head. "Just an idea, but I want to get some information before I say anything. Chief Inspector, could you wait here a moment while I speak with an aide?"

He gestured acquiescence and Leia hurried off. Han leaned back against one wall, feet crossed, thumbs hooked in his belt. He smiled at d'Reyfus. "Don't ask me; the husband is always the last to know." His smile turned rueful. "If k'Rass' statement is correct, then one hell of a lot of people here tonight could be involved. Or more than one. It could be a conspiracy among some of his enemies. Though," Han mused, "it's more an inconvenience than a telling blow, since the diamond has already been paid for. It's not a big business deal that can be messed up."

"Good point, Admiral. It would appear to be more a theft for monetary gain."

"Yeah, but they'd either have to cut it up, which would decrease its value, or sell it far enough away from Trantos so that the authorities here would not hear of it."

"An outlying region of your Republic, perhaps?" d'Reyfus suggested.

Han nodded. "Yeah," he said again. "But the safest bet would still be to cut it up."

Leia and Sergeant d'Lith arrived almost at the same time. Leia, however, was not out of breath. The sergeant needed a few seconds to regain his voice. "Sir, we did a background check on the staff. Turns out that one of them," he consulted his compupad, "one Gemith Claren, has a prison record -- for theft."

"Excellent!" his superior responded. "Perhaps we have a break in our favor." He turned to Han and Leia. "Do you still wish to accompany me?"

"Wouldn't miss it." As they fell in behind the two security officers, Han whispered, "The difference in the last names. Some kind of class distinction?"

She made a face at him. "Don't you read any of the diplomatic information I send your office before we go on one of these little jaunts?"

"Nope."

"It's nice to know my efforts are appreciated. You're lucky we're in someone else's home, flyboy; I don't want to get blood on the carpet. Anyway, it's more of a *caste* than a class system. This under-caste makes up about 90 percent of the poorest segment of the population, and most of the servants. Since it *is* a caste, you can't rise out of it. If you're born in it, you die in it. However, for severe crimes against the State, a member of one of the higher castes can have their honorific letter removed and they can be sent down into it. It's a lifetime punishment." She sighed. "A caste-oriented, sexist society. You know, Han, I get less and less sure that I want to form any kind of a formal alliance with Trantos, even to protect the mines."

Han patted her shoulder. "I was beginning to wonder about you. Now me, I put it on a more gut level: except for the Chief Inspector, I haven't met a Trantosian I've liked."

Gemith Claren was down in the kitchens and he seemed to have no inclination to flee the grounds. "Wot yer want?" he inquired truculently in response to d'Reyfus' query as to his identity.

"Some conversation. Our records show that you have undergone rehabilitation for the crime of theft."

Claren sneered. "O'course. A man ain't never served 'is time to you bully boys, 'as 'e? Somefink's pinched, and right away, it 'as to be me, eh?"

"We aren't saying it's you," replied d'Reyfus smoothly. "However, under the circumstances, it's something we must check into. Now, then, can you tell us where you were when the blackout occurred?"

Claren smiled and a smug note entered his voice. "Locked in a pantry."

Leia and Han stared at him in disbelief, and even the Chief Inspector appeared taken aback. "Locked in a *pantry*?" he repeated in astonishment.

"Oh, yes, sir." A kitchen maid gave a slight curtsy. "Couldn't get 'im out, we couldn't, until the lights came on and we could find Master d'Nath. 'E 'ad the keys."

"How did the door get locked?"

"Door's always locked, it is," she replied. "They all are. Need the keys to open them from the outside and ye can't open 'em from the inside at all. Doors is kept closed 'cept when someone's inside. Then they're stoppered open."

"Yeah," Claren added. "Not trusted, we are. Can't get in without permission of someone with the keys. Can't close the door without gettin' locked in. So's we can't steal, see?"

"Who has the keys?"

"Five people, sir. The Chief Steward, the 'ead Day Steward, the 'ead Night Steward, the Chief Chef, and the 'ousekeeper."

Han had been watching Claren closely. Finally, he asked, "How did you end up locked in, if the door is stoppered open?"

Claren eyed him thoughtfully, as if trying to decide if Han was someone he needed to pay attention to. He gave a grudging answer. "There were

some things the underchef needed that 'adn't been placed out. Master d'Nath -- 'e's the 'ead Night Steward -- let me in to get them. When the bleedin' lights went out, I tried to leave the pantry. Must've kicked the stopper with me foot. Bloody door shut on me, it did. Banged on it with me fists for some tosh to let me out."

