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Diplomatic Maneuvers

by [Judy Ebberley](#)

Why was nothing ever simple? Leia Organa wondered as she sat in on the meeting with the council members who were gathered to discuss the upcoming Rishian mission. What should have been straightforward set of negotiations was assuming nightmarish proportions. Before the mission had even begun their translator who had made initial contact with Rish had succumbed to a particularly virulent virus and was now ensconced in the base's medical facility. Using C-3PO was not an option since the H'kig high council refused to negotiate with droid translators so it seemed that the mission might have to be cancelled if a humanoid interpreter could not be found in the next day or so. That was not going to be easy. Rish was not a language that was used much out of the planet's own system and there were few people who were fluent in it.

"There must be someone on this base that can speak enough Rishian to allow the negotiations to start."

"Can you name one?" The princess snapped at her fellow council member. The man looked away, embarrassed by her demand. Satisfied that she had made her point Leia continued more calmly, "It's a very difficult language to master and it takes considerable intelligence to learn the different cases. I know because I've tried it myself. It will not be easy to find a replacement."

"The princess is right," Belar Farrai put in. The woman was a member of Reikken's tactic's team. A Loordian by birth, Belar had dedicated her life to the struggle against tyranny after the death of her husband and son in an Imperial attack. "Rish is the most complicated language I have ever come across." She turned to Leia. "I hope this doesn't signal the end of your mission"

"So do I," Leia agreed "but I fear we may have to rethink our plans if General Kaldrain is unable to find us another translator."

The council members watched with growing anxiety as Kaldrain consulted his screens. A flashing light finally indicated that the search he had instigated had located one suitable candidate. A wicked glint appeared in his eye. Blair was well aware of the present "situation" appertaining to the princess and the Rishian speaker identified by the computer.

"Give him a chance, Leia," Kaldrain pleaded, some time later. "He may surprise you!"

"That's what worries me!" the Alderaanian spluttered. "Look," she tried to explain her opposition to the inclusion of the Corellian in reasonable terms. "While Han may be able to speak the language, a diplomat he certainly isn't. He's hot-headed, has a penchant for outrageous behavior, a total disregard for other peoples feelings and--"

"He's all we have," Blair cut in. "Personal prejudices apart, Leia, we have to be realistic. I know he isn't the most obvious candidate for the kind of diplomatic work you have planned." Leia snorted. "But believe me, he does have some good points."

The Alderaanian was apparently unimpressed by the general's championing of his one time cadet. "Really? What are they exactly?"

Blair thought hard. "Well he has been known to display, artfulness, craft, skill, tact. Well, perhaps not tact," he amended, as Leia looked set to explode. "But he's an expert tactician and no mean negotiator, both useful skills on a mission like yours."

"Unfortunately," the princess grumbled, "he also has some skills which aren't. Like a loud mouth, a short temper and a partiality to use his blaster to solve all of his problems."

While admitting to himself that Leia had a point, Kaldrain felt obliged to support his fellow Corellian. "Given that some of what you say is true, your highness. Can you think of any other way of opening negotiations with Rish on time?"

Leia considered the alternatives and decided sadly there were none. "No," she admitted, "I can't."

"And we might be arguing over nothing. We may not be able to persuade Han to help us anyway."

"Offer him enough credits and he'll do anything," Leia muttered, remembering with some bitterness her last run-in with the cocky Corellian pilot. Not often bested in verbal warfare she had come away from a bruising encounter buoyed up only with the fact that her barb over his mercenary tendencies had managed to wound the pirate. She had seen the momentary hurt in his green-gold eyes before he had masked it with his most infuriating smile and a sharp comeback. Not sure why that satisfaction was less pleasing to her than it should have been, Leia returned her thoughts to the latest Alliance problem. It seemed that she had no choice. The rebels were going to have to place their faith in the hands of that unpredictable, outrageous, infuriating Corellian. Again.

"It'll be interesting," Blair encouraged.

"It'll be a nightmare!" Leia responded dryly.

As the Falcon's systems started to shut down, Solo tucked his flight gloves into his belt and leant back in his pilot's chair. Pondering yet again on how much his life had changed. True he was still smuggling, but now it was more often weaponry and supplies for the rebels than spice. Many times in the last few months he had announced his intentions of cutting his losses and running. But always something held him back. Han wasn't yet prepared to put into words what he knew was in his heart. He wanted to belong, wanted to make his own contribution against the Empire but committing himself to a cause had never been easy.

Then there was the problem of her highness. He spent too much time, he decided, thinking about Leia Organa. He still wasn't at all sure what he wanted to do about her. Sometimes he quite liked her, at others like after their last confrontation he could cheerfully have strangled her.

He hadn't tried to conceal his growing perplexity over his emotions concerning the princess from his co-pilot, not that it would have done him any good if he had. Chewbacca knew him better than anyone else in the galaxy and was often more adept at discerning his captain's real feelings than the Corellian himself. Han grimaced. Sometimes too damned adept!

As the engines fell silent, Solo let out a long whistling breath.

Catching the sound, Chewbacca had no difficulty in deciphering where his captain's thoughts were. Many of their conversations on this last trip had started with, "D'ya really think she...."

