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Family Connections

by [Judy Ebberley](#)

From the amount of noise emanating from the *Falcon*, Luke concluded that the repairs that Han had been moaning about after their latest hair-raising escape from the Imperial forces were well underway. Good.

He smiled as he took in the battered and scarred exterior to Solo's pride and joy. His initial reactions to the ship, on their flight from Tatooine had been one of disbelief that the thing could actually fly. He had swiftly learned however that the *Falcon's* appearance belied its abilities. The ship may have looked like a flying scrap-heap but it was a thing of power and grace when under the control of its temperamental master.

Thinking of that master, Luke's lips twitched. Han Solo was very like his ship. What appeared on the surface was nothing like the substance underneath. To the casual observer the Corellian appeared to be what he insisted he was, an uncaring mercenary. If you got behind that facade or if the man allowed you into that select group of beings he called friend. Then a very different man emerged, caring, loyal and Luke now knew very vulnerable to hurt.

As he reached the ramp a positive blast of bad language hit him. Not overly familiar with the Corellian language he had been around Han Solo long enough to know that these curses were particularly choice, he pursed his lips, it seemed things were not going well. That seemed to be common problem around here he concluded glancing around the crowded hangar deck. The alliance's last clash with the Empire had left their fleet sadly depleted and what few ships they had were all in need of repair. Which meant that it was even more imperative that he could Han to help out on his next mission. It would not be easy. It was never easy. Despite everything Han still clung fiercely to his independence Another

string of highly colorful curses floated out to him. Ah well, whoever said life in the rebellion was going to be all medal ceremonies and princesses!

Calling up into the interior he received permission to enter from Solo's co-pilot the giant Wookiee. He acknowledged Luke's presence with a toothy grin and an apology for the language that was once more assailing his ears. "No need to apologise, Chewie, I'm getting used to it." The Tatooinian chuckled "Can I go on in, I need to talk to him."

Taking into account Han's uncertain humor Chewie thought that perhaps this was not the best time to interrupt him. Maybe it would be better to wait, he suggested.

"I have to see him now." Luke laid a pleading hand on the Wookiee's huge arm, asking for his understanding and getting it. The Kashyykian had become one of his staunchest supporters over the last few months often using his considerable influence over the renegade Corellian to get him to co-operate with the rebellion. "It's very important."

Nodding, Chewbacca patted at the youth's head and waved him to proceed him into the main cargo hold. Calling ahead so that his captain would know who their visitor was. Solo's reply to this information was less than encouraging. "What d'ya want this time, kid?"

Luke sat hunched up at the games table a hot drink in front of him, provided by the thoughtful Wookiee.

Han was doing his best to ignore Chewie's meaningful look as he placed his own drink into his hands. The Wookiee obviously believed that they should offer to help out again. Damn his partner's soft heart. "Why does it have to be me?" he asked plaintively, "That's what I wanna know. There are plenty of other pilots around here"

"Not with your skills and knowledge," Luke supplied.

Solo sniffed. While it was nice to be appreciated he wasn't going to be won over by flattery. "Sorry, kid You're goin' to have to find someone else to do your ferryin' this time."

"Han, it really is urgent!"

"It's always urgent!"

"Please."

"Look, I'd like to help yah out," Han muttered vaguely uneasy as he saw strain showing in Luke's face. No one that young should have to shoulder the burdens Luke was being asked to take on. "But you can see for yourself the ship's in need of urgent repairs." He waved at the clutter. "I can't take her out like this, 'specially not to somewhere like Nimbuskus." Luke's face fell. Solo felt like he'd just kicked a defenceless parater kit. Knowing he was about to do something real stupid, but unable to ignore the kids obvious distress, Han grouched, "All right I'll do it. But I'm goin' to need some help to get this bucket back together."

Looking again at the co-ordinates Han sighed heavily. Why had he let himself get suckered in? He knew the answer to that one even though he refused to acknowledge it. In the months since he had 'joined' this bunch of crazies, Luke Skywalker had become very important to him. He felt a sense of responsibility for the youth. Just before Kenobi had sacrificed himself to allow for their escape from the death star he had looked over to where Han was urging the younger man to 'come on'. Solo wasn't about to admit it to anyone but he had felt as if a message had passed between them. Kenobi had in effect transferred the mantle of responsibility to him for keeping Luke safe. It was stupid of course and Han did his best to ignore the feelings this stirred up in him. But with increasing frequency he was finding himself placing Luke's needs above his own. Or maybe it was that his needs were being changed because of his association with the youth. Luke Skywalker reminded him of himself when he was that age and he had no desire to let the youth suffer as he had done. While he wasn't going to tell anyone Luke filled a deep seated need in the Corellian. The boy provided him with what had always been missing in his life a 'human family'.

Acknowledging, Chewie's comment that they were all set. Han turned his thoughts to their missing companion. He swore as he spotted Luke still standing in the docking bay talking to the princess.

"Jeeze." Solo turned to grouch to his partner, "Hasn't her holiness finished with her advice yet?" Pointedly he gunned the engines. How come Luke rated all this attention. All he'd got was a lecture on keeping out of trouble.

Chewie rumbled a soft remonstrance, for his captain's poor behavior. Was Han jealous? he inquired snidely. "No, I ain't!" Solo snapped back. Something in Chewie's expression caused him to elaborate further. "I'm just tired of bein' kept waitin' is all. The *Falcon* ain't a taxi service, you know!"