The maid nodded. "That 'e did, sir. But, without the lights -- cor, it were dark! -- we couldn't go find Master d'Nath. 'E'd gone upstairs, 'e 'ad, to check on the servers. We got 'im after the lights came back on and 'e let Gemith out."

Claren's alibi was confirmed by other members of the kitchen staff and by Head Night Steward d'Nath, and the former thief was dismissed. Han said nothing as they headed back towards the guest quarters. There was an intense expression on his face and Leia cocked an eyebrow at him.

"A credit."

He blinked as if waking up. "What?"

"For your thoughts," she prompted.

"Oh." He smiled. "Let me sleep on it first."

Leia yawned. "Sleep. What a great idea. Chief Inspector, you would not consider it remiss of us if we were to take a break for the rest of the night? It's been a long day."

"Not at all, Madam President. Until tomorrow then."

* * *

Han dressed the next morning with the same distracted air. When throat-clearing failed to get his attention, Leia finally decided on the direct approach. "Okay, flyboy, spill it. What's on that miniscule mass we laughingly refer to as your mind?"

"I don't let remarks like that bother me" Han said generously, "since I recognize that such behavior is merely overcompensation for being short."

Leia gave an appreciative chuckle. "Well, now that we've gotten the morning quota of insults over with, where do we go from here?"

"Back to the kitchen."

"So, you don't believe that a former reprobate can change his ways?"

"Nope. Once a scoundrel, always a scoundrel."

"I certainly hope so." They smiled at each other, in perfect accord. "You don't buy Claren's story?"

"Well, there seems to be little doubt that he actually **was** in the pantry, but...something just doesn't feel right."

"Aha. The Force strikes again."

Han made a face at her. "Don't you start, too," he warned. "Luke is enough. The kid is driving me crazy." He sighed. "Don't get me wrong. I'm **glad** he's getting the foundation of his New Order off to such a great start. I'm **thrilled** he's got something to do with his life. I'm **ecstatic** that it keeps him off the streets at night, from stealing skimmer hood ornaments and, especially, out of the clutches of fallen women. But if he doesn't stop talking about it ad nauseum, I'm going to shove his lightsaber where the sun don't shine!"

"Han!"

"Sorry," he said, though he looked totally unrepentant. "But he **is** boring me to death. However, I have decided on a counterattack."

"I can't wait to here about it," Leia said dryly.

"Glad you asked. The next time he starts telling me about his latest possible recruit, **I'm** going to tell **him** about the most recent miniscule specifications changes in our top turret guns. And our bottom turret guns. And every **other** gun -- not to mention the bunk lengths, galley menus and carpet colors. Whether we should move the buttons on our uniforms from the right to the left, or vice versa, depending wherever the hell the buttons actually are."

"I'm not sure there **are** any buttons on the uniforms," Leia mused.

"Well, then, maybe there should be. We could discuss that, too. And the complete details of our latest maneuvers. Let's see how long it takes before **his** baby-blues glaze over!" Han beamed at her. "What do you think?"

"I think I want to be in the next galaxy when the Great Talk-Off takes place! To come back to our present puzzle, do you think you'll be able to see Claren? It's day shift now."

"Actually, it's not Claren I'm really interested in seeing; it's the pantry."

"And how long have you had this pantry fetish?"

"Right after I decided that closets were too self-absorbed for a long-term relationship."

Leia threw up her hands in defeat. "You win. Let's go visit the object of your affections."

They sought out the Chief Steward, Master s'Lar, who had been somewhat nonplussed to hear of his important visitors. On caste-conscious Trantos, the upper class did not descend to the kitchens. He greeted them obsequiously and received his second shock when Han cheerfully informed him they wanted to see one of the pantries.

"Gentle sir, gentle madam, was there something wrong with the food or the service last night?"

"No, no," Leia said in her most soothing manner. "Everything was fine. We're here to see a **specific** pantry, the one that Gemith Claren was locked into."

"Ah, yes, Madam President. A ridiculous business, that."

As they walked, Han studied the area they were crossing. "Master s'Lar, I notice that the ceiling is considerably fancier than the rest of the kitchen area. Do you know anything about the history of this part of the palace?" Leia glanced up, curious. The ceiling was made of heavy wood, designed in a chessboard pattern, each square heavily carved and decorated.

