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THE DREAD BARGE OF GARBAGE

By Cypher

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"All I want," the creature said, "is my loincloth."

Han Solo peered down at the shaggy little being at his feet. "You got so much hair, Sutha, I'd say you don't need clothes."

Sutha's translucent wings fluttered in agitation. The crimson sunlight of Byrantiss shimmered off their luminous scales, creating a soft glitter that, Han had to admit, was rather spectacular. Far more so, in fact, than the Byrantian himself, whose half-meter height did little to support his attempts at self-importance.

"You do not understand, Captain," Sutha piped in his raspy but reedy voice, bracing his lowermost set of fists on what passed, in his species, for hips. "I speak of a ceremonial loincloth, which an adult Byrantian Mini-Mite must win before being considered fully enfranchised. This is generally accomplished by performing some doughty feat of heroism or public service assigned by our Elders. Generally, the task is designed to test some particular trait, such as courage or strength, but only the Elders know which trait is being sought."

Han scratched the back of his head and yawned lazily. "Well, seein' as your job's to escort these building supplies through a sector that's got as many pirates as a Bantha has sand fleas, I'd guess in your case they're testin' for stupidity."

Sutha's wings folded primly into the form that denoted offended sarcasm. "In that case, Captain, I would assume that you, too, are being tested for that characteristic, since you did agree to carry both my cargo and myself."

Han snorted good-naturedly. "Sutha, if your folks're willin' to put up eighteen thou for me to ship you and your crates to HoovIV-4, I'd say they're the ones who need the test. Yeah, there're pirates out there--a whole lot of 'em. But none of 'em have the juice to get a jump on the Millennium Falcon." He patted his ship's exterior plating affectionately. "Hey, this's the ship that made the Kessel--"

Sutha sighed. "You told me, Captain. Several times. And I have full confidence in her speed and your ability to outmaneuver the brigands, especially since you will receive the remaining half of your pay only when you return me safely to Byrantiss with whatever negotiables I have been able to collect."

"Let me get this straight." Han cast his mind back to the conversation he had had with the Byrantian Elders when he'd signed the contract for this particular job. "As I understand it, you have to swap the building supplies for something of value. It doesn't have to be money, necessarily, but it has to be something of enough importance to impress your ruling counsel, right?"

"That is correct, Captain. I do believe that I will succeed in my assignment. After all, currently several settlements are being inaugurated in the remote polar regions of HoovIV-4, so building supplies should certainly be welcome." He paused and his wings began to droop. "It is just that--"

"That what?"

The wings fluttered weakly. "That I have never been off - planet before, Captain, and frankly I am apprehensive about the prospect of space travel. To be out among the stars, in that terrible void, with nothing solid beneath my feet-- Captain, it was only recently that I emerged from the familial burrow to see the sunlight. I have lived safely surrounded by friendly walls of stone and earth. But now--" He shuddered.

The notion of spending most of his life underground gave Han a twinge of claustrophobia. He was only truly happy when lifting off from some dirtball, headed for the welcoming arms of the galaxy and the great hard darkness that was his friend. He shrugged. "Well, it won't be for long--no more'n four days shipboard. Then I'll ferry you back to collect your loincloth, and my money. Okay?"

"I suppose." The little creature cast one last look around at the landing field, one of a handful on his homeworld. With longing eyes, he took in the sparse, prickly vegetation, the juts and fortresses of volcanic crags thrusting upward toward the red sun, and, in the distance, the dark mouths of the family

tunnels running back into the mountains. "Farewell, lovely Byrantiss," he murmured.

"Yeah." Han shook his head. Sutha's idea of beauty certainly wasn't his. But, then, it was a big galaxy and he'd learned to accept, if not appreciate, quite a few conflicting notions. "We'd better lift off before the atmospheric flux kicks into high gear," he warned, "or we'll be stuck here 'til tomorrow."

Sutha turned sadly from the barren vista and started up the ramp to the Falcon's hatch. Halfway, he paused and looked back at Han. Captain, are you sure that my cargo has been completely loaded? Is your co-pilot aboard? I have not yet met --"

"It is and Chewie is and we're ready to go. The ship's already warmin' up. Hear the engines? You just go ahead and strap your- self in. When we've cleared the atmosphere, we'll make the jump to lightspeed. Then you can come to the cockpit and meet Chewie. Once we're cookin' along, one of us will show you around the ship."

"That sounds reasonable." Sutha continued his climb toward the hatch. "Perhaps," he said thoughtfully, "we will not encounter any pirates. Perhaps this will be an entirely uneventful trip. I do hope so. Frankly, Captain, I doubt my ability to show courage in the face of adversity--or at least in the face of bloodthirsty brigands."

"Don't worry," Han assured him. "You won't have to. The Falcon'll show 'em her heels. This trip's gonna be smooth as a mynock's hindquarters."

They left the gravitational pull behind them and the naviputer digested the course coordinates. Han was punching them into light- speed when Sutha poked his head into the cockpit. "Captain," he began, "is it all right--" But as he spoke, the Falcon's hyper- drive engines started to kick in. The ship thrust herself forward sharply and the Mini-Mite, taken unaware, was catapulted backward into the corridor, where he fetched up with a thunk against the bulkhead.

"Terrific!" Han growled. "Hold on, Chewie; cut back and hold the jump 'til I find out if our short passenger's hurt himself."

In the copilot's seat, Chewbacca the Wookiee rumbled a query. His partner shook his head. "Little idiot probably cracked his skull but good. I told him to stay strapped in 'til one of us came to get him." Frowning, he headed out of the cockpit.

To his surprise, Sutha was picking himself up with no sign of pain. "My, but that was a surprise," the Byrantian chirped.

"Sounded like you took a pretty good hit there; sure you aren't hurt?"

Sutha shook himself and spread his wings to their full one-meter width. "Not at all, Captain." He grinned in self-satisfaction, showing tiny sharp teeth set in a mouth that was a disconcerting shade of green. "We Byrantians are far less liable to injury than we might appear. Unlike larger, coarser creatures." He gave Han a glance that might have been a teasing smile, except that Han had never known a Byrantian with much of a sense

"Who're you callin' coarse?" Han snapped.

Sutha did not reply, but groomed his silver-plum fur with his four clawed hands until every strand was in place. At that moment, Chewbacca entered the corridor, woofing a question to Han.

When Sutha saw the two-meter-plus anthropoid, his eyes widened until they looked like tiny black holes speckled with light. His jaw dropped and his tongue protruded in wonder as he scanned the Wookiee's massive body from hairy feet to hairy head. Then, stunned, he stumbled forward until he stood just in front of Chewbacca. He had to look up even to see the Wookiee's knee.

"Hey, Sutha," Han said. "This is my First Mate, Chewbacca."

Sutha's mouth worked, but it was several moments before anything came out. Finally, he squeaked, "oh, goddess! oh, wonder of wonders! oh, heart's-mine, mate of my burrow!"

Han and Chewbacca eyed each other, brows furrowed. They looked back at the awestruck Mini-Mite, who had clasped his two sets of hands together as certain species did in obeisance to their deities. Half-entranced, he reached out tentatively to stroke Chewbacca's coarse russet fur. A shiver raced through his tiny frame.

"Goddess, indeed!" he murmured. He peered up into what he could see of Chewbacca's face from his low-angle viewpoint. "Oh, one-to-be-worshipped, give me a sign that this is no mere hibernation fantasy! Tell me that I indeed wake and, waking, behold you!"

The bemused Wookiee rumbled something noncommittal but reassuring. Han shook his head. "I don't know what hallucinogen you're on, Sutha," he said, "but

Chewie's real, all right. Big as life and just as smelly." He ignored his partner's protest at the final comment.

"Real? Real?" The Mini-Mite leaned into Chewbacca's leg and wrapped all four arms around it as the startled Wookiee woofed. "Real indeed, oh Goddess!" Without releasing his hold, he turned his tiny face to a thoroughly bewildered Han. "Captain, be truthful with me. Is this wondrous creature your mate?"

