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## **A Family Feeling**

by [Carolyn Golledge](#)

There had been many times since the destruction of Alderaan that Leia Organa had wondered if she would ever again find any place she could call home. Now, more than ten years after the horror of that loss, the Princess could smile, content in the knowledge she had found more happiness than she could ever have dreamed. Home. She sighed and curled closer to the warmth of her husband's side, then looked about the bedroom. A glowtube gleamed dimly on the bedside table and silver starlight fell in filtered patterns entering through double windows with their view of Wakell's forested hills and gardens.

Leia had never felt able to refer to their quarters on Coruscant as home and she was more than glad that the Senate had opted for a new location. Wakell was a world naturally designed for security. Here at last the Organa-Solos could truly be a family. Close by, in adjoining bedrooms, their children lay asleep -- eight year old twins Jacen and Jaina, and their four year old brother, Anakin. It was so good to have them all so close, so well guarded yet free to run and play like normal children.

Leia turned and snuggled more comfortably against Solo's shoulder, resting one arm across his broad chest. "It's so good to have you home again," she said, stroking the muscles of neck and collar bone.

"Oh?" Solo kissed the soft curls of his wife's disarrayed hair. Leia knew it gave him undue satisfaction to know he had succeeded in mussing her normally strictly groomed hairdo. Tossing her head about the way she did during their lovemaking put terrible knots in those long strands, but she never complained about all the time it took to brush them out again! "You really missed me, huh? And this last survey sector was such a cinch too. I was only gone three tenners."

He added with comic plaintiveness, "I hate to imagine how you'd exhaust me if I waited any longer to come home. I'll have to tell the Council to -- Oww!"

Leia reached up and grabbed hard at Solo's shaggy hair. "Scoundrel! You know," she added absently, "you need a haircut."

"Yeah, a shave," Solo agreed ruefully, "for my own protection!"

"Aww," Leia said with mock sympathy, "I'd only find something else to grab at!"

Solo gave that some thought. "I think I might like that." She slapped him and he laughed. "Look who's talkin' haircuts!" He reached out, grabbed a fistful of Leia's waist length hair and flipped it up over her face. She began shaking her head, but he stilled the movement as he lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her soundly. When he drew back he looked down into her brightly happy eyes and said sincerely, "I missed you too."

Leia's lips quirked up at the corners. "I know," she teased.

Han dropped his head back to the pillows and gave an exaggerated groan. "You're never gonna let me live that down, are you?"

"No," she said primly. Smiling, she rolled over again into the crook of his arm and pushed her hair back. "I suppose the Council will want you and your team to go straight on to the next Sector now?"

"Maybe. We caught 'em by surprise with our early find on this last mission. They're running around like moon-crazed limsets over the reports of all that agri-plus factor. I didn't think I'd ever see anyone get so excited about a planetfull of smelly eargrawl droppings."

"If you think the Econ Branch are excited wait till you see the reactions of our Farmworlders." Leia said. "They should be able to bring in triple grain crops when all that agri-plus is shipped to them. They'll probably kiss you on sight!"

Solo grimaced. "Remind me to hide from anyone from the AgriWorlds Sector." He paused, then added slyly, "I much prefer kisses from Alderaanian Princesses."

"Like this one?" she obliged.

"Mmm," he sighed appreciatively. "Exactly like that one. Our little trio of mischief-makers seemed pleased to see me too. Did they get into much trouble while I was gone?"

Leia gave a half-exasperated, half-amused groan. "I think the twins are a bit too much like their father for poor Threepio."

"Me!?" Han said indignantly. "More like their mother's Forceful blood and all that 'tricks and nonsense stuff' they keep pulling, I'd say."

That had Leia giggle in earnest. "We had to have Threepio fitted with a new ancarid motivator adaptor. He said all that levitation was -- and I quote -- "utterly unhinging his scientific programming."

Han shook his head and smiled wryly. "I can identify with that. They're getting pretty good, huh? Asking Threepio a lost of unanswerable questions?" He was proud of his children's seemingly insatiable curiosity and amused by their impish, but good-natured sense of humour.

"Plenty!" Leia agreed. "But I think it's all the demonstrations in Force applications to physics that are rattling Threepio. The twins said they couldn't convince him he was wrong about the laws of gravity, so-- you remember how Luke provided a display of 'god-like' magic for the ewoks?"

"I'm not about to forget, I was getting' real warm about then ." Han turned to look down at her, his expression showing he was both impressed and amused, "they can lift Threepio's weight already?"

"Well, .I think they can only manage so much when they work together. Fierell is a very good Jedi tutor but even she seemed a little taken aback. Han?"

"Mmm?" the sound was muffled as his lips nibbled at her earlobe.

"You know that aquatic world -- Stastia? You and Chewie plotted it for the Council, umm, what about eight months ago?"

"Hmm," he lifted his chin. "The place with the weird stretched-out humanoids and all that acquiul salt floatin' untouched wherever ya looked?"

"Yes. Well, we have all the legal work completed for a trade contract with them." She propped herself on an elbow to look down into Solo's eyes. "I'm tired of being chained to a desk. I handled all the negotiations for Stastia along with three others. All I get to see is a computer screen full of numbers. I haven't been off-world in months. And I never see any of these beautiful worlds you keep discovering --"

He interrupted. "Beautiful is not a word I'd use for some of those places. Dangerous is more like it."

"Hmm. But the others. I offered to act as diplomatic courier to Stastia."

Solo moved back to look at her in surprise. "You did? I bet The Council was impressed! Are they gonna let you go?"

"I didn't give them much choice in the matter. I know this would be combining business with pleasure, but -- Han, please, I can't think straight when you do that!"

Already celebrating, Solo was trailing kisses over whatever bare flesh he could find.

"Are you sure you want to think straight right now?" Solo's tone was eager mischief mixed with that silky undercurrent Leia recognised as arousal.

"No -- oohh!" she said and he took up where he had left off. "Solo, you're incorrigible!"

"So I've -- been told," he mumbled from somewhere in the vicinity of her belly.

She grabbed a double fistful of his hair, slowing his progress. "You don't even know what I'm going to say."

"Yes I do!" he protested.