"I most certainly do, Admiral," the Chief Steward replied. "This part is very old. Almost as old as the area now known as the ballroom. That section of the palace predates the rise of the Oligarchs. It was originally the entire 'palace,' if such it could be called." He gave a disparaging sniff.

"To continue, during the time of the second Oligarch, there was considerable...unrest --" A rather minor term to describe a major civil war, Leia noted wryly "-- and this part was quickly added on as meeting and war rooms; that's why it is underground. The floor sits on solid ground. They used some of the material that had originally been intended to extend the upper portion of the palace. That's why the ceiling's so much more ornate than the rest."

"When did it become a kitchen?"

"During the time of the fifth Oligarch. The troubles had ended and prosperity had finally been restored, and the Oligarch decided to build a palace more suitable to one of his position. Because of the haphazard construction, this section was consigned to be the kitchen and storerooms."

"So then, these are the meeting rooms put up by the second Oligarch?"

"Not exactly, Gentle Sir. Those chambers were all fairly large, too large for our needs. So they simply threw up some extra walls to make smaller rooms."

They had stopped in front of the pantry that Han wished to inspect. "I see." Han waved one hand to the right and the left. "Pantries on either side?" s'Lar nodded. "What about behind the back wall?"

"More storerooms, Gentle Sir."

"And all with the same automatically locking door?" Leia asked, seeing where Han was heading.

"Yes, Madam President."

"Okay," Han said briskly. "If you could open this pantry for us and provide a stool or chair that we might use, we would greatly appreciate it." He looked thoughtful for a moment, then asked, "How easy would it be to kick the stopper out?"

"Very easy, Admiral. The stopper is attached to the door on a spring. It's designed to spring back up upon being kicked, even lightly, so that workers with their hands full can make sure the door closes behind them with little effort."

A few minutes later, Leia and Han were studying the infamous pantry from the inside. Han scuffed at the floor. "Solid underneath, and locked doors on all sides. That means --" his eyes swung toward the ceiling "-- up."

He pulled the stool over, climbed onto it and began to explore the chessboard patterning with his fingers. The silence lengthened to several minutes, then Han gave an excited grunt and began to play with the edge of one of the squares. With a sudden twang, a section of the ceiling was pushed up. Han fiddled with it for another moment, then he slid it back, leaving an opening three feet square.

"Aha," he crowed triumphantly. "I have you now!" He gripped the sides of the opening and hauled himself up and out of sight.

"*Well?*" There was a definite note of impatience in Leia's voice. "What do you see?"

"It's a fairly large room. Probably covers quite a number of pantry rooms." His voice grew fainter, accompanied by fading footsteps. They both returned almost immediately and, with a laugh, Han dropped back down into the pantry.

"The room's empty; looks as if it hasn't been used in a while. It's on the same level as the ballroom, *and* -- ta ta -- it has an unlocked door!"

"Oh, frabjous day! Let's go tell Chief Inspector d'Reyfus."

* * *

Claren was considerably less smug his second time around. He had nervously played with the sleeve of his jacket during the interrogation, while answering questions with as much defiance as he could muster. They couldn't show that he had known about that bloody hole in the ceiling, could they?

At the moment, they couldn't. "But there's no doubt in my mind that he *did* know. There's just something in his face..." d'Reyfus shrugged.

The three of them stood in the corridor outside the small room in which Claren was being held. The Chief Inspector tiredly rubbed his eyes. "I think that if we keep the pressure on, sooner or later he's going to give us the person behind this." He looked up, then sighed. "More trouble."

Han and Leia turned to see k'Rass striding toward them, eagerness in every step. He was still twenty feet away when he began talking. "Chief Inspector, I've heard that you have the man responsible."

d'Reyfus pushed himself away from the wall. "We believe we have *one* of the people responsible."

"One?"

"Yes, Master k'Rass. This is way out of Claren's league; he was never big time. We are fairly sure there has to be someone else behind this."

k'Rass nodded. "I see. Will you be questioning him again?"

"In a few minutes. We're trying to keep him as off-balance as possible. I'm certain that, in time, he will see it is to his benefit to cooperate."

"May I join you?"

The Chief Inspector hesitated. "I think it would be best if you didn't. However, if you wait in the area, I will let you know immediately if we learn anything."

"Thank you, Chief Inspector. I'll take you up on that."

Leia stepped back from the group and crooked a finger at Han. He moved over to join her and leaned forward when she indicated she did not wish to be overheard. "You staying?" He nodded. "Okay. I'm going to talk to Laaitia k'Rass. In a society like this, where a woman's prestige hinges on that of the males in her life, there tends to be a lot of behind-the-scenes intrigue. She may know something she wouldn't say in front of her husband."