"My mate? Yeah, I told you -- my First Mate."

"First Mate?" Sutha frowned. "Do you mean to say that your kind takes more than one?"

Han's eyebrows arched quizzically. "Well, yeah, if the ship's big enough. But the Falcon's a two-man job."

"Oh." Sutha thought for a moment. Then his face opened in realization. "Captain, I fear that I have misspoken myself. I was not referring to your, er, working partnership. I wish to know if this lovely creature is your lifemate."

"What?" Han's yelp rattled a set of Quixxon drinking gourds in the galley.

Sutha hardly heard him. He once again gazed adoringly upward at the by now totally befuddled Wookiee. "Surely, Captain, you cannot be so blind, so ignorant of feminine pulchritude. But if that is indeed the case--" He turned a meltingly worshipful gaze on Chewbacca's kneecap. "Then I must offer my own suit as soon as possible. Oh, marvelous giantess, greater than any Byrantian female I have ever seen--nay, greater than even in legend and song--I pray you, consider me as your lifemate. True, I have not yet won my loincloth, but Captain Solo assures me that this journey will be accomplished with ease, and then I will be enfranchised, with the right to found a burrow of my own." He appraised the Wookiee's huge frame carefully. "True, it will have to be a very large burrow. But, if you, beauteous Chewbacca, will deign to share it with me, my happiness will be complete. Oh, do say you will be mine!"

Han's reaction to this exhortation was to collapse against the bulkhead, shaking in glee. Chewbacca, momentarily stunned into silence, merely peered down at his tiny admirer, who was still clinging to his leg. Then the Wookiee's great body began to quiver, to rumble, finally to explode with laughter that eclipsed even Han's helpless whoops.

"But what--?" Sutha glanced from one to the other. Finally, he squeaked, "Captain, is that unseemly noise the sound that is considered by your species to denote great amusement? If so, I would certainly like to know what you and this

lovely creature find so humorous. My words may have been a trifle fuliginous, but, ripped from my newly captive heart, they are entirely sincere."

With difficulty, Han got himself under control. Chewbacca had already subsided and stood looking rather abashedly at his suitor.

"Sorry, Sutha," Han choked, wiping away tears of mirth. "I didn't mean to insult you, and I know Chewie didn't, either. It's just that--well, what in the heavens gave you the idea that Chewie's a female? 'Specially, a female of your species?"

Sutha frowned. "Granted, Chewbacca is a trifle larger than our females generally are. Well, more than a trifle, actually. But the difference is largely a matter of degree. Our females are considerably taller than we males; about twice as tall, in fact. And they are wingless, which is certainly the case with your First Mate. In fact, among Byrantians, female pulchritude is in great part a factor of size, which makes Chewbacca by far the most spectacular female I or any of my kind have ever seen."

Gently, Chewbacca reached down and unwrapped the four tiny arms from his leg. He emitted a soft but rather embarrassed rumble.

"Well," Han said, "there's a little problem here, Sutha. Chewie's not one of your folks, or even a distant cousin ' as far as I know. He's a Wookiee. But most of all, he's a he. Fact is, he's got a wife and youngster back home on Kashyyyk. So you see, you're barkin' up the wrong, er, leg."

"But--but--could it be?" Carefully, Sutha circled the Wookiee, studying him. Finally, he sighed and his wings drooped to the deck. "I do see a few physiological differences, now that you mention it. But he is such a magnificent example of a female--"

"Well, I'm sure he's flattered." Han shoved himself off the bulkhead. "Meanwhile, we'd better make lightspeed before we pick up some unwelcome traffic." He grinned wickedly at his partner. "Chewie, you wanna keep Sutha company for a while?"

He found himself bouncing off the bulkhead as Chewbacca rushed past, heading for the cockpit. Han couldn't repress a snort. "Oh, you wanna handle the jump, furball? That's okay with me. Gimme a minute to make sure Sutha's dogged down good." From the cockpit came an abrupt acknowledgment.

Sutha appeared dejected, so Han decided to distract him from his woes. "Hey, Sutha, let's take a quick look at that load of yours. Chewie did all the heavy work while I was negotiatin' with your Elders, and I trust him to have it stored right, but one extra check never hurts. C'mon." He headed for the cargo hold and

the Byrantian followed, the tips of his wings making a soft metallic hissing on the deck plates.

The cargo hold was three-quarters filled with large molded crates, each one with a digital readout that glowed "CONSTRUCTION MATERIALS -- RECYCLED". Sutha seemed quite overwhelmed at the number of containers and even forgot his short-lived, ill-starred romance for a moment. "Good heavens, Captain Solo, I had no idea there were so many. I do hope I have no difficulty delivering them."

Han thumped one of the crates experimentally. It sounded solid and very heavy. "You got any idea just what kinda stuff's in here, and what it's worth? I'm pretty good at negotiatin' deals, but it'd help to know what I've got to trade--just in case you think you could use a little help on the business end."

"I don't have the slightest--" the Byrantian began, but he was cut off by a violent jolt that threw both of them into the end of a container. The jolt was followed by another. From the cockpit, Chewbacca's roar echoed down the corridor.

"Trouble!" Han snapped, dragging Sutha into the passageway. "Sutha, you go strap in." He started forward, calling back over his shoulder, "And stay there 'til we tell you everything's clear, understand?"

"I understand, Captain Solo." The Mini-Mite's voice soared an octave above its usual piping pitch.

Two more jolts rocked the ship before Han could throw himself into the pilot's seat and take stock. "Holy jumpin' Jedi!" he gasped. "What in all the hells is that thing, and why didn't you warn me before it started shootin' at us?" The attacking ship appeared to be at least twice the size of the Falcon, vaguely wedge-shaped, with three power nacelles dropped from her stern. The style was unfamiliar to Han, who prided himself on his near-encyclopedic knowledge of ship configurations.

Grabbing for the lateral and vertical controls, Chewbacca growled an explanation.

Han nodded, but he didn't like the Wookiee's words. "Popped up so fast the sensors didn't even read it 'til it was nearly on top of us, huh? That's bad news. Gotta be something special about this ship--" He took a closer look, then eyed the distance read-outs. The attacker was farther away than he'd thought, which meant that it was a lot larger than it looked.

Chewbacca threw the Falcon into an evasive tangent as Han checked the shields.

A laser-light bloomed off the port shield, which buckled, but held. "Gods, that monster's packin', more fire- power than an Espo cutter. Our guns won't touch her. And she's fast--too fast. Just keep us away from those blasts, Chewie. We'll be able to jump in a sec--'

Chewbacca didn't respond. He sideslipped a lethal flash that exploded harmlessly off to starboard.

"Just--about--now!" Han yelled and the Falcon lurched into her faster-than-light gait, the starfield streaking past, leaving the cruiser behind.

Han collapsed against the backrest. "Whoo! That could've gotten hairy, partner. Biggest damn pirate live ever seen. But we're safe now--and as long's there aren't any more of 'em waitin' when we cut back into sublight in the HoovIV-4 orbit lanes, we'll be free and clear." He checked the readouts again and frowned. "Falcon's gonna need a little work, pal. That front port shield's hangin' on by a wish, and the mid-port one doesn't look too healthy, either. If you can keep goin' here, I'll head back and see if there's anything I can do to shore 'em up 'til we can set down and make repairs."

As Han stepped into the dayroom, Sutha peered up from the impact webbing. "Captain, is it safe for me to come out now?"

"Sure. Here, I'll give you a hand."

The little Byrantian slid to the deck, stretching his wings experimentally. "Heavens, but that was terrible. Are we safe, Captain? Was it brigands?"

"Yes and yes. But now that we're in lightspeed, we oughta be fine al the way to--" His voice broke off suddenly. His nose twitched and his hazel eyes suddenly began to sting. "Seven hells of Hallaammos!" he snapped. "What's that smell?"

At his feet, the Mini-Mite was convulsed by a sneeze. "Oh, Captain Solo--how dreadful!"