An insistent buzzing of the communicator interrupted the Wookiee's thoughts. He reached across to activate the speaker but was beaten to it by his captain.

"Yeah, what d'they want?" Han rolled his eyes in exasperation as the technician asked him to verify his identity. "It's me! How many other Millenium Falcons are there sitting in this hangar? No, I only just got in. All right, all right, tell him I'm on my way. Yeah? Same to you. Asshole!" he added as he de-activated the link. Turning to his partner, he answered Chewie's unspoken query. "Aw, It's Kaldrain, wants to see me 'urgently.'" He continued to grumble as he extricated himself from his seat. "Friggin' rebels, you lend em a hand once or twice and they think they own you! Come on Chewie," he encouraged the Wookiee who had been patiently waiting for Han to get out of the way so he could exit the cabin. "I ain't got all day."

The Alliance general closed his eyes and counted to twenty, again. Ensnorced next to his desk, booted feet stretched out before him, Han Solo was being deliberately irksome and obtuse. Briefly, Blair regretted the fact the pilot was no longer a cadet back at the academy on Corel. Such wayward behavior would have earned him an immediate reprimand. A glint in Solo's eyes told him that Han was probably thinking much the same thing and was enjoying the situation immensely.

"You are the only one on base capable of acting as interpreter," Blair repeated as calmly as he could. "Without your help the mission will fail and the rebellion will lose an important foothold in this system. Surely you wouldn't want to be responsible for that?"

As aware as anyone of the strategic importance of Rish, Solo still resented Kaldrain's attempts to con him into pulling the alliance out of another mess. "It ain't my fault that no one can speak the language," he grumbled, levering himself to his feet.

"Han, wait!"

Solo swung on an impatient heel. "What?"

The captain of the Millenium Falcon clapped his hands over his ears as an outraged Wookiee howl echoed through the forward hold. "What d'ya mean extortion?" he yelled back.

Chewie growled an angry comment about greed.

Solo, was not about to be intimidated. It seemed only fair to him that the alliance paid for his services at a premium. While not averse to using blackmailing tactics to get his own way he didn't appreciate having the tables turned on him. Kaldrain had no right to threaten to tell the base about his years at the Corellian cadet school. He winced; in his imagination he could already hear the disbelieving gales of laughter if such information became common knowledge.

"He twisted my arm, damn it!"

* He shouldn't have needed to!* Chewie remained firm in his conviction that Han was in the wrong.

"When did you become such a damned philanthropist?" Solo matched the disapproving Wookiee glare for glare. "You were the one who taught me to go for the best possible deal available."

*I did not teach you to cheat your friends. *

Han hunched an offended shoulder. "Who said they were friends?" he mumbled sotto voce. This earned him another growl and a scalding rebuttal of his barbed comment. "Yeah? Well you ain't going to make me change my mind about the fee. Don't matter what you think."

"Han!" Kaldrain's delighted shout alerted the rest of the room to his presence as Solo slid reluctantly into the briefing room followed by the Wookiee. "At last. I was beginning to think you weren't coming."

Solo looked as if he wished he hadn't.

"General." He cleared his throat. "I need to talk to you."

There was a definite edge to Solo's voice that caused Kaldrain to look at him quizzically. "Oh?"

Pulling on the man's arm, Han maneuvered him over to a corner of the room. "It's about the fee."

Kaldrain's eyes widened at this announcement. "I don't think I could get the council to agree to any more, Han, I--"

An impatient hand waved him to silence. Choking down on his next words as if they were very unpalatable, the pilot eventually managed to spit out, "I don't want more. I want less."

"Less? You want less?"

"Keep your voice down," Solo pleaded, throwing an anxious glance around the room to see if anyone else had overheard.

"What made you change your mind?" Han shuffled his feet mumbled something unintelligible, then couldn't resist the temptation to glance across the room to where Chewbacca was standing. Kaldrain followed his gaze. The Wookiee winked, causing the general's lips to twitch. "Ah! Now I understand."

"Understand what?" Han demanded suspiciously, then caught another silent exchange between his partner and the Corellian general, which explained it. "Do you want me on this mission or not?" he demanded hotly.

Blair patted at his arm. "We do and we are very grateful," When Solo appeared slightly mollified by this acknowledgement he couldn't resist adding, "To Chewbacca."

Leia Organa studied Han Solo as he stood talking to Blair Kaldrain. The barefaced effrontery of the man was astounding. Knowing he had them at a disadvantage he'd demanded a truly exorbitant fee for his services. If there had been any alternative to agreeing to his demands, Leia would have taken it, but there wasn't and he knew it and was exploiting the situation. Just when she was beginning to think there was more to him than money! Her eyes were drawn back to the two Corellians. They seemed to be arguing about something. He couldn't possibly be trying to get more credits? More importantly what would she do if he were? Satisfying visions of him suffering all kinds of terrible tortures floated before her eyes Reluctantly she decided that Chewbacca probably wouldn't let her kill the Corellian outright. She saw how Solo glanced over towards his giant partner. Chewie didn't look at all happy with his Captain; maybe he wouldn't mind that much after all! She wondered what Han had done to incur the Wookiee's wrath.

