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A Festival in Paradise
by J.A. Berger

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Han Solo pulled absentmindedly at the flight gloves as he strolled wearily down the dimly lighted corridors toward his quarters. His thoughts were on the comforts of a soft bed and uninterrupted hours of dreamless oblivion. He was tired.

He slapped the gloves against his leg as he luxuriated in the peacefulness of his surroundings, and lengthened his stride with single minded purpose.

"Han. Wait up."

He stopped. Weary shoulders straightened, muscles suddenly taut with expectancy; he turned. A belligerency flickering in his hazel eyes, he watched the graceful figure in white robes hurry toward him.

The expression on the Corellian's handsome features was noticeable, for Leia Organa's steps faltered as she reached the tall man's side. "You're back. Did you get it?"

"Did I get it?" Solo quipped sweetly, his eyes sparkling with irritation and mounting anger. "Oh, I got it all right -- "

"What's wrong with you?" Laia questioned sharply, her temper rising to meet that of the Corellian.

"Why in hell didn't you tell me that pickup was smuggled Imperial weaponry?"

"You were quick enough to take the fee I offered for that run," she defended hotly. She met hazel-eyed anger with brown-eyed fury. "I told you it would be dangerous when you accepted the mission, fly-boy!"

"You didn't tell me those coordinates you gave me for pickup would be the Imperial War Department!"

"I tried to, damn you! You said, and I quote, 'I'd go to Falantina's Hell Hole if the price was right.'"

"Well, I think we've been there," Solo stated belligerently. "Chewie and I 'bout got our asses shot off. You can thank your royal hide you ran into me, and not my co-pilot, right now."

Leia Organa bit off a short retort as she attempted to control her anger. She drew a deep breath and glanced past the arrogant spacer to the deserted hallways as she chose her next words carefully. "Han I'm sorry. You are all right, aren't you?"

A surprised brow shot upward. "Did I detect a note of concern? For me?" An inquiring hand brushed his shirt in mock amazement. "What's the catch?"

"Han, it was important or I wouldn't have sent you. You know that, don't you?"

"I just assumed you enjoyed watching me get my tail shot off."

"I said I was sorry." She bristled. "I promise to be a little more detailed an future briefings, all-right? Truce?"

There was no longer any doubtl suspicion Was easily readable in the Corellian's hazel eyes. "Okay," he agreed uneasily, "truce." He studied the beautifully clear, totally unreadable features of the young senator, and his wariness mounted. "Chewie's unloading the last of it now. If you'll excuse me, I'm going to my quarters, and sleep for the next twelve planet hours. The Force had better be with anyone who bothers me ... "

A small white hand reached out, stopping him as he turned away. "Han, wait -- something's come up."

He turned back to the young woman. "What?" The single word was tainted with distrust.

"We only have a few hours..."

"Of course," he moaned. "Why do I listen to this?"

"Han, the Faloon -- can she be ready to lift off in two or three hours?"

Understanding straightened the Corellian's broad shoulders - "No! Oh no, you don't!" He shook his head in denial. "Uh-uh, no way! We had an understanding before this last trip, remember?"

"It won't interfere, I promise."

"No!"

"Han, let me explain ..."

Solo whirled and started down the quiet corridor, hot Corellian execrations filling the silent hallways.

Leia ran after him. She reached for his arm, hesitated, then attempted to match her shorter stride to his long one. She failed, and resorted to a graceful, light-footed trot. "Han, just listen -- that's all I ask, please?"

Solo stopped in mid-stride. The Princess bumped into him, quickly backing out of his reach.

"I don't want to hear anything about another mission," he stated firmly. "Chewie and I put in for a leave several weeks ago, remember?" He smiled. "You should -- you okayed it."

"Of course I remember -- "

"Well, that's fortunate, because we're taking it just like we planned," Solo interrupted. "I ain't under no obligation to this rag-tag organization."

"No, you're not," Leia agreed softly.

At her tender, very feminine acknowledgement, Solo backed away. "Oh, no, you don't! That ain't gonna work on me. I--"

"Han, it's only for two or three days, round trip--"

"Sorry. Chewie and me are looking forward to getting to Kashyyyk and spending some time with his family before Life Day. We've promised ourselves some time off, and we're taking it!"

"This won't interfere, I promise!" Leia promised fervently. "Chewie can take an Alliance shuttle and go on home. You and the Falcon can meet him there in five days. That's within your leave schedule, isn't it?"

"Dammit, woman, you know it is. But this isn't gonna work, not this time. I'm damned tired of getting shot at ... "

"No, no," Leia denied quickly. "It's not that kind of mission, Han, honestly. No one will be shooting at you. This is strictly a diplomatic trip.

"Uh-uh, no way!" Solo turned and started away from her. "That's worse than getting shot at," he declared hotly. "Give me a detail of blaster-happy stormtroopers any day to a table full of smiling diplomats. Get Luke. He'll take you."

"Han." She swore under her breath as she watched the arrogant spacer stride away from her, his back rigid with determination. "Han, I would ask Luke, but you're the only one on base who knows anything about the Mandarin System."

Han Solo stopped in mid-stride. He turned back to face her, and for a brief instant interest flickered behind hazel eyes before it was quickly extinguished. Leia hurried to his side. "What's Mandara got to do with this? She's a closed world."

"That's where we're going."

"And I'm not going to be shot at?" Solo interrupted, his voice rising in the silent halls about them.

"Han, keep your voice down!" Leia hissed. "There are people trying to sleep!"

"Lucky them."

"The Mandarin system is located--"

"I know where it's located! It just happens to be in the center of the Imperial Defense Corridors. That system's patrolled like the Emperor's harem -- and even less accessible. Shit, woman, are you tired of living?"

"We've got coordinates to Mahdara," Leia explained with short patience. "We'll pop hyper over there and go right down -- in and out. Does that sound so difficult? It shouldn't -- you've perfected the procedure to a fine degree here at base," she reminded him with a definite barb to her words.

"You weren't listening," he snapped back. "She's a closed world."

"If you'd shut up I could have told you we've gotten permission to land there," she replied in sugar-coated sarcasm.

"What ... " There was no longer any doubt; Han Solo's interest had been thoroughly aroused.

Excitement brightened the Princess' expressive eyes as she met his interest eagerly. "Han, the Mandarians have opened diplomatic channels to us. Do you realize how important this could be?"

"Mandara? You -- got Permission -- to land -- an Mandara?" He articulated each word carefully, his features extremely thoughtful.

"Are you listening to me?" Leia glanced into the fathomless eyes of the smuggler.

"Sure." The word was softly spoken, Han's eyes still vacant with faraway images of unknown pleasures.

"The Mandarin world is located strategically in the very heart of the imperial shipping lanes. if we could establish a rapport with her peoples, perhaps even petition for a base there ..." Leia paused, irritation noticeable in her dark-eyed gaze. The expression on the Corellian's face had changed from speculation to an almost undeniable touch of euphoria. "Han."

Solo drew a deep breath and slowly released it. Vivid pictures came unheralded into his subconscious; holos of paganistic rites; beautiful women, scantily clad, swaying to the strange blood-stirring rhythms of primitive drums; strange tales of passion, undeniable longings for the pleasures of body and mind, heightened by a native drink that brought a man's body to a fever pitch -- a woman's the the very depths of obedience and wanton desires

"Han Solo, have you heard anything I've said?"

The Corellian started at Leia's sharp words. "What? Oh, sure. why have they contacted us -- what can we offer them?"

"They weren't specific," Leia hedged, fearing his disapproval. "Just that they're desperately in need of help."

"We can't refuse a cry for help."

She glanced at him suspiciously. "No, we can't." She tilted her head and studied him intently. "Can I assume you've agreed to this mission?"

"Sure." Innocence radiated from his hazel eyes. "Like you said -- in and out -- back in three days. I mean after all -- " He fumbled under her intense scrutiny. "A chance to see a closed world. A guy doesn't get an opportunity like that every day."