Hunching an offended shoulder at the Wookiee's disbelieving hoot Han returned his attention to his flight controls. Doing his best to ignore the deep bass chuckles now emanating from his so called best friend.

It was an inauspicious start to their journey and their luck was no better when they reached Nimbuskus. The merchant who had been holding the medical supplies had got tired of waiting and sold them to a higher bidder. He regretted it by the time Han and Chewbacca had finished with him, but it was too late for the alliance the supplies were gone from the warehouse.

Luke cursed, loud and long. His language would have done even the inventive Corellian proud.

Having dusted off his clothing and re-holstered his blaster Solo looked down on the dejected younger man, now perched on a broken packing case. "It wasn't our fault, Luke, there was nothing more we could have done."

The Tatooinian gave a long sigh. "I know, Han, but damn it my first real trade deal and this has to happen. We needed those supplies, he knew we needed them." He waved at the unconscious merchant.

"Ahh!" Solo waved a dismissive hand towards his late victim. "People like him don't care about causes or need kid. They're only interested in profit. It's business, there's no room for ethics."

A small wry smile tugged at the corner of Luke's mouth at that remark. That was what Han always said about his work. Except that Luke knew better, the Corellian had, had a very strict code of business ethics, drilled into him by his partner from the start of their time together Solo's word was his bond, and he had nothing but contempt for those who failed to reach his and the Wookiee's high standards.

A deep bass rumble marked the return of Chewie who had been rifling the man's office to see if he could find a trace of the missing supplies and had been unsuccessful.

"Shit!" Solo threw a frustrated frown at his giant friend. "We have to dig up some supplies for them from somewhere. They need that vaccine." Chewbacca smiled knowingly and Solo said hastily, "It ain't the rebel cause I'm worried about, it's the state of my hide after Her Highnessness gets through with blaming me for comin' back empty handed." Dejectedly, Solo dropped his chin into his hand adding morosely, "And she's bound to blame me for it. She always does."

Another rumble from the Wookiee caused Han to lift his head sharply. "Who? Rahandir? You think he'd be willing to help out?"

Chewie nodded he was certain the Loordian would do his best for the Alliance especially if Han asked him. Solo scowled, being beholden to the Loordian Casino owner was not a situation he enjoyed. Still if it would help Luke. The Tatooinian was slumped next to him as if he had the weight of the worlds on his shoulders. "Well, I suppose it wouldn't kill me to ask."

Skywalker looked up at his words, a glimmer of hope reappearing in his face. Jeeze, Solo wondered, had he ever been that young and hopeful?

Deciding that Rahandir had to be a better prospect than an irate Leia Organa Solo slapped Luke's shoulder. "Come on kid, I got someone I want you to meet."

Solo grinned at Luke's round-eyed face. "Spectacular ain't it?"

The trio were standing outside one of the cities most famous landmarks the Shimmer Moon Casino and pleasure complex. The building towered over the surrounding area, the warm pink of the local stone enhanced by clever additions of holo-gems that reflected the light and made the whole structure look as if it was shimmering. "This is where your friend lives? Wow!"

"He doesn't just live here, he owns the place," Solo corrected, drawing a still staring Luke into the entranceway. "And not only this place either. He has casinos on all the best worlds in this sector. And he isn't a friend." Chewie grumbled a soft demurral at this denial. Han threw him a dirty look. "He may be your friend," he defended himself "but that don't make him mine. He's just a useful contact that's all."

The Wookiee sighed for patience, *Rahandir Rodolosa was more than a friend to both of them,* he growled, *and had hauled Han's rear-end out of trouble on numerous occasions, and it was time Han acknowledged it.*

"Yeah, and he sure likes to remind me of it," Han shot back. "Look, it doesn't matter anyway as long as he can help the kid out does it? Hey, you," he slapped a hand down on the reception desk, "Go tell Rahandir he's got visitors, will you." The reception droid whined a pre-recorded greeting informing them that Master Rodolosa was unavailable and would they like to leave a message.

"Listen, tin-head!" Han poked his blaster into the droid's voice box. "Why don't you go tell your master that Captain Han Solo and Chewbacca are here to see him, huh?"

The little android gave a high pitched squeal of terror at this threat but was saved from imminent annihilation by a soft, cultured voice. "Thank you, Gembee. I'll deal with this 'problem'. You return to your duties."

Solo slewed round, hands on hips and glowered at the owner of the voice. "Who're you callin' a problem?"

Shaking his head at the belligerent stance and the outraged expression adorning Han's face, the man greeted the Corellian cheerfully. "It's good to see you too, Han, it's been too long. Chewbacca my good friend." He put out a hand to the Kashyykian, then clasped him firmly in a passable imitation of a Wookiee hug. "How are you?" Luke scrutinized the newcomer carefully. Taller than either Han or himself the man was well-built, with green-gold eyes and a neatly trimmed beard. Luke put his age at around seventy standard years and he was in excellent physical shape. As the Casino owner turned towards him, and waited for Han to effect an introduction, Luke was struck by a sudden strange feeling, that he already knew the man. Blinking, he shook his head trying to clear it of hazy half formed images of the man before him with a wife and two young children, then terrible loss and hurt. Han had told him that Rahandir Rodolosa was a Loordian national who had no real connections with Solo other than the hotly disputed 'friendship' tag. But Luke knew instinctively that there was far more to their relationship, than Han either knew or was prepared to admit. He was still puzzling as to what it was that connected the two men as Han presented him. As they gripped arms he felt a familiar tingle, a faint trace of the force sensitiveness that he seemed to be gifted with. Whoever the man was Luke knew from that contact that he meant the Corellian no harm. On the contrary he had nothing but good intentions and feelings towards the renegade pilot.

