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The Ganna II Affair
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The dangerously deceptive Millennium Falcon boomed through the atmosphere of Weylan's Reef. A battered-looking tramp freighter, she featured a pair of deadly quad-mounted guns and more boost than an Imperial Cruiser.

At her controls in the cockpit jutting out to her starboard side were a pair also dangerously deceptive--co-pilot and First Mate Chewbacca, a 7-foot tall Wookiee, and her captain, Han Solo. At the moment they were engaged in a tricky bit of flying that creased Han's brow in a frown of concentration.

"Give me TFS downrange," he said. "We're going to have to set her down in that next series of hills or forget the whole thing."

Chewie switched Terrain Following Sensors fore-all and Han scanned the readout carefully. Coming in through the Reef's sensor web to avoid tagging and ident had been a neat trick of slip streaming a giant ore barge, but staying beneath the web's invisible pulses called for maneuvers more suitable to a land speeder than a supra-light starship. Nevertheless, Solo survived and occasionally prospered in the dubious business of smuggling because of his uncanny instincts, seasoned spacer's reflexes and a willingness to take hair-raising chances for a profit.

Presently, seeing the spot he wanted, Han hit full braking thrusters and brought the Falcon to a dust-stirring hover between two purple hillocks. Sensor scan showed nothing out of the way. The land was wide and quiet. He set her down, shutting off all but emergency systems, although he kept her engines simmering.

Leaving Chewie to initiate the pre-arranged signal through the com board, Han shot the main hatch and descended the ramp. A youthful figure, his audacious good looks belied a cynical reserve as he leaned against the ramp strut, arms folded. He wore military trousers bearing the eye-catching Corellian bloodstripe. On his right hip, low and strapped down tight, was a business-like custom fitted blaster in a fast-draw holster.

A faint buzzing filled the air around the ship just on the edge of hearing but insistent--the signal which should alert his customers that their goods had arrived.

Presently, Han saw several greenish tubular shapes undulating over the lavender landscape in the direction of the Falcon--Roodelits, the reptoid dwellers of the Weylan's Reef out-back. Han had agreed to ferry their cargo from a Drome intermediary with an uncut gemstone up front and the promise of a thousand credit gratuity on the other end. He had not inquired as to the cargo, supposing it to be utilitarian items necessary for survival in the bleak and spartan Old Country, although the necessity for secrecy puzzled him.

But the eager chattering and liquid sucking which passed for language among the Roo-delitti had an excited, festival air about it which made him think they were gearing down for a big blow out. "Hey, Chewie, shut down the commo," he hollered up the ramp, "and get out here and do some translating." Although the giant Wookiee spoke only his own growling language, he understood a sizeable number of alien tongues and often served as interpreter in the course of their many and varied business deals.

The Roodelits group had grown to a crowd now, a writhing mass of meter-long beings with large ovoid heads and narrow, intelligent features. They gathered around the Falcon's ramp, susserating and clicking as Chewie stacked several cargo cases on the ground and prized one open to display its contents.

At the sight of the objects thus exposed, the already agitated Roodelits appeared to go into paroxysms of jubilation. They surged forward but halted nervously at Chewie's abrupt bark. One Roodelit separated himself from the press and came forward, head raised to about the level of Chewie's knee. He spoke for a moment in what was to Han an incomprehensible farrago of glottal stops and saliva, and ceremoniously proffered Chewie a small skin pouch. Having done this, the Roodelit bowed twice, made another nonsensical noise and coiled around, lunging for the open cargo case with a high-pitched whistle.

As though it were a signal, the rest of the slithering mob joined in, pulling out plasti--wrap containers which they tore into enthusiastically. Chewie, watching the melee with a grin, passed the pouch to Solo who checked it out with his customary prudence where money was concerned. It did indeed contain the thousand credits. Not bad, Han thought judiciously, for running a load of... "Chewie, what was in those cases anyway? From the way they're carrying on you'd think it was high caliber jet juice."

The creatures had succeeded in opening all the cargo cases and emptying them of the containers; plastiwrap now littered the ground where pairs, triads, juarteles and occasional single Roodelits squirmed and rolled about as though, well, Han wasn't sure exactly what, but it had an odd look to it. "Well," he asked the grinning Wookiee, "what in blazes IS that stuff?"

Chewie hooted merrily.

"IT'S WHAT? You mean we've been hauling around porno for SNAKES?"

Chewbacca was laughing so hard now that he was obliged to lean against the other ramp strut. Han muttered a choice oath, then he too was struck by the ridiculousness of the spectacle and began to laugh helplessly.

The sounds of their hilarity mingled with the cacophony of the orgiastic reptilians. And for a whHe a minor tumult enlivened the stillness of the Weylan's Reef outback.

Zilk was a medium-sized facility which, like spaceports throughout the galaxy, boasted its share of carnal divertissements. Han had chosen it, however, not for these, although he was far from eschewing them, but for its proximity to their recent delivery. A short hop overland seemed preferable to trying to beat the sensor web and the ever-present patrol ships. And until he'd forged an ident and exit permit he thought it politic to remain planetside and, in short, take, it easy.