"Corellian curiosity?" Leia offered, amused.

"Yeah. We've got tons of it," Solo replied brightly.

"I didn't notice any of it prior to this last assignment."

Solo shrugged. "You've seen one imperial cannon, you've seen 'em all."

Suspicion hit the young senator hard. Her eyes narrowed with a closer scrutiny of the Corellian spacer. "Han, what do you know about the Mandarians?"

"Not much," Solo hedged, choosing his words carefully. "I've seen some old Imperial holds somewhere -- I think-- years ago. I can't even remember when -- where. And I've heard rumors, like you hear about all inaccessable worlds -- " The look he gave her was one filled with hooded innocence. "What do you know about them?"

Leia shook her head in negative response to his inquiry. "Less than you, Obviously. I didn't see any of those holos." She glanced at him. "They're said to be a very primitive, peacefully innocent people who were preyed on by the scum of the galaxy until they petitioned for closed world status."

"That's life," Solo quipped philosophically, paganistic drums again sounding in the man's subconscious.

Leia's voice hardened with irritated anger. "Of course, the Emperor, was quick to grant their request. There's nothing of great value an mandara and because of her position relative to the Imperial Defense Corridors, it was to their advantage to keep off-worlders out of the sector."

Solo shifted uneasily from one foot to the other, his interest moving from the young woman to the empty corridor. "Hadn't we better get moving? You did say you wanted to leave in two or three hours. I'll have to see to the Falcon."

"Yes, of course."

Solo checked his chronometer. "I'll be ready to lift off at 0400. How's that?"

"That's fine, thank you." She drew a deep breath and mumbled softly, "Why do I get the feeling there's something going on here that I don't know about?"

"It's just your overworked suspicion," Solo commented, and quickly changed the subject. "Luke's going, Isn't he?"

The suspicious gleam returned to the dark-eyed gaze of the pretty senator. "Why?"

"For company. I'll need someone to talk to while you're tabled with the diplomats."

She smiled. "I think he can be talked into coming. In fact, I think I'll insist on it. Maybe he can keep you out of trouble."

Han smiled agreeably, the lopsided grin masking the eagerness that pumped hotly through his veins. "See you at 0400."

Laia stood, hands on hips, watching the arrogant spacer hurry down the corridor away from her. "That was too easy, dammit," she mumbled softly, then shrugged pretty-shoulders and turned toward the personnel quarters and the young Jedi who awaited her return.

"Han, the coordinates are locked in."

"Hold it steady," Solo reached above his head and flipped several switches, bring the Falcon's high powered sensor package alive. "Deflector shields are on max, cut in sublight engines

Luke's hands moved over the co-pilot's board as he brought the freighter out of hyper under the watchful eyes of the Carellian seated beside him.

The starfield streaked, dappled, then settled into place outside the Falcon's circular canopy.

Solo threw another switch and the vessel's main thrusters sped her to the small emerald-green world that was growing before them. "Look sharp, Luke, this is one busy sector. If there's any Imperial patrols around, I want to see them before they see us."

"Han, I'm picking up something on the sensors -- it's not a ship."

"I see it. It's stationary -- just outside Mandara's air space. Check and see if there's any others positioned around the planet. "

"Yes. I've picked up a dozen, maybe more, in equidistant positioning. What are they?"

The Carellian swore hotly. He banked the vessel to port and maneuvered toward the nearest blip. "Imperial eyes." His thumb moved with obvious intent to the auto-fire button on his console.

"Beacons, set out in the corridors around Mandara to record and alert the Empire to any activity -- friendly or otherwise -- coming and going from the planet. "

The small black device moved into the crosshair of Solo's targeting grid. His thumb tightened. "No -- wait I--"

A flash of blue energy erupted from the Falcon's main turret. The Imperial instrument glowed then exploded before their eyes.

"Why don't you just send out announcements that we're going in?" Princess Leia snapped as she dropped into the navigational seat behind Solo.

"That's exactly what I'd've done if I hadn't blasted that thing, Your Royalness," Solo replied. His eyes remained on the sensor screen as he expertly guided the Falcon into a planetary orbit well below the influence of the remaining beacons. "Luke, mark our descent pattern. We'll want the same corridor at lift-off. Are you getting any signals from Mandara?"

"I've got a weak 'homer' on the scanners now."

Solo nodded his relief. He turned to the obviously miffed Alderaani. "Those beacons are equipped with holo apparatus. As soon as we'd crossed its eye, the holos of this ship would have been beamed to imperial headquarters. How long do you think we would have had on this trip of yours after Vader or some of his crowd saw this ship?"

"What are they going to think when that beacon doesn't signal their board at the next check in?' she inquired, watching the arrogant spacer intently.

"They'll think it's probably malfunctioning, since all the others are still sending out signals. And when they've got a ship in the area,

they'll check it out. Odds are it won't be before we've finished our business and left."

"You can't be sure of that."

"No, I can't, your worshipfulness," he smiled sweetly. "But the odds are still a hell of a lot better than they'd be if a holo of the Falcon was received, now isn't it?"

"Han, look at her! She's beautiful I've never seen so much water." Han Solo smiled at the Tatooine native's wide-eyed amazement as they roared across Mandara.

Solo flipped on his TPS scanner and made some quick checks on the planet over which they flew. "She's about four-fifths ocean. There's one major land mass, where our co-ordinates are taking us. Seems lightly populated, settle-ments scattered throughout the interior."

Solo frowned and rechecked several instrument readings. "I'm not picking up any kind of communications signals. None at all. How in hell did they contact us?"

"Maybe their systems are shielded," Leia offered helpfully, as she leaned forward to watch the fertile green world grow before them.

"Maybe," Solo replied, but he didn't sound convinced.

The Falcon roared over lush, green jungles; everything in cool green and blues, accented with subtle hues of brightly colored flowering trees and lush foliage.

"Have either of you seen any sign of vehicle accesses or roads?"

Luke and Leia shook their heads.

"This doesn't make any sense," Solo mumbled and he checked their co-ordinates again. "It's got to be shielding." A clearing opened before them, surrounded by low buildings more open than covered, built from the native trees and foliage of Mandara. "Talk about a closed world--"

"I've never seen any place so peaceful, so beautiful--" Luke voiced in wonderment.

The freighter's landing gear dropped into place, the hydraulics silent; blocked by the powerful emissions of the vessel's retros. She edged gracefully toward the ground in the center of the clearing.

"We're there." Solo slapped all his systems to silence and struggled to his feet, motioning the others out of the cockpit ahead of him. "Let's go meet the natives."

"Before we leave the Falcon, there's something I'd like to say." Leia stopped him.

Solo stiffened expectantly. "Say it."

"These people have asked for this meeting. As I understand it, this is being held during an important time for them. Please, you two, remember what we're here for; try to respect and understand their ways--be friendly--"

Solo choked.

Luke struck him sharply between the shoulder blades. "Are you all right?"

"Fine--just fine," Han croaked hoarsely, wiping at his watering eyes with the back of his hand. He met Leia's questioning look. "You--want us to--uh--join in--sort of, do in Mandara what the Mandarians do--" he ventured carefully. "Be friendly?"

"Exactly." She eyed him apprehensively. "Am I asking too much?"

"No--no, not at all," Solo assured her pleasantly. "I just wanted to be sure I understood your orders. Their every wish will be my command."

"Good." Leia shot him a very distrusting glance, but the Corellian's countenance was a mask of innocence. "Let's go, they're probably waiting for us."

Han carefully maneuvered past the young senator and activated the Falcon's hatch-open sequence. The servos purring in health, he ordered the ramp released and the appliance moved smoothly into place.