Leia let out the breath she hadn't known she was holding as Blair laughed at something Solo had just said. He slapped the younger man on the shoulder and handed over the data pad, which contained all of the background information on Rish. It seemed that Solo was going to co-operate, for once.

Han pocketed the itinerary that Blair Kaldrain had just presented him with. Exchanging another glare with his partner he felt another pair of eyes covertly studying him. Oh great! Just what he needed her high and mightiness herself. What was she here for?

If she as much as mentioned the fee he'd demanded, he told himself. The whole deal was off. There was no way he was going to stomach another of her harangues about his 'mercenary' tendencies. Soft in the head was more like it!

She took a step towards them. Mentally preparing himself for an assault Han folded his arms and assumed his most pugnacious stance.

"General Kaldrain." Leia beamed at the general then turned ice cold eyes on the man standing next to him. "Captain Solo."

If looks could kill he'd be dead and buried, Solo decided as he responded to her greeting with a drawled, "Your Royalness."

"Shall we sit down." Kaldrain ushered the combative pair towards the table. "It looks like everyone is present."

Wearing a plainly false smile plastered across his face, Han made a great show of holding out a chair for the princess.

Insufferable man, Leia fueled her anger against the pilot, as she allowed him to seat her. "How much is this out of character display of manners going to cost me?" She inquired waspishly.

"It depends what you got on offer your highnessness?" Han purred in her ear, his leer making it plain what he was hinting at.

Before Leia could respond, beyond jabbing her elbow backwards into Solo's ribs. Kaldrain intervened, "Shall we get started. We obviously have a lot of ground to cover before we will be ready."

Deliberately choosing a seat as far away from the princess as possible Han scanned the other beings in the room. For the first time since he'd agreed -- been blackmailed, he amended mentally into agreeing to this mission it occurred to Han that he didn't know who else was going to Rish.

A now familiar sinking feeling in his stomach caused him to lean over to Kaldrain and whisper vehemently, "You never did get round to telling me who else was involved in this jaunt?"

The general managed to look as innocent as Han did on occasion. "No I didn't, did I," he agreed blandly turning back to the table, "But then you didn't ask!"

"I'm askin' now!"

"Can we come to order gentlemen," Belar Farrai called from the head of the table.

Courteously Kaldrain turned his full attention towards the chair, swiveling his head so that Han couldn't see the smug grin that was now plastered all over it.

"Kaldrain!" Solo hissed.

"I'm waiting," The Loordian added more pointedly. Several beings frowned disapprovingly at the talkative Corellian. Han glared back.

Someone was heard to mutter something about what could you expect from a space jockey. About to answer in kind a soft rumble and a firm shake of the head from his partner persuaded him to keep quiet. Chewie was wearing his 'don't even think about it' face.

Reluctantly Han turned his attention to the top of the table and the meeting got underway.

"I am very grateful," Belar was saying, "To Captain Solo for agreeing to act as translator for us at such short notice. Without his cooperation the mission could not have gone ahead."

Han saw the princess stiffen at the woman's words of praise. From the way she was biting her lip it seemed likely that she had to stop herself shouting out 'at an exorbitant price!' So he smiled his most irritating smile in her direction and muttered for Belar's benefit, "My pleasure, ma'am."

She nodded her thanks before continuing, "Now Major Regg, would you like to tell us more about what our negotiators might come up against."

The major rose to his feet clearing his throat in preparation for his input. Culinem Regg was a no nonsense individual who wouldn't have looked out of place if he worked as a bouncer in a Regelian brothel. But he possessed a prodigious brain and was a mine of information on rim world systems and cultures that Han had come to admire. If he was going along maybe things wouldn't be so bad. The man was a keen Sabacc player.

Settling back into his seat Han centered his attention on the princess, doing his best to irritate her and disturb her concentration. After all how much more did you need to know than that Rish was a male rule dominated society; no bad thing in his view given present company. That religion and protocol were of great importance to them and that they had until now resisted all attempts from the Alliance to talk about placing a listening post on their world. The only other thing that seemed to be in their favor as far as Solo was concerned was their apparent hatred of the use of droids in any but the most menial positions. Now if only he could persuade her royalness and the kid to ditch that walking squawk box Threepio.

He became aware that people were looking at him again obviously waiting for a response. He turned to Kaldrain for help.

"Major Ferrai was asking is you had any questions," he obliging repeated.

"No, uh thanks. I mean," he added as he remembered his earlier question that Kaldrain had swiftly side stepped, "Just one, who else is going on this trip?"

"You mean you don't know?" Belar appeared suitably shocked at this confession.

"Too busy haggling over credits, Solo?" Leia put in snidely. "How remiss of you not to ask."

Solo decided he didn't like the smirk that had appeared on the princess's face one little bit. She only ever smiled like that at him when he'd fouled up big time and she was the beneficiary. He was getting a very bad feeling about this!

"Well," Belar continued as if unaware of the by play between Solo and the princess. "Besides yourself and your partner, Chewbacca. There will be Major Regg who will handle background information and intelligence. You will be in charge of translation and security and the princess will handle the diplomatic side of things. Naturally she will be in overall charge of the group. You will defer to her on all matters of importance."