To this end he and Chewie were getting pleasantly swozzled in one of Zilk's less reputable cantinas.

He was eyeing a particularly gorgeous Kemerian barmaid whose obvious assets were barely covered with a few scraps of cloth, when his attention was diverted by a noisy altercation at the bar.

A man of striking appearance was good naturedly bearing the brunt of a young drunk's vituperation. About Han's height, he was older, though it

was difficult to tell by how much. He had a leonine head of thick, dark hair shot with silver and a magnificent handlebar moustache beneath which a dazzling smile flashed. He was dressed in a black body suit and high boots.

There was something very familiar about him which Han strove to register. Then as the man in black cocked hands on hips, Han saw the roto-cross bikers' vambraces and remembered.

At that moment the drunk, apparently infuriated by his inability to provoke the other took a swing. The older man sidestepped easily and caught the blow on one of his braces. Drunk as he was, the antagonist reeled with the painful shock of impact. Staggering back against the bar, he hollered over his shoulder, summoning reinforcements. At once a motley crew of punk-types appeared, converging on the lone biker who had not lost his smile, although Han noted a certain feral cast to it now.

He had put his back to the bar, assuming a deceptively relaxed stance from which he could move instantly in any direction. Two punks came at him at once. At the last moment he moved. His shielded forearms came up in a wicked ebony flash, warding off the grappling attack on his right, while his left foot shot out perpendicular to catch the other assailant with a breath-stopping blow to the midsection. In one arcing swing he threw his weight onto the left foot, jerked the other attacker's arms behind his back at a joint-cracking angle and, leaning back, planted his right foot on the kid's rear and sent him sprawling in Han's direction.

Immediately, three others joined the fray. The super aggressive biker took out the first one's face with a ferocious forearm smash, but the other two executed a clumsy but effective gang tackle that brought all three of them sliding in a tangle across the hastily cleared spot at the room's center.

One of the punks managed to straddle the biker's back, only to be heaved clear as he came up with a surge, rolling sideways and cracking the youth's jaw with a barefisted blow. The other threw himself on the man's back and went for a strangle-hold. At the same moment the original assailant felt recovered sufficiently to launch himself at the struggling duo. The biker saw him coming and tried to work a shift that would give him the necessary momentum to deliver a swing kick, but the first Punk shunted in under the booted blow and grappled the older man's knee, giving it a wrenching twist that took him off balance.

With a crash he slammed into Han's table, the scrappy assailant still clinging tenaciously to his neck. The biker managed a wry grin. "Sorry, spacer, it hasn't exactly been my day," he rasped, laying full out in a swirl of Ebla beer to bring both feet up and ram them like pistons into the

first punk's chest. As he shot backward, skidded into the bar and collapsed like a pile of dirty laundry, Chewie inconspicuously reached out and snapped the wrist of the last remaining assailant. He rolled away with a howl of pain, and the biker stood up gratefully.

He brushed himself off, still dripping Ebla. "Thank you, there, Wookiee," he nodded, "and, again, friend, sorry for the fracas."

"No problem," Han said. "Have a seat. I'll buy you a drink."

The biker accepted the invitation with good humor. "My name's Ben Adrick," he said with the openness of one who makes his living on the right side of the law.

"You roto-cross, don't you? I saw a holo of your last Galactic Run. You're damn good. I'm Solo, and the bone masher there is Chewbacca, my First Mate."

Solo was not in the habit of asking questions, but Adrick's affable manner, combined with his own curiosity, got the better of him. "So what is a roto-cross champion like you doing on Weylan's Reef?"

Adrick looked ruefully into his beer which the stunning Kimerian had just set before him. "Not much, I'm afraid. I was on my way to the Universals on Ganna II when my transport developed jump trouble. She's doing down time now and the only other liner bound for Ganna will get me there just about in time to catch the finish."

"That's bad," Solo said tipping Chewie a look. "But," he continued, "we just unloaded freight and it's clear skies for us, so you got a ticket to Ganna II if you want."

Adrick's seemingly irrepressible spirits bounced to the fore again, and his grin split the luxurious moustache. "You're on, Solo! That is, if you can get me there in less than three time-parts?"

The smug look that Solo pulled was one with which Chewie was very familiar. "My ship can do it in half that. The Falcon's one of the fastest things out there."

Adrick cocked an eyebrow. "The Millennium Falcon? Then you must be Han Solo. The day's turning out better than I expected." They traded grips.

"Cargo?" asked Han.

"Just my machines. And there's my mechanic, Bari. He was suppose to meet me here."

"Well, collect your gear and your man and meet us at docking bay Six. Right? Oh, by the way, what was that scrap about, anyhow?" He jerked his head toward the bay area where the last of the victims of Ben Adrick's flamboyant martial style were being towed away.

"That? I don't know," he looked faintly puzzled. "The youngster must have had me confused with someone else." His grin flashed, "He called me an over-the-hill dust buster."

Han watched the figure of Ben Adrick saunter from the room in a lazy biker's walk. Despite himself, he was impressed.