"Where's it--" Han choked as his breakfast threatened to recycle itself. He forced it under tentative control. "Smells like it's comin' from--the cargo hold!" He threw himself toward the still-open hatch to the cargo area, Sutha following as fast as he could between sneezes.

The stench was so overpowering that Han couldn't force himself through the hatchway. But even from the opening he could see the source. During the bombardment and Chewbacca's evasive maneuvers, one of the heavy crates had come loose from its stack and slammed into the deck. A corner had split and something dark and viscous was puddling on the deck.

Han gagged and coughed for a while. Finally, he managed to gasp, "No building material ever made smells like that. What is that stuff?"

Sutha's answer was a thin wail of dismay and a rapid retreat toward the dayroom. Han followed, after first slamming the hatch shut. Even with it closed, the stench filled the ship. A muffled howl of Wookiee dismay told him that it had filtered through to the cockpit as well.

Eyes streaming and stomach doing a Carnoolian clog dance, Han turned to Sutha. The little Byrantian was trying to stuff himself into the most distant corner of the acceleration couch. "Sutha," Han choked, "something gives me the idea that you recognize that-- that stink. You wanna tell me what it is?"

Sutha squirmed and sneezed a few more times, but finally went limp, his wings flopping across the couch. "I confess, Captain Solo, I have smelled that particular odor before, although never in such a concentration." He tried to draw himself up in dignity, but didn't quite succeed. "Captain Solo," he said at length, "do you know the primary export of Byrantiss?"

Han thought for a moment. "It's some kinda drink, isn't it? Wait a minute, I know: pthoolia juice."

"That is correct, Captain. And do you know how pthoolia juice is made?"

"No," Han growled, "but I'm sure you're gonna tell me."

"Pthoolia juice is distilled, through a very complicated twenty-seven stage process, from the green vines of the pthool plant, which grows wild in the Nether Reaches near the equator. Since there is a very small yield of juice from each vine, the process requires a proportion of one hundred to one: one hundred- weight of vine to one weight of juice. Do you follow me?"

"Yeah, but I'm not gonna follow you much longer. Give me the short version; in about half a minute, I'm gonna throw up."

"Well," Sutha went on unhappily, "the result is that Byrantiss is left with great masses of vine fiber after the juice has been extracted and processed. In the past, the residue was dumped in the craters of the Farther Reaches under the assumption that it would decompose. Unfortunately--" He paused for a sneeze. "Un- fortunately, it was recently discovered that, once the vine has been processed, the residue remains intact."

"What?"

"It does not rot, Captain Solo. The uncounted tons of fiber deposited in the Farther Reaches have simply sat there accumulating. Now they have become impossible to ignore."

Comprehension dawned. "The smell."

"Precisely. The smell. Remarkably pervasive and highly unpleasant."

Hah gagged again. "I noticed."

"The Elders ordered the residue buried, but that had little effect, as the odor seeped up through the ground cover. They tried burning it, but it was impervious to flame and the smoke carried the odor over an even wider area. They attempted a number of other measures, with no result. The situation has become so desperate that people have been relocating their burrows away from the afflicted areas. Unfortunately, the smell continues to spread. It has not yet reached Essien Junction, where the main spaceport is located, but I fear it is only a matter of time."

Very calmly, so as not to enrage his combative stomach, Han stepped up to the Byrantian, wrapped both large hands around the small body and lifted it up until the Corellian's eyes, now green with rage, glared into Sutha's plum-furred face. "Do you mean to tell me," he enunciated carefully through clenched teeth, "that your Elders crated up a bunch of that vine residue and loaded it onto my ship?" His voice soared on the final word and broke there.

"I fear," Sutha quavered, "that they did precisely that."

"And they thought we'd be able to pass it off as building materials to some poor sucker on HoovIV-4?"

"I fear so."

Han's face flushed rapidly and the muscles in his jaw rippled. For a moment, Sutha was convinced that the Corellian was about to bounce him off the far bulkhead. The Byrantian, too terrified either to move or to speak, merely hung in Han's grip, trembling.

Finally, Han took a deep breath, immediately regretted it as he gagged again, and set the Byrantian down. Some of the darkness faded from his face. "Sutha, tell the truth. Did you know what was in those crates?"

"No, captain, I swear it!"

Han studied him for a moment. "Okay," he said at last. "But we're gonna have a hell of a time figurin' out what to do now." A strange, distant look flashed over his face and his eyes crossed. "'Scuse, me," he gulped and fled for the head.

"Obviously," Sutha said, "this is my test, or at least part of it." His piping voice was made oddly nasal by the clamp that pinched his nostrils shut. The words came out, "dis is by dest."

"My poor ship!" Han moaned in the same nasal way. His clip was uncomfortably tight and, after four days of wearing it, his nose was raw and sensitive. But he wasn't about to remove the clamp and endure another olfactory attack. "We're gonna haveta have her fumigated--and even then I don't know if we'll get the stink outa her."

Chewbacca, whose sense of smell was far more acute than either Han's or Sutha's, had plugged his nostrils with cylinders of plastic and covered the whole lower half of his face with a safety mask. He had permeated the mask with attar of ossenard, but even through the plugs and the potent perfume he thought he could detect the nauseating odor of processed pthool vines. He rumbled a warning. It was half muffled by the mask, but Han understood.

"Okay, Sutha, we're comin' outa hyperspace and into the shippin' lanes. You better go strap in."

The Byrantian nodded and trotted out of the cockpit. Han gave him enough time to prepare, then reached for the hyperdrive deactivator. "Here she goes," he murmured and threw the switch.

The Falcon's mechanical voice changed pitch, dropping into a familiar rumble as the sublight engines cut back in. The streaking stars outside slowed into pinpricks of light, and then the ship was at cruising speed. Ahead was a great green globe, glowing in the light of twin suns: HoovIV-4.

"Almost there," Han sighed, "and none too soon. Chewie, I can't take much more of this smell. And you better bet I'm gonna charge that little passenger of ours extra for gettin' the Falcon cleaned out. I've got a suspicion that every piece of cloth in the place is gonna need sonic detox--not to mention us. First thing I'm gonna do is find a hotel with a deep-cleansing facility--"

The telltale interrupted him and Chewie's simultaneous roar overrode his words. His head snapped up. The star field was empty, so he checked the readouts. "Ship, comin' in fast from the stern--" He hit the mag. "There's the little sucker. No, not so little. Looks like -- gods!" He slammed his fist down on the control panel. "It's that same ship that hit us a few days ago. They must've made the jump, too, and been layin' around, waiting for us or somebody else." He thrust himself out of the seat. "I'm goin' to the guns."

Chewbacca growled absently, keeping his eye on the approaching ship. He frowned, remembering the Falcon's damaged shields. Han had made some patchwork repairs, but the Wookiee knew they wouldn't hold under heavy bombardment. The only chance was to outrun or outmaneuver the pirate, at least until they could drop into the planet's atmosphere where they'd be under the protection of the Hoovian patrol boats. Considering how often he and his partner had tried to avoid just such patrols on a score of worlds, Chewbacca couldn't withhold a wry snort.

In the upper gun turret, Han set the tracking computer and prepared for a fight. He had few illusions about their chances. The pirate craft was far larger and more heavily armed, with massive engines to power massive shielding systems. He probably couldn't do much except make noise and a nice light show, unless one of the quad guns could find a weak spot or a chink where the pirate's shields didn't quite overlap. He gritted his teeth and fired off four rounds, more for the record than anything else. "Chewie," he growled to himself, "punch her!"

Chewie did. Han was shoved against the side of his seat as the Falcon cut sharply to starboard. Then he was slammed back as Chewbacca threw her upward. On both sides, Han saw laser tracers going wide. His own shots blossomed harmlessly in space. Chewbacca flung the Falcon all over, making it impossible for Han to get a line on his target. But he noticed that the pirate ship was having no better fortune. At least, there had been no concussions signalling a strike on the Falcon's shields or exterior plating. "By the gods," he muttered, squeezing off another wild shot, "we might just get through this--"

That's when the pirate's starboard guns got lucky. The Falcon shuddered violently, but held together. Chewie sent her into an evasive spiral.