Squeezing his eyes closed, Han stifled the curse that came to his lips. Next to him Kaldrain's shoulders were shaking silently.

"Is there a problem, captain?" the Loordian asked solicitously.

"No," Han managed. "No problem, no problem at all. I'm looking forward to it."

He tried not to see Leia's triumphant grin.

"Why the hell didn't you tell me she was going?" An irate Han Solo demanded.

General Kaldrain sat back in his seat in his tiny office grinned unrepentantly and asked in return. "When I tried to tell you about the team. You said and I quote 'I don't care if Palapatine himself is leading the group I ain't going.' Later when you changed your mind you seemed more concerned with your fee than personnel."

Han didn't appear to appreciate this reminder; but Kaldrain continued undaunted, "And when you renegotiated, You didn't inquire either. By the way I haven't had time to tell Leia about that yet."

Which at least explained her frosty reception of him at the meeting Han acknowledged.

A throaty chuckle reminded him of the Wookiee who was leaning up against the wall. *How many times have I told you that it pays to listen more and talk less. *

Solo had heard this particular homily many times and wasn't in the mood to have it repeated. "Okay," he attempted to fend off another repetition, "So I should've listened. Don't rub it in, huh?"

Chewie took no notice of this plea continuing to scold the Corellian roundly. Solo sank down into his seat a long-suffering expression on his face as the diatribe continued for several moments. He found himself wishing he'd recalled this good advice when he'd first entered into negotiations with Kaldrain.

"You finished now?" He asked as the Wookiee finally ran out of steam.

For the present.

"Good," Han grumbled sourly.

Less than a standard week later Solo was wishing even more fervently that he'd remembered Chewbacca's words of wisdom. This mission was turning into a nightmare.

Three days out from base, Culinem Regg had succumbed to the same virus that had hit their original translator. Too late to turn back they had dropped the man off on the nearest habitable world called for a ship to pick him up and continued on their way to Rish.

Regg had done his best to keep their minds on the mission, but with his departure Han and Leia had been thrown together even more. Already strained, their relationship was almost at breaking point by the time the Falcon settled into her berth.

The mismatched pair had spent much of their travelling times falling out with each other. Leia's attempts to instruct the pilot in the basics of diplomacy met with scant success. The more she had criticized him the worse his behavior had become. Han had, made it very plain that he had, had enough of what he had described as the 'imperious' ice princess act that Leia had been inflicting on him; Finally recognizing the futility of her actions she had left Han in peace. Merely prophesying that they were heading for disaster if he continued with his determinedly undiplomatic approach.

Chewbacca who had played mediator since the departure of Cullinen Rigg rolled his eyes as he entered the main hold where the others were preparing to go to their first meeting. Overhearing their latest argument, the Wookiee shook his head.

"I'm merely trying to tell you that it is not customary to wear a blaster during diplomatic discussions." Leia eyed Solo's custom-made rig, which seemed to be permanently attached to his right leg.

Han's sarcastic, "Well ain't that damned a shame!" Sent Leia's blood pressure soaring and earned him a disapproving frown from the watching Wookiee. Ignoring this as he'd ignored nearly everything else Solo moved in very close. The princess had to will herself to keep still. "If you want me to translate, princess. You'll just have to get used to it. I ain't goin' anywhere without it."

Chewie took in the stormy expressions on the faces of the two humans and could only hope that they would stick to the promise they had made to Major Regg before he'd gone to the med. center that they would not to allow their personal differences to affect the work ahead.

Sighing he ushered the still bickering duo towards the hatch. Hoping to stop further argument by commenting that Kaldrain had designated security as one of Han's responsibilities. The Corellian threw the princess a smug grin, which faded a little as Chewbacca continued, smoothly, *But you would do well to remember, Han. That you are under Leia's jurisdiction when it came to matters of protocol.* He held up his hand to stem the protest that was trembling on the brink of Solo's acerbic tongue. * I don't want to hear it.* and encouraged his captain's departure with a swat on the rear that sent him tumbling down the ramp, straight into Leia Organa. To Chewie's dismay they started another argument almost immediately.

The discussions were to be held in the Rish Council main meeting hall. The building which had been built to be impressive was set in large formal grounds. Han's opinion; was that it reminded him of a brothel he'd once frequented on some rim world. Leia knew better than to rise to his deliberate baiting, contenting herself with a caustic, "I'm surprised you had time to notice the architecture hot-shot."

"Listen your holiness--" The arrival of representatives of the ruling council, inviting them to partake of a buffet reception before the main negotiations took place caused him to bite off his reply. Han found him self too busy acting as translator to do more than scowl at a smug faced princess.

It was more than an hour later before Han finally got some time away from his duties. Leia had gone off to find a fresher unit. Taking advantage of her temporary absence he slipped out into the sunshine.

"Damn him!" Princess Leia Organa swore to her self a few moments later, "Where has he gone now?"

She too stepped out into the bright sunlight and took a second or two while her eyes re-adjusted to the light.