Mistress k'Rass was in her quarters and she buzzed Leia in. "I'm in here, Madam President. In dear Maervin's room."

The arrangement of the suite was typical for Trantos: two separate bedrooms, each with its own dressing room and bathroom, joined by a large sitting area. She and Han had shocked the protocol officer by indicating that one bedroom would be sufficient, thank you very much.

Laaitia k'Rass was searching the closet in her husband's dressing area. "My apologies, Madam President, but Maervin wished a certain jacket laid out for him, and he prefers that I do it over the palace staff."

"No problem, Mistress k'Rass." Her eye fell on the pitcher of mountain spring water beside the large bed -- such pitchers were provided for all the guests -- and she called out, "I'll help myself to a glass of water. Take

A flurry of activity greeted her words. Laaitia hurried from the dressing room. "Oh, no, no, Madam President, if you please." She sounded somewhat breathless.

Startled, Leia stepped away from the night table. "Your pardon, Mistress k'Rass. I meant no offense."

The other woman made a vague, apologetic gesture. "It is I who must beg *your* pardon. It's just that dear Maervin is very...particular about things. He hates to have anything of his moved without his permission. Why, at home, the servants cannot even remove his dinner plate until he says so. It can sit on the table for hours after dinner if Maervin gets busy."

"And the staff here goes along?"

"Oh, yes, Maervin made it **very** clear the first time we were here."

I'll just bet he did, the petty little tyrant. "Well, I'm certainly not thirsty enough to cause trouble!"

"Please allow me to get you a glass from mine." Her voice lowered. "Actually, you probably wouldn't have liked it, anyway. The servants won't even **change** the water without Maervin's permission, and he usually forgets about it. That pitcher's been there for three days!"

Leia laughed. "You're right; it's undoubtedly warm and awful."

As they stepped toward Laaitia k'Rass' room, Leia said, "As you may be aware, the Admiral and I are very interested in the investigation of this matter. Do you mind if I ask you a couple of questions? Can you think of any woman who might have wanted your diamond so much that owning it would be enough, even if she could never show it, and who might encourage her husband to find a way to steal it?"

Her hostess thought for a moment. "Only two; the others wouldn't be happy if they had to hide it. But neither of the two was present. They reside on one of the colonies and either could not make it or were not invited."

"What about enemies of your husband?"

"Well, Maervin is an excellent man of business. That always makes enemies. But powerful enough to try this..."

"I see." Leia studied the other woman. "Did your husband build up his business from scratch?"

"Oh, no. My father owned it first, though Maervin expanded it. I was an only child." She hesitated, then gave a brittle laugh. "Somewhat disappointing, I'm afraid. He so wanted a son. He chose Maervin as a husband for me. Maervin is so **clever** and capable, and I'm neither, you know."

Leia suddenly felt very sorry for Laaitia k'Rass, pity mingled with a surge of anger at the stratified, sexist society that had trapped the woman between a cold, uncaring father and an equally uncaring, tyrannical husband. Leia decided abruptly that she would be very happy to leave Trantos.

* * *

Han was already gone when Leia awoke the next morning. Dressing quickly, she stepped out of her quarters to find one of her aides camped on her doorstep. He jumped quickly to his feet and bowed. "Madam President, I have the information you requested."

One half-hour later, a huge grin spread across her face, she went in search of her missing husband. A tip from a palace steward carefully polishing already gleaming metal decorations sent her to the library, which Leia found to be the only truly impressive room in the palace. Whereas the rest of the palace seemed a tribute to glitz and bad taste, the library showed the fine hand of a scholar. Even some ancient tomes printed on paper could be found.

She was also able to find one wandering Corellian, who was ensconced in a corner, morosely leafing through a paper-paged volume entitled GEMSTONES AND JEWELRY. She plopped down in the cushioned armchair next to him and frowned at him. "What's wrong?"

He wasted no time. "Claren's dead." There was an angry glint in his eyes. "He may have been a thief, but that's not generally a fatal offense. On the other hand, stupidity is -- and Claren was stupid enough to hook up with the wrong person. Somehow, his confederate got to him. Poison."

"That bastard!" Leia said furiously.

Han's eyes narrowed. "You know something I don't?"