Standing at the opened hatch, Han Solo got his first look at the peoples of Mandara. He smiled hapidily, his eyes dancing in anticipated pleasures. He stepped aside to allow the Princess to take her place at

the head of the ramp. He heard her barely controlled gasp of surprise, and his smile broadened.

Leia stood spellbound at the top of the ramp, gazing in wide-eyed astonishment at the assembled masses.

Han guessed there to be several hundred women and men standing in the semi-circle before them. The men were short, broad-shouldered, masculine in every line of their scantily clad bodies. Their minimal dress was light and designed to show to advantage their obvious attributes to the females of their race.

Han sighed. His gaze wandered rampant among the tall dusky maidens of Mandara, their willowy, pleasingly rounded bodies draped with light, filmy robes which accented the delights underneath. Yes, Mandara was everything the holos had promised. He sensed, rather than saw, the amusement on the Tatooin's face.

"I think I understand your excitement about this trip now," Luke mumbled softly, his words carrying only to the tall Corellian. "They're as beautiful as their world."

"Yes, aren't they," Solo said, his eyes roving over the wealth of pleasures he envisioned as they moved slowly down the ramp behind the rigid back of the Alderaani who was very much overdressed in the flowing white robes of her office.

Han's eyes settled on a dark beauty who stepped away from the others and moved gracefully toward them. A barrel-chested, muscular young man moved from his place in the crowd and fell in step beside her. Solo studied him briefly before returning his admiring gaze to the dusky beauty.

"Welcome to Mandara, off-worlders. I am Labee Ono, high priestess of our Festival of Renewal." She lowered her regal brow and bowed gracefully before them.

"I am honored," Leia replied softly, returning the bow with equal grace. "I am Princess Leia Organa, Alderaani Senator and chosen representative of the Rebel Alliance. I greet thee."

"This is Re-Dav, high priest during the time of Festival," Labee Ono introduced pleasantly, nodding to the handsome man beside her.

Leia bowed before the stocky Mandarin, her dark eyes flashing as she tried to avoid the openly flirting gaze of the man.

"I welcome one of such delicate beauty to our time of renewal. May your days be filled with peace, serenity and the loves of your desire."

"Thank you," Leia mumbled in growing unease as the Mandarin continued to eye her with an open speculation. Damn him, she swore to herself, thinking of the tall spacer behind her. Somehow he knew!

The Mandarin priest smiled at her discomfort and his eyes drifted with hooded conjecture toward the two men behind the small Alderaani.

Leia smiled. "Excuse my manners, Your Highness. This is Luke Skywalker, a native of Tatooine." Leia nodded toward the young Jedi then turned to the tall, arrogant man to her right. "And, Han Solo -- "

"A Corellian, I believe?" the Mandarin voice softly. His dark eyes settled on the blaster on Solo's hip. "You picked your entourage well, Princess. Are their talents as varied as their looks?"

Leia's eyes hardened with a mixture of embarrassment and anger as she witnessed the exchange between the Corellian and the Mandarin maiden beside Re-Dav. "You can bet on it."

"Diplomacy, remember, Your Royalness," Solo said serenely as Leia blocked him momentarily from the Mandarin's view. "Gods, I think I'm in love," he murmured as his gaze settled again on the beautiful Labee Ono.

Labee clapped her hands sharply and turned to face the gathered throng. "It will soon be time of feasting and our guests must have time to rest. Everyone, about your ways in preparation for the hours of Renewal. We will meet at the appointed place -- at the appointed time."

There was a great deal of bowing and the assemblage slowly drifted away from the two Mandarins and the off-worlders. There was little conversation between them as they went about their tasks.

"I know there are many questions and much to be discussed," Re-Dav said as if in anticipation of words already forming on Leia's lips. "But first, let us show you our compound. We will talk of that which brought you here at feasting tonight -- "

Re-Dav extended his arm and Leia hesitantly accepted, her discomfort finding release as she glanced around the primitive compound of the Mandarins. She was conscious of the beautiful maiden taking the arms of both Luke and Han, her gracefully rounded contours fitting happily between the two young men's. Luke's features were a mixture of embarrassment,

unease, and a growing curiosity of their surroundings and the world's people. Solo's reflected complete contentment and open devotion to the vision of loveliness that clung so possessively to his arm.

"And I told him to be friendly," she mumbled between clenched teeth. "Someday, I'm going to learn to read that man before he makes a fool of me," she vowed hotly.

The day was hot, the weather humid as befitting the climate of a tropical world. The three off-worlders were soon sweltering in discomfort under their inappropriate clothing as they wandered through the primitive living areas of the Mandarian society.

Luke pulled uncomfortably at the white desert shirt as it clung wetly to his perspiring body. "I'm used to hot weather," he apologized to his companions. "Why do I feel it so much more here?"

Labee Ono smiled in puzzlement.

"Tatooine's a desert world," Solo explained easily.

"of course," she smiled, her dark eyes almost carressing Solo in their open admiration of him. She turned her attention back to the young Jedi. "We're accustomed to it and dress for its discomfort. Here, let me help you." She reached out and with swift efficiency released the tie to Luke's desert wraparound. It fell open to Luke's surprise and Solo's amusement.

The young Jedi stood in uneasy discomfort as the priestess pulled the shirt from his arms, her openness making little of her boldness. Luke's features darkened with his growing embarrassment as his blue eyes met and held the bemused but obviously annoyed gaze of Leia Organa.

"What's -- that over there?" he stammered as he turned toward a long, low building and away from the gentle hands of the maiden.

"That is our place of rest and fulfilment," Re-Dav explained. "Come, we will show you."

Luke drew a deep breath as he glanced at a smiling, mischievously amused Corellian, then slipped back into his shirt. At a questioning glance from Labee Ono he left it open.

They entered the building, finding the structure pleasantly cool, each end open to allow ventilation. There were openings abundantly spaces along each wall made of woven fiber from native grown materials. Spaced

throughout the dwelling, on each side of a narrow, cleanly swept aisle, were single and double woven mats.

"These are sleeping quarters," Solo commented innocently, avoiding the smoldering gaze of the Princess.

"Yes," Labee Ono confirmed. Her dark eyes met the hazel ones, and she smiled.

"Is this the men's or the women's quarters?" Leia asked as they traversed the room.

"I'm sorry, pretty one," Re-Dav mumbled in hesitation, "I didn't understand your question."

"This building, who sleeps here?"

"All sleep here. It is the place of rest and fulfillment."

A sudden understanding filtered across the Senator's face as she blushed prettily. She openly avoided the smile of the Corellian beside her. "Of course," she mumbled and moved eagerly forward to put her back to Solo. Inwardly she cringed at her innocence. Usually it was Luke who made such diplomatic blunders. She angrily chastised her-self. Then a thought brought her to an immediate halt. "Are we -- I mean -- will we be quartered here?"

Re-Dav smiled. "of course not. You are guests of Mandara. We have inquired into your customs and sleeping ar-rangements. Special quarters have been prepared for your privacy. However, I fear we did not anticipate your -- aides."

Leia drew a grateful breath, her suspicions lulled as they finished their tour of the paganistic life style of the Mandarin people.

"Re-Dav, I've seen no children -- no elders. Where are they?" Luke inquired.

Labee Ono's hand tightened in Solo's arm. He smiled at her, then frowned. For a moment, he thought he had read real fear in her eyes.

"Our young and old are at different compounds during the Festival of Renewal. After the days of fulfillment, we will return to our homes and those who await us."

Tatooine, Alderaan, and Corellia all exchanged comprehending glances.

Leia groaned as she recognized the importance and meaning behind the Festival of Renewal. Her discomfort and unease was reflected and equally returned in the blue eyes of the young Jedi. She did not find it in the hazel-eyed gaze of the Corellian smuggler. Instead, she recognized a look of eager anticipation. And I begged him to come on this mission, she kicked herself mentally. When will I ever learn?