"Sit down all of you, let me get you some refreshments." Rahandir bustled about ordering drinks and food as Chewbacca and Luke sank into the plush upholstery of the still quiet main dealing hall. The Loordian rolled his eyes as Solo ignored his invitation to make himself comfortable and stood instead propping up the nearest wall, arms folded across his chest. "You quite comfortable over there, Han?" he called over to the pilot. Chuckling softly at the growl he received in response the Loordian sat down opposite the Wookiee and inquired after what had brought them to his sector of space.

I see." Rahandir nodded as Chewbacca came to the end of the story. "That was very unfortunate. Those medical supplies are in short supply at the moment and command very high prices." He glanced over at the Corellian, who at some point in the re-telling of their troubles had deigned to join the others. "I'm puzzled as to how you got involved in this business, Han?" He raised an elegant eye-brow at his guest. "I thought you had nothing to do with the rebellion." He tugged thoughtfully at his beard. "A bunch of crazies is I think how you last described them to me."

"They pay like everyone else," Han's voice was strictly neutral, he didn't want to enter into a debate with the Loordian over his reasons for helping out the alliance, he had a suspicion he'd find it very difficult convincing the man he wasn't involved with the rebellion. Hell he had problems convincing himself these days! "I have a ship to maintain, why shouldn't I run contracts for em?"

Rahandir breathed a mock sigh of relief at Solo's explanation. "And there I was thinking you'd had a sudden change of heart and were doing it out of a sense of responsibility?"

Han didn't deign to answer such a provocative remark and Rahandir let the subject drop. The Corellian would have denied it of course but behind his hard exterior lurked a deep sense of commitment and a need for acceptance and belonging. The Loordian was pleased to think that his relationship with the rebels was at last providing him with a home and cause to believe in again.

Sensing a growing undercurrent of unease between the two men, Luke sought to ease the situation. "If it hadn't been for Han I wouldn't be here now. He's saved my life, more than once and I'm not the only one." He went on to relate Solo's part in the recent release of Samian Anthus.

"Anthus." Rahandir's eye-brows rose at this name. He looked across at the silent Wookiee for confirmation. Chewbacca was wearing a very proud smile. "I heard about it, of course." The man continued storing this latest evidence of the real persona behind the mercenary facade Han tried so hard to maintain. "Even the Empire can't keep some things quiet I wondered who'd pulled that off. That was quite a rescue. How did you manage to get involved in that, Han?"

Solo, true to form, did his best to downplay his part in the recovery operation. "Right place, wrong time that's all!" he grouched. Turning the topic of conversation into safer waters. "Look, can you help us get those supplies or not?"

"Finding replacements at the price your friends can afford to pay will not be easy." Rahandir managed to stop himself picking up Han's unconscious use of the word 'us' to describe the rebellion, knowing that Han would spend time trying to convince himself and the others that he wasn't 'involved' with the alliance. "You will have to give me some time; a day, maybe two. I'll put out some feelers to contacts and see what they can come up with. In the meantime you are all welcome to remain here as my guests I'd be pleased to have the company. I look forward to getting to know you, Luke," he turned his green-gold gaze on the Tatooinian "I suspect you'll have some interesting tales to tell me about your relationship with Han, and Han's 'business association' with the Alliance." Solo grimaced. The man turned his smile on the Wookiee, "And I hope we have time for a game or two, while you're here friend. I've been trying a few new moves out. This time I definitely intend to win."

Chewie allowed himself a toothy grin at this offer. *You can try of course.* He teased his old adversary. Holo-chess was his abiding passion but few people were as skilled as he was at the game. Rahandir was a true tactician and a worthy opponent.

"Han?"

"Hmm?" Solo was still examining their recently assigned quarters, he would have preferred to have stayed on board the *Falcon*, but he knew Luke would enjoy the luxurious apartments that the Loordian had offered them. Finally satisfied that the room was not bugged, booby trapped or in any other way likely to cause him inconvenience Han dropped back on to the bed, folding his arms behind his head, stretched and allowed himself a wriggle of sheer pleasure. "A guy could get used to this!" he decided.

His companion agreed, "I've never seen anything like it. Do people really live like this all the time?"

Solo's snort was softly humorous. "You've never seen anything you mean!" He ducked just in time to avoid the pillow Luke lobbed at him. "Tsk, tsk." He shook his head. "Is that anyway to treat the man who's introduced you to this life of luxury."

"So," the Tatooinian demanded, ignoring Solo's laughter. "Tell me about Rahandir Rodosolor. Where did you meet up with him?"