In the enthusiasm of engaging a lively charter, Han had momentarily forgotten the necessary detail of forging the ident. He now sat at the Falcon's main computer busily programming into it a landing code number and exit permit. That he should not have been able to do this bothered Solo not at all. That he could, delighted him, and he gave a mental thank you to the law-bending techs who had given his computer the capability. It gave him an edge, and every edge helped.

Presently Chewie called from below where he was running an outer-systems check with the docking bay's portable monitor. Han punched up the last of the coded entry data, and went back to meet Adrick.

The biker was standing beside a repulsor-lift cargo handler which held a seam-sealed case several meters square. He was looking up dubiously at the Falcon's somewhat ramshackle exterior. Solo watched him from the hatchway, hand on hip.

He was used to it. "Never mind what they tell you, Adrick," he said, "A ship is not a woman. It's not how she looks on the outside that counts."

"I'll trust you for it," Adrick replied.

"You will if you want a shot at the Universals. Chewie, stow the bikes in forward-3. I'll finish the hullcheck." The shaggy co-pilot whuffed assent and shambled off to engage the cargo tractor that would lift and load the precious machinery.

"Where's your tech?" Han asked, operating the monitor scan.

"Beats me. I don't want to lift without him, but if he doesn't show soon..." he looked around as though his glance might summon the absent Bari.

"Any time you're ready, Adrick."

The older man shrugged. "I left messages everywhere I could think of. He'll just have to grab the next transport and meet us there."

The lift-off was uneventful. Automatic devices in Zilt's computer bay probed the Falcon with invisible pulses, logged her ident and exit permit, and graciously passed her through the sensor web.

Han was leaning back with his left hand extended, leisurely punching up jump co-ordinates at the navigator's station when Chewie growled a warning. All attention forward, Han registered the starboard screen showing him a pair of recon Cutters coming up fast. The como board was sHent.

"They're not Reef Patrol ... What do they want with us?" he demanded. As if in reply the forward ship loosed a shot over the Falcon's bow that brought her shields on full. "Yeah! I KNOW they want us to stop!" he snapped in response to Chewie's roar. "How'd you get so clever so quick?"

Han threw the Falcon on her side giving the attackers a low targeting profile and cut between them, wondering how he was going to complete feeding the jump coordinates to the navicomputer before the cutters boxed him in. They appeared too small to mount much tractor pull, but they were nimble and over-powered and, swift as the Falcon was at supra-light, she was at a disadvantage at space normal.

Solo thought furiously, diving now to avoid a crisscross laser pattern the cutters were setting up. They were firing for effect but not disintegration which gave him the feeling that his charter might be more than he appeared. "Adrick! Are those bikes of yours a lot hotter than I think they are?" Ben, seated in the communication service chair behind Chewie, spread his hands in an elaborate shrug.

"Can you pilot?" Solo hollered over the growing commotion of warning devices and Chewie's Wookiee profanities.

"No," Adrick yelled back, "but I can shoot."

Han turned to see the predatory grin on Adrick's face and matched it with one of his own. He decided to slug it out. Chewie could handle the main controls competently if not with Han's own brand of inspired insanity, and if they could take out their pursuers, the safety of hyper space would be only a few seconds away. "Chewie, charge up the main guns and give us plenty of clearance. We'll jump when and as we can. Come on," he added to his passenger.

At a dead run they reached the access tube, Solo directing Ben to the belly turret as he scaled the ladder two rungs at a time to man the topside quad-mount.

Ben took a moment to familiarize himself with the big guns' capabilities, but appeared quite at home and even happy strapped into the recoil-cushioned seat, the ship's intercom headset supplying him with compu-data and a great deal of salty Wookiee language. His hands closed on the grips and swung the big guns once in a practice arc.

One of the agile cutters appeared on his screen. Momentarily, confused by the grid-approximation, he decided to forget the computer visualization and operate eye-hand. It was how he roto-crossed, and he did it very well.

Solo, meanwhile, had taken a few swipes at the cutters, but it was infuriatingly like trying to look at electrons--the force of the laser canon's blasts seemed to shunt them aside. He reached Adrick over the headset and briefly explained the principle of the Money Lane. "Got that, Chewie?" he added. The Wookiee acknowledged. Han spared a glance down the tube to Adrick's back. With all that hair he looked-like a dark relative of the Falcon's First mate. Han was amused, and oddly comforted.

The cutters were flying in tandem now, not splitting their bet, in an attempt to blow one after another of the Falcon's shields and force a surrender, unacquainted-with the unyielding nature of her intrepid captain.

Chewie rolled the ship again, and again trying to give the gunners optimum opportunity to intersect laser vectors on the cutters' hull. It was an unusual engagement for the co-pilot, the Falcon much more often than not being on the defensive, concerning him with evasion and beating the heat out into hyper space. Now he was positioning for attack, aggressively maneuvering the ship for maximum kill potential while the pandemonium of the big quad guns pounded on through the sound damped field of the turrets.

Ben and Han both had managed to nick the cutters on several runs, but their powerful shielding held, while telltales showed the Falcon's shields draining seriously fast in the constant barrage of lase-fire.