"Any damage?" Han snapped over his headset. The answering snarl from the cockpit gave him the bad news. "That shield again, huh? Well, pal, we just can't take another hit." He checked their location. "We're outmaneuverin' 'em, anyway--"

The great green ball that was their destination swelled in his viewport until it filled his field of vision. Suddenly, without warning, the pirate was gone. Han swivelled the gun seat with hits tracking computer, but found nothing except a rapidly fading blip behind him. Just then, he felt a slight lurch and heard the

sub- light engines shift tone and knew that the Falcon had hit HoovIV- 4's gravitational pull.

"Whoeee!" he whooped, whipping off the headset. "Good flyin ", pal." He pushed himself out of the seat and dropped down the ladder. En route to the cockpit, he paused to check his passenger, who was curled up in the webbing with his wings wrapped in desperation around his shaggy head. "Don't worry, Sutha," Han called out as he passed. "From now on it's clear sailin'. We'll be down and rid of this crap of a cargo before you can say 'ceremonial loin- cloth.'"

The two Hoovians spoke in the odd, archaic variation of Standard that characterized their race, but they were having no problem making themselves understood.

"Beist thou insane?" screamed the taller one, his faceted eyes flashing like emergency lights on a star cruiser, his mandibles clicking in agitation. "Thou darest attempt to bring contraband through mainpost customs--"

"And thou darest," the other chimed in, "to purvey that malodorous miasma of decomposition to myself under the guise of construction materials! Thou poltroons! Thou meaching malefactors!"

Sutha squealed in fear and dodged behind Chewbacca's calf, leaving the Corellian to placate their enraged hosts.

"Now, wait just a minute--" Han began. "We didn't know--"

"Aha! Not only perfidious, but also prevaricious!" The customs official snapped his notebook shut with a flourish and tapped three pressure plates on the red formex cover. The book hummed for a moment; then a melange of green letters swam into view. They swirled disconcertingly before resolving themselves into a single word: REJECTED.

The customs agent nodded his head, his antennae waving in satisfaction. "There thou has it, varlets; thou are rejected by HoovIV-4 now and hereafter, with all thy goods and chattels and--" He sniffed. "--thy effluvious excuse for a cargo."

"But I must dispose of it!" Sutha squeaked. "I cannot return home without having exchanged it for something of value."

"Thy troubles be no chiton off my carapace," the smaller Hoovian snorted. "Personally, I wouldst be greatly gratified never to deal with thy ilk again."

Thou mayest inform thy council of Elders that henceforth they mayest carry their poor excuse for trade elsewhere."

"Now, wait just a minute," Han began, but the customs officer cut him off.

"Nay, poltroon. Thou hast no time to squander. Once thou hast been by law and rule rejected, thou hast only half of one Standard timepart in which to hie thyself and thy ship and crew elsewhere, lest the Hoovian Enforcement Contingent descend upon thee and render thee and thine into space dust." He checked his timepiece. "And thou hast less than that time e'en now."

Chewie snarled and Han growled, but Sutha tugged at the Corellian's trouser leg and squeaked, "Captain, we must depart. The Hoovians are rather literal of mind when it comes to their laws. We have no time to spare--and the Hoovian Enforcers are notoriously efficient." He peered around Han toward the open door of the docking bay. "In fact, I do believe this may be they."

Through the door marched twenty of the largest Hoovians Han had ever seen, each armored to the mandibles and bearing artillery far heavier than the strongest human could lift without risking a rupture. By the tilt of their heads and the musculature beneath their armor, he could tell they were females. Han had met Hoovian females before on a couple of rather unpleasant occasions. He winced. The males, in their picky ways, were bad enough; the female were lethal. And their mating practices didn't bear close scrutiny.

"Okay, we get the hint," he said, turning toward the Falcon's ramp. "But you know, you're sendin' us right into the teeth of a pirate cruiser that chased us all the way here."

The shorter Hoovian, the one to whom Sutha's cargo had been consigned, spread his mandibles in what passed for a smile. "Good," he said. "'Twill be my pleasure to contemplate thy doom at the pincher hands or paws of such as they."

Han was almost getting used to the nose clamp, but Chewbacca had grown decidedly testy. He snarled behind the mask as he piloted the Falcon through the space lanes toward the outer edge of the Hoovian atmospheric envelope.

"You're tellin' me," his captain muttered, with a less-than-friendly glance at their small passenger. Sutha whimpered and enfolded his head in his wings. Han sighed. "Well," he said, "we got no choice. If we can play hide-and-seek with those buccaneers, we'll just run our little pal and his smelly shipment right back home to Essien Junction. Tell you the truth, Chewie, I don't even much care if we don't get the rest of our pay. I just want this garbage off our ship!"

Sutha's wings unfolded swiftly and he peered up in alarm. "Oh, Captain, surely you would not return me before I have had another opportunity to fulfill my mission. You cannot imagine to what terrible fate you are consigning me if we return to Byrantiss."

"It can't be half as bad as the fate I'm gonna consign you to if I haveta smell that stuff much longer," Han promised ominously.

The Mini-Mite ran to the Wookiee, seated at the controls. Grabbing the shaggy russet pelt, he hung on, gazing up at him imploringly--and, Chewbacca noted with alarm, adoringly. Apparently, Sutha had not yet shed his infatuation, despite Han's earlier explanation of the difference between Byrantian female and Wookiee male.

"Oh, Chewbacca," he cried. "I implore you--surely you, who are so like one of my own species, would not condemn me to such a dire situation."

The Wookiee rumbled deep in his massive chest, but his reply was muffled by the mask. Gently, he tried to detach his tiny petitioner, but Sutha clung with the strength of desperation.

"You have no idea what it means to be an unenf ranchised adult male on Byrantiss," he plunged on. "I would be the lowliest of the lowly, with no burrow of my own, disowned by my family, a pariah in my own society. No female would so much as brush my wing, much less witness my mating flight. No remunerative employment would be open to me, and I would be relegated to working in the pthool dumps." A small sob escaped him. "For those unfortunates whose fate this is, life is mercifully brief. Without decent shelter, adequate food and the support of burrow-mates, they survive generally no more than three or four seasons."

He turned his pleading black eyes on Han. His wings drooped so bonelessly that they appeared to melt. "Captain Solo, I beg of you: Do not return me to Byrantiss. instead, let us try some other world where I might have an opportunity to dispose of this burden. There must be someplace where pthool-vine residue is either unknown or socially acceptable."

"Anyplace where that stuff is acceptable is no place I wanna be," Han snarled. But he couldn't resist a glance at his pathetic passenger. He was half afraid that Sutha would expire from sheer hopelessness right there on the cockpit deck. One section of his brain growled, "Good riddance!" but the other, better part of him considered the Mini-Mite's words. The gods knew he didn't want to be responsible for consigning Sutha to disgrace and early death.

A stray current from the area of the cargo hold wafted past, detectable even through the nose clamp, and he nearly punched in the coordinates for Byrantiss. Then he signed, at least as well as he could with his nostrils pinched shut.

"Well, he told his copilot, "if we can help Sutha get rid of this stuff, we can collect our full eighteen thousand. Otherwise, we'll run short--and we may need some extra cash to get that shield fixed."

The Wookiee's comment was dry as a Tatooine drought.

"Hey, I'm not gettin' soft in the head. I'm just tryin' to get us our money. We've sure earned it. Of The Wookiee remained silent, a lack of response that Han took for assent. "Okay, Sutha, you get one more chance. Let's check the computer for a likely sucker--er, species--who'll take this stuff off our hands."

By the time they were clear of the Hoovian atmosphere, Han was grinning.

"Thought those folks were somewhere in this sector," he announced. "They're the factors on Kerrationna, and they-'ll bargain for anything. Their whole life is buyin' and sellin'. I've dealt with 'em before, and I can guarantee you won't get rich, but you won't lose your second pair of arms, either. They're fair."