"I know who and why. I just don't know where. Consider: you're a businessman, part of a partnership, who's made some really rotten investments, possibly using money that wasn't all yours to use, and you want to chuck it all and start over."

Han frowned. "But k'Rass barely insured the diamond."

"Great minds *do* think alike." She leaned forward and rested one hand on his arm. "That's what the Chief Inspector told us, but after the interview with k'Rass...I don't know, I just had a feeling. He'd mentioned dealing with people in the Republic -- I think that was a slip on his part -- so I asked one of my aides to take one of the smaller vessels and head to the nearest fleet base. Since Trantos is an unallied independent, that base is right over the border zone."

She settled back deeper into the chair. "He plugged into their computer, which has all the information placed into our official system, and was able to obtain all the information we need. First, he ran k'Rass through under his own name -- all major legitimate economic deals, especially

those with outsiders, have to be recorded -- then, using the finger and voice ident from that, he turned up *two* other identities!

"Both of them were supposedly Republic citizens," she continued. "I'd like to know from whom he got the phony papers and identifications --"

"Are you kidding?" Han broke in. "I could name a dozen or more that I know of alone."

"Somehow, flyboy, that does *not* surprise me. Remember that dear Maervin told us he'd never been to the Republic? Technically that was correct: as k'Rass, all his business deals were conducted through agents. But the other two gentlemen are familiar figures within our borders. k'Rass made some very conservative deals and investments, but those other two jokers, *they* liked the high-risk, speculative ventures. And they lost boodles."

"Boodles? Is that a technical term?"

"Pay attention; there'll be a quiz."

Han grinned. "And you don't think all those boodles lost were personal funds."

"Not when you look at the bottom line," she said, shaking her head. "The amount would stagger you --"

"I don't know; I can imagine quite a lot."

Leia, who had been regaled years earlier with Han's gallant reason for jumping to her rescue, smiled sardonically. "This is even out of your league. Anyway, k'Rass, having lost a hell of a lot of partnership money, knowing that he'll never survive an audit, what does he do?"

"He plans to get out while he still can."

"Exactly. He's not particularly concerned about leaving the little woman behind, the bastard. There's the Republic next door, a whole lot of territory to get lost in, and no extradition treaty. But he needs a stake, so he can start over. He obtains a diamond -- notice I didn't say *buy*. There's some question about that. The diamond showed up first in uncut form in the hands of one of those independent prospectors, who made the mistake of dealing with someone who was also one of k'Rass' Republic contacts."

"Never seen again?"

"Not alive, anyway." Leia's voice hardened. "And the diamond next shows up here, brilliantly cut."

Han looked grim. "That makes two murders to his score. But he can't use the diamond as it is; it's too recognizable. And if he cuts it up, the parts won't have anywhere near the value of the whole."

"Ah, but then there's the insurance. Not *here*, but in the Republic. A *fifty*-million-credit policy. *That* is a sizeable stake. Plus whatever the cut-up diamond would bring."

"Wouldn't he have put that policy in his real name, since that's the way the final theft report would read?" At Leia's nod, his brows drew together in a frown. "Then he didn't just plan to 'disappear.' A fatal accident, instead, something where no one would expect to find a body, like an explosion in space. And probably more deaths to his account."

He got up and began to pace. "He's thought it all out, I'll give him that. If he's dead in an accident, why would anyone here think of checking in the Republic, either for the policy or for k'Rass himself."

"You know," Leia said thoughtfully, "I'll bet this treaty has him somewhat worried. Most of them include an extradition clause." She signed. "I *still* have no idea where he has it hidden. They've searched every inch of this palace."

"Yeah. Right now, I'm flat out of ideas."

His wife joined him in his pacing. "I really want to nail this guy, Han. He cheats his partners, murders whenever it's convenient and terrorizes his wife. Do you know that when I went to speak to her, she almost had a coronary when I reached to take some water from his pitcher? Seems no one's allowed to touch anything of his without permission. Even the staff *here* won't move anything..." She suddenly realized she was talking to empty air and she turned around.

Han had stopped abruptly and he was staring at her. A moment later, a brilliant smile spread across his face and, with a whoop, he jumped forward, raised her to eye level and kissed her soundly.

"Well, I don't exactly object," she said, still a foot off the ground, "but is there a *special* reason for this sudden display of mad passion?"

"You're brilliant!"

"Of course, flyboy, though it has taken you a pretty long time to arrive at what I would have thought was an obvious conclusion. What made you decide?"

He grinned broadly. "I know where the diamond is. Let's go get the Chief Inspector."