"It's good to see Han relaxing his guard somewhat." Two old friends were enjoying a rare opportunity to gossip together Their conversation was almost entirely to do with the young human closest to both their hearts, Han Solo. Rahandir Rodolosdor had long since learnt to curb his feelings in public. In the company of the giant Kashyykian he had no need to be so reticent. There were no secrets between them. Chewbacca was one of few beings in the galaxy who knew Rodolosa's real identity and his connection to his partner and captain. For the man was in fact Han's father forced to live a life of deceit away from his family through the actions of the growing Empire Rahandir had used his time well, setting up a series of casinos that not only provided him with excellent cover but which now also provided the hard pressed rebellion with funds for their continued fight against the empire. In deed so successful was the underground system initiated by Rahandir that he had been unable to leave the operation. Eventually he hoped that he would one day be able to return to his rightful place as a

military strategist but at the present time the credits and information he garnered were worth more to the Alliance than his presence back on one of their bases.

"He seems very fond of young Luke," the Loordian glanced up at the wall chronometer, before adding "I hope they enjoy themselves tonight they both looked as if they could do with some R and R." Chewie rumbled an agreement to this statement then added a wry comment of his own. The Loordian laughed. "Yes, I hope they stay out of trouble as well..."

"I don't think Her Highnessness would approve of you goin' in there, kid." Solo shook his head at the seedy establishment Luke was gazing at so intently. "Hell, I don't think even I would approve." His nose twitched with disgust at the all pervading odour of sweat and stale beer that was escaping through the swing doors of the small bar. Of all the places on Nimbuskus this was the last he would have thought Luke would have shown an interest in. Solo's tastes were cosmopolitan, he had been to places seen sights that the Tatooinian couldn't even begin to imagine. He had traded and spent time with a hundred or more different species, in all kinds of places. Some much worse than the club they were standing outside of. But, on a night out, with no particular problem with money and no Imperial entanglements he would not have chosen to stop here. He attempted to get his companion to move along by tugging at his arm. But Luke stood transfixed.

"I have to go in there."

"Kid, there's hundreds of bars most of em better than that dump. What's so all fired special about this one?" The youth turned bright blue eyes on his friend. Solo groaned as he took in the boy's expression. "No," he protested. "Don't tell me." Luke smiled that faraway dreamy smile that set Solo's teeth on edge. "You and your damned force." Han held the door back reluctantly acquiescing with Skywalker's wishes. He had never yet succeeded in persuading Luke to do something contrary to his force feelings, but as the youth passed him Han muttered forbodingly, "I got a bad feeling about this!"

The club Awikilla was as unpretentious inside as out. A wall of sound and smells assaulted the two mens senses as they paused on the threshold to allow their eyes to adjust to the subdued light. The room was full, with all kinds of species. Most of whom, Solo decided from the cursory glance he spared them were the scum of the galaxy.

Han decided that maybe some of his partner's fastidiousness was beginning to wash off on him as he side-stepped the rather obvious attentions of a Religian female. Luke didn't appear to have even seen her, which was probably just as well, Han decided. A glacial glare, aimed at a seated couple encouraged them to move places, thereby securing them a back booth where Han could see both entrances to the establishment and they had the protection of knowing there was nothing behind their backs except a garishly painted wall, depicting the sorts of practices that were strictly illegal even on many back-water rim worlds.

Solo groaned as his sleeve caught in some sort of sticky substance adhering to their table. He didn't even want to know what it was, he decided.

Ordering two drinks from the droid he settled back and waited. Luke sat silently beside him having said nothing since they had entered the bar. It was a pattern Han was becoming all too familiar with. The kid was obviously drawing on some inner source for information. It was left to Han to guard their present position.

Luke adjusted his senses and reached out again for the nagging voice that had demanded his presence in the bar. It was faint and elusive now, but something in this place needed his help he was sure. It might take some time to find out what. Slowly he withdrew his force probes and returned his gaze to the silent Corellian opposite. Stretching out his arm he was about to swallow on the drinks that had been delivered when Solo's hand stayed him.

"I don't recommend it, kid. They're strictly for show. Maker knows the last time those glasses saw the inside of a re-cycler, and the beer is as stale as the atmosphere." A small crooked smile appeared as Luke blinked at him and then pushed away the offending glass, hurriedly. So," he inquired of the still silent Skywalker. "What was it that called you into this pleasure palace, huh?"

Luke shook his head. "I don't know Han. But there's something very wrong here. I can feel it."

You didn't have to be a force sensitive to realise that Han decided. He was about to make another attempt to get the youngster to leave when the lights in the center of the room came up. There was an immediate hush in the room. An air of expectation as the crowd settled into their seats. Solo glanced across at his friend sensing his agitation. Whatever had drawn him to this place was obviously closer. Loud jarring music sounded over the speakers and the proprietor a large humanoid introduced the floor show. To Han's disgust a group of freaks were paraded round the room some Solo suspected owed their present state to judicious cosmetic surgery; a practise he had come across more than once. As the troupe tumbled, danced and sang to 'entertain' the cantina's clientele. Han looked away deliberately. He hated such exhibitions.

The whole routine lasted some time, with the crowd growing more raucous as the displays became increasingly suggestive and provocative.

At last the final parade was made and as it did its rounds both men's attention was caught by an additional exhibit.

Inside a gilded cage moved by hover motors were two magnificent avians. Their plumage lit by garish light shimmered gold and blue. Their tails were a rainbow of iridescent colors, which swept the bottom of their tawdry prison. The birds were things of real beauty in stark contrast to the rest of the players in the troupe. The proprietor used a shock wand to get the birds to move and show off their plumage more fully. Even allowing one or two of his customers to help themselves to the feathers pressed so closely to the bars. "Bastard," Solo breathed.