"They sound quite promising, Captain solo-" The Mini-Mite perched on the armrest of Chewbacca's chair and peered at the computer screen. "How long is it from here to Kerrationna?"

Han checked. "'Bout two days. Regular shipping lanes all the way --Hey!"

"What is it?"

"Wait just a--'? Han's attention had shifted to the early alert system, which was chiming a warning. A green blip had appeared on the console tracking screen, and it was moving fast.

"Something comin' on like a bastbat out of Corell." He cranked up the magnification to maximum and slammed his fist down on the console. "Looks like our piratical pals again."

"Can we outrun them, Captain?"

Much as he hated to, Han shook his head. "I'd figured the Falcon as fast enough to beat their time, but those little tete-a- tete's we had told me some nasty stuff. For one, whatever the ship's got in those power nacelles, it's enough to catch us. And for another, she's armed heavy enough to give an

Imperial cruise a hard time. We've gotta jump--" He went to work on the naviputer.

Chewbacca had been busy on his own, checking the energy readings from the pirate ship and arming the Falcon's guns and shields. Now he noted something on the screen that made him yelp.

"What is it, pal?"

Chewbacca growled, pointing at the readouts.

"Terrific!" Han slapped his forehead with the heel of his hand. "No wonder they were able to get us."

"What is it, Captain?"

"It's Formenlii, that's what it is."

"I beg your pardon, Captain?"

"Later, Sutha--if we survive." Han checked the naviputer again, then the star darkness outside. The pirate vessel was approaching so fast that he didn't need any magnification at all now. "Hold on, folks," he snapped. "We're gonna jump."

The Falcon sped through hyperspace, her relays and circuits maintaining a constant speed. The three living beings within her took the opportunity to relax while they could.

Elba beer in hand, Han was sprawled in a chair, his long legs propped up on the gaming table. Chewbacca roamed the dayroom, occasionally gnawing on a chunk of preserved woblort. Sutha perched on the acceleration couch, methodically chewing his fingernails down to nubs. He was working on his fourth and final hand as Han explained the Formenlii.

"You see," he said, "they're sentient--about as sentient as they come. But they aren't what you'd call humanoid. In fact, I'm not really sure just what they are. I've never seen one in the flesh; they're a small-numbered species and tend to keep to themselves. But I've seen pictures. They look like of like big leathery carpets with a pulpy fringe around the edge. They keep changin' shape, too. Their sensory organs're located somewhere in their midsection, or at least as much of a midsection as a Formenlii has." He took a slug of his beer and felt it gurgle down his throat. Unfortunately, he had discovered, the nose clamp had the effect of killing taste. He missed the pungent bite of the beer,

but the prospect of facing the Falcon's tainted atmosphere--an atmosphere even the ship's recyclers hadn't been able to clear-- kept him from removing the clamp.

"But, Captain Solo, how are they able to follow us through hyperspace? It was my understanding that such a thing is impossible."

"Yeah, it is." Han set down the beer and stretched his arms over his head, working the kinks out of his shoulder muscles. "But one thing the Formenlii are is smart. They're also technologically minded to a degree you wouldn't believe. For something that looks like an escapee from a second-hand rug dealer, your average Formen- li has an impressive brain, wherever it's located. If there weren't so few of 'em, they'd rule the galaxy."

"But you haven't answered my question--"

Han sighed. "The Formenlii are the only species, to my knowledge, to have invented a VLRIT. In other words, a Very Long Range Information Tap. It's some kind of power boost they can run through their ship's engines and computers to tap the computer of another ship. In short, once they're within viewing distance, they're close enough to read another ship's hyperspace coordinates."

"And calculate that ship's destination."

"Right. And since their ships're faster than most, they can be at the other end, waitin', when their victim drops back into real space."

Sutha's little green mouth made an O of astonishment. "But then, how can we evade them? Or can we?"

Han grinned lazily. "Oh, sure, we can dodge 'em. But it'll mean changing our plans. We'll haveta bag Kerrationna and find another destination, that's all. While we're still in hyperspace, where they can't read us, we'll just calculate a new course and go somewhere else."

"But, Captain, how very clever!" Sutha's eyes were glowing. "Do you not think so, Chewbacca?"

Chewbacca allowed that the idea wasn't bad.

"It's a damn good thing we can get away from 'em," Han said. "They're tenacious as hell. Absolutely single-minded. They've been known to follow a ship through half the galaxy until they catch it. Nobody knows just what attacks Formenlii pirates, but whatever it was that made us interesting to 'em is gonna keep 'em after us. Good thing we can shake 'em."

"They sound terribly formidable, Captain Solo."

"They are. But they've got one redeeming trait: They're true to their word. Once a Formenlii makes a promise, it's as good as in ferrosteel." He chuckled drily. "The prob'em is getting 'em to promise something in the first place." He stood up and gulped the last of his beer. "I'd give my bloodstripe to lay my hands on one of their VLRITS. But they're so closemouthed, nobody'll ever get that secret out of 'em. Guess it's just as well, anyway. Can you imagine a galaxy in which everybody could read everybody else's hyperspace coordinates?" He shivered at the prospect.

"Okay, folks, heads up," Han announced. "We're droppin' back into real space to reprogram. I've got a little alternate destination in mind--second moon to Glabwoczq. Not as good as Kerrtionna, but at least we won't have the Formenlii on our tail there."

"How clever you are, Captain," Sutha fluttered.

Han couldn't think of anything suitably modest to say, but he grinned in self-satisfaction as he hauled back on the controls. The Falcon whined and shuddered for a moment, then continued on her headlong course.

"What the--?" Han frowned, eyeing the readouts. He tried again with the same lack of results.

Chewbacca rumbled a question

"I dunno, pal. Everything looks right. According to the readouts, there's nothing wrong with the engines. We oughta be losin' speed, but we aren't."

Chewbacca ran a few tests from his own station as Han, shaking his head, rechecked his computations. Finally, with a surprised snort, the Wookiee announced his findings.

"The hyperdrive computer? How can something be wrong with the computer? That's about the only thing on this ship that doesn't go bad." Han pushed himself out of the seat. "Well, I'll got take a look at it. Maybe something came loose during those gunfights we had."

"Captain, is something very wrong?" Sutha quavered

The Byrantian seemed so worried that Han disguised his own concern. "Naw, nothin' much. I'll have it fixed in no time." But inside, he wasn't so certain.

When he returned to the cockpit a short time later, he was rigid with rage. His hands, shiny with something dark and viscous, wrestled with a stained rage. Chewbacca didn't even have time for a query before Han snapped, "Sutha, you little--"

"Oh, no!" Once again, the Mini-Mite fled to the protection of Chewbacca's comforting bulk. "Captain, I did nothing, I swear!"

"It's not what you did," Han snarled, stalking the Byrantian like a carnosaur at lunchtime. "It's what your damned cargo did! That leak dripped between the deck plates and got into a conduit carrying some of the computer elements. We're just lucky it didn't wipe out the control or life-support systems. But what it did was bollux up the hyperdrive computer." He turned to his partner. "Near as I can figure, we're fine as long as we stay on our programmed course. But it won't let us drop back into real space before we're due to. And I can't figure out how to fix it without a whole mess of stuff we don't have in stock." He scrubbed at his hands with the rag. "Furthermore, this goo doesn't come off! I feel like I've been swimming in the slime pits of Sllaaviuma." Throwing down the rag, he reached for his tiny passenger. "Sutha, I'm gonna kill--"

Chewie shielded the Mini-Mite with his enormous body and tried to calm his furious passenger.

Han was having none of it. "Don't tell me it's not his fault. Whose fault is it? Mine? Yours? If he hadn't brought that stuff on board--"

Chewbacca attempted to mediate.