"So will you be able to get time off to come with me for a little vacation to Stastia? I miss Chewie and The Falcon too. We could drop off that trade contract, iron out any last minute details, tape the final version back to The Council, then spend a few days on the planet of our choice."

Solo was already grinning so delightedly as to brighten the room. "What do you say?"

"Leia," he sighed with pure pleasure, "I can't think straight when you're doing that."

"Oh?" she said innocently, "Should I stop?"

"No, definitely not." He moaned happily, "but I warn you, keep this up and we may be late to Stastia."

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"Mistress Leia, this vid-disc from Master Luke just came through the communicator. Shall I run it for you now?"

Seated at the breakfast table, Leia looked up as Threepio entered the sunny dining area. The room was small but this morning had been given an air of

spaciousness as the window-screens were open, giving an unbroken view of sweeping gardens. A soft breeze stirred at the flower arrangement in the centre of the table, flowers the twins had proudly picked from their own garden so as to present them to their father in welcome home. Leia lifted an eyebrow in unspoken question as she glanced across the table to her husband, wondering why Luke had contacted them.

Han gave an 'I-don't-know' shrug, and was about to comment but had to make a last minute save of the flower arrangement as the twins bounded to their feet, bumping the table.

"A message from Uncle Luke?!" Jacen's dark eyes lit with joy. He ran to Threepio and reached out for the small disc, but the droid kept tight hold of it.

"You think maybe he's coming to visit us?" Jaina added, just as eager. She made good use of her twin's distraction of the droid so as to make her own grab at the disc.

"Slow down a minute, you two!" Han said with a laugh. He too got to his feet, then bent again to pick up Anakin who was in danger of stampede.

"There's only one way to find out," Leia said, trying to sound calm but looking almost as excited at the prospect. "Thank you, Threepio. Yes, we will play it now."

The twins ran escort for Threepio, urging him to hurry as they headed back into the main living room. Following with his youngest son in his arms, Han turned to smile down at Leia. 'Nice to know the kid hasn't forgotten us in all the hustle at that new Academy of his. How long has it been since they shipped off Yavin?"

"Three months," Leia replied, seating herself at the com-station.

"Three months!?" Solo gaped. It hadn't seemed anywhere near that long to him since he'd last seen his bond-brother.

Leia nodded, watching as Threepio inserted the message disc and programmed the console. Han hoisted one hip up onto the corner of the desk and let Anakin down. He immediately pushed his way to stand between his older siblings and stare at the screen.

Waiting, Solo pondered the difficulties of keeping accurate track of time when he spent most of his life planet-hopping. He studied his children who were shifting about with evident impatience. They were growing so fast -- Solo and Leia had been denied the usual joys of parenting infants, had missed the moments when their children had taken their first steps, spoken first words -- as much as Han loved to be off-world among the stars, he was beginning to dislike any further

separation from his family. Maybe he should ask the Council for re-assignment away from the Survey and Contact branch of Alliance Command.

Han left off those thoughts as Skywalker's familiar voice filled the room and his image appeared on screen. His bond-brother was no longer the skinny kid he remembered meeting all those years ago on Tatooine. Married life and Jedi Mastery obviously suited Luke, he had never looked happier or healthier, his arms and chest rippling with muscle beneath the sky-blue tunic he wore. Luke must be getting plenty of exercise training his recruits. And all of it outdoors if that suntanned face was any indicator. Solo smiled, happy for his friend's happiness - - if there were any man alive who had earned good fortune after long years of adversity and sacrifice that man must be Luke Skywalker.

Luke finished his light-hearted greetings and got down to business. "So, I just wanted you and Han to know that Ari and I are on our way. We should be landing four hours later. We're en-route to do some mediating for the Ruthallians and K'lalms -- but there's no rush. We've got twelve hours free after we get our briefing from the Council, so we thought we'd catch up on some of Han's tall tales of alien worlds." Luke winked as if he could see Solo's reaction to that, then he added even more mischievously, "You can outdo him with your stories of the latest political infighting, Leia. Ari and I are taking you both out to dinner. Oh, and by the way, tell the twins to have their simul-sabers primed and ready for a practice session. And I have a surprise for Anakin too. See you soon. End."

Jacen and Jaina gave a very creditable imitation of one of their father's gleeful Corellian victory cheers. Anakin listened but decided against copying them -- he hugged his father's leg instead.

Han picked him up and kissed him, then let him down quickly as Anakin squirmed to be free to join his siblings who were jumping about and taking mock saber thrusts at one another.

"Luke knows I'm back?" Solo wondered, puzzled. He had arrived home unexpectedly only ten hours earlier. "How --?"

Leia shook her head, amused by her husband's continuing difficulty with acceptance of the powers of the Force, but the children were not so reticent.

"Da," the boy said with a somewhat exasperated tone, "Uncle Luke always knows where you are, and --"

"So do we!" Jaina put in, finishing her twin's sentence -- another habit Solo found somewhat disconcerting.

"You do, huh?" Solo went down on one knee and spread his arms wide, "I suppose that goes double for you, cub?" he asked his youngest, and Anakin

nodded solemnly. The children accepted their father's open-arms invitation with an enthusiasm that all but overwhelmed Solo. Playing along, Han rolled onto his back and began wrestling all three, trying to tickle each one before they could escape. The melee was ended -- long after Threepio's repeated entreaties -- when Solo called "Troops, attention!"

Eagerly, they obeyed, forming a line and standing backs ramrod straight, and hands to foreheads in salute. It was a routine they loved, pretending to be inspected by their famous General father. Solo gave them mock stern looks and flicked imaginary dust from their clothes. The General asked, "So my troops know where I am? Always?"

Grinning in a replica of their father's mischief, Jacen and Jaina replied smartly, "Yes sir, General! Always!"

"Sir!" Anakin put in a fraction late, still looking serious.

"Good," Solo said softly. He bent and kissed each curly head in turn, then squatted down, met his children's eyes, and added intently, "I know I'll always be safe with you three watching after me. Troops, dismissed!" he called, laughing as he got to his feet amid a mini stampede.

"Now, children!" Threepio pleaded fretfully, "How many times have I told you not to run in the house?" He hurried after them, waving his stiff-jointed arms as he disappeared back into the dining area.

Leia took Solo's arm as they made to follow. "You're very good with them, Han," she said.