Luke who had seemed mesmerised by the avian's appearance caught that soft oath, and once again recognised the depth of compassion for other beings that the Corellian strove so hard to hide. "Han, I think they are what called me here, what are they and why are they being held against their wills?"

Solo dragged his eyes away from the pair in the cage. Disgust made his voice harsher than he had intended. "I don't know kid. I've never seen anything like 'em? They sure as hell are beautiful."

Luke was hit by a wave of feelings from the avians. "I have to get them out of here, they're in terrible distress." He got to his feet about to make a dive for the locked cage. His need to help overriding his usual caution.

"Luke, kid, now ain't the time." Han snatched at his friend's arm pulling him back into his seat, knowing that there was no chance at the present to effect a rescue bid. They were outnumbered and it was too public. Two of the club's Gammorian bouncers turned their way, Solo gave them a dazzlingly innocent smile and they moved their gaze elsewhere.

"Damn it kid," he complained to the Tatooinian as he released the breath he had been holding. "When are you goin' to learn some sense?"

More aware than most of the Corellian's loyalty and protectiveness towards those he cared for Luke didn't react to Han's wrath. Concern for his friends often manifested itself as anger.

"What in all the seven hells made you try such a dumb trick anyway?" Han groused.

Luke shrugged. "I couldn't help myself they were in pain, and I," he stopped, blue eyes pleading for understanding. "We have to do something, Han."

Solo rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah I know kid." Like his companion he had an inbuilt disgust for any form of captivity, seeing such beauty being abused offended his sensibilities." But there's no way we can do anything for them now." Han held up a hand to stem the younger mans imminent protest. "I didn't say we weren't goin' to do something." he insisted "I said now ain't the time. Settle down will ya?" Solo shook his head at the youths impatience. "Too reckless is what you are, kid. Just as well I'm here to keep an eye on you!"

Luke looked disgusted by this but Han gave him no time to remonstrate with him. "Are you sayin' those beings communicated with you somehow?"

"Yes." The younger mans face clouded with sorrow as he remembered. "They use thoughts, not language." Solo grunted, with understanding having come across several species that communicated that particular way. "They can sense the thoughts and feelings of others around them and being in such a place." he shuddered. "We have to get them out of there." His hands twisted together. "Could we inform the local enforcers? Maybe they could do something about it." Han snorted at this thought.

"I thought keeping sentient life against their will was outlawed in this sector?"

The Corellian shook his head sadly at this comment. Despite everything that had happened to him the kid was still 'innocent'. Which was another reason for him staying with him. "Fraid that's just Bantha-shit kid, if there's money to be made out of it some low life scum will be there rakin' it in. I wonder if those goons know what they have there? I doubt it. They'd have sold em on by now if they thought there was more profit to be made. If they find out they can read thoughts." Solo shook his head in disgust at what might happen. No he wasn't about to stand by and see more suffering. There was too much of that in the galaxy as it was. "So we'd better do something about it before they do hadn't we?" A familiar gleam came to his eyes.

"What about" Luke began but his words were cut off by a curt, "Shut up kid and let me think."

Luke transferred the weight of his chin from one hand to the other and sighed meaningfully. If Solo had heard him he gave no sign. Since Han was deep in thought the youth took the opportunity to study his friend closely. Reaching out with all his senses to feel for the already familiar warm aura that was the Corellian pilot. His lips twitched slightly as Han raised his eyes from their contemplation of a dark stain on the table to focus briefly on the man seated opposite. "Luke!"

"Sorry, couldn't help it." As Solo's attention again focused on how to free the two avians Luke returned to his scrutiny, being slightly more cautious this time so that Han didn't feel his presence. So much for not believing in the force the youth chuckled Han was in some ways quite an adept user of force skills. Even though he chose to call it something else.

The Tatooinian thought back at their earlier conversation regarding Solo's 'relationship' with the Loordian casino owner. It was a situation that intrigued the young Jedi apprentice. Something formed a strong bond between the twosome, he wished he could find out what it was. From the little he'd managed to prize from his tight-lipped friend it seemed the pair had been acquainted for over ten years. Han when pushed, begrudgingly described the man as 'a sort of a friend' When pressed to explain that further, he'd initially demurred "what do you want to know that for?" Then had done his best to further define his complicated relationship with Rahandir Rodolosor. Thinking that maybe talking about it would help him sort out his own confused feelings over the man. For some reason he had always wanted the Loordian to approve of him and his life. He didn't know why it was important to him but it was. Shifting uncomfortably he'd reluctantly continued "Well, I trust him, with my life if necessary. So that says somethin' about how I feel about him, I guess. There aren't that many people around I'd say that about. And I know if I'm ever in a bind he'll do his best to get me out." Remembering some of the more stringent lectures he'd been called on to endure from the sharp tongued Loordian he then added wryly, "course, when he does, he gives me hell about it, his payback I suppose. I can't account for the way I feel about him kid. I don't understand him, I can tell you that." Solo sounded frustrated.

Luke, smirked but prudently refrained from pointing out to the pilot that many people felt the same way about him and let his friend continue. It wasn't often that Solo opened up. "Once in a while when he looks at me." Han grunted. "I think he's seeing something very different from what's in front of him. Hell I don't know." The Corellian had shrugged. "It's like he knows much more about me than I do. And I don't like that! It makes me uncomfortable."

"He cares about you, Han I know that much." Luke smiled at the Corellian's doubtful expression. "And he'd never do anything to harm you. Do you know anything about his family?"