The cutters swept into the Money Lane once more, so close together their shields nearly kissed. "Hot pilots, aren't you, whoever the hell you are," Han muttered. But it gave him an idea. Quickly he communicated it to Ben.

Chewie threw the ship over again and they lead the cutters with fiery trails, scoring another near miss. Chewie's worried hoot reached Han with the depressing news that the Falcon's shields had just dropped below tolerance. A kid with a flinger could take us out now, Han thought grimly, but shields or no he was going to give it his best shot.

Chewie flipped the vulnerable starship a final time. With more intuition than skill the two quad gunners directed a desperate rain of lase-fire between the rapidly approaching cutters. Where the trails converged an alarming field of super hot shield shimmer began to expand.

"We got 'em! We got 'em!" Ben shouted.

"Keep it up! Pour it on!"

Suddenly the terrific force of a total shield blow-out hurled the cutters apart and sent them spinning. Without waiting to see the outcome, Han flung himself out of the gunner's seat and down the ladder to one explosion of motion. The co-ordinates racing through his head, he slid to a halt at the navi-computer, punched up the rest of the jump, hoping their little waltz with the cutters had not appreciatively affected anything relevant space-time wise, and yelled, "Hit it!"

At once the Falcon's hyper light engines cut in warping the limited area inside her drive field and taking her, in one gut-wrenching, wonderful surge, effectively out of existence.

"Now, suppose we take a look at that cargo," Solo suggested.

"Sure, why not," Ben replied. "You think maybe I'm smuggling something, Captain Solo?" He was amused,

"Let's just say I'm curious to find out why I almost got my tapes wiped for good because I'm hauling a biker to a race."

Solo led the way to forward-3, leaving Chewie to doctor the depleted shield mechanism. Since they didn't actually exist at this point with relation to space normal, little vighance was required during jump. Inside a ship's drive field, hyper space was perhaps the safest place that a person could (not) be.

Han waited patiently while Ben unsealed the crate, noting the man's equitable good humor appeared to extend even to falling under suspicion of law breaking and also that he was unruffled by the recent shoot out over Weylan's Reef with a philosophical sort of competence that Han, not always noted for his cool temper, admired.

When Ben stood back, the seal seams gave way and the crate's sides swung out and dropped with a rush. Han caught his breath. Mounted in suspensor stasis was a Darga-Phelan 800 Magnum Sand Cat and baddest looking Blackline Deuce he had ever had the pleasure to see.

Ben grinned with pride, catching Solo's expression. "Nice, aren't they?"

Solo thought his mouth was going to water. He could not have been more impressed if the crate had contained a pair of Estarian senso-stim dancers. "Which one is your main machine?"

"It depends on the course. The Deuce has got a fraction more go, but the Cat has the edge in the turns. You know," he continued, "I don't like going into the Universals without a mechanic."

"I know roto-crossers," Han heard himself saying, mesmerized by the sleek machines.

"How about if I boost your fee a thousand and you crew for me -- just for this one run, of course. Give them a good check-out before the race."

Han stepped back, drawing himself away from the spell of the bikes, hands on hips. "No, sorry. I run a starship now. I don't crew for anyone," he said, though pleasantly, for he did not want any hard feelings between himself and this man.

"Captain Solo," Adrick said engagingly, "would you consider the job if I threw in your choice of the bikes and a shot at the Universals?"

Solo felt his resolve crumble. To hell with it, he thought, a youthful exuberance possessing him. He gave Ben an elaborately appraising look. "Make it the Deuce," he said.

Without subterfuge the Falcon breached the atmosphere of Ganna II and received landing clearance, an unassuming freight hauler and her law abiding crew.

"If they were after you or your bikes," Han was saying, setting the Falcon down in a shallow docking bay, "and they weren't some poor girl's vengeful brothers or something, then we can probably count on seeing them again. They must have known you were headed for Ganna II. Besides you left messages for your mechanic."

"Yeah, Bari ... I wonder where he got to?"

"And," Han said, "odds are there's more than two. Somehow there always is," he added, half to himself. The Falcon settled with a sigh onto her landing gear.

"But I can't even guess what they want with me," Ben sounded puzzled but not overly concerned. "They're good bikes, sure, but that was quite a bit of effort to land a couple of sets of wheels. A reasonably competent smash and grab man could get enough to buy them in a few weeks. And so far as I know I haven't stepped on anyone's toes that hard lately."

"You'd be surprised what upsets some people," Han said.

He had spent most of the jump time back with the machines, going over their responses. The Falcon resounded with the throaty roar of induction roto-drive engines until Chewie had menaced Solo with his bowcaster. Han assumed his partner was indulging in hyperbole, nevertheless, he piloted the Cat back to the deck on its roto-thrust from near the top of the compartment where he'd been checking amplification curves, and contented himself with a quieter brand of tinkering.

Ben had appropriated the acceleration couch and slept most of the way.