The gardens surrounding the main negotiating hall were beautiful. Formal paths and banks of exotic flowers vied for her interest as she traversed the walkways. Finally she spotted her quarry, the pilot was engaged in skimming stones, across the ornamental lake. She had to admit he looked good, as he bent to pick up some more ammunition. She couldn't at present see his green-gold eyes; the ones that alternatively spat fire and danced with wicked mischief depending on his mood or that lop-sided grin he habitually used when he wanted to endear himself to someone. But she could admire the long legs and nicely proportioned back. Han, as many of the females on scattered alliance bases through the sector were all too willing to tell her, was not only dangerously handsome but he could be a real charmer when he wanted to be, she clarified. She found herself wondering what it would be like to be charmed by Han Solo and swiftly cast such treacherous ideas from her mind. They had a mission to complete; it was difficult enough trying to remain on 'friendly' terms with the Corellian as it was. She certainly could not afford to start day dreaming about him again.

He didn't turn around at her approach, but Leia knew he was aware of her presence.

She coughed and made a great show of consulting her chronometer.

Solo noted her actions and couldn't resist asking "Something irritating you your Highnessness?"

"Only you," Leia retorted sharply. "Don't you realize that the talks are about to start?"

Han gave her his patented smug smile the one guaranteed to send her blood pressure sky high. "Not without me they ain't."

"It won't do our cause any favors if we are late for the opening speeches," Leia snapped.

Solo, waved a hand in the direction of the open doorway, ushering her ahead of him. "Well in that case, your imperiousness, we better not stand out here talkin' anymore had we? After you."

As the droid-controlled ground car provided by their hosts carried the negotiators back to the Falcon at the end of the first full day of negotiations Han unfastened his shirt collar and allowed himself to relax.

After eight solid hours of talks he felt drained and exhausted. The strain of constant thinking and translating backwards and forwards had taken their toll on his nerves. Han wasn't sure how he'd managed to get through the day without resorting to violence, he had been sorely tempted several times. His main target being the H'kig member who insisted on starting each of his long winded diatribes with "Honored translator!" Still despite these irritations he was pleased with the way things had gone. It had been hard work but surprisingly satisfying. Giving a soft sigh he closed his eyes briefly, his head was pounding.

Also mulling over the day's events, Leia sat opposite the sprawling spacer. She had learnt quite a lot, today she reflected, not just about the mission but also about the man seated across from her. Until now she hadn't appreciated how gifted Han Solo was with languages, or how adept at reading behind the spoken word. His insight into the thought processes of the H'kig had also been very useful, as was his ability to cut to the heart of the discussion. General Kaldrain had been right she decided he was proving to be an asset to their team. Yet despite mounting evidence to the contrary Han still continued to insist he was nothing more than, a low life mercenary for hire. How he reconciled that opinion while involving himself with such difficult missions for the Alliance, the princess couldn't imagine, but being Han Solo he managed it

The Corellian's first introduction to the exigencies of diplomatic negotiations had certainly been a baptism of fire. The formalities the Rishians had insisted on were stifling. The over blown false rhetoric of the H'kig council sickening and the obvious disdain they had shown for the alliance team hard to stomach, even for her. For someone with such an allegedly short fuse she had been impressed by the way Han had handled himself.

He had also proved himself a fast learner. While his style wasn't orthodox, she smiled at that thought. Nothing she suspected could be described as conventional about the Corellian; it was certainly effective.

Hearing a sigh, she turned towards Han catching the Corellian rubbing at his aching temples. "Headache? "

Unaware that she had been watching him, Solo immediately snatched his hands away and disclaimed any such problem. "Nah, just tired that's all. Those guys could talk the hind leg off a dinko."

Leia laughed at his apt description of the H'kig negotiating team. "Yes I think you're right." Her hand touched his arm. "Thank you for your efforts today."

Never very adept at handling praise, Han mumbled something unintelligible and attempted to change the subject. "How long do you think it's likely to take to wrap this thing up?"

Leia thought about it for awhile. "I'd like to say soon, but I fear that our progress is going to be slow. Some of the councilors do not seem entirely convinced of the need to support our cause. We may have a troublesome few days ahead of us."

As it happened this turned out to be prophetic statement, some of their hosts proving themselves to be rather less than enthusiastic in wanting to ally with the rebellion and seemingly intent on making life as awkward as possible for the alliance team.

Along with their attempts to throw the alliance team off stride Solo had found the patronizing attitude displayed by some of the elder's behavior towards the princess very hard to take. The two main leaders of the elders the ones who caused most disruption in the meetings, had the sort of pinched self important air that Han had taken an instant dislike to. He recognized the type, born bullies accustomed to using their positions to get what they wanted. They had considerable influence over some of the younger members of the councils negotiating team. These in turn were the ones who had taken it upon themselves to make life as difficult as possible for the rebel team away from the negotiating table.

On the second day of negotiations the transport that had been arranged to carry the team to the talks had failed to materialize. Furious exchanges with the H'kig authorities had produced no results. It had taken a spectacular display of anger from Chewbacca to secure an alternative vehicle and some very fancy driving from Solo to get them to the talks on time. Leia who had clung to the safety harness eyes tightly closed throughout the trip was more than forthright when they reached their destination.