"Thanks," he halted and looked down at her. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

She smiled and nodded. "You don't mind?"

Solo snorted with wry amusement. "I was kinda hoping we could take them with us, but I thought --" he shrugged, "you might want some privacy."

"Me?" she said archly, and pinched him. "There's a lock on our cabin door."

"Why Your Most Royal Wickedness!" Solo said in good imitation of Threepio's most scandalised tone, "whatever are you suggesting?" She laughed and he added seriously, "You think The Council will kick up a stink about it?"

Leia's lips firmed into the famous Organa line of resistance. "They're our children! We can take them on vacation if we wish!"

"That's the spirit!" Solo agreed, and they marched together into the dining room. "No one outside of Security need even know they're gone." He paused. "You can tell Fierell."

"Coward," Leia said.

The children in question looked up as their parents entered. "Can we go get our simul-sabers now?" Jacen pleaded. "We want to be ready to show the new moves Fierell taught us last tenner."

"We finished our breakfast," Jaina put in, throwing an irritated glance at Threepio. "We don't need any more!"

"Bolting your food like half-starved gurreens cannot be good for your metabolisms," Threepio protested.

"Mama, Da," Anakin put in before Threepio had finished, "can I have a simul-saber too?"

Han held up a hand. "One at a time! Your mother and I have a very special surprise for you --" They looked set to jump up from the table, "--if you settle down!"

Jacen and Jaina exchanged oddly secretive-looking expressions, sitting perfectly still. Solo looked at them suspiciously -- he'd seen that expression often enough when he himself was up to no good. "Threepio and Fierell say you've been working very hard at your lessons."

"Me too!" Anakin spoke up somewhat defiantly.

Solo reached out and ruffled the toddler's fair hair. "You too. I'm proud of you all." He sighed. "I just wish I had more time with you."

"We know," the twins said sincerely and there was a strange twinkling in their eyes.

Solo shook his head, wondering if it would ever be possible to truly surprise his Force-Sensitive family.

"Your father and I think you've earned a reward for all your hard work," Leia put in, somewhat amused by Solo's expression.

"We know we haven't had our tenth birthdays yet," Jaina said, and Jacen finished, "but you promised to teach us about piloting when we're eight and we thought --" Jaina finished, "maybe --" Jacen finished in a rush, "we could go with you on some missions for The Council."

Solo's jaw dropped. "Well, I don't know about the mission part --" he said slowly, "but how would you like to come with us on The Falcon? We'll stop off and pick up Uncle Chewbacca, then go on and see one of those new worlds."

"Wow!" the twins exclaimed, and Anakin said loudly, "Yes, please!". There was a display of gymnastic somersaults and backflips that left no doubt as to their pleasure in the 'surprise', even little Anakin gaping in wide-eyed amazement, "You mean it?" Jacen asked breathlessly.

"Sure do, Ace!" Han laughed, "but you'll have to learn to act dignified like me while we're mixing it with the official types on Stastia."

Overhearing that remark, Threepio almost dropped the decanter of kalin he was carrying to the table. He recovered quickly to ask something he'd been eager to know ever since he'd heard Master Luke's intent of visiting them. "Mistress Leia," he began hesitantly as he poured kalin into her cup, "do you think --?"

"Artoo always comes with Uncle Luke, Threepio," Jacen said.

"So you'll have a good time too." Jaina finished.

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Later that evening after a very enjoyable dinner in the city, Luke Skywalker accompanied Solo to the docking bay where Han began pre-flight checks for The Falcon's scheduled departure the following morning.

Luke settled himself within Chewbacca's enormous chair and watched Solo's familiar ritual. Ever since Han had explained his plans to include a stopover on Stastian before going on for a well-earned holiday with his family, Luke had felt ill at ease. Whenever his Force sight centred on the newly discovered ocean world there was no jangling of alarms, no premonitions indicating any awaiting danger, it was just that something was not right.

Solo smiled when Luke informed him of this bad feeling. It was not that Han did not take the warning seriously -- Solo well knew better -- but the familiar words brought back many a remembered adventure for which the term "bad feeling" had proved most understated.

"You think there's a reason that Chewie and I handle Stastian alone first?" Solo asked abruptly, almost as if reading Luke's thoughts.

Luke concentrated, ran one final check, then smiled at Solo's wary expression. "No. It's not a true Force warning. More to be classified as a hunch."

Solo snorted. "Good. You had me worried some. I still remember Haldorthia."

Recalling the agony Solo had endured on that jungle world, Luke frowned. "No, it's nothing like that, thank the Force. Just a feeling of deception clouding any images I try to locate regarding Stastian. Don't accept anything they say without triple checking."

"Hey," Solo's hands spread wide in the familiar gesture of feigned insult, "This is me you're talkin' to. I can smell a swindle a parsec off."

Luke knew that this was no idle boast. Han did have a remarkable gift for judging character and an astonishing perception for a profitable business deal. "Right," Luke chuckled. "It is just that --"

"You've got a bad feeling about it." Solo said with a roll of his eyes.

"Sorry. I know you can't disappoint the children just because of a vague feeling. I'm sure if there was any real threat I'd know about it. Besides, your family couldn't have better protection anywhere in the galaxy than when they're with you."

Uncomfortable with the compliment, Han turned away, re-checking the flightboard. "Yeah, well you can be sure I'll keep my eyes open and they've already agreed on me wearing my blaster to all their fancy dinners. We should only be on Stastia for one, maybe two days. Leia'll keep me outa trouble and we're picking Chewie up on the way." Solo glanced back at Skywalker, a wry smile playing about his lips. "Hey, you can always Mindspeak with your twin if you get the jitters."

Luke nodded, stood and squeezed Solo's shoulder. "Take care, my friend. I'd best be going. I want to hear all about it when you get back. Enjoy yourself and -- May the Force be with you."

Solo sat silently in the shadowy cockpit watching as Skywalker disappeared across the docking bay floor, exiting back into the city. A frown creased his brow as he pondered the Jedi's cautious mood. He would have to be on the alert with the Stastians. Even a hunch from Luke Skywalker was not to be taken lightly.

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Two shipboard days after they had picked up Chewbacca from Kasyyk, The Falcon exited hyperspace three planetary diams distant of Stastian. Solo had changed his mind and allowed Threepio to come along, though he insisted the droid was to be deactivated until needed by the children.