Modrell was a wide-open city that Han favored over the controlled, artificial sterility of most of the metro areas under the aegis of the Associated Regent's Combine, an off-shoot of the vast Corporate Sector. It was a frontier town on a planet at the fringes of the ARC Authority where local powers called most of the shots, making it chancy, but an interesting place to live. It was an ideal spot for the annual combination of noise, hilarity, violence and general mayhem of the Universals.

From the spaceport to the Race Masters office was a short hike. Ben and Han walked abreast getting their share of respectful looks, but perhaps fewer than they might have drawn on a more civilized world, for the streets seemed to be filled with gun-men and rakishly tricked out bikers of all descriptions.

"Solo! Hey, Solo!" Han heard a familiar voice hail him from behind. He turned, his face breaking into that intense smile that only lighted up for certain people. Trella Noon was one of them.

Six feet tall and built like a computer model programmed for perfection, she was wearing a hot pink two-piece skimp-suit that left something, but not much, to the imagination.

Her wealth of red-gold hair floated in all directions as she elbowed her way past slower pedestrians to fling herself into Han's waiting arms with a squeal of pure delight. She was quite an armful.

"Solo, you gorgeous hunk!" She gave him a kiss that could have vaporized a lesser man, then backed off, grinning happily.

Han shook his head in wonder, as he always did when confronting the phenomenon of Trella Noon. "You never could resist me, could you?" he asked. They were eye to eye.

"Resist you? Solo, one day I'm gonna eat you alive!" Han didn't doubt it for a minute. "Hey," she lowered her voice, glancing at Ben, "who's your friend?"

The biker was waiting patiently to one side, his customary good-natured look heightened by amusement and obvious appreciation. Solo kept a semi-proprietary arm around Trella's waist as he made introductions. "Trella, Ben Adrick; Ben, Trella Noon. Ben and I are competing in the Universals."

"You, Han? I thought that hot starship was your way of sublimating."

"I roto-cross," he said defensively.

"I'll be watching for you both. I'm here for the races."

"Trella," Han said, struck by a good thought, "we're stopping at the Race Masters office then picking Chewie up at the terminal. Why not come along with us and we'll spend some credits?"

Looking them over attentively, she said, "Two good looking trackers and a Wookiee in the bargain? Best offer I've had all day." She gathered one on each arm and the trio proceeded up the sidewalk, while the respectful stares directed their way multiplied by a factor of three.

A bright and glorious morning whipped past the two bikers. There was a pulsing, vital pleasure to be found in hurling the roaring machines over the unexpected terrain, their powerful roto-drives alternately churning up the dirt and lifting and dropping over natural obstacles with an exhilarating surge that tugged at the pit of the stomach. That they were enjoying themselves was obvious.

Ben was highly skilled, a champion rider who maneuvered his flashy Sand Cat with consummate style and control. Han was somewhat rusty, but a natural athlete and a capable biker. Not so stylish as the older man nor as smoothly competent, he nevertheless found he could keep up with him, although he suspected Ben was holding back somewhat.

When they had covered perhaps 25 kilometers of Ganna's wasteland they drew to a sand slinging halt. Ben slouched on the low saddle, legs spread wide and feet planted firmly on the earth. He stripped off the helmet and shook out his luxuriant mane, laughing up at the sky. Solo thought he had seldom seen a man more in his element.

"Nice ride, Han," he said, "You handle that Deuce like a pro."

"It's one sensational machine, Ben," Han replied appreciatively. Not known for his modesty, he still had to give the magnificent bike a good deal of credit. They had eased onto a first-name basis during the camaraderie of the previous evening which had covered several hours of unrestrained hilarity.

"Your Trella is one sensational lady," Ben changed the subject.

"UM. She's entertaining," Han said breezily. "And I don't know about 'mine'--she was giving you all the attention."

"Oh, I'm a novelty."

"Not around here, not during the Universals."

Ben shrugged. "I think she's got enough to go around."

Han had to agree. Who, after all, could be possessive of a natural wonder like Trella? At this very moment, Han knew, the statuesque blonde was cruising somewhere in Modrall botanical park with his First Mate, who enjoyed escorting a beautiful female as much as the next male.

They were preparing to fire up their bikes for another few kilometers of trial run when a pair of shadows crossed overhead and Han's internal alarms went off like klaxons. With good reason.

The shadows resolved into a big Overland Argosey, a richly-appointed merchant ship, accompanied by a smaller, but heavily-armed, escort which settled to a landing only a few meters away, throwing sand, small rocks and pieces of scant vegetation at them in the backwash of their retro thrusters.

Ducking, turning away from the barrage, Han fumbled with the restraining strap of his blaster and pulled it clear of the holster only to hear an amplified voice from the Argosey command, "No weapons. You're covered. And no tricks! We've got some friends of yours aboard." Han heard Chewie's outraged bellow and Trella's very distinct expletive. Han mouthed a few of his own and looked helplessly at Ben. "I think they got us out gunned."

"Nothing to do but wait and see," Ben said.

The Argosey's hatch slid up revealing an armed figure in paramilitary dress. He looked like a lieutenant in some mogul's private army. Gesturing with the lase-rifle he directed Solo to drop his sidearm. Ben opened his leather jacket exposing an unarmed torso. When he was satisfied that the two were rendered harmless, the lieutenant stood aside and a grossly corpulent man thrust himself through the entrance and down the ramp. The mogul, thought Han.