Han had done his best to look suitably affronted at this casting of aspersions on his driving abilities but had failed miserably. Annoying the imperious princess was one of his favorite pastimes and there was the added bonus of allowing Leia the opportunity to vent her spleen without taking her temper out on the delegates they were negotiating with.

He didn't miss the surprised looks exchanged between some of the negotiators as she swept into the hall and it strengthened his resolve to do everything in his power to ensure she was successful in her mission. In the last two days he had

been privileged to see another side of the Alderaanian princess and was impressed despite himself. The more he knew of her the more he wanted to know. He was and he knew it, getting more and more entangled in the tentacles of the rebellion and what was worse he liked it!

She was one hell'uva woman, he admitted to himself as he found himself following meekly in her wake he was almost beginning to feel sorry for the H'Kig councilors they just didn't realize who they were dealing with. Leia Organa gave the word determined new meaning.

By the fifth day Han would have cheerfully traded in the Falcon if it had brought them nearer to a resolution. He found it hard to disguise a yawn as he waited for the H'kig councilors to seat themselves. As usual the H'kig team were making the procedure as complicated as possible. Idle fingers drummed an impatient tattoo on the tabletop as one of the fussier elders demanded to be moved closer to the center of the table.

Han threw a glance over towards the princess she appeared as calm and as collected as ever. Although he could sometimes feel her sense of frustration with their lack of progress she never showed it when they were at the negotiating table.

His thoughts were interrupted as the chair of the talks called the two groups to order. Nodding at the H'kig side to begin, Solo groaned as his least favorite councilor got to his feet. "Honored translator,"

Several hours later Han shifted the weight of his chin from one cupped hand to the other, It looked like this session was destined to go on for ever, he blinked hard and tried to stifle another jaw breaking yawn. Leia would only stomp on his foot again if she caught him. Across the table his least favorite negotiators were exchanging snide under the breath comments. They were usually pitched at a level that allowed Han to guess at what they were whispering but not be able to hear it clearly. But the pair were growing bolder and their remarks more audible by the moment.

Leia paused, guessing she was being talked about and turned her ice-cold gaze on the two elders seated opposite, the younger one snickered. Biting back on a sharp response; diplomats didn't allow such bad manners to faze them, and thanking her training in the Imperial Senate which allowed her to go on as if nothing had been said Leia prepared to continue with her speech.

Beside her she felt Han bristle, before she could restrain him he was out of his seat, leaning across the table and had grabbed the offender by the throat. The elder's pale blue eyes bulged as he was dragged half way across the table top.

The other delegates fell back, alarmed at this sudden violence in their midst. None of them however seemed all that keen to intervene. Solo's size, obvious strength and anger being sufficient deterrent to them to stay out of the firing line.

"Han, that will do," Leia's tone was calm but determined. "Let him go, please." The pressure of her hand on his arm encouraged Solo to drop the man's shirt. But his eyes remained bright with barely suppressed fury.

Freed from the iron-fisted grip the councilor Han had man-handled massaged his throat, and gasped for air. His partner who had caused the initial breach of diplomatic etiquette with his sotto voce comment began to demand that negotiations with the rebellion be terminated immediately and that the alliance translator be taken into custody and charged with assault. Ostentatiously Han unhooked the safety catch, of his blaster he wasn't going anywhere without a fight.

Ignoring this demand, the chair of the talks shook the man off called for calm and when this was restored declared a short recess so that all the parties could cool off.

Han slanted a sides way look at the princess as they strode silently towards the room they had been allocated. Leia was ominously quiet. He could only guess at what she was thinking but he was quite sure it had something to do with the painful dismemberment of a certain Corellian.

Mentally bracing him self for the expected onslaught Han ushered her into the room hit the lock and swung on his heel. Leia was standing hands on hips rather than the look she normally wore when she was about to lambaste him she was wearing an exasperated smile.

"This was supposed to be a diplomatic mission you laser-brain," Leia scolded mildly. "Not a bar room brawl. Haven't you listened to any of the advice I've given you in the last week?"

If the situation wasn't so serious the princess might have laughed out loud at his sudden change of expression. Looks of surprise, relief and discomfort chased each other across his mobile features. Solo had obviously been expecting a tongue-lashing.

"I never pretended to be a diplomat," He muttered guiltily. "I'm just the dumbass spacer, remember."

"How could I forget." She chuckled dryly. "When you keep reminding me so regularly. Stop beating yourself up Han. You are doing an excellent job in very difficult circumstances, I mean it," she added as he looked skeptical. "And it was nice to have someone defend my good name so fiercely." Her smile grew more mischievous. "I'm willing to bet that our good friend Hal'kij doesn't try that trick again in a hurry. I thought he was going to have apoplexy." She eyed the tall Corellian appraisingly. "I'm glad you're on my side, hot-shot?"

To her private amusement this modest praise caused Solo to flush uncomfortably. "Yeah, well," he muttered. "I should have known better than to fall for an old trick like that. They set me up to lose my temper didn't they?"

"Yes!"

Solo's brow furrowed he didn't like the idea of having been played for a sucker.