Somewhat surprised by the sudden change in the topic of conversation Solo thought about it. No, he didn't. The man had never mentioned family. He'd always been alone as far as Han was aware. What made him ask that?

Luke had shaken his head, just curious. Some sense was urging him to be cautious. He no longer doubted that there was a strong link between the two men but what it was, was still unclear.

"Luke, LUKE!!" Solo punched his companions arm in an attempt to gain his attention. "Geeze." The Corellian shook his head at the younger man. "Remind me never to leave you on guard somewhere will ya?"

Han slipped from his seat. Settling his holster more comfortably, he sighed as he took in his friends tight-lipped expression. "Sorry, kid. This place is as tight as an Imperial installation. There's no way we're goin' to be able to get those birds out of here." He winced at the distress this caused. "Now don't get too down-hearted, we ain't beaten yet. We're just goin' to have to think of something else. There's nothing I'd like more than to beat the crap out of that low life scum, but sometimes you have to use other methods. Come on." He hauled Luke to his feet. "Let's get outta here."

Having tossed and turned for over an hour Han finally gave up on the idea of sleeping. Sitting up he swung his legs out of the bed. Picking up the white robe that he'd found in the bathroom he slipped out of the guest quarters. Padding bare foot towards Rahandir's private lounge.

As he rounded the corner he realised that even at this late hour he was not alone already seated on one of a pair of twin couches was his host.

Rahandir was holding a small holo-cube in his hands and was gazing at it with an intensity that surprised the younger man

As if suddenly aware of his presence Rahandir turned towards him, and Solo was astonished to see the depth of sadness in the man's expression as he closed down the cube. "Uh, I couldn't sleep." Han waved vaguely at the kitchen area. "Thought I'd get myself something to drink. Didn't mean to disturb you."

"You didn't." Rahandir managed a smile. "I was just indulging myself in a little nostalgia. Here sit down I'll get you something " he offered as Han began to poke about in the cooling unit.

"Thanks." Solo lowered himself onto the lounge. "Family?" He nodded at the holo-cube.

The Loordian smiled. "Yes, would you like to see?" Before Han could answer Rahandir tossed him the cube.

"You don't mind? I mean I don't wanna stick my nose in ..."

Laughing at this unaccustomed diffidence the casino owner encouraged Solo, "Go ahead. There, you see, nothing so very dreadful." He leaned over the back of the lounge and pointed out the faces. "Just me when I was a lot younger, my wife and our two children. It was taken just weeks before Larrissa was killed."

Han who had been studying the faces, looked up, startled by the words.

"I'm sorry, here." He offered the cube back. "I shouldn't be prying."

"Oh it was a long time ago now Han. I've come to terms with it." Rahandir patted the man's shoulder. "Still, occasionally I wonder what my life would have been like without the interference of the Empire." A haunted look came to his face but was quickly erased, forcing himself to smile he added, "Not half as interesting as it is now, I'm sure."

Han stared down at the picture. From the clothing he guessed it must have been taken at least twenty years ago. Rahandir's wife had sure been pretty he decided, hazel eyes and long curling hair with a sweet smile. Even the two kids looked okay, a boy and girl they smiled out of the picture with all the innocence and optimism that only the very young could muster. Han wondered briefly what it was like to be a part of such a family group obviously loved and wanted. It wasn't until he'd fallen in with Chewie that he'd grown to understand the importance of family. Until this visit he'd never stopped to think about the Loordian's past. Strange to think he'd once had a family, he wondered what sort of father the man would have made. Uneasy at that thought though he didn't know why, he passed the cube back to the older man. "Your wife was very pretty. Was she Loordian as well?"

"No." Rahandir re-activated the cube and gazed at the woman's face. "She was Corellian. You'd have liked her Han. And I know she would have liked you."

"What happened to your kids?" Solo asked softly.

"When Larissa was killed I sent my children away to what I hoped would be a temporary place of safety. I thought I'd be able to reclaim them once the empire lost interest in me. But they didn't, they hounded me from one world to the next, and I knew that if they found my children they would suffer the same fate. So I gave them up to trusted individuals. I daren't even keep them together anymore. Then I changed my name and my life and started again."

Solo stared at him. "You mean you just let em go?"

"There was no just about it, Han." The man noted Solo's consternation at what he'd done and it hurt him desperately. "I wanted them safe." He justified his actions. "Without them constantly having to look over their shoulders. Palapatine has a long memory, if I'd kept them with me they would always have been in

danger. So I sent them away, it was the hardest decision I've ever had to make. I'd already lost the one woman who ever meant anything to me, now I was losing them as well. But their safety and survival was paramount. They were both still very young I hoped that they would have a new chance in life. Not tainted by my presence. But it hurt, Han." He rubbed a finger over the portraits in the cube. "It still hurts."

Han swallowed hard. Awkwardly he patted at Rahandir's arm. "Do you know what happened to them?"

The man smiled. "Oh yes. I managed to keep tabs on the pair of them, from a distance. I still do. They're both grown up now, leading lives of their own. My daughter is soon to be bonded. My son is an independent business man, like yourself. I often wonder what they'd think of me if they found out what I'd done all those years ago."

He looked so sad that Solo felt the need to offer some comfort. "They'd understand Rahandir."

The man looked at him searchingly. "You think so? Would you understand, Han?"