"Good day, gentlemen," the fat man sang. "Lovely day for a ride. I picked up two passengers already in the botanical park and now you two will join me and we'll go for another little jaunt--and if you think I'm bluffing, you're very wrong, En Morgan Ben Adrick!"

Solo started at that and swung around to face Ben, forgetting for a moment the weaponry trained on him. "En Morgon Ben Adrick? You're the heir to the throne of Yaniwess? You?"

"My past is like a dog on the trail of my present," Ben quoted. Turning to the fat man he said, "We're of necessity at your service."

Subdued, Han allowed himself to be frisked then herded aboard the Argosey along with Ben. They could see their bikes being stored in an aft compartment of the big ship as they were thrust into a forward compartment. There they found Chewie, the delectable Trella and a surprise; Slouching in a corner looking unhappy was the missing mechanic, Bari.

No one had much to say during the rest of the trip. Chewie and Han exchanged a few words and Han was appraised of the manner in which he and Trella had been ambushed. Trella stretched her incredible legs out in front of her, critically eyeing the toes of her intricate sandals. "They worked up my shoes, Han," she said sadly. Ben sat quietly, composed, and watched the jittery mechanic.

Weasly and short, Bari was an unattractive young man with thinning hair and a scraggly beard which appeared to camouflage a receding chin. Han wondered how Ben could tolerate his company. Catching at his thoughts Ben turned to him with a mirthless smile. "He's good with his hands."

It was a while before they felt the vehicle set down. Again the taciturn lieutenant herded them at the point of his weapon, this time across a strip of barren sand and into what looked like an abandoned nerf herder's rendering barn. Not long enough abandoned Han thought, his nose wrinkling. There they were bidden to seats on the floor while the fat man reposed before them in a suspensor chair brought from the Argosey. Outside, several techs were busily scanning both the roto-cross bikes.

"Now," the mogul began. "You may not know who I am . . ."

"An idiot who hires ham-handed help," Trella alliterated. "Look what your clowns did to my shoes."

"shut up, my dear," the mogul said amiably. Han gave Trella a dig in the ribs. "As I was saying. I am Garfut Kune. I head an interstellar combine of gem dealers. Not long ago one of my agents on Jerook was relieved of a significant number of uncut gemstones ...Ah, En Morgan Ben, you recognize the name Jerook, do you?"

"Of course! I raced on Jerook less than a standard month ago, and I never heard of you or your damn gemstones."

Kune smiled nastily. "Of course, my dear Prince."

"Prince? He said Prince?" Trella whispered excitedly to Han.

"He's heir to the throne of Yaniwess," Han said out of the side of his mouth. Wide-eyed, Trella subsided. She leaned against the Wookiee, "A Prince, Chewie, what do you know..."

But Kune was saying, "I happen to know the gemstones left with you, Captain Solo." He snapped, "You had in your possession an uncut gemstone!"

"Uh, yeah. but I got it ... " he stopped. What was he going to say? I got it for running porno for Roodelits?

"You see," Kune said, satisfied that he'd caught the smuggler in a gaffe.

"But," Han sputtered, "I didn't get it from him."

"Oh of course not," Kune said sarcastically. "Now listen to me, you two-bit hustlers," he continued, all pretense of courtesy gone.

"I resent that," said Trella.

"And shut the lady up before we mess up something more than her pretty footgear! Now, you will tell me the whereabouts of the rest of the gemstones or I fry you one by one, starting with her. You've got a couple of hours to think it over, Rik!" He beckoned to a paramilitary and directed him to tie the captives' hands. When he had done so, four distinctly unhappy humans and a disgruntled Wookiee were left in the uncomfortable and odiferous barn while a chilly Ganna twilight lowered, not only the general dark, but their spirits as well.

They snuggled closer together for warmth, Ben and Han being particularly solicitous of Trella's comfort, and even the weasly Bari insinuated himself next to Chewie's hairy bulk.

"Solo, why is it that these things always happen wherever you are?" Trella asked.

"Me? It's our royal friend here who's got the heat on his case, Sweetheart!" Han was indignant.

"Yeah, but somehow he managed to find you, didn't he?"

"Tell me." Ben interjected, "Just how long have you two known each other?"

"Ah, now that's a story," Trella said, and even in the darkness they could tell she was smiling. She settled back against Han's chest, and the others moved closer to listen.

"Once upon a time when I was much younger and much prettier ..."

"Impossible," Ben said gallantly.

"I was also much more innocent and I entered a beauty contest on Sampet. The Promenade of Celestial Virgins, it was, and I was qualified.

"Well, our dashing Captain Solo just happened to be an Sampet doing something nefarious and we ran into each other. Se Celestial Virgins were chaperoned, but I always have disliked confinement. Anyway, when he found out I was a contestant in the pageant, he really raised the roof. 'How could I be so stupid? Was I born yesterday?' and on and on." She chuckled at the memory.