"It's not your fault Han." She could tell from his expression that he was angry with himself for having fallen for the councilor's trick and feeling guilty over the likely consequences of his impetuous behavior. "The person to blame is our friend Hal'kij. "

"Yeah, maybe." He didn't sound convinced. "So what do we have to do now?"

She was silent for a moment knowing he wouldn't like what she was about to tell him. "I don't think the situation is irretrievable. We have the support of the leader of the talks, but they're not going to make things easy for you though!"

Solo grimaced as he realized what she was hinting at, he wasn't very good at apologies. "Do I have to?"

"If we want to get that treaty signed yes you do," she told him. "You don't have to mean it." She consoled "Just sound as if you do."

Han took a deep breath and gritted his teeth as he took in the self-satisfied expressions on the faces of the councilors opposite. They were obviously looking forward to seeing him grovel. Well, he told himself, it's your own damn fault. He turned to the chair of the meeting, who smiled sympathetically at him, obviously he didn't approve of the councilors actions. That made his task a little bit easier, but not much. The words of apology almost stuck in his throat as the two men exchanged smug looks but he swallowed his pride and completed his expressions of regret without actually gagging on his words.

Leia smiled at him as he sat down, her hand warm and comforting on his arm

"Thank you, Captain Solo. That couldn't have been easy for you." The leader of the group added a few words about courtesies being observed on both sides. Hal'kij spluttered angrily obviously about to frame another complaint but the leader waved him to continued silence.

The princess nodded her awareness of the leader's support and rose to her feet. "Our translator is very protective. All the more so considering the many inexplicable mishaps and accidents that seem to have befallen us since our arrival." She paused to let Han translate again. "Accidents that we have not felt the need to complain about until now." She turned her gaze from the two councilors to the leader of the talks. "My apologies to you, master H'Litil. Maybe I should have spoken of this earlier but we felt that there were more important matters to hand. Now I begin to suspect that someone." She looked directly at the older council member who had insulted the princess. "Hal'kij is deliberately trying to sabotage the talks. Why else would they so blatantly insult me?"

As her accusation was translated there was an outbreak of chatter around the table. Shock and disbelief were swiftly followed by demands for Hal'kij to answer her accusation.

"She's lying."

"No, she's not." Solo slammed a small box onto the table. "In case you ain't familiar with this piece of technology, it's a voice recorder. I've recorded every meeting we've had, gentlemen." He paused and began to fiddle with the controls. "If you'll just bear with me a second I think I can find where our friend," he leered at the ashen faced councilor, "swore at her highness, causing me to react so violently."

Unable to sit still any longer the Rishian leapt to his feet dashing the player to the ground. It split open to reveal nothing more than an empty container.

Furious at being duped and at having advertised his own guilt Hal'kij stormed from the room, his coterie of supporters following quickly behind him.

There was a short period of silence then everyone began talking at once.

Han flopped back into the cushioned seat of the auxiliary com station and let out a noisy sigh of relief. Chewbacca shook his head. * I take it they finally agreed to a treaty? *

"Thanks to Han's quick thinking," Leia told him. "I was as surprised as anyone when you pulled that trick with the recorder, Han. What would you have done if he'd called your bluff?"

"Shot 'im," Solo deadpanned. "It would have saved a hell'uva lot of time if I'd been allowed to do that at the start of the damned negotiations. I told ya he was trouble."

"Is that a typical Corellian diplomatic approach," Leia asked, "Or just one you've made up?"

"Hey, it worked didn't it."

Handing over her case to the puzzled Wookiee, Leia chuckled at his words. "You'll have to ask him about the Corellian approach to diplomatic negotiations, Chewbacca. It adds new meaning to the words gun-ship diplomacy and his bargaining style is definitely unique."

Solo grumbled at this latest slur on his talents. "Yeah, well the sooner we get that treaty signed the happier I'll be."

Solo allowed his gaze to sweep the room, scanning it for any sign of the two disaffected H'kig members. They were not present and he allowed himself a small smile of satisfaction. He didn't want anything to spoil this for the princess. Still it didn't do to relax too much. H'litol, who had chaired the negotiations had added his own note of concern as they waited for the final signing ceremony, Hal'kij had not been seen since he left the negotiations, he too had come prepared.

As Leia stepped forward to add her signature to the document, Han caught a glimpse of a movement behind her. Yelling a warning he charged the podium, knocking Leia to the floor, using his body as a shield as old-fashioned gunfire whistled over their heads.

His own blaster came automatically to his fist. His first shot struck its target and the would-be assassin fell injured. Trying to get off another shot he found his line of fire impeded as pandemonium broke out and people dived for cover. Wanting to protect the princess he remained where he was until a sharp dig in the ribs and a muffled, "Solo, get off me," caused him to shift slightly. Han grabbed a heavy table overturned in the panic and dragged it in front of himself and the princess giving them more substantial cover. Then and only then did he allow Leia to get up from the floor and take shelter behind him. "Stay put," He directed coming to one knee to scan the room. "There's still another one out there." He blinked as Leia moved closer to him and a tiny but deadly blaster appeared in her fist. Where the hell had she been hiding that? He asked himself while flashing her a grin.