"I think, if you don't mind," Leia interjected carefully, "we would like to go to our quarters, cool off and rest a little. It's been a long trip, and as you mentioned, your weather is taking its toll of us."

"of course," Re-Dav voiced his concern. "I will be pleased to show you the way. Labee, perhaps you can arrange fitting attire for them, to ease their discomfort at feasting."

"it will be a pleasure." Labee Ono squeezed Solo's arm then released it, her dark expressive eyes meeting his with veiled meaning. "Rest well -- the evening will be a pleasant one, filled with song, food and the pleasures of companionship."

Solo sighed as he watched the graceful figure moved away from them. He was unaware of anything else until Luke touched his arm and they moved hurriedly to catch up with the stocky Mandarian priest and the Princess who walked beside him.

"No, this is too much! I can't stay here with--"

"Your Royalness," Solo quipped sweetly as he turned to face the despairing Alderaani. "I believe your orders to Luke and me were to accept their ways, respect their customs -- go along, fit in, make an honest effort to belong. And now, after they go to all this effort to see to our comfort and provide us with private accommodations, you behave like this."

"Are you finished?" she snapped, irritation rampant in her dark eyes.

Solo smiled and sat down on the small room's one piece of furniture, then lay down on the beautifully handcrafted, very large, very comfortable bed.

"Luke?" she pleaded helplessly with the bemused Jedi.

"Han and I can sleep aboard the Falcon," he assured her.

"And hurt their feelings?" Solo commented softly, his eyes closed, his hands crossed behind his back.

She stared belligerently at the resting Corellian. "Mister Know-It-All. Festival of Renewal."

Leia swore hotly as she stared belligerently at the resting Corellian. "Mister Know-It-All. Festival of Renewal. I should have expected something like this. You did, didn't you?" She glared at the peacefully serene Solo.

"Me?" Han opened one eye and presented the young woman with an innocent look that was anything but convincing.

"Have you been here before?" she accused, watching him in tight lipped anger.

Solo sat up. "No." Hurt radiated from the single word. "I didn't lie to you, your Royalness." He put a bite to his words at her suspicion. "But I've been around long enough to recognize the signs of a people who participate in fertility rites. I thought you had too. You are the diplomat, remember? It is your job to find out these things."

"Han, how could she--" Luke defended, "Mandara's a closed world, she couldn't have known."

"It's okay, Luke." Leia admitted begrudgingly, "He's right--again. I should have known when we stepped off and were greeted by only young, virile, very desirable people. Their clothing, their interest in us, even the sleeping arrangements -- the signs were there -- I missed them. I was a damned fool -- worse, a blind one."

A silence fell over the small room as each mulled over his or her own thoughts. A knock fell at the door and Luke drew a grateful breath and opened it.

In the open doorway stood a tall girl of Luke's age, her arms filled with clothing which she held out to the young Jedi. She smiled, a deep dimple in her cheek adding to her dark virginal beauty. Luke smiled back, accepting the clothing without conscious thought. His blue eyes were deeply enthralled with the dark beauty of the girl.

She lowered her eyes in blushing shyness but not before he felt the brushing touch of uneasiness against his Force-sensitive consciousness. "Thank you," he mumbled, his words stumbling over a suddenly thick tongue. He forgot the warning as the girl flashed him another shy smile and left the room.

Luke started, blinked then blushed noticeably as he met the silent but amused stares of his friends. "I guessthese are for us." He offered the clothing innocently.

"Ahh," Leia groaned. "I can see I'm going to have a hard time getting any help from either of you."

She took the meager pile of clothing from Luke, sorted through it, separating it into three piles. "Here, youtwo, you can dress in the Falcon, and I'll meet you back here at the appointed time."

Luke accepted the clothing, glanced at the meager attire, then shifted a pleading look to the tall Corellian.

Solo held up a hand silencing the young Jedi, as he smilingly accepted the native attire handed to him. "No."

"What?" Leia glanced at him sharply. "What did you say?"

"I said -- no," Solo repeated sweetly.

"Han, this is a diplomatic mission, remember? Don't get difficult about this." Slender well-groomed hands went to nicely-shaped hips as she faced off before the tall smuggler. "You were damned quick to agree to the sleeping arrangements."

"Your Royalness," Solo interjected patiently, "you're the diplomat. Luke and I just came along for the ride. 'Sides, I'd look damn strange with a blaster belted over a loin cloth."

Luke grinned at the Corellian's teasing words.

"It's not that bad," Leia started, then paused. "Blaster? Han, you can't be serious! You can't go armed!"

Solo's smile broadened but there was no laughter in his hazel eyes. "Yes, I can."

"That would be an open statement of mistrust."

"Han," Luke ventured, "how about a Corellian compromise?"

Solo shot Skywalker an interested glance. "Sounds intriguing, kid. What's on your mind?"

"These shirts," Luke held up a vest-like shirt, light, open down the front, sleeveless and heavily stitched with mandarian symbols. "They look cool and comfortable. What do you say we wear them to show our good faith, and stay with the rest of our own clothing?"

"And the blaster?" Leia snapped in irritation.

Luke sighed. "I understand the importance of this alliance, Leia," he stalled, glancing from the suspicious Alderaani to the arrogantly confident Corellian, "but I agree with Han."

"You would," she moaned.

"You're wasting your breath, Luke," Solo replied, his eyes sparkling with mirth.

Leia stood before the uneasy Jedi.

"I can't explain it," Luke hedged. "It's a feeling I've had since we landed here -- Han?"

"I know what you're saying, kid, but I can't help you. I ain't got no all-powerful Force to jangle my suspicions. I just know I don't like Re-Dav."

"I can't believe this!" Leia swore under her breath. "I haven't noticed the two of you finding anything objectionable about Labee Ono!"

"No," Solo agreed, drawing a deep breath. "Nothing objectionable at all."

"Ahhh, men!"

A speculating light flickered momentarily in the Corellian's hazel eyes as he studied the young Senator before him. "Have you looked at your wardrobe yet, Your Royalness?"

Leia glanced suspiciously at the tall spacer then belligerently shook out the long gown and held it up. Her eyes widened with horror as she studied the beautifully decorated, very thin apparel. "Oh, gods."

"You'll look like a million," Solo commented admiringly. "You should have every man out there begging you to follow him to the mats."

"I can't -- "

"Remember, Your Royalness, this is a diplomatic mission and you are the diplomat."

Dark eyes turned pleading helplessness toward the blond rebel youth. "I can't wear this."

Luke's blue eyes softened at the frustration in Laia's eyes. "we could probably open the Corellian compromise to include an Alderaani." He smiled gently as he read eager acceptance to his solution.

"How?"

"Your Senate robes," Luke fumbled, avoiding Solo's amused gaze. "Are they... guess they have to be -- multi-layered -- "

Leia frowned in confusion.

"Undergarments -- slips, chemise, l'matres, ii'matas--" Solo offered helpfully in several galactic languages.

"You would know," Leia glared at him.

"Just trying to help," Solo smiled roguishly.

"Could you put the Mandarin gown over them without," Luke flushed under the Corellian's steady gaze.

"Making a spectacle of your Alderaai attributes," Solo finished again.

"Will you two please get out of here?" Leia whispered pleadingly.

Luke grabbed at the primitive door latch, eager to leave the small room and the upset Princess. He heard Solo's soft chuckle behind him.

"You know what to do. I don't want anything going wrong now."

Labee Ono nodded, her dark eyes lowered before the heavy set figure of the Mandarin priest.

"I want you to keep that damned Corellian occupied tonight. I don't want to give him a chance to start asking questions. You've instructed Lacy in the entertaining of Skywalker?"

"Yes," Labee whispered. She glanced up, her eyes filled with fear. "Must she be pulled into this? She's young-- this is first Festival for her ..."