"Out the airlock, that's where he's going Out the airlock--"

Another placating growl. Finally, Han subsided. He flopped into the pilot's chair like an anemic Prattlian bloodsucker. "Well, I guess we don't have much choice. Okay, Sutha, it's not your fault. If anybody's to blame, it's your blasted Elders for gettin' you and us into this." He turned back to Chewbacca. "But what I wanna know is, what're we gonna do when we pop out of hyperspace at Kerttionna and our Formenlii friends are there rollin' out the red carpet and lickin' whatever they've got for lips?"

As it happened, the Formenlii were nowhere in sight. Han double-checked the coordinates, absently rubbing his hands, which stung from the paint stripper

held had to use to remove the pthool residue. "Well, we're in luck. The computer malfunction threw us off course a bit. Maybe we can get a jump on 'em--finish our business and head back to Byrantiss before they track us down again." He eyed the red giant on the viewscreen. "Kerrationna, here we come."

"As you humans say," purred the Kerrationnalian, "not on yer life."

"C'mon," Han wheedled, flashing his best would-I-trick-you? grin. "Perspexx, are you gonna tell me that you won't even make an offer for this fine cargo?"

"This fine cargo'd gag the offal-eaters of Erythraz. Hey, I know there's no use for processed pthool vine, and I know processed pthool vine when I smell it. Not a prayer, Solo; get that stuff outa my warehouse and off my world. I'm s'prised the Outer Beacon Squad even let ya get planetside. Maybe they ain't seen the news yet."

"News?" Han frowned "What're you talkin' about?"

The Kerrationnalian chuckled harshly. He swiped his leathery black nose with a raspy tongue and cocked one triangular ear in amusement. "You're famous, Solo--you and yer obnoxious excuse for a cargo. Last night's Holo Rimnews reported that you'd been eighty-sixed from HoovIV-4 and why. I'd be s'prised from now on if any civilized world even letcha inside its atmosphere."

"What?!" Han yelled. Simultaneously Sutha screeched, "Oh, dear!" and Chewbacca snarled.

Perspexx remained unflustered. He turned his head to groom the tawny fur on his left shoulder and rolled his green-flecked eyes back toward the Falcon's ill-assorted complement. "Yer ass is grass," he said. "Now get it off Kerrationna before the Beacon Squad vaporizes ya."

"That does it!" Solo snarled as he blasted off another cannon shot at the pirate ship, which had appeared as soon as the Falcon had touched space again. "We're goin' back to Byrantiss."

"Please, please, Captain Solo," Sutha cried from the deck of the gun turret, where he clung with all four hands to a cross-brace beneath the targeting computer. "One more chance! Just one! Surely you couldn't condemn me to a mateless, miserable existence in the pthool dumps!"

Solo watched one of his shots shatter on the pirate ship's forward shields and prayed that Chewbacca's web of evasive maneuvers would hold until they could jump once more. A near-miss shook the Falcon. He gritted his teeth and loosed another set of shots. Knowing that held regret it, he spared a glance at his terrified, supplicating passenger. There was something about Sutha's utter helplessness ...

"One more," he snarled, knowing in his heart that he was making a terrible mistake. "One more." He was thrown back as the freighter flung herself sharply upward. "But if the third time's not the charm, I'm gonna decorate my cabin with a very small furpiece."

Sutha shuddered.

By the time they popped out of hyperspace a discreet distance from Hellenicon's World, Han's brow bore a permanent crease. The Falcon's sublight engines were singing at a slightly different pitch, a pitch he knew forecast an imminent shortage of fuel.

Things were going so badly that he wasn't altogether surprised to face another disaster: a taped broadbeam transmission directed to all area traffic.

He slumped in exhausted resignation as a computer voice announced, "to all ships in the vicinity of Hellenicon's World: The Millennium Falcon, a stock freighter of Corellian manufacture, is said to be en route to this sector, bearing a cargo of highly toxic refuse. Ships' officers with knowledge of this vessel are urged to notify Hellenicon Base Security immediately. Under no circumstances is this garbage barge to be allowed to enter orbit. Repeat: Under no circumstances is the Millennium Falcon to be allowed to enter orbit."

"My ship is not a garbage barge!" Han snapped, but he was too weary to put much real emotion behind the words. He sighed, "Well, they may have our name--but not our number, so to speak. We can punch up one of our fake IDs; maybe that'll at least get us planet- side--"

He was interrupted by the computer voice: "In case said Millennium Falcon attempts to land under false registration, Hellenicon Base Security shall broadcast a rendering of said freighter as soon as this warning ends. Ships' officers should study the rendering closely in order to facilitate identification."

"Oh, great!" Han growled.

Sutha was curled up in the navigator's seat, his wings wrapped dejectedly around his tiny body. When the message began to repeat, he shrank as deep into the padded chair as he could. Han turned on him with a glare that could have melted silica into a looking glass. Even Chewbacca, Sutha noticed with distress, was rumbling as ominously as a starving Sarlacc.

"I am terribly sorry!" Sutha squeaked. His companions said nothing; they simply glowered. Han tried to snort in derision, but succeeded only in blowing the protective clamp from his nose. The clip bounced off Sutha's chair and disappeared beneath the naviputer console, and Han's next breath brought with it the full-strength dose of pthool-vine odor. Even though he'd lived with the scent for days, the undiluted reminder nearly toppled him. He gagged, snatched as shallow a breath as he could manage, and threw himself to the deck, scrambling for the clip. Just as his body started to scream for another breath of the tainted air, he found the clamp and slammed it home on his abused nose. Gratefully, he grabbed a lungful of air through his mouth. The odor came along for the ride, but in a muffled form. Flushed with anger, the Corellian threw himself back into his seat. Sutha moaned in terror.

But Han's ire quickly faded as he checked the worrisome fuel readouts once again and cast an eye around for approaching ships. So far, they were alone. There wasn't even any sign of the persistent pirates.

"Well," Han said at last, "we've got no choice but to get outa here. Obviously, we're no more welcome on Hellenicon's World than we are anyplace else. And judging from the way word's gettin' around, we'd haveta shoot through the Fire Rings of Fornax to find a planet that hasn't tuned into those hellfire-spawned holos. That's the bad news. The good news is that we've got enough juice for one more medium-sized jump, and then we're dead in the water. And we need to make it before the Formentlii show up again and read where we're going. Anybody got any suggestions?"

There was a long pause, interrupted only by the recorded message as it began a third round. Han slammed his hand down on the console, terminating the transmission.

Sutha's reedy sigh cut through the sudden silence. "Alas, I can see no alternative but to return to Byrantiss. Our ill fame has obviously spread throughout the sector. We have no possibility of disposing of our malodorous cargo--despite all your noble efforts, Captain Solo and Chewbacca." The look he turned on them was appreciative, but heavily tinged with sadness. "At least on Byrantiss, you can obtain fuel. Meanwhile, you have certainly done far more than reason and logic and professional dedication could expect, and for that I shall be ever grateful--even as I labor in the pthool dumps for the brief remainder of my life."

Han wanted to mutter something in the line of, "Serves you right," but found himself unable to keep an edge on his resentment in the face of Sutha's looming fate.

Besides, admit it, he grumbled to himself, Sutha isn't half bad. Fact is, you kinda like him--even though he's still givin' Chewie the big eye. That little one-sided romance has been the only thing worth a laugh in this whole gods-forsaken fiasco.

"Look, Sutha," he began, despite his best instincts for self-preservation. "Maybe we're not licked yet. There's a half-assed little fuel refinery on a primary in the Loozzo system. If we just popped outa hyperspace on the dark side--"

Chewbacca's yelp made Han spiral toward the viewscreen just as the telltale bleeped a warning. "Seven hells!" Han raged as a dot of light mushroomed swiftly into a familiar form. As he slammed the Falcon into a dive, a white light blossomed from the pirate's forward guns. The Falcon shuddered and faltered, then picked up speed again. On the console, a red light flashed urgently.