"It seems as though the winner, THE Celestial Virgin, was given the honor of being sacrificed to the planetary god. Quaint, huh?" Han, his back against the wall, was grinning up into the dark, remembering.

"So," Trella went on, "Han offered to get me off-planet before the contest, but like the fun-loving gal I am, I wanted to stay and see it through. Besides, I'd looked over the competition pretty well and knew I didn't stand a chance of winning -- those local Sampet fems surely appealed to their horny old god more than an outsized alien, right? Wrong!

"We were all tarted out in the most outlandish costumes you ever saw -- feathers, straps, silks and jewels enough to satisfy the Fetish of the Month Club for a standard year --and taking a final promenade along a suspended ramp when the official in charge announce the winner. Trella Noon of Sashet!"

"You can bet I was surprised, and scared! I was standing there about ten meters off the floor in this preposterous get-up suddenly realizing that their horny old god had developed a taste for ME, and thinking, 'Han, I changed my mind!' when I heard this Wookiee holler something. A bowcaster shot came over the ramp and landed near me.

Everyone started screaming and milling around up there and we must have looked like a covey of perverted voola-quail. But I had the presence of mind to take a took atthe quarrel. There was this little package attached to it, see. Chewie had delivered me a miniature suspensor module, and I activated it just as the High Priests came a-running. They had these ridiculously dedicated expressions on and I swear they would have wasted me then and there. But the suspensor cut in and I jumped clear of the ramp right under their noses.

"The whole place had gone crazy by this time. Their Celestial Virgin was airborne, the priests were hollering their heads off, and Han was guiding me down with a hand-tractor. About the time he caught me, the security guards had broken up the party and were throwing their weight around, so Chewie tucked me under his arm. and we split out the side door."

Trella's voice softened then, the glorious memories flooding back in a moment of untempered pleasure. "I had won the Promenade of Celestial Virgins, you see, but by that time I didn't qualify any longer."

Chewie had listened with the rest, amused at the reminiscence. Now he yeoped something to Solo. "You're right there, partner," Han sighed. "It's a great story but it isn't getting us any nearer a solution to the present problem. So, Ben, why not tell us what the Crown Prince of Yaniwess is doing roto-crossing out in the ARC and boosting gem-stones?"

"As to the first part, the Crown Prince of Yaniwess is pretty much persona non grata around the old ancestral palace. My father offered to pay me to stay away, but I preferred the ups and downs of making my own living. Actually, En Morgan is only a nominal dignity. Kune just used it to try to impress me with his information-gathering abilities. The title passed to my kid brother when I'd amply demonstrated a ... well, rather unconventional disregard for the formalities of court life."

Years ago Solo had heard a story about a gala reception on Yaniwess. Dignitaries from all other the ARC had gathered to witness and investiture of the King's eldest son as Prince of the Greater Provinces. But he had apparently had other ideas.

Appearing at the head of the staircase in his magnificent royal robe of investiture, he had waited until all eyes were on him, then the Crown Prince of Yaniwess had thrown back his robe with a flourish and flashed the thunderstruck Lords and Ladies of a hundred worlds. He had dropped out of sight shortly thereafter.

"And when a pretty hot roto-crosser showed up several systems away," Ben continued, "no one thought to connect the two. Until now. But as far as gemstones ... I don't know. How about you, Bari?" he added with an edge to his pleasant voice that Solo hadn't heard before.

Bari hadn't spoken at all since they were thrown together earlier that day. Now, he squirmed around next to Chewie, cleared his throat a few times and said, "Oh, you may as well know--you know already, don't you, Ben? I took the gemstones. But I didn't actually steal them," he said hastily. "One of Kune's own people filched them. All I did was agree to transport them to a buyer on Ganna II, but then the transport had a drive

malfunxion and Kune caught up with us. Well, he caught up with me, you'd gone off with Solo and the Wookiee," he sounded miffed.

"Then why didn't Kune just take the stones and a good piece of your hide? Why'd he come after us?" Ben wanted to know.

Bari didn't sound too happy. "I didn't have the stones. You did."

"Where? They're obviously not in the bikes. They went over those with a scanner, and they frisked us when they picked us up. That's when they found Han's gemstone."

"Uh, Ben," Bari lowered his voice to a whisper, "They're in your 'braces."

There was a moment of silence while everyone thought of the black plastex forearm guards Ben always wore. Somewhere within their insulated layers of shock absorbing mat lurked a fortune. Ben said softly, "Well, I'll be damned."

"It's a good thing they didn't scan us," Han ventured.

"I don't know," Trella said thoughtfully, "maybe if they'd found them they'd have let us go... No, I don't suppose they would have, would they?"

"Bet on it. We'd be feeding the badlands banshees right now. As it is, it's only a matter of time unless we can think of something."

Trella shifted restlessly. "It reeks of nerf in here," she complained.

"What's a nerf?" Bari asked.

"You don't want to know," Han told him, but the mention of nerf set him on a vectorfull of intriguing possibilities. "Unless I'm way off, this place is a nerf rendering facility and that means nerf oil. Spread out, look for containers, anything full of something that stinks worse than the rest of the place."