The spacer thought about it, and finally answered, "Yeah, maybe not straight off. I'd be mad, and hurt, confused to, 'cause what I'd always thought was my life wouldn't be. But eventually I think I'd be pleased to think someone cared enough to live with that hurt all their lives." He didn't notice Rahandir's reactions to his words to caught up in his own thoughts. "I never had a family, either, you know. Not till Chewie took me on. He makes one hell of a good father, don't you think?"

The corner of the Loordian's mouth quirked upwards at that comment. "He certainly does." He cleared his throat managing to look the Corellian in the eye. "Thank you, Han."

"For what?"

"For listening. For trying to understand It means a lot to me more than you know."

Solo's brow furrowed as he thought that one over. Then he gave up on worrying about it and decided to lighten the mood a little. "Hey, where's my drink, a guy could die of thirst here."

"It's not going to poison you."

The Loordian laughed as Han sniffed suspiciously at his drink. When he'd come searching for a night cap he hadn't had hot milk in mind. Taking a cautious sip, he found to his surprise that it was really quite palatable. Shifting further onto the couch he stretched out his legs and relaxed.

"So why couldn't you sleep?" Rahandir prompted.

"Hmm," Han appeared to be deep in thought. "Oh, I was thinkin'." One green-gold eye opened and trained it self on the man opposite. "No smart remarks please. I get enough of them from the kid and her highnessness."

"I wouldn't dream of it," the man assured him. "What is your Leia Organa really like? Chewbacca said she reminded him of you, in many ways."

"That Wooks got rocks for brains." Han was obviously unimpressed at the comparison. "She's okay, sometimes, when she ain't yellin' at me. But that's beside the point." He fell silent again.

"You still haven't come up with a plan for getting those birds free have you?"

Han shook his head. Irritation at his inability to come up with an alternative scheme to free the avians was writ large on his face. "I got to think of somethin' for the kid's sake," he mumbled half to himself. "He's pinning his hopes on me. And I don't wanna let him down."

"Maybe I could help," The Loordian offered, hiding the smile that had come to his face at his son's words. Yet another example of Han's real character, had slipped through the Corellian's security ring. 'Not wanting to let someone down, indeed. Very mercenary!' "Chewbacca and I discussed it after you and Luke had gone to bed. I think we may have come up with something that will allow us to free those captives, without putting the alliance's needs at risk." Solo sat up straighter. "If we can't use force, either physical or metaphysical." Han grimaced at the pun. "Then perhaps we should try something else. You remember that time you and I got those credits back from that Barinian."

Han rolled his eyes at that particular memory. In return for a loan, needed to get himself out of another bind. He'd masqueraded as the part of body guard to the Loordian while the man won back a huge number of credits. "How could I forget?" he grumbled. "After all my efforts to keep her out of it. I still ended up deep in the shit with Corrin Val-Dorn. She had my ass in a sling for over two full planetary turns, because of it."

The other man laughed having forgotten that aspect of their adventure. "Yes, well, you deserved it. Losing her credits like that." Solo sniffed, unimpressed. "But I was thinking maybe we could do something similar this time."

Solo covered his mouth with a hand to prevent anyone seeing the grin he was having difficulty controlling. This was better than a holo-comedy. He risked a quick look in Luke's direction and saw the kid was similarly afflicted

In front of them, the heavily disguised Loordian was giving a virtuosos performance as an Imperial bureaucrat. The cantina owner was spluttering and reeling from the strictures being heaped on his head by the 'official from the ministry of public decency'. He'd never heard of this particular office but the two armed guards standing behind the administrator not to mention the huge Wookiee was encouraging him to remain quiet.

Rahandir was now demanding to see the documentation for the keeping of exotic species which the human obviously didn't have. The Loordian was a natural, Solo acknowledged as not for the first time he found himself admiring the mans acting abilities. Initially the proprietor had been full of belligerance at their intrusion. By the time Rahandir had finished he had the owner begging him to take the birds off his hands. He even offered to pay for their transit. Surely the official didn't want to see an honest business man put out of work. He could make it worth his while he wheedled.

Solo bit his lip hard. The whole scenario was so absurd he was finding it increasingly difficult to keep a straight face. He daren't look at Luke, who was similarly sorely pressed. Chewie growled reprovingly in his ear. Han blinked and did his best to straighten his face. He'd found out early in their relationship that it wasn't wise to upset the Wookiee too much.

"You think they're goin' to be okay here until we finish our other business?" Solo asked his fellow porter as the avians were loaded into the less than palatial surroundings of the *Falcon's* hold. "Is there anything special they need, to make 'em more comfortable? "

The Tatooinian turned back to the birds and communicated with them silently for a few minutes. "They say they'll be fine here, until we can get them passage back to their homeworld and they send us their grateful thanks."

As always when complimented Solo managed to look as if he wished the deckplates would open and let him drop through into oblivion. "That's all right then," he muttered. "We better get out of these outfits." He indicated their 'borrowed' uniforms. "Then get back to Rahandir's. Can you believe that stunt he pulled" The Corellian was still chuckling over the Loordians successful play-acting. "No wonder he's so damned successful in his chosen business."

Like you, Luke agreed silently noting another similarity between the two men. Perhaps that was why Han had difficulty in 'getting-on' with the Loordian. although the pair seemed to have come to at least a better awareness of each other since their conversation the evening before. Solo had even said he 'understood the guy' now. That he wasn't all that bad. That he felt more at ease with him than he'd ever done before. Whatever the two men had talked about and Han wasn't prepared to tell him that much. It had obviously led to a major change in the way Solo saw the Loordian national. Luke hoped that their new found friendship would be strengthened he felt sure that both men would benefit from a closer relationship.