"Okay, cub," Han said, turning in his pilot's seat to take his youngest son from Leia's arms. "you can come forward and sit with me now. I want you to get a good look at this as we enter orbit."

The twins had already clambered up with Chewbacca and were straining forward, ogling the view with an open-mouthed wonder that made their father smile. All three children found it extremely difficult to sleep last night, overcome by excitement at the thought of being among the first humans to see the oceanic world Solo had discovered some eight months earlier. Now that he had the necessary height to see above the flight console, Anakin craned forward, his mouth rounded, a long "Oohhh" the only comment he made.

Amused and warmed as he eyed father and son, Chewbacca snuffled to himself and exchanged a telling glance with Leia, who stood at Solo's back. Anakin's blue eyes were unblinking, jaw agape as he drank in the dazzling beauty of the new world spinning slowly ahead, shining beneath a yellow-white primary. General Solo, on the other hand, was staring at the boy, his hazel-brown eyes glowing gold with proud love as he enjoyed his small son's rapt expression. Han rested his chin lightly atop Anakin's softly curled head and remained silent, the moment too precious for words.

Leia and Chewbacca shared a small smile, knowing they were thinking the same thing -- it had been a rare joy to watch the slow but sure unmasking of the supposed cynical smuggler captain. Chewbacca closed one knowing blue eye in a secretive wink and Leia nodded understanding.

Chewbacca broke the silence. "It is a very beautiful world, don't you think, children?"

The twins, having grown up with the Wookiee's frequent company, needed no help with translation. "Oh, yes!" they agreed and Jacen added, "Are all those swirling colours the oceans or are some of them clouds?"

Solo explained. "The atmosphere is unusually clear. The colours are mostly caused by the sunlight reflecting from the jillandra salt crystals in the water."

Leia bent forward and kissed her husband's cheek. "Now I understand exactly why you love this survey work so much," she said. "To be first to see worlds like this -- it's so fresh, so full of promise."

Han reached up and took her hand. "I'm glad you're here to see it with me this time." Turning back, he settled Anakin more securely then gave Chewbacca a thumbs up. "Okay, pal, take us in. Pilot a stationary orbit. The sooner we get the business settled, the sooner we can get on with the pleasure part of this tour."

As Chewbacca established orbit, Han contacted the Stastians. Prepared weeks earlier, they were flattered and honoured, excited by the pending visit of such a prestigious personage as the former Princess of Alderaan, now President of the Allied Worlds. This trade contract was of vital importance to them, promising at last the opportunity to truly become galactic citizens. Han was given an

enthusiastic welcome followed by landing instructions. He relayed the message to a relieved Leia then began helping Chewbacca with shutdown procedures.

"Come on," Leia began ushering the children from the cockpit, "You can help me run a check on the life support systems of the aqua shuttle. We'll need to get into our pressure suits too."

"And wake up Threepio," Anakin added, climbing down from his father's knee. Han groaned at the reminder.

As soon as they were alone, Chewbacca repeated his concerns, finishing with a long drawn out sigh of resignation. "If only there were some way we could land the Falcon down there, I'd feel much happier. I don't like being so far from you all should there be any trouble. Not one land mass on this entire water-world. I'll be bored silly sitting up here alone for two days."

"Yeah, I know," Solo flicked his partner a sympathetic glance. "Sorry, pal, but I don't think you'd be too comfortable in one of those pressure suits. As I seem to recall they give you a rash."

Chewbacca whuffed a rueful laugh. "I had forgotten about that. I've never felt so miserable in all my life. I don't know how you humans put up with clothes. I cannot understand why you will never go "naked" as you call it. There is no shame in having no fur."

Laughing, Solo shook his head. "Remind me to have you discuss that with Leia some time. Maybe she can bring it up at the next Senate meeting." He got to his feet. "I'm going back to prepare the shuttle for drop and load up. We'll be back before you know it. Keep an eye on the Falcon for me."

Chewbacca snagged Solo's shoulder with one immense furry paw, his expression abruptly serious. "Remember, Han," he warned, "those humanoids down there have developed enormous strength living under such great ocean pressure. They could even overpower me in hand-to-hand combat. We know very little about them, they have been isolated a long time and are very secretive. A suspicious race. Be careful."

Han nodded but smiled crookedly and ruffled the Wookiee's chest fur. "You're gonna be a "naked" bald Wookiee if you don't quit all the worryin', pal. They're not going to try anything, they need this trade contract too badly. They'll treat us like royalty, and I'm not going to rub anyone the wrong way, not with the cubs and Leia to watch out for."

"I know. It's just that --"

Han held up a hand, interrupting. "Chewie, I swear, if you say you've got a bad feeling about this, I'll -- tie your fur in braids."

"Oh, you will?" The Wookiee's furry face crinkled with amusement. Standing, he towered over his much smaller partner and hauled him from his feet. Solo squirmed but Chewie hugged him tightly before letting him down again. "Watch your mouth, Solo," he let out what to anyone else would have been a terrifying snarl, but Solo only laughed. "Oh, get going before I decide it'd be wiser if I took your place." He gave the human a playful, gentle shove that nonetheless sent Solo stumbling out into the corridor.

Regaining his balance, Han turned about and gave Chewbacca a rude Wookiee gesture. "See ya later, fuzzball. Don't rig the holo-chess set while I'm gone this time."

Wookiee laughter rang in Solo's ears as he walked toward the hold access in which were stored the various all-terrain vehicles. The aqua shuttle had already been positioned above the airlock.

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Barely restraining themselves from a repeat performance of the deafening cheers that had set their parents wincing as the shuttle blasted free of the Falcon, the children watched fascinated as the sturdy aqua-craft left the clear, nitrogen thick atmosphere and dove beneath the rich blue-green surface of the Stastian Ocean. Below the waves the salts did not seem quite so brilliantly colored, but this lack was more than made up for by the abundance and variety of marine life. The water and seabeds were alive with swimming, crawling, floating and burrowing creatures, flitting from one of the shuttle viewscreens to the next.

Observing their children's lively interest, Han and Leia exchanged proudly amused glances, certain they had chosen correctly in bringing them along. This was an education no other children in the galaxy were privy to. "Enjoying the sights?" Han asked with feigned nonchalance.