"A lady can't always rely on diplomacy, Han." Leia chuckled at Solo's double take as she primed her weapon.

Han shook his head. "Cover me will ya I think I know where the guy may be." Without waiting for their answer he made a dash for the other side of the room, diving for shelter as gunfire erupted around him. He found a breathless H'litol protecting two less robust council members. "He can not get away, Captain Solo." He informed the Corellian, who was taking the opportunity to catch his breath. "Re-enforcement's will be on their way, if we wait just a short time, we should," he never finished, for as if in answer to this advice another gun man rushed from cover heading straight for H'litol.

Lightening reflexes ensured that Han was there before him. The pair grappled for a few seconds before the older man was overcome. Solo took great pleasure in smashing his fist into the man's face before handing him over to the newly arrived guards.

"I've wanted to do that for days now," he told them with a grin. Turning to H'litol he asked. "Where's Leia?"

The diplomat looked around as if expecting to see the princess. "I don't know." Disquiet filled his voice "she was just here. Where could she have gone, and where's Hal'kij?"

Han had skidded out of the door in pursuit of the missing Alderaanian before H'Litol could warn him to be careful.

Leia had watched Solo's assault on H'Litol's attacker with a growing sense of frustration. She was not accustomed to being told to stay out of things. As her would be protector and the assailant had grappled with each other out of the corner of her eye she saw a side entrance previously hidden by a wall hanging slide quietly closed. Hal'kij had obviously planned his escape route as meticulously as he had his campaign against the alliance. Well the Corellian wasn't the only one who had become tired of diplomacy. Glancing round to make sure she wasn't being followed she had stepped into the passageway.

"That's far enough, you Corellian vermin."

Han Solo swore silently. Disgusted with himself for allowing himself to be so concerned with Leia's safety, to charge straight into trouble. His eyes never left the ancient fire-arm that the Rishian was pointing straight at him.

"This time it is I who has the advantage. I may not have your technology but my weapon will kill you all the same"

"What do you hope to gain from this?"

The man sneered. "The end of negotiations, alien scum. First I will dispose of you and then turn my attention to your precious princess. Your deaths will certainly lead to the alliance calling off their treaty and Rish will not be further violated by aliens who don't respect our ancient ways." He laughed a strange maniacal sound that chilled Solo's blood. "Step back out of my way and hand over that fancy blaster of yours."

Slowly Han began to comply with the councilors demand. All the time looking for an opening to jump the man.

"Put down your weapon," a voice ordered quietly.

Hal'kij swung round, to see Leia Organa standing there, surprised he began firing wildly. Solo dived at him his yelp a second later had more to do with indignation than pain as one of the councilors shots ricochet off the wall and caught him in the arm. Grabbing the man he shoved his own blaster into his face. "You're goin' to regret that," he threatened. About to lay into the man he was stopped as the H'Kig guards arrived. They swiftly hustled away the disgraced council member before Han could exact his revenge.

"Damn it." Solo, bereft of his initial target turned to vent his anger on the young woman beside him. "Don't you know better'n that? Yer Worship." He nursed his throbbing left arm. The bullet had torn into his flesh and the wound was still bleeding. "The last thing you do with someone holding a gun is to make 'em jump. What were you tryin' to do get me killed?"

"If I wanted to kill you I'd have chosen something more effective than that thing," Leia indicated the discarded weapon. "And I'm not a gun handler, Solo." Her words made him grin wryly at this reminder of his earlier excuse that he wasn't a diplomat. "Let me have a look at that wound."

Han removed his bloodied hand from the bullet hole so she could inspect the injury. "Thanks," he grouched, giving her his best hurt little boy look, and wincing slightly as Leia probed his wound. "And I thought you were beginning to like me a little!"

Han almost didn't hear Leia's softly worded response as she turned away, to pick up the med kit left by the guards but her words brought a pleased smile to his face and made the last few days more than worthwhile.

"I am fly-boy, I really think I am."

"So it was a complete success." Kaldrain finished the report Leia had presented them with on her return. "Leia and Han seem to have made an excellent pairing." He looked across at Rieekan adding mischievously "Maybe we should consider using them together again? Now that they appear to have worked out their differences."

Rieekan laughed as he heard raised voices in the distance. "Are you sure?"

Kaldrain listened and rolled his eyes at the rising noise level in the hallway. Chuckling he hit the door lock.

Totally oblivious to the people waiting them in the briefing room. Solo and Leia stood toe to toe on the threshold. Insults flying backwards and forwards between them. Rieekan and Kaldrain exchanged rueful smiles. "Ah well it was nice while it lasted." Kaldrain acknowledged "I suppose we shouldn't expect miracles. Not with this pair. And think how dull it would be around here without all the free entertainment they provide." The noise level shifted up a gear.

"Listen your wonderfulness," Solo yelled, leaning in closely to the princess who was standing centimeters from him. "If you'd listened to me we could have cleared the whole damn mess a lot quicker."

"Listened to you! If I'd listened to you, hot-shot. You could have been really dead, as well as being brain dead!"

The two generals reluctantly decided they had better intervene before they had a full-scale diplomatic incident on their hands.

end

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