"Come on, kid." Han had completed his checks on his beloved ship and was urging Luke to get a move on. "We better get back and see if they've managed to track down anymore of that Couratizine."

His words caused an obvious reaction from their new guests both birds became notably excited then indicated that they wished to communicate with Luke again.

The ear splitting grins that both young men were wearing were in marked contrast to the more sombre faces of Chewbacca and the Loordian.

"Hey, why so glum?" Solo slapped his partner's arm before falling onto the couch, tipping up his feet and propping up his head with his hands. "We got 'em out okay, didn't we?"

Rather than answer the Wookiee fixed his concerned blue eyed gaze on the Tatooinian's face. Knowing the news he had to give him would hurt. *We have just heard from the last of Rahandir's sources. The cost of Couratizine has doubled in the last few days, it seems there has been an outbreak of foralix fever on one of the core worlds. Any Couratizine available is being bought up by the Empire. I'm sorry young Luke it seems we are out of luck.*

"I'm sorry too Han," Rahandir added. "I tried my best but even I have my limits. I know how important those supplies were. Still you have been able to free those avians of yours so your mission hasn't been a complete loss." He stopped as far from looking disheartened Luke and Han were exchanging very smug grins.

"Am I missing something here?" he demanded. "Chewie!" He turned for support to the puzzled Kashyykian.

Cub?

"Don't lose yer temper, pal." Solo chuckled. "You're right, Luke's good deed was worth it. More than we could ever have guessed. Whatever it was that called the kid to that cantina had somethin' in mind beyond getting them avians their freedom. The planet those birds come from is where the plant Couratizine grows. It's a natural resource, and they've promised us as much as we need once we get em home."

"It's true," Luke added. "They heard us talking about the supplies we needed and that's when they told us. It's great isn't it, and it was the force, Han," he corrected the Corellian, obviously not for the first time.

"Luck," Han retorted, his grin taking the sting out of his words. "Just plain good luck."

"Well whatever you want to call it," Rahandir interrupted before the pair could begin another of their squabbles over the force. "This calls for a real celebration."

After an evening of revelry that rivalled the party after the destruction of the Death Star. Han allowed Chewbacca to inveigle him into a holo-chess game, which the Wookiee was winning easily much to Solo's disgust.

Luke meanwhile found himself being quizzed by his host about Han Solo and his adventures. "You must know him as well as I do?" he retorted to the seemingly insatiable Loordian.

Rodolosor shook his head. "I think I'm beginning to know him finally but you can never be sure where you stand with that one. The more ammunition I have to use against him the better. So tell me more."

Rodolosor laughed softly at Skywalker's retelling of some of Solo's more audacious missions for the rebels, as well as his run-ins with the Alderaanian princess. "Well." He threw a swift look over to where the pilot could be seen arguing over one of his partner's moves. "I'm glad to hear I'm not the only one who gets frustrated by him, I can't wait to meet that princess of yours. But for now I'd better get over there. Han you can't accuse poor Chewbacca of cheating just because you're losing."

"Why the hell not?"

"Well, mainly because he's likely to rip your arms out of your sockets if you do," the man responded causing all three of his companions to chuckle, at the old jibe.

"Aww he wouldn't do that." The Corellian grinned at his furry opponent. "I told you he likes me too much."

Not that much, Chewie retorted good naturedly, mussing Solo's hair for him.

"Hey stop that ya big lug." Han dodged out from under the Wookiee's paw. "Rahandir I changed my mind, get over here I need protection." He studied the board again, positive that Chewbacca had made an illegal move somewhere. "You sure he ain't cheatin?"

The Loordian made a show of studying the remaining pieces then shook his head. "I'm sorry, Han he's not. He is just a much better player than you."

Solo pouted for a second or two then flipped the switch that conceded the game. "Yeah, yeah!" he muttered at the crowing Kashyykian "So you won, don't go on about it." He sagged down in his seat long arms hooked around the backrest. A lazy smile came to his lips obviously happy with his present situation. "I think we all came out okay on this trip. Luke got to play at being a jedi mystic again."

Skywalker recognising the teasing glint in the Corellian's eyes refrained from comment. Like his friend he felt too good to get into a wrangle over 'hokey religions'. He did add however, "And the rebellion gets those vaccines as well as a guaranteed source in the future."

"True," Han agreed, "Even her highnessness should be happy this time."

"And what did you get out of this trip?" Rahandir prompted.

"Me?" Han paused then glanced over at the Loordian. "I got to understand a friend a little bit better." He raised his glass in salute to the man.

Rahandir covered his surprise and depth of emotion with droll words. "Does that mean in the future Chewbacca won't need to drag you in here kicking and screaming when you need some help?"

Han's smile was warm. "Yeah I guess it does at that."

Laughing, Rahandir put out his hand to seal their new found mutual regard and found himself enveloped in a fierce Corellian hug instead.

Watching the men embrace, Luke was suddenly struck by another force image. A family reunited, a smile came to his lips as his feelings about the connection between Han and the Loordian were finally explained.

The future was going to be very interesting he decided joining the celebrations.
Very interesting indeed.

end

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