"You bet!" the twins chorused. "Wow, look at that striped thing over there. What is it?" Jacen pointed, indicating a massive three meter long cylindrical shaped cephalopod.

"You'll have to ask the locals for their name for it, cub," Solo said. "All these species are brand new to us." He turned questioningly to Leia. "Has the Senate Council commissioned a xenobiological research team for Stastia yet?"

"No," Leia smiled across at him. "You and the other survey teams are coming with new worlds so fast that we can't find the numbers of scientists needed to

explore them all immediately. But I know they are particularly keen to get to this one."

"I can imagine," Han said somewhat distractedly, busy adjusting the shuttle's course. "Well, there it is, the entrance to the undersea capital of all Stastia."

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The meeting with the Stastian Ministers was just as fussy as Han had figured it would be, all bowing and scraping, Threepio was in his element. The best that could be said for it was that it was short, the natives recognising the visitors' need to make themselves comfortable. Now, settled in their specially designed pressurized rooms, Han was very glad to strip out of his environ-suit, smiling at his family's relief as they did likewise. But it was all an adventure as far as the children were concerned. They ran about eagerly exploring their new quarters, Threepio hurrying after. One entire wall was transparisteel, and even well-travelled Solo had to admit the view of the underwater city was spectacular.

"Beautiful," Leia sighed as Han crossed to her side and placed an arm about her small waist.

"Always," Han smirked, stooping to kiss her. "And portable too."

Leia turned about in his arms and looked up at him. "And you, Solo, are as incorrigible as always." She smoothed out the wrinkles pressed into his white shirt by the pressure suit. "And rumpled."

"Rumpled?" He cocked an eyebrow. "Well now, we can't have that, can we, Your Royalness. Your braids are all messy too." He reached out to re-arrange an errant curl.

"These are not braids." Leia patted her fancy, inter-woven tresses.

"Whatever. Shall we adjourn to the bathroom. There's some special features to the plumbing I want to demonstrate for you."

"I'm sure," Leia returned his sly smile and followed in the direction of his sweeping arm gesture. A pair of ornate, scallop-shaped doors slid apart and Leia stopped in her tracks. "Oh my," she breathed.

Han chuckled, pleased by her reaction. "Impressive, isn't it?"

"And then some! They call this a bathroom? That -- that tub, spa thing alone is the size of a sports stadium swimming pool."

"Yeah, not exactly intimate. But watch this." Han flipped a tiny panel that had concealed a control console. He tapped commands. Twin pearlescent walls whooshed up in a fountaining of gold-pink water from the floor of the pool, and a shell-like silvery dome lowered from the high ceiling to meet it. When the movement ceased, it had created a much smaller, completely enclosed private space in the water at the nearest steam-cloaked surface but Leia could see no entry-way into the dome.

"Very nice," she said. "But how do you get in?"

"Follow me," Solo winked. "First you need to get rid of these." He reached out and slowly unslid the long catch on the front of Leia's white jumpsuit. Smiling, she did the same for him, sliding her hands beneath the warm fabric of his shirt to free the friction clasps. She pulled off her shoes and stepped out of her clothing as Solo pulled the shirt over his head.

"Are you going in with your boots on?" Leia said with amusement as he came closer to embrace her.

"Hmm. That could slow me down. Wanna give me a hand?" He turned about and draped himself full-length along a cushioned lounge at the edge of the pool, lifting one booted leg. Leia straddled it and pulled with all her strength. The boot didn't budge, the outside pressure no doubt causing Solo's feet to swell as were her own. She struggled to no avail.

"Pardon me, Your Regalness," Solo said, and placed his other foot against Leia's rear. He shoved just as she tugged extra firmly.

"Sol---o!!" Leia's outraged squeal was cut short as she was catapulted head first into the water, clutching the abruptly freed boot. She came up spluttering, wearing an indignant expression that instantly melted to pleased delight. "Oh," she said, eyes round, then she lay back and repeated on a long, luxuriant sigh, "Oh --"

"Thought you'd like it." Solo stepped to the pool rim to stand grinning down at her. "It's something they put in the water, instant feel-good."

Leia stretched arms and legs, drifting a little. "They could make a fortune exporting this alone," she said, closing her eyes and floating in the warm, scented water.

Watching, Solo drew a half-gasping breath, overwhelmed by the beauty of the moment and feeling the stirrings of arousal. Leia's hair fanned out halo-like, her pale, cream breasts and thighs sheathed in gold-red liquid, wisps of steam curling upward, making the whole effect dream-like. Han decided he wanted to

remember this image forever. He stood mesmerised, engraving the scene in his memory.

Leia lifted her head and frowned quizzically at her unmoving husband, "Are you going to stand there staring all night?" she giggled.

"You should see yourself," Solo breathed. "Goddess of the waters."

Leia snorted, scooped an arm through the water and splashed him.

"In a playful mood tonight, Your Majesticness?" Solo brushed water drops from his bare chest and tilted his head in amusement. "You're gonna need that energy!" He picked up his booted foot and hopped about, trying to free himself of its encumbrance. "Damn, military-issue, torture devices --" he muttered, staggering as he fought for balance, teetering near the edge.

Leia swam closer, reached up and snagged a bare ankle, toppling him into the pool in a fountaining splash. He came up blinking, and said indignantly, "Hey, my pants!"

"Yes," Leia batted her eyelashes flirtatiously and gave an exaggeratedly sensual pout, "Oh dear, how ever will we get them off?" She tugged at his belt, pulling him toward the half-submerged privacy dome. "Where's this secret entrance you want to show me?"

Solo grinned crookedly, tilted forward and closed his mouth over hers in a warm kiss. "Come along with me," he rumbled in her ear, "Keep a hold of my belt."

"Oh, I will," Leia said coyly. Solo slid underneath the water and she followed, entering the shell through an underwater arch rippling with continually changing light-patterns. Inside were more architectural marvels, but none, Leia decided, could hope to equal the perfectly sculptured musculature, the pure symmetry of line, the living breathing wonder that was Han Solo.

"The Stastians make little Stastians in these domes," Solo whispered suggestively, nibbling at her ear-lobe and wrapping his arms about her as they drifted beneath the shimmering, curved ceiling.