"No. The boy is young, too. Anyone older and he might be put off. Besides, being your sister, she knows what will happen if Skywalker loses interest and becomes curious." Re-Dav reached out and grabbed the long black tresses of the Mandarin girl close to the skull and wrenched her head backward until she was forced to look into his hardened eyes. "If you get any ideas of your own tonight, remember your family and the others in the interior. If you make one move to warn Organa or the others, they die. Understand?"

"Yes," Labee gasped as he savagely released her. "They are good people,' she whispered in defence of the guests. "Why do this to them?"

"They are enemies of the Empire!"

"This is our time of Renewal," Labee whispered urgently. "A time of giving reverence to life." She glanced up, fear naked in her eyes. "Your plans are to take life -- it is against our ways!"

"They are offworlders and of no concern to you." Re-Dav's eyes hardened with threatened mayhem if she continued her defiance of his orders. She fell silent. "Have the contents I gave you for the drinks been prepared?"

Labee nodded.

A cruel light of pleasure touched Re-Dav's dark eyes. "We shall make this night a memorable one for our guests."

"M'laka is our ceremonial drink," Labee objected softly. "It was not meant for outworlders -- nor to be used in the way you have intended."

"I want you to fill the Corellian to the gills with the stuff."

Fear touched the maiden's eyes at Re-Dav's harsh words. "He will not be responsible for his actions!"

Re-Dav chuckled, the sound hollow and evil in the darkness of the coming night. "You're a woman, a very desirable one. I've seen the looks he's given you. I want him totally at the mercy of your charms. The drink will keep his mind, and his body, on you and away from the others. Divide and conquer -- a very old, very effective battle plan."

"Lacy ... "

"The Kid'll probably pass out, so don't worry about Lacy," he warned. "The stuff's strong. It has to be to make sure Solo gets his fair share--and the Princess, I don't know about their tolerance levels."

"The Princess? She's unarmed! She can give you little trouble once the men are away from her side."

"I've always wondered about the pleasures of bedding royalty. Tonight I shall enjoy the company of a very pretty, very willing Alderaanian."

"No! It is not right! our Festival is not meant for use this way!"

"Remember, my Mandarian beauty, what will happen if you do not do as I've instructed. The Mandarians are a very old, very primitive race compared to the powers of the Empire. You could find yourselves bartered as slaves on the open market, and this world opened to imperial colonization."

Labee Ono shivered in repugnancy. "How can we know this will not be done anyway?"

"You have my word," Re-Dav snickered. "Besides, we have a partnership beneficial to us both. We wipe the scum of rebellion from the galaxy, and the Mandarians continue their meaningless existence on this closed world."

Solo sat at the low table that had been prepared for them on the dais before the assemblage. The meal had been of native fruits and an unfamiliar variety of meat that he found tasty and filling. And, he glanced at the beautiful, dusky maiden at his left, the company had been more than pleasant.

Labee's dark eyes met his and they held a silent promise of better things to come. Han reluctantly pulled his attention away from the Mandarian and forced his Corellian blood to cool. He felt restless, edgy, and the feeling disturbed him. Everything had progressed as anticipated. There had been Mandarian entertainment; songs, dances which left him awe of the people's history and their primitive reverence of life. Yet, his uneasiness continued to grow.

He glanced to his right and Luke smiled at him.

"Han, why can't we find this kind of peace in our worlds?" the young Jedi commented softly.

"I don't know, Kid," Solo replied. "But I've always found there's at least one snake in every paradise--and Mandara has hers."

Luke frowned in puzzlement, then followed Solo's gaze towards the opposite end of their table. He watched as Re-Dav, smiling, leaned closer to the enthralled Alderaanian, his hand finding hers and holding it with a familiarity that stiffened Luke's shoulders. He glanced back at the Corellian.

"What is it, Han?"

"I don't know," Solo admitted hesitantly, "I just don't like the bastard."

Luke blinked, his pale blue eyes locking to the worried hazel ones of his friend. "He can't get too friendly here at the table. I'm sure Leia can handle him."

"Sure," Solo mumbled, but the hazel eyes were hooded with a hardened light Luke could not put a name to.

A small, brown hand touched his arm lightly, Luke turned and smiled at the dusky maiden to his right. He took the cup she offered him. She grinned, her dimple deepening prettily, her eyes lowered demurely before his admiration.

"Solo?"

Han turned back at the softly spoken word from his table companion, and met the dark-eyed beauty of Labee Ono.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, Labee," he assured her. He felt her leg brush his under the table.

Her voice husky with the closeness of their growing friendship, reached only his ears. "Is there anything I can do?"

"No, everything's fine--just fine." Solo's eyes softened.

"You've had enough to eat?"

"Plenty." Again he felt the brush of her leg against his. It was a pleasant sensation and he returned it eagerly. She moved away from his touch. His brow furrowed in puzzlement.

"Labee," Re-Dav's voice intruded on their closeness. Solo stiffened in mounting dislike. "Please see your guest's cup is filled when he had finished eating."

"Yes, Re-Dav." Labee Ono reached out and took the polished wooden decanter and poured an emerald-green tinted beverage into the empty container before the watchful Corellian.

"This is M'laka." Her dark eyes touched his. She carefully set the decanter aside. Again her hand covered his over the stem of the delicately carved container. "It is the traditional drink of our Festival--a symbol of fulfillment. The drink is important in our celebration of Life." Her hand tightened on his, her lips quivering as she leaned closer to the enraptured spacer. "Man and woman, and the continuation of Life. We are honored that you agree to share this time with us."

"We are honored to be asked," Solo returned diplomatically. He moved closer until their lips met over the brim of the primitive cup. She stiffened at his touch, but did not draw away. Her eyes flickered closed, then opened, as she gently pulled away from the soft kiss. Her hand moved from his, then returned to grasp it tightly again.

Han smiled, feeling the warmth in the woman's touch. He sighed. This evening held a great deal of promise for the fulfillment of Corellian dreams as well as Mandarin traditions, he thought happily. Maybe he had been worrying about nothing. He pulled his hand reluctantly from hers and raised the cup to his lips, his eyes meeting and holding hers.

He took a sip, hesitated, then touched the cup to his lips again. This time he did not drink. He touched his tongue to the sweet drink. Had he seen fear touch the beautiful brown eyes of the Mandarin? He was uncertain. "It's very good," he commented. He raised the cup again. This time there was no doubt, fear and helplessness touched Labee's expressive eyes. For him?

Alarms clanged in Solo's mind, as he again sampled the drink. It had a familiar tang to it. Before he lowered it, he sniffed inconspicuously at it. His eyes hardened as memory identified its contents. He returned it to the table, all but untouched.

"Is it a native drink?" he asked, as he grasped the surprisingly cold hand of the Mandarin maiden.

"Yes. It is prepared especially for Festival. Mandarians drink it at no other time. It is made from various herbs, fruits--carefully fermented and aged to proper strength for Festival."

Solo smiled and watched her closely as he again pretended to drink from the cup. The alarms resounded and he turned to face the young Jedi next to him.

"Have you tried the M'Laka?"

Han glanced at Re-Dav. The Mandarin leaned toward the softly speaking Alderaanian and refilled her cup from the same decanter he had passed down to Labee. Solo's eyes hardened with suspicion as he watched Leia take a large sip from the cup.

"Just a little," Luke commented easily. "It's a little sweet for my tastes, but it is good."

"It is, isn't it?" Han said, loud enough to carry the length of the table. He lowered his voice and leaned toward the young Jedi. "Stay off the stuff."

Luke glanced at him quickly, reading the seriousness in the Corellian's eyes, he nodded. He glanced at Leia, then helplessly back to Solo. Han slowly shook his head. They were too far away to warn Leia without alerting Re-Dav to their suspicions.

It was the splash of liquid that pulled Solo's attention back to Labee. She had refilled his cup. He smiled warmly at her and raised it to his lips. Again, he witnessed the worry in her expression. With the cup still at his lips, he glanced at the Mandarin beside Leia.