"Shield's gone," Han snapped. "Looks like some overlap weakened the front starboard shield, too. We gotta turn her around. Chewie, you take care of that--at least we can get our rear shields between us and those guys for however long they hold. We might have time to lay in coordinates and jump. I'll man the top gun--"

Chewbacca slammed the controls down. The Falcon responded, but sluggishly. The Wookiee tried again and was rewarded with a metallic scream, a groan of overstressed machinery and a firework of sparks from the panel to his right.

Han cursed. "Lucky hit; that last shot wiped out the vertical controls." Furious, he fired three blasts from the cockpit gun, but they shattered harmlessly off the pirate's defense system. The Formenlii ship filled the viewscreen.

"Chewie, can you sideslip 'em?"

Chewbacca's great shaggy head swung side to side. Simultaneously, the Falcon juddered, then began slogging toward the pirate craft. "Tractor beam!" Han muttered. "Shut her down; no point in burnin' out what engines we got left." Grimly, he gripped the armrests and glared at the enormous Formenlii ship. As the Falcon was drawn in, he saw a port on its side iris open and a service tube extrude toward the imprisoned freighter's upper hatch.

In the stress of the fight, Han had temporarily forgotten Sutha. Now a tiny wail of despair brought him around to face the Mini-Mite. Sutha's wings were pale with terror and his whole body shuddered. "Oh, Captain, we are prisoners! How dreadful! They will slay us, won't they?"

"Maybe," Han growled, "and maybe not. Like I said before, they're erratic as hell. But I promised you one thing: they aren't taking the Falcon without a fight."

"You will resist by force of arms? But, captain, if we are outnumbered--"

"Oh, we're outnumbered, all right." Han's face was grim as his long fingers caressed the butt of the custom blaster on his thigh. "But we've got a place to hide beneath decks--"

A metallic screech told him the service tube was in place and the upper hatch had been forced. "Well," he amended, "we don't have time to hide. But resistance doesn't always haveta be armed resistance, Sutha. Sometimes it's better just to sit back and see which way the solar wind is blowin'." He lifted himself from the seat and gestured with his head. "C'mon, folks. Time to see what our guests have in mind."

Han's first look at Formenlii in the flesh would have made him laugh if the situation had not been so dicey. As it was, he could get little amusement from the fact that their captors did indeed resemble floor coverings. Floor coverings, moreover, that flowed and ebbed in shape so frequently that it took Han a while to make sure of their numbers. Finally he determined that eight had come on board.

Their skins varied in color from mud brown to screaming scar-let, and in surface pattern from plain to eye-boggling. Each creature was also adorned with an independently mobile and brightly-colored fringe. The fringe, and a spherical lump that he guess housed the Formenlii's sensory organs, were the only constants in their ever-changing bodies.

Nearly every fringe, he noted with a mental sigh, was wrapped around a perfectly serviceable-looking sidearm.

Seven of the eight pirates, weapons at the ready, flowed into a rough circle around Han and his companions. The eighth, the only one not bearing armament, paused in front of the Corellian and metamorphosed into something resembling a two-meter-high pillar of molten blue plastoid.

"Surrender, you pip-brained, mother-nursed, desert-skinned single-shapers!" the Formenli commanded in passable Standard. "You outnumbered be, your vessel entrapped be. Your sidearm relinquish, lest you blasted into atomic particles be."

"Okay, okay," Han said placatingly, sliding his blaster from its holster and handing it over butt first. "You've got the jump on us. Hey, we know when we're licked. But," he smiled, "you're wastin' your time chasin' us all over creation. We don't have anything you'd want. You people're so technologically advanced, you couldn't have any use for a beat-up old freighter like this."

"Silence, slimebrain, or 1, Sploqqq the Magnificently Malleable, Master of Five Thousand Forms and Terror of Seven Systems, make munchmeat of your disgusting torso will." Sploqqq passed Han's blaster to one of his henchbeings and waved his topmost fringe in the general direction of three others. "The ship explore," he ordered. "Valuables seek. When valuables find, these three out the airlock will."

At the mention of the airlock, Sutha, who had been frozen in terror, latched himself with all four arms onto Chewbacca's leg. The Wookiee signed in resignation. He was less than fond of what was becoming Sutha's favorite position. Still, he had other things to worry about. As the three Formenlii went to explore the Falcon, he rumbled under his breath to Han.

"Hell, I know we aren't carryin' anything they'd find interesting," the Corellian began. Softly as he spoke, the Formenlii leader heard him.

"Silence I ordered, oh biological accident! A plugged zlotz your life worth is. Confiscate your treasure we shall and of you dispose. To our own vessel return and a banquet of celebration and victory order." His upper reaches flowed in Sutha's direction, stopping toward the terrified Byrantian. A gurgle of surpassing ugliness erupted from somewhere within the elastic expanse, and Han shuddered to realize that the noise was the Formenli equivalent of a chuckle. "oh, minuscule piece of worthless excrement," Sploqqq rumbled liquidly, "amusing your insides outward to turn." He extruded a set of fringe, which

The Mini-Mite's cry of horror galvanized Han, who launched himself without thought toward the pirate. He had no idea how to fight this formless adversary, but he was driven by an instinctive need to protect his tiny, helpless passenger.

The moment his hands grasped Sploqqq's fringe, the universe exploded. Han barely felt himself strike the bulkhead with enough force to knock him silly.

Dazed, he slid to the deck, only vaguely aware that the Formenli had nailed him with some kind of electrical charge. "Whaaa--" he murmured groggily,

Chewbacca's move toward his fallen friend was arrested by the four armed Formenlii, who turned all their weapons upon the Corellian. Chewbacca, hesitated, realizing that Han was not badly hurt and unwilling to bring any more of Sploqqqls wrath down upon him.

Sutha, however, surprised them all, including himself. Releasing his grip on Chewbacca's leg, he spread his glowing wings and launched himself through the air toward what would have been Sploqqqls head if the Formenlii had possessed one. All four hands were outstretched and his sharp little teeth bared in fury. "You cannot abuse my friends so!" he screeched, slamming into the yielding cerulean bulk. Like Han's, his attack was short-lived, and he found himself collapsed upon the deck at Han's side, his wings limp.

Seeing both his companions laid low was too much for Chewbacca. With a roar, he turned on Sp'loqqq. Four weapons clicked into killing position, and as they did, Han and Sutha shouted, "No!" Sutha, faster to recover than the Corellian, flung himself aloft once more, but this time he halted and hovered in the air between Chewbacca and the Formenli leader. "Please do not shoot!" he begged Sp'loqqq. "I pray you, spare my friends. Kill me if you wish; my life is worth nothing. But they are good and kind and of great value in the universe. Spare them!"

The Formenli seemed taken aback for a moment. Then he subsided into an amorphous blue lump less than a meter high. His fringe waved and flickered. "Interesting," he rumbled. "That such an insignificant insect--"

He was interrupted by one of the search party, who flowed into the room with fringe flashing in agitation. "oh magnificent master, a discovery!"

"Explain!" Sp'loqqq snapped.

The Formenli drew himself into a puce-and-yellow ball. "Food, oh Serene Any-Shaped! Of surpassing deliciousness is." He brought up a clump of fringe enveloping a substance Han recognized even in his dazed state.

The Corellian shook the remaining cobwebs from his brain and beckoned Sutha and Chewbacca to his side. The armed Formenlii watched, but made no move to prevent them. When the three were together, Han whispered, "That's pthool residue! Look how they're fussin' over it." He frowned. "You don't suppose they can eat that stuff, do you?"

Apparently, they could. Sp'loqqq enveloped a glob of the matter. A shudder ran briefly through his now-ovate body and his skin tone lightened to a pleasant wrak's-egg blue. "Excellent is," he announced at last.

Sutha leaned toward and Han whispered, "Captain Solo, don't they notice the smell? How can they bare to be in such proximity to the residue?"

"Damned if I--" Han began. Then his face flashed like Light Festival on Corell. "They can't smell it! Or if they can, it doesn't bother 'em!"