"No?" Leia looked at him in mock surprise. "Anything else?"

\* \* \*

"Why didn't you tell me about this before?" Leia tried to sound annoyed but simply couldn't find the tension she thought was justly owed her. The way her body was feeling right now left tension a distant option. Glowing all over was the best way to describe it. She'd continued to feel herself floating long after she and

Solo had left the water. Now sitting before her bedroom mirror, Leia shoved hopelessly at her disarrayed hair, piling it atop her head. "I'll never fix my hair in time."

"Leave it." Pulling on a fresh shirt, Solo came over and bent to kiss the exposed nape of her neck. Obviously, he too was still feeling the effects of their love-making Stastian-water style. He oozed contentment, barefooted, as flexible and graceful as any feline. "They're not up on human female coiffure," he advised, "First time they've ever seen hair in fact. Show it off, leave it down, they'll be more impressed that way, trust me."

"You think?" Leia asked doubtfully, eyeing her reflection. The low-cut dress didn't seem to lend itself to that style, the hair would hide the shoulders bared by the glittering black fabric.

"I know," Solo affirmed. Gently he closed his hands over hers and lowered them, releasing Leia's gossamer-sheened, freshly shampooed hair to veil her upper body. "Reminds me of the way it looked floating about you in the water." He brushed his lips over hers, sending tiny tingling pleasure-shocks through every synapse.

"Solo," she breathed, futilely trying to find the will to push him away, "We'll never make it if you keep on like this."

"I thought we already did," he whispered, nuzzling her throat.

"Mistress Leia," a familiar, panicky voice sounded as the doors slid back, "the Stastians are -- Oh my. I didn't mean to intrude. I thought you were finished with that -- I mean, I am terribly sorry."

"You will be," Solo threatened, lifting his head to direct a glare at the droid.

Leia got to her feet and rearranged the folds of her long skirts. "We're coming, Threepio," she said somewhat breathlessly, "Tell them we're coming."

"Not any more," Solo muttered mournfully, bending down to collect his boots. Leia giggled and slapped at him.

"Are the children asleep?" Leia asked, moving toward Threepio who had turned his back. He lived in fear of the dire threats Solo had made should the droid ever again interrupt a romantic moment.

"Yes, Mistress," Threepio said, sounding relieved and hopeful that such success would earn him a reprieve from Solo's wrath. "They were most over-excited, as you know, but I managed to find some entertainment that kept them sitting still long enough for their natural exhaustion to --"

"Great, great," Solo cut him off, stamping as he pulled on the final boot. He hurried to the children's bedroom door, checked they were indeed sound asleep, kissed them goodnight, then turned back to ask Threepio, "You said the Stastians are waiting?"

"Oh, ahh, yes," Threepio all but stammered, daring to look into the General's eyes. His gold-metalled body seemed somehow less stiff as he realised Solo intended accompanying him rather than melting him down. "Just follow me. They have prepared a pressurized corridor leading to the viewing area. Right through here."

"I hope this musical circus doesn't run on too long," Solo sighed, falling into stride beside his wife. "I'm ready for bed myself." He reached out and squeezed Leia's hand.

"Shouldn't be," Leia assured, squeezing back. "It's late and they know we want an early start to tomorrow's conference. And they sprang this on us without prior scheduling."

"Yeah, tell me about it," Solo said glumly. "You only have to sign those diplomatic papers in the morning and then we're outa here, right?"

"Right. Absolutely."

"Then why am I getting one of Luke's bad feelings about this?"

Leia flicked him a genuinely startled glance. "How bad?"

"Nothing serious," he assured, kissing her brow, "I just mean as regards delays."

"Oh," she breathed relief. "No, I'll hurry them along if need be."

"Do that," Solo nodded terse agreement.

They halted a few paces further on at yet another ornate, arched doorway, carved with intricate shell patterns done in silvery scales above gold waves. Two Stastians in somber gray-red cloaks towered guard, flanking the arch through which the Stastian Ambassador, a smaller figure in green and blue scarves and tunic appeared. His name was Bansia and he was the most genial of them all, which wasn't saying much.

Solo was used to Chewbacca's awesome height and strength, but there was something ominous about these beings. Something in the way their spines stooped them forward, making them lean like feathered carrion feeders waiting to gorge, waiting for death. The guards' lidless, yellow-slitted eyes gleamed without the least trace of emotion -- which was expected of military persons on duty. But

the other Stastians, the ministers, were even worse. Their eyes were red-flecked, and held an unsettling hunger, almost a cruel anticipation. Solo shivered.

"Are you cold?" their host enquired immediately. "We have allowed for the pressure differences, but perhaps we have not adjusted the temperature control adequately?"

"No," Solo smiled brightly. "Thanks. I feel just fine."

"Good," the Stastian said politely, then eyeing Solo closely added in a tone of revelation. "yes, of course you are. The jillandra water was to your satisfaction?"

Solo nodded while Leia expressed thanks. There was a certain smugness to the comment that angered Han too much to trust his voice. The sooner they left this place the more he'd like it. He forgot all about that as Bansian stopped before more doors which suddenly irised open to reveal a dazzling scene of amazing, intricately tiered performers upon an elaborate stage.

"As you see," Bansian purred, pleased with his guests' awed reactions. "We have prepared a special cultural display in your honour. We are most anxious that it will meet with your approval."

"And we are most grateful," Leia managed, still staring. "Your people are masters of great artistic accomplishment. Your artisans will soon be famed throughout the galaxy."

Bansian smiled, showing a flash of curved, needle-sharp yellow teeth. "You are very kind, Highness," he said, and he bowed in a perfect of the human fashion he had studied on the tapes left by one of the Alliance survey teams. "If you think the stage arrangements are spectacular, wait until you hear our music. Tonight's performance will cover as much as possible of our history and will be presented through all the varying means available -- choral, instrumental, dance, and so on. A real feast for your eyes and ears."

"Wonderful," Solo sighed, ushering Leia to her seat and picturing a lengthy stay. Stastians also used sonar communications via organs at the base of their skulls. No doubt this music would be literally spine-tingling. Solo hoped it didn't give him a headache. He had other plans for the remainder of the evening.