Re-Dav lifted his cup and toasted Solo wordlessly. Solo returned the gesture. Again, he tasted the familiar tang almost masked by the sweetness of Mandarin wine. He knew the ingredients, and his suspicions mounted. Fatalina's notorious Joy Juice was not native to Mandara. Mandara was a closed world. Corellian speculation summed up the obvious. It had been brought in. By whom? He again took a tongue wetting sip.

He knew how much it would take to have the expected effect on him. He had participated in its pleasures before. But it was a heavy concentration and he could already feel the familiar warmth crawling into his system.

Luke. The thought sent his glance again toward the young Jedi, who was talking softly to the young Mandarin maiden beside him, his glass untouched beside his empty plate. Solo drew a grateful breath.

"There will be plenty of time to discuss the alliance between our peoples tomorrow, pretty one. Tonight is Festival -- the time of fulfillment and

the pleasures of companionship." Re-Dav's voice filtered into Solo's consciousness, and he shot a worried glance toward the Alderaani. He groaned. Leia Organa's usually pale features were flushed to a very becoming pink. Her eyes were dark with the warmth of emotions and passions he had never seen in them before.

"I agree." Her voice was husky with mounting desires and Han swore under his breath. Serve her right if I let this continue

He cleared his throat, and lifted his cup to the captivated Mandarians. "To the Alliance." All cups were raised.

Leia's eyes met his and he flashed a silent warning to her, his eyes going to her cup then to his. He shook his head curtly. Leia's eyes flashed with something he did not at first recognize. He groaned in sudden understanding as she held her glass out for Re-Dav to refill. She glared defiantly at the Corellian.

Damn! Solo lowered his cup as he glowered at the Alderaani senator. She met his gaze squarely and emptied her glass.

"Han," Luke whispered urgently, "she's drinking that stuff like water."

"She misunderstood me," Solo murmured. Mentally, the Corellian kicked himself. He should have sent the warning by Luke. Leia had thought he was telling her she had had enough, that she couldn't hold her drinks. "Damned hard-headed woman."

"Han, would you like some more?"

The Corellian turned guiltily back to the Mandarin maiden. "Yes, please." He smiled as the liquid splashed into his partially filled cup. He felt the blood surging through his veins as Labee's hand carelessly brushed his. His nerves tingled at the contact and he swore silently. He had miscalculated, too.

Labee Ono leaned forward and a small hand reached out and gently touched his lips. Again, he was aware of his leg brushed by hers. Immediately, he felt his body's eager awakening to her advances. He fought it down.

"Are you all right?" Labee watched him closely.

"Fine." He glanced about the other tables, many now empty as Mandarians finished and quietly left. They were totally ignored. "Where's everyone going?" he asked as he fought to control the heat that threatened to invade his rationality.

"At completion of Festival all go to the place of rest for fulfillment and the joys of companionship." Her hand touched his lips and outlined them gently. Again he felt his body's heightened demands. He lifted the cup and Labeé smiled and lifted hers.

For a moment her hands were off him and Solo could think. He glanced longingly at her then wondered if it had been a smile or a leer. A giggle from his right and he stiffened as if hit by a bucket of cold water. Leia Organa giggling! He turned to Luke urgently. "Luke, you're sick!"

Luke leaned toward Solo. "What?"

"The next time that bastard fills her cup," Solo met Re-Dav's eyes and smiled, "I want you to get sick, And make it good. We've got to get her out of here -- now!"

Luke's expression was one of total puzzlement. His cheeks were slightly flushed from the small amounts of the beverage held taken, but he seemed in better control of himself than Han had dared to hope. Another giggle from Leia and Luke nodded in understanding.

Solo sighed. It was good having a friend like Luke. The kid seemed to know instinctively when to do what he was told without unnecessary explanations. He glanced again at Leia and recognized all the classic symptoms of the Joy Juice. Leia had reached the danger point. He swore at her helplessly. If Re-Dav got her alone she would do anything he asked. Serve her right if I let him He didn't finish the thought. There was no way he was going to let Re-Dav get his hands on the young senator.

Han Solo pushed the retching Skywalker toward the opening that would take them to their quarters. He smiled at the puzzled Mandarin priestess and made his brief apologies, nodding to a stern and obviously upset Re-Dav. Han found he enjoyed the stocky man's discomfort as he steered the unsteady, suddenly very affectionate Alderaani after the seemingly ill Luke. "Too much party, I guess," he apologized smoothly. "If you'll excuse us. I'm sure everyone will be fine after a good night's sleep."

As if cued to his words, Leia snuggled into his shoulder with purring contentment. He put an arm around her waist to keep her on her feet. Smiling innocently at their hosts, they beat a hasty retreat.

He swore under his breath as they allowed the darkness of a beautiful Mandarin night to close about them. "Luke?"

"Right here. Is she all right?"

Han groaned as Leia reached up and kissed him, pressing her very desirable body against his all too sensitive one. He moaned as he felt his body's response to her attentions. "She will be when this stuff wears off. Are you okay?"

"I think so. You warned me before I got more than a sip or two. What was it?"

"I'll explain later -- " Han paused before their quarters and shifted the snuggling Alderaani onto Luke's hesitant shoulder. "You get her to bed and stay with her until she can throw off the effects of that stuff. Get some water down her if she'll take it."

"What are you going to do?"

"There's something going on here that has my instincts screaming. I'm gonna get some answers." Han shot Luke a sharp look. "Don't let her out of your sight. And don't let that bastard Re-Dav anywhere near her."

Leia smiled and pressed herself against the young Jedi. At the surprisingly quick response of his body to hers, Luke glanced in momentary panic at the amused Corallian. "Han, how long till this stuff wears off?"

The lopsided smile pulled at Solo's lips as he recognized the uneasiness in Luke's features. "Shouldn't take too long. We got her away from it pretty quick." He quickly stifled a chuckle as Leia ran gentle, caressing fingers under Luke's shirt.

"I mean -- me --"

"You're human, kid. Roll with the munches. She'll understand."

Luke eased Leia into a gentle embrace then paused at the amusement he recognized in Solo's voice. He groaned. "I'll bet."

"Just follow your instincts -- and don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Luke moaned at the spacer's banter. "That's what I'm afraid of. Dammit, Han, do you know what she's doing to me?"

A touch of pity flickered in hazel eyes. Solo turned and swung the door open for the young rebel. "Yeah, kid," he admitted softly. "I know."

Han Solo eased the blaster into place on his hip and flicked the thong from the weapon's scope mount as he moved purposefully toward the long, low dwelling whence they had exited hurriedly moments before. His mind was filled with uneasy thoughts.

It was nothing he could put his finger on directly. All he had to go on was a feeling, a gut feeling, that he had had to rely on a lot in the past. It was good enough for him but he knew he would have to have more to convince Leia when she recovered and realized what a shambles they had made of her mission.

A dark figure moved out of the silent shadows before him, and his hand streaked toward the bolstered blaster. He stayed his hand as he recognized the slender figure of Labee Ono. She motioned him silently toward her, a finger to her lips as she moved into the heavy undergrowth at the edge of the compound.

Solo glanced over his shoulder, the night silent around him -- too silent. The hairs on the back of his neck raised in warning. He drew his blaster, thumbed the toggle to kill and cautiously followed the young woman into the darkness, silently cursing himself for a fool.

He pushed through the heavy darkness of the fragrant undergrowth, until he was aware of the figure he followed stepping into a clearing. She stopped before the shady edges of a peaceful lagoon and turned to await him.

Solo studied the undergrowth before him, then stepped warily out to meet the Mandarin. "You can holster your weapon. We are alone."

Solo glanced around the closed lagoon then hesitantly complied to her softly voice command.

"Where's Re-Dav?"

"With Lacy," she whispered softly.

"That little girl at the table with us?" Solo commented in disbelief.