* * *

k'Rass was distinctly less pleasant on the Chief Inspector's second visit to his quarters. "This is an unwarranted intrusion, Chief Inspector," he growled, backing away sufficiently to permit them to enter at d'Reyfus' insistence. "I shall most certainly inform the Oligarch."

"Perfect timing, Master k'Rass," the Chief Inspector replied smoothly. "I expect to be speaking to him shortly as well. Now, Admiral, if you would be so kind?"

"Yes, flyboy. You've been the cat that ate the canaret all the way down here. Spill it."

"My pleasure. Which one is his?" At her gesture, he nodded. "Follow me."

Leading the way into k'Rass' bedroom, Han continued speaking. "I had some trouble sleeping this morning, so I started wandering around. Bumped into Sergeant d'Lith; that's how I found out about Claren. I ended up in the library, started browsing through some books on gemstones and I came across something interesting. I'd wondered why people used the expression 'diamond of the first water' and one book had a piece of information that suggested an explanation. It also started me thinking about possible hiding places, but it didn't fall into line until Leia talked to me this morning. She mentioned something as an aside that made it all click."

He moved closer to the night table. "You see, what the book said was that a high-quality white diamond is virtually invisible in water. But I couldn't come up with anything that worked. It couldn't be too large, like the pools or the ponds in the garden; you'd never find the diamond again. And it couldn't be something that other people would use, or which would be moved or cleaned or changed regularly. Then Leia told me about Master k'Rass' quirk."

Leia's eyes widened and she stared at him with dawning comprehension. "I'll be damned!" She turned to look at the table. "The water pitcher!"

For an answer, Han laughed and plunged his hand into the pitcher, unconcerned with the water that slopped over onto the table. An instant later, he pulled it back, fingers clenched around the massive gemstone.

It blazed beneath the lights of the room and its dazzling brilliance held them spellbound. Then, with a sudden move that took them all by surprise, k'Rass grabbed Leia and threw her at the Chief Inspector, who was blocking his path to the door. He raced for the corridor, Han hot on his heels. A startled Sergeant d'Lith called after them, but neither was interested in engaging him in conversation. k'Rass had almost reached a transport tube when Han hurled himself forward and slammed into his quarry at knee level.

The Trantosian landed with a solid thud. He lay still for a moment, then lashed out with one foot swiftly. Han barely jerked his head back in time. He pounced on k'Rass and the struggle turned into a wrestling match, which suited the Corellian just fine. *His* dirty tricks hadn't been learned in the boardroom.

To prove his point, he immediately used his knee to good effect, followed by a couple of admittedly low blows. k'Rass slumped over, gasping, and raised one hand in a gesture of surrender.

Han was not through, however, and he dragged k'Rass to his feet and threw him roughly against a wall. "That," he said grimly, "is for throwing my wife around." He turned his head at the sound of approaching footsteps and nudged the Trantosian with the toe of one boot. "He's all yours, Chief Inspector."

"Thank you, Admiral. Master k'Rass and I *do* have several things to discuss." d'Reyfus stood aside to permit Sergeant d'Lith to cuff the prisoner. Leia was a step behind the sergeant and the Chief Inspector gave both Han and her a bow and a warm smile. "Admiral, Madam President, you seem to have quite a knack for this. Have you ever considered changing professions?"

"Thank you for the compliment, Chief Inspector." Leia matched his smile. Like Han, she found that she genuinely liked d'Reyfus. "I'm afraid we'll have to decline the offer, but it does look as if we've acquired a new hobby." She started to turn away, then she glanced back. "Have *you* ever considered changing governments? If you do, look us up."

Ignoring the expression on the Chief Inspector's face, a combination of astonishment and thoughtfulness, she moved to her husband's side. He studied her carefully, all the time trying not to be too obvious about it.

She wasn't fooled. "I'm *fine*, Han. Don't even *think* of fussing."

"Corellians never fuss," he replied loftily. "We *hover*."

Leia laughed. "Well, don't do that either. Of course," she added, pulling him down and whispering into his ear, "you could kiss the boo-boo and make it better."

"Really? Where is it?"

"That would be telling. Let's see if you can find it for yourself."

Han grinned wickedly. "Race you back to our quarters."

"Sure. And if you get there first, flyboy, you can start without me."

"Point taken." He offered her his arm. "What say you we stroll back together?"

"Anything you say, Old Ironpants."

There was silence for a moment.

"Old?"

END

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