Leia turned to Threepio who had been trailing them ever since the guards showed up. "We'll be making a recording of this event," she assured the droid, "you can view it later. I'm sorry you can't stay."

"Oh, that's quite all right, Mistress," Threepio said, "I understand I must return to the children."

"Yeah," Solo warned, lowering his head to growl directly into the droid's audio-sensors, "Don't leave 'em alone for one second. Hear me?"

"Of course, General. I'd best hurry along then."

Watching him go, Han was very glad of the extra security devices he'd insisted the children wear subcutaneously. Solo and Leia both wore chronos linked to these devices. The children could contact them at an instant. And if -- Stars forbid -- they should be kidnapped and silenced their parents' chronos would nonetheless emit alarms triggered by part of the alarm system, and Solo and Organs had refused to attend any function unless it was held within rapid access of their children. Solo fingered the blaster holstered at his hip -- another diplomatic concession he'd insisted on. These Stastians might be capable of breaking him in half with little effort, but they'd have to catch him first. And they were no match for a good blaster.

\* \* \*

Sometimes Threepio wished he wasn't a droid. Having perfect recall was not an advantage when there were images you'd rather forget. Such as the danger lurking in General Solo's glowering expression and growling tone. 'Don't leave 'em for one second,' he had ordered.

"Even I cannot be in two places at once!" Threepio complained to himself as he hurried back to their quarters. He entered the apartment, crossed the expansive tiled paving of the foyer and living-rooms and halted just outside the locked door of the children's bedroom. That was another disadvantage to being a droid -- metallic feet were very noisy on hard surfaces, it was impossible for him to tiptoe inside. He braced himself and hoped the children were sound sleepers.

He began tapping out the door code when a muted sound came to his hearing. What? It sounded like running water, and -- splashing! He stared at the door, yes, this was the bedroom suite, not the swimming/bathing room.

"This is fun!" Jaina's voice proclaimed on a high squeal of excitement mixed with a giggle from Jacen.

Oh no! Threepio hurried to open the door. As it slid back a shallow wave rippled out to pool about his feet. The twins were splashing about in ankle-deep water covering the floor. Anakin sat frowning doubtfully at them from the safety of his bed.

"What have you done?!" Threepio scolded. "Get back into bed. No, wait, dry your feet first!" Too late, startled, the twins had leaped for the bedcovers.

"I told you he'd be right back," Anakin said smugly.

"It's not our fault," Jacen pleaded, looking and sounding remarkably like his father.

"Yes," Jaina explained, lifting her chin in typical Organa-style defiance. "We were sound asleep until the water came in."

"There was a noise," Jacen continued. "Sort of a crash. Then we saw the water coming in from over there." He turned and indicated the rear wall. "We were trying to get Anakin to come with us because --"

"It's not safe in here," Jaina concluded, and threw a glare at Anakin as she added, "but he wouldn't come."

"I see," Threepio said, not really understanding at all. He sloshed through the water, found it did indeed seem to be leaking in beneath the wall that adjoined the swimming room. That was a relief, it was only the pool leaking, not a breach in the pressure walls of the city itself. "Come out into the living room," he advised, attempting to usher them from their beds. "I'll call for assistance."

Jacen and Jaina were happy to oblige, jumping eagerly back into the water, but Anakin remained unmoving. Threepio went to him, thinking to carry him. "There's no need to be afraid," he soothed.

The twins snorted. "He's not afraid," they declared in unison, Jaina finishing with, "He's listening to them."

"Them?!" Threepio scanned the room quickly. "But there's no one here."

"They're in the water," Jacen explained with pained patience.

Threepio stared at the murky surface and felt like joining Anakin in the safety of the bed. Instead he scooped the child up and hurried to the door. "We must get out of the water, quickly!" he urged.

Reluctantly, the twins followed. Threepio hit the door lock, relieved to note its closure cut off the mini-tide.

"I can still hear them," Anakin announced dreamily. He smiled. "They're nice. They like to play games too."

"Who?" Threepio said exasperatedly, pausing as he made to activate the comlink.

"The fendals," Anakin said. "You can't keep them out. They're already making another tunnel."

"You better stop them," Jacen said. "Mama and Da will be mad if there's any more water in here."

"Yes, do that," Threepio urged, noting water was now oozing under the intervening wall.

Anakin frowned concentration, his blue eyes losing focus then clearing as he reported. "They say they must speak to us, see us, but they can't come out of the water. We have to go to them. Hurry!"

Threepio made a grab but too late as Anakin evaded him. The toddler ran to the swimming pool door, frowned at the door lock then somehow, the door irised open. There was an explosion of splashing noises mixed with a low hum inside and Threepio feared another flood. But not so much as a drop leaked from the inner room.

"You're very pretty," Anakin was saying, his voice echoing in the larger area. The twins joined him quickly to add, "Wow!" and "Can you show us how to do that?"

"Come back here," Threepio demanded. He edged nervously to the door, looked inside, and felt his photo-receptors widen in astonishment. There must have been dozens of the creatures, leaping and splashing in a frenzy of welcome from within the poolwater. They were indeed very colorful, striped and patterned in myriad rainbow hues. They had smooth, round heads and large bright blue eyes, their bodies tapering to long, twin-finned tails. These they used expertly to heave themselves upright above the water, then flipping and somersaulting in a dizzying display of athleticism. They emitted high-pitched humming from their beak-shaped mouths, seeming to smile with several rows of small, blunt teeth. Threepio adjusted his auditory range and discovered an entire language, a noisy reverberation of ultra-sonics. He powered his language processor to high and began frantically trying to make sense of it all while at the same time hurrying forward to reclaim the children who were sitting on the pool edge, legs dangling in the water.

"Please, Threepio," Jaina pleaded. "We must stay and talk with them. They're trying to warn us. They say the air-breathers, the Stastians, are telling lies and we shouldn't sign their contract."

"But," Threepio spluttered, "that's for your parents to decide. Why did they come to you? You can't help them, you're only little children!" That earned him an indignant trio of glares, but the children's attention quickly returned to their visitors. "Tell them to go away and come back in the morning, attend the trade conference."

Jacen looked over his shoulder at Threepio and rolled his eyes in exasperation. "They don't know what morning is! And if they go to the conference they'll be killed!"