Labee nodded. In the flow of the moonlight, twin tracks of silver stained her cheeks. Solo reached out a gentle finger and touched the wetness of her tears. "The time of fulfillment -- the continuation of life," he repeated her words softly. "You said them tonight with reverence and the rightness of your beliefs. Tears seem out of place, Labee. Why?"

She lowered her head, avoiding the tenderness of the Corellian's words. He lifted her chin with a gentle hand. "Labee, look at me."

The Mandarin maiden glanced up sharply at the hardness that had touched Solo's voice. "You knew about the drinks, didn't you?"

"M'laka is a native--"

"And the Joy Juice?"

Puzzlement touched her features. "Joy Juice?"

"There was something else in the M'laka, I recognized the taste and the smell. Who put it there?"

She avoided his gaze, her voice low. "There was nothing that did not belong -- it's part of Festival."

Solo frowned. Could he have been wrong? Perhaps Mandara' fruit, distilled long enough, mixed with herbs of a type he was unfamiliar with, could have produced a drink with similar qualities. And it did fit into the rumors held heard of Mandara, and the holos he had seen dealing with their rites. Was he being overly suspicious?

Again he was reminded of the importance of their mission to Mandara. He studied the beautiful figure of the Mandarin, and he felt the beverage heightening his very human desires. He reached for her and she came willingly into his arms. Or did she? His head roared with the blood fever of longing as he tilted her head and kissed her gently at first, then harder as he felt the fever building. Again, he felt something within the woman reject his advances.

He swore at his all too male weaknesses to dispel the desires that screamed for release. He forced himself away from her. There were tears in her dark eyes and something else -- fear. He filled the soft night air with heated Corellian execrations as he forced his desires down, cursing his lack of control over the power of the drugs in his system.

"You are able to overcome the -- Perhaps I am not pleasing to you?"

"Damnit, woman I want you so much I--" Solo groaned, then his eyes hardened with ironclad determination. "I don't take what ain't freely given."

"Our feast is a time of renewal..."

Solo swore softly. "Where have I heard that before?"

"A time of joy. We revere life. If this works, this time, how many more deaths will we be responsible for?"

"What? Woman, you lost me. Are you all right?"

Labee Ono looked up, fear again meeting his questioning gaze. "You are so different. I thought I could do this and not feel the -- shame -- the wrongness. You are not Mandarian. It would be done. He would be gone and we would be left in peace again, to our ways, our world left uncontaminated as it was before..."

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Solo mumbled. He pushed Labee away from him. "Labee, tell me about Re-Dav. Is he Mandarian? "

The maiden lowered frightened eyes but her soft reply reached the suspicious Corellian. "No."

Solo swore as alarms clanged again sharply in his subconsciousness. "Who is he, where's he from?"

"I don't know." She read his disbelief. She touched his arm hesitantly. "We know him only as Re-Dav. Some have said he takes his name from his master."

"His Master? Have you seen him?"

She shook her head. "He comes at first light." Sudden realization widened her eyes. "You must leave -- please -- I don't know what is to be done with you. They didn't expect you. Re-Dav fears Corel--"

"Corellians?" Solo spoke the word softly.

"Men of your world?"

"Yeah. who did they expect?"

"The Princess organa. Re-Dav was very upset when she didn't come alone, or without -- aides?"

Solo nodded. "I'll bet he was. Re-Dav, he's imperial?"

"He is from that which is known as Empire. The ones who have closed our world with the lights in the sky."

Solo nodded absently as he thought over the woman's words. "A damned trap -- Imperial nastiness." His thoughts filled in several pieces to the puzzle. "He wanted us separated -- beaded down comfortably and ready for pick up at dawn."

"Yes..."

"And the clothes -- I must have upset him when I didn't leave my blaster in my room tonight," Solo thought aloud. "Thanks to you we've got time to get out of here." He stopped. "There's more, isn't there?"

"It's nothing. you must leave before Re-Dav "

"Labee, you said it earlier, Mandarians revere life. This time is a time of joy and fulfillment. You wouldn't have done this willingly. What did Re-Dav threaten?"

"Our family compounds are under guard. if we had not done as we were told, they would have been killed and our world opened to slavers."

Solo swore hotly. "They can't do that, Labee. As powerful as the Empire is, they can't throw open a closed world to that kind of oppression. Your world is situated in the middle of their defence corridors -- they wouldn't want that kind of attention centered here. It's a bluff -- a nasty Imperial type bluff."

"You are sure of this?" she asked hopefully.

"Yeah, I'm sure. 'Sides, there's no reason for Re-Dav to think you squelched his trap. You did everything you were told to do. He'll just blame it on the damned suspicious nature of a Corellian." A contemplating light touched his hazel eyes. "Are there any more Imperials here in the compound?"

"No. They felt more would lead to suspicious questions. He would only set up the plans, then await his Master's arrival before the three Of you were to be taken."

"You've aroused my curiosity, woman, but I don't think I'll wait around to meet the guy." He smiled and gently touched his lips to hers. "Now I want

you to go wherever it is you should be. we'll say goodbye here -- and thanks. The rest is up to us. I want you clear of this."

Han worked his way cautiously through the silent compound, avoiding the few Mandarians who wandered about the open areas. His blaster in a tight-fisted hold, he paused, then crossed the open space between buildings and let himself into their quarters.

Luke stood before the bed, a pale, obviously ill-tempered Alderaani glaring at him as she stood on very shaky legs.

"Oh, you two have a lot of explaining to do! Gods, what was in that drink? Where the hell have you been?" She turned and glared at the Corellian, and her eyes widened at the sight of his drawn blaster. "Oh hell, don't tell me you've shot someone?"

"Not yet. We're getting out of here -- now!"

"Oh no -- " Leia stalked unsteadily toward the tall spacer. "I don't know what you've been drinking, but--"

"You sure you want to pursue that line of argument?" Solo snapped. "Seems like I remember a certain Princess snuggling up real cozy to -- "

Leia groaned. "What was that stuff?"

"Fatalina Joy Juice."

"You're kidding! Where would they get ..."

"Luke, we haven't got time for this." Solo pulled the Mandarin shirt off and grabbed his own, noticing that Luke had already changed back into his desert shirt. "The Falcon lifts in ten minutes and we're going to be on her."

"Nothing's been decided! We can't leave!" Leia protested hotly.

"Yes it has," Solo refuted, his eyes aflame with a no-nonsense light that Leia chose to ignore. "I've decided-- we're leaving."

"Oh no, Solo, not this time."

"Luke, will you get Her Royalness out that door before I do something we'll both regret later?"

Leia stopped Luke with a hard, threatening look. "I'm not moving a step until you tell me what--"

"It's a trap!" Solo swore contemptuously. "An Imperial trap! Re-Dav is imperial. His orders are to capture you -- dead or alive, he ain't gonna be too particular."

Leia shot him a look of total astonishment. "You're crazy. It must be combat fatigue! I should have let you go on that leave. You need it -- you're seeing Imperials behind every--"

Solo mumbled something under his breath that sounded strangely like an apology. He doubled up a fist and struck the young woman on the point of her pretty chin. She crumbled into his arms. He lifted her, cradling her easily against his chest. He turned smoldering hazel eyes onto a speechless Jedi. "Don't you give me any trouble. I can only carry one of you."

Luke's hand drifted to the hilt of his sabre as Solo's gaze hardened. "You sure?"

"Yeah."

"Let's get moving."

Solo drew a deep breath and hurried after the young rebel. "Thank the Maker for good Tatooine sense. Damn, if we get out of this alive, she'll probably have me shot -- if she doesn't do it herself."

Solo rounded a corner of the hut and bumped into Luke. "Keep an eye peeled for Re-Dav-- until his reinforcements get here at first light, he's on his own."

"Han, that's not long from now!"

"And you wondered why I wasn't going to stand there and debate the subject with Her Royalness! Let's move!"