His grin widened a moment later when Sp'loqqq turned to him and rumbled, "Strange and appealing sensations evoking. A feeling of--of peace. Satisfaction. Of--" He paused to subside into a leathery puddle the approximate dimensions of a formal dining table. "Wonderful substance is," he added, the words flowing lethargically. Chewbacca whuffed softly, calling Han's attention to the rest of the pirates. All of them, by now having sampled the pthool residue, were flattening and spreading, their weapons drooping from fringe gone limp. They murmured liquidly among themselves.

Han's excitement brought him to his feet. "You know what that stuff is?" he demanded of his friends. "Its a Formenli trunk, that's what it is! Look what it's done to 'em. They're as mellow as a blissed-out bantha in a field of somnolysis weed." He chuckled. Then, suddenly, something came back to him--a memory of words Sutha had spoken earlier.

Waving Sutha and Chewbacca to remain where they were, he approached Sp'loqqq, who was puddling happily on the deck and muttering to himself. "Hey, Sp'loqqq," Han said. "How'd you like to make a little deal?"

"Deal?" The fringe flopped weakly. "What deal mean you, oh groad-eyed offspring of diseased Malanaconian morph dragons?" Somehow, Han reflected, the insult lost much of its sting when mumbled by a tranquilized Formenli.

To Sp'loqqq he crooned, "Well, I just happen to know where you and your friends could lay, er, fringe on a whole lot more of that stuff." He grinned ingratiatingly. "But you're gonna haveta deal for it. For starters, maybe we can negotiate for the small amount we have back in the cargo hold there."

Sp'loqqq was wavering about the edges, but he gathered enough Formenli arrogance to rumble, "And just why, oh loathesome endo- skeletal offspring of pustulent ancestors, deal with you should I? Seizing your cargo easily could I, and then a little laser scorching to your disgustingly inflexible pedal extremities could I, the location of the remainder of the food locate, no?"

"Yes." Han noted that the rest of the Formenlii, however influenced by the pthool residue, had perked up somewhat at the mention of torture. He took a breath and proceeded with caution, accentuated by Han Solo's Number One Charming smile. "But, you know, a lot of us organics aren't as durable as you folks. We tend to kick off at inconvenient moments, and lots of times we die without giving any information--or, at least, not the right information. Now, wouldn't you rather be sure of getting what you want through a nice, friendly trade?" He caught his breath and held it. Finally, just as Han felt his face turning puce, Sp'loqqq said, "Intrigue me, you. Explain."

Han let his breath out with a "whuff." "What if my friends and I could come up with a lifetime supply of this stuff for every Formenlii alive and guarantee it for--well, for centuries? What would that be worth?"

Sp'loqqq was interested enough to congeal himself into an oval lump. "Such a benison worth much would be. Truth you speak, worm-ridden spawn of an uncaring universe?"

"Truth I speak--I mean, yeah. But you can understand that I can't make any deals unless you'll hold up your end. I'd need a good-faith exchange of some kind--a sample of the goods, on our part, for something we want."

"Which be?"

It was down to the crux. "Our lives, our ship, all our possessions and any spare fuel you might have lying around."

The Formenli was silent for so long that Han started to sweat. Maybe you didn't set the hook as deep as you'd thought.

Sluggishly, Sp'loqqq flowed into a shape vaguely resembling a giant sand-eating slug of Opticon. There was something decisive about the move. "An unending supply guaranteed can be, oh micro-brained effluviant of a farraquahr fart?"

Relief washed through Han. "All we have to do is sign a pact." He indicated the Mini-Mite, who had been watching the proceedings with enormous eyes. "Sutha here represents the owners of this, ah, wonderful food. He can cut a deal with you here and now, and take it back to his bosses. Before you know it, your planet and his could have a nice little trade goin'."

Sutha drew himself up to his full half meter. "Indeed, Captain Sp'loqqq, I am certain that your people have a number of items that we would welcome in exchange. I understand that yours is a technologically advanced society. We would certainly be interested in trading our, ah, food for any number of

electronic or mechanical devices. The details, of course, are to be determined once contracts have been signed," he added.

The Formenli rippled. "In this case," he said, "trade rather than piracy more profitable is. A pact, therefore, make we will: as much of the food as you have in your possession in exchange for your lives, goods, ship and fuel. Contract for the greater supply negotiations soon to commence."

Han smiled. "It's a deal. Your folks're gonna be awfully happy when you come back with the stuff and a reliable source for more.,, He glanced down at Sutha, whose wings were shimmering and dancing for joy. "And I can think of a bunch of Elders who're gonna haveta make a new ceremonial loincloth."

"Well, Captain Solo, Chewbacca--how does it look?"

Han grinned. "Like a loincloth--only smaller." As the Mini-Mite's smile started to fade, the Corellian added quickly, "Seriously, Sutha, it's fine. Makes you look--well, official or something." Chewbacca rumbled agreement.

"And what do you think of my burrow?" Sutha's wings fluttered in pride of ownership as he indicated the curved rock walls that encompassed them.

Han fought down a touch of claustrophobia. "Very nice. Now all you need is a lady who'll appreciate your best qualities." A scuffing sound at his side drew his attention to his co-pilot, who sat hunched uncomfortably on the floor of Sutha's yet-unfurnished quarters. Chewbacca, he noted, had discreetly moved one large leg out of the Byrantian's reach, just in case the mention of a mate had awakened any old memories.

Sutha didn't seem to notice. His face broke into a radiant smile as he hugged himself with all four arms. "Oh, but already I have had tenders of interest from two families, Captain. Apparently, once the Elders released their decision on the success of my assigned task--" He glanced at his companions and amended, "or, rather, our task--I suddenly became a marketable commodity in the marital arena."

"No wonder," Han said, trying in vain to ease his cramped muscles. Sutha's burrow was comfortably sized for a family of Mini-Mites, but for a human it was a real test of endurance. For a Wookiee, it was little less than pure physical torture. He admired Chewbacca's willingness to pay a visit, but decided that they had done their duty nearly long enough. "No wonder," he repeated, "seeing

as you're the only Byrantian ever to come up with a solution for the pthool-residue prob'em, and arrange a nice, profitable interplanetary trade to boot." He snorted. "Too bad, though, that you couldn't talk the Formenlii into throwin' one of their VIRITs into the contract. Guess it's just as well."

Sutha's elation changed into something approaching shyness. Wringing his hands together, he peered up at his guests. "Captain Solo, I could never have succeeded without your help and Chewbacca's. Your forbearance and willingness to assist me--even at the risk of great danger to yourselves--taught me the value of friendship." He paused. "How strange it is that our very lives became the things of value for which we bartered our consignment."

"Well, at least your Elders made a public announcement on the Rimnews so everybody knows the Falcon's not carryin' that hell-spawned stuff any more. Now maybe we won't be treated like Ghardon lepers." A cramped shoulder muscle twinged, and Han took the hint. He stood awkwardly. "Sutha, we've gotta get movin'. Sp'loqqq asked us to drop by for a goodbye drink--though the gods only knows what, or how, a Formenli drinks." He grinned. "You know, Sp'loqqq and the rest turned out not to be so bad after all. But the way they talk fries my brain. I'll be happy if I spend the rest of my life never again dealing with folks who put their verbs at the end of the sentence."

Chewie chuckled and unfolded himself gingerly. Standing, he had to bend double to avoid cracking his head on the low ceiling.

Sutha's wings drooped. "My dear friends--for I hope I may call you that--I shall miss you." The Mini-Mite extended all four hands; Han clasped two and Chewbacca the others. "But you will always be welcome in my burrow. I hope you will return to Byran-tiss soon. And if not," he added with a twinkle, "then perhaps I shall even see you out among those distant stars. After all, now that I have survived one trip into space, why should I not attempt another, and even another? I believe I would have no difficulty doing whatever is necessary to locate you, especially since the Elders have honored my persistence -- the trait they sought when they set me to this task."

"Why not?" Han released Sutha's hands. "Hey, if you ever want a ride, you've got one." He quirked his mouth to one side. "Just don't bring any more 'building materials' along. I don't think we or the Falcon could survive another easy trip like the last one."

END

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