"Killed!?" Threepio all but squealed. "Oh do come away from them." He grabbed at Anakin's arm. "Tell them to speak to the adults," he repeated.

Anakin shook him off, still concentrating fiercely, apparently talking to the fendals via the Force.

"But, Threepio," Jaina sighed. "They think we are adults! Just smaller."

"Oh," Threepio was taken aback. "Well, then -- tell them you are babies -- young children," he amended at another glare.

"Anakin is trying to," Jacen said, "but you're making it hard for him to concentrate."

At that Threepio shut down his vocoder and stood watching warily, hoping the creatures would realise their mistake and leave. Finally, Anakin broke off communications, rubbing at his brow as if he had developed a headache.

"They don't understand," he said plaintively. "They say we look just like Mama and Da so we must be adults. I did make them see that only our parents can sign the trade contract. They want to speak to Mama and Da -- now."

"Now!?" Threepio repeated in astonishment.

"I'll call them," Jaina said, lifting her chrono/comlink.

"No, wait!" Threepio said hurriedly. "You can't interrupt them now."

"Why not?" Jacen frowned. "They're only at some boring, musical circus -- that's what Da called it."

"Threepio's right," Anakin said. "If Mama and Da both leave, the air-breathers -- the Sastians will come back with them. Then our friends will be hurt."

"Friends?" Threepio queried.

"The fendals," the twins explained as if speaking to an infant. "The Stastians use them as slave workers. Only the fendals can find, farm, and harvest the jillandra."

"That's the crystals that make the water feel good," Jaina went on. "That's what the trade contract's for."

"But we can't sign any agreement involving slaves," Jacen glared. "Da told me. It's an important part of our new constitution."

"That's correct," Threepio said automatically. Children and fendals both fell silent, watching him expectantly. "Are you certain these -- fendals -- would be punished if the Stastians knew they were here?" he asked.

"Yes," Anakin nodded gravely. His blue eyes filled with tears. "X'cuted."

"We saw pictures in our heads," the twins added solemnly. "The Stastians feed the fendals to giant fish things with lots of teeth."

"Oh my," Threepio said in horror. "We must tell Mistress Leia. She'll know what to do."

He turned about to go back to the living room and was met by his worst imaginings. General Solo stood there, blaster in hand, eyes blazing an anger just recovered from astonishment.

"What the Fires is goin' on here!?" he demanded. "Tell Leia what?"

Threepio was saved from answering as Solo was engulfed in a charging whirlwind of children.

"Da, Da," Anakin cried. "you've got to save them!"

Solo drew Anakin into his embrace and managed to drape the other arm, blaster and all, about the twins. "Outside," he said firmly. "We'll talk about it when you're calmed down and far away from them." He nodded at the creatures in the pool who were watching him intently and seemed to be whispering among themselves.

At that Anakin struggled to break free and won as his father tried to maintain hold of the twins too. The toddler ran back to the pool-side, turned about, and shoulders squared, jaw set, said, "No! I won't let them hurt my friends!"

Wisely, Solo made no move toward his son, who may well have tried to escape into the pool. The General simply sat back on his heels, opened his arms wide and said very gently, "Easy, Short Stuff, I'm on your side." He holstered his blaster. "No one's going to hurt your friends." He flicked a worried, curious glance at the finned creatures. "Who are they?"

"Fendals," the twins answered. They stumbled over one another retelling the story, explaining the warning they had been given about the trade contract and the grave risk the fendals had braved to relay it to them. At the description of executions, Solo frowned, then turned to regard Anakin, who nodded solemnly

then calmly returned to his father's embrace, apparently now assured of Solo's support.

"We won't let them get eaten, will we, Da?" Anakin sniffed and buried his face against his father's shoulder.

Solo patted his small son's back, eyes blazing, reflecting the shimmering gold waters of the pool as he met the fendal's anxious gaze. "I hate slavery," he said slowly, voice low with harnessed emotion, "I know what it's like to be a slave. Not a chance in all the worlds we'll do business with slavers. I'll tell Leia when she gets back. We won't sign that contract now."

"Yes! Way to go, Da!" the twins whooped. They began dancing a jig about their father, Anakin smiling shyly as he watched, then turned to relay the message to the fendals.

"Ouch," Solo rubbed at his ears as the pool-creatures erupted in a frenzy of celebration, squealing and clicking happily. "What's with all the noise?"

The twins laughed. "They say they're free! They're happy!"

\* \* \*

"So how did it go?" Chewbacca asked as soon as his friends had stripped out of their pressure suits and joined him in the Falcon's rec room.

"No problems," Solo said airily.

Leia slapped at him and the twins rolled their eyes and chorused, "Da!"

Solo laughed. "Luke was right about his "sorta" bad feeling. But the Terrific Trio here took care of it, ain't that right?"

"Right!" they laughed, running to his embrace and wrestling him to the deck.

Leia stood looking fondly down at the squirming, giggling tangle of bodies. "We're negotiating a new contract with the Stastians," she explained for the puzzled Wookiee. "One that guarantees equal rights to their farmer-workers, the fendals."

"Former slaves," Solo took time out from tickling Anakin to give Chewbacca a darkly meaningful glance.

"Slaves!" Chewie snarled.

"Yeah. But Leia talked them 'round and they were ready to agree. They need our business real bad."

"To be fair they didn't realise the fendals were sentient or understand how much we'd abhor the system they enforced on their workers. They'd never been shown any other way. They are intrigued by our ideals of free choice. They've agreed to allow a permanent Mon Calamarian team of guardians to oversee the working conditions of the fendals."

"They'll be free!" Anakin said with a triumphant grin, running to hug Chewbacca's leg.

"And next time we visit," Jacen said eagerly, "Da says we can go swimming with them."

"They'll take us out to the reef where the jillandra crystals grow," Jaina added. "Look, we brought some back to show you." She held up a pouch tied at her waist and carried it to the rec table where Jacen, Anakin and Chewbacca gathered to examine them.

Solo climbed to his feet to kiss his wife. "Well, your Diplomaciness," he said with a smile, "I'm impressed. You do your job well. Now, I shall demonstrate my own fabulous skills."

"Which are?" Leia arched an eyebrow.

"Why -- piloting us to the pleasure part of this trip, of course," Solo said with mock innocence. "What else did you think I meant?"

THE END

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