Luke eased into the open, the unactivated sabre in his left hand as he led the way toward the darkened hull of the Corellian freighter. Only silence greeted their approach. Han shifted his cumbersome burden, missing the assurance of his blaster which had to remain holstered while he carried the Princess.

In the open area of the compound, halfway to the berthed vessel, the figure in his arms struggled to get down. "Luke, hold up," Han hissed as he allowed Leia to slip out of his arms. Her feet touched ground and he steadied her.

There was a fury in the Alderaani's glare he didn't care to put into words. "How dare you!" He clamped an urgent hand over her mouth and moved his lips close to her ear. "Settle down," he hissed and tightened his hand. "One more word and you'll take another nap." He groaned as he realized the mistake he had made in his voice threat.

She bit him. He swore and released her.

"Is that so?" She stepped down hard on his instep, and Solo bit off the painful exclamation before it became audible.

"Leia, hurry I--"

"Luke, do you realize what he's doing? He's messing up our chances of alliance with the Mandarians!"

"Leia, trust him. I do."

Solo's glance took in the silence of the compound, their voices unnervingly loud in the early hours before dawn.

"You're both crazy." Leia paused, a smug expression pulling at her pretty mouth as she looked past Solo and Luke. "Well, maybe now I'll get some straight answers."

Han swore, angry at himself for not seeing the silent figure that had disengaged itself from the Falcon's shadow. He reached for his blaster.

"Oh no, you don't!" Leia grabbed his arm, stopping his draw.

Solo's eyes widened as he saw Re-Dav raise a blaster and train it on the slender figure of Leia Organa. He yelled as he read the imperial's deadly intentions, his finger tightening on the trigger. "Luke, take him!"

Han shoved Leia roughly toward the ground, as he threw himself into the line of fire, his body between Re-Dav and the young woman. His hand streaked for his holstered weapon.

The blaster in Re-Dav's hand spit its beam of death, mingled with the hiss of Luke's activated sabre.

Han felt the searing pain of the energy beam tear across his ribs as he fell. He jerked his blaster up and fired. Luke's sabre deflected Re-Dav's next shot from the Corellian's body. Han's shot took the spy down. The man convulsed, jerked then lay still.

"Han?"

Solo struggled to his feet, reading the concern in Luke's eyes as the young rebel focussed on his wounded side. "It's nothing -- just looks bad -- let's get out of here! We're running out of time, it's getting light!"

Luke whirled, reached out and helped Leia to her feet, rushing her toward the Falcon. She made no attempt to slow their progress .

Solo brushed past her as he keyed in the hatch close sequence and hurried to the cockpit. The Falcon's main engines were warming when he dropped into the pilot's seat. "Let's get the hell out of here before she decides to get difficult again."

Luke wisely remained silent as he brought the Falcon into lift-off mode.

Solo took the yoke, hit his main thrusters and the Falcon lifted gracefully from Mandarian soil. He reached up and swiftly activated the deflector shield, angling them fore. He shoved the gain to maximum.

He was acutely aware of the small figure who crossed behind Luke and dropped into the navigational seat behind him. He turned to his navicomputer, pointedly ignoring the young woman as his flipped in his desired coordinates. "Keep your eyes open. I figure the Imperial slug'll use the same corridor we did."

"You're paranoid, you know that, Solo?" Leia commented drily.

"Maybe," Solo fenced as he glanced again across his board, "but I sure in hell have enough sense to know when someone's about to fry me!"

"You were the one going for a blaster!" she defended hotly. "He wasn't shooting at me!"

"Luke, have you got anything on those sensors yet?"

"No. The corridor's open."

A light flashed on the navicomputer. Solo whirled, obtained the jump data and snapped it into his guidance system.

"A blip -- 12001."

Solo grabbed the yoke as Luke relinquished control. He banked the freighter sharply to port and pushed her toward hyperspeed velocity as an imperial cruiser approached them from the defence corridor above Mandara.

"Her shields have snapped on. She's going to battle stations!"

"A few more seconds..."

"It could have been a mistake..." Leia's voice trailed off as the huge cruiser fired, the energy beams speeding toward them.

Solo swore as he pushed a silver lever forward and another back. "Why don't you ask them, sister? Maybe they're just lost and shooting at us to pass the time of day."

The star field dappled, blurred then winked out as the Imperial energy bolt passed through empty space. The Falcon went hyper.

Han Solo drew a deep breath, closed his eyes and leaned gratefully back into his seat. The silence of hyper lulled his tension, and he felt the first throbs of his burned ribs. He winced as he felt his blood-soaked shirt pull across the wounded area. He waited patiently for the barrage of anger he had grown to expect from Leia Organa.

"You two have got a lot of explaining to do," she started.

The cockpit remained strangely silent as she glanced first from one man to the other. "Well?" She glanced at the blond Jedi who found something of sudden interest on the long range sensors which were inoperative during hyperspace. "You do realize we've lost all chances of that alliance -- "

"A diplomatic trip ... " Solo's voice interrupted softly. His eyes remained closed.

"Just because you two started seeing imperials behind every rock --"

"In and out -- nothing to it ... "

"That feast was a diplomatic disaster -- almost turning into an orgy -- you and Labeé kissing over drinks," Leia continued her tirade.

"This won't interfere ... a holiday in paradise..."

Leia paused as a careless hand encountered a very sore spot on her chin. She winced, touched it again and anger flared as memory ripened. "This time, Han Solo you've Just gone too far!" She glared at a very uncomfortable Jedi. "And you! You just stood there and let him--"

"Deck you," Solo finished softly.

"Deck me," Leia finished, glaring with murderous intent at the resting Corellian.

"For all their faults, you can always count on an Alderaani to stand by her word. 'It's not that kind of a trip, Han' -- those words shall be forever etched in my mind. 'You won't get shot at.'"

"Next you'll try to make me believe you saved my life when you pushed me down!"

"Gratitude is so refreshing in Alderaanis," Solo quipped in a voice feigning a growing weakness.

"Don't give me that, fly-boy!" she snapped. "If Re-Dav had been shooting at me he would have hit you!"

Luke groaned under his breath as he heard the hotheaded young senator step into the carefully laid trap. He grinned as Solo closed it with expert efficiency. "You gonna talk me to death or--" Solo paused for the proper emphasis, then continued weakly, "just let me bleed to death."

Leia Organa turned suspicious eyes on the Corellian. He lay strangely quiet, alluringly vulnerable before her outrage. "What?"

Luke smiled and reluctantly took sides. "He stepped into Re-Dav's line of fire. He took the shot that would have hit you."

Solo turned his seat just enough for the suddenly pale princess to see the blood caked shirt plastered to his blaster-burned side. Gods -- " She blanched. "Han, why didn't you say something?"

"You will -- tell Chewie -- I tried to -- get there -- "

"He was shooting at me! You saved my life ... " She stumbled to her feet, an anxious hand gently brushing the Corellian's hair from his forehead. It was a gentle, caring touch.

"I feel numb -- I think I'm fading..."

"Luke, watch him! I'm going after the medikit. How could you just sit there, knowing he was hurt and not do something?"

"You'll see that -- the Falcon gets to Yashyyyk Chewie'll know -- what to do..."

"Han," Luke interjected softly.

"S',okay, kid. You'll make it -- without me..."

"Han, she's gone. You can turn it off, I'm not buying it."

one hazel eye opened, checked the empty navigational station then closed again. The lopsided smile pulled at his mouth. "No, but she is," he replied happily. "Whatcha think, Luke? If I play my cards right, I could get another medal out of this -- maybe even a little reward ..."

"How about forgiveness for decking a senator?" The words were softly spoken. The Corellian's eyes shot open, and he settled his gaze on the soft, pale and very sincere features of Leia Organa. He sighed in contentment.

"Yeah, I figure that covers it nicely."

End

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