"And if we do find some, then what?" Ben wanted to know.

"Well, first of all we lubricate these manacles off..."

The lone soldier mounting guard outside the nerf barn beard the girl calling. "Hey, come here whoever you are. We've got to talk before Kune comes back!" Certain there was a trick awaiting him, he nevertheless was

bored and, armed with a lase-rifle, felt himself quite capable of dealing with whatever little plan his bosses motley captives had cooked up. He opened the door and shone his flash into the musty dark.

Against the far wall they huddled together miserably, the Wookiee, that terrific girl, (he could hardly take his eyes off her) and the other men--they were all there. He stepped into the barn. They were almost all there.

Han caught the rifle barrel with a hard, underhand smash that sent it up discharging harmlessly into the roof, grasped it with both hands on the recoil and put the stock into the guard's face with bone shattering force. Coming up quick Ben grabbed the fallen flash and killed the light. "That was slick," he said.

"Uh-huh. So far so good. Bring the others and the barrel," Han muttered, moving cautiously out of the barn. He had no idea if his wildly improbable scheme would work, but the way he saw it, the odds were always better on your feet and moving.

Operating that way, Han covered his companions as they rolled a large barrel of nerf oil out onto the sand. The night was chill and star lit and very quiet. They tried to match that quiet as, led by Chewie, they tipped the barrel and began to slash the slimy, evil-smelling stuff around the entrances to the Argosey and her escort, taking special pains with the extended ramps. Soon, great pools of nerf oil lay before each craft sullenly reflecting the starlight on their viscous surfaces.

Bringing the lase-rifle to bear on the escort gunboat, Han whispered. "Okay, beautiful, let 'er rip!" and Trella let out an ear-piercing shriek that set the desert dogs howling for miles.

Both ships immediately began to discharge armed soldiers who hit the ramps and at once became a sliding, slipping, skidding, crashing tangle. Han had a moment to wonder how many tailbones had been fractured in the initial charge. "It looks like Amateur Day at the ice rink," he shouted, catching a loose lase-rifle and tossing it to Ben.

Chewie howled happily, collaring a pair of soldiers who had slid his way, and relieving them of their weapons after snapping their heads together with a satisfying crack. Even Bari had entered into the exuberant spirit of the moment and appropriated a blaster.

Placing their shots as well as they could in the dark, the small but resourceful band began to move toward the gunboat, hoping that, where the nerf oil was concerned, fore warned was forearmed.

The gunboat had emptied her crew first, and those who were still ambulatory were trying to work their way out of the treacherous oil while firing randomly in the dark. One shot, delivered by a soldier still very unsteady on his feet, splashed into and ignited the volatile nerf oil. With a terrible roar of combustion, a wall of flame exploded between them and the escort.

"The Argosey!" Han yelled as loud as he could. In the hot, wavering light they could see the bulk of Gorfut Kune poised at the hatchway of the larger ship.

Firing on the run, Ben took him high on one arm and Kune staggered sideways, slipped and tumbled to the ground. Ben dropped on one knee avoiding a hail of supporting fire from the hatch and sent a lethal barrage back, taking out several soldiers and a bit of control circuitry into the bargain.

"Get moving!" Solo shouted furiously, urging the others on quickly toward the big boat as he and Chewie covered the retreat, lase-guns cutting powerful slices of energy through the red-hot billowing shadows.

Bari charged up the slick ramp, losing then regaining his footing. He reached the open hatch, threw a hand around the jamb and was starting to swing inside when a laser bolt took him in the midsection. With a cry he was torn backward and went sprawling limply at the ramp's foot.

Chewie ducked into a crouch. Still on the move he swiped a giant paw at a downed guard, coming up with a concussion grenade from his utility belt.

"Back off!" Han yelled as Chewie lobbed the canister through the hatchway. There was a flash, followed quickly by a whomp that sent a great burst of debris, some of it human, out the door.

Staggering and slipping gracelessly, they scrambled up the ramp and worked to shot lock the door. "I'm kinda sorry about Bari," Ben grunted, straining at the locking mechanism which his lase-fire had fused.

"It's the breaks," Solo said philosophically, joining him to apply main force on the stubborn lever. "At least he went out kicking." It was a better epitaph than the little mechanic might have expected. Chewie lent a hand. With a jolt the lever dropped and the hatch slammed shut.

Han spun and raced toward the forward control area. "Stay sharp," he threw over his shoulder. "Chewie, come with me."

As they slid into the piloting seats Chewie growled an interrogative. "Sure I can, fuzz-ball! I can fly anything that lifts!" As though to confirm his boast, the big engines fired under Solo's deft manipulations and he spared Chewie a smirk. The Argosey heaved her vast bulk off the ground.

They were taking heavy fire aft and Han noted that the unshielded pleasure yacht's rear bulk heads were in immediate danger of giving way. He cursed.

"We're never going to get anywhere like this. Damn! We're fresh out of firepower and this useless bucket must weigh ... Chewie, we're backing this thing up!"

"Hoorp?"

"You heard me, back her up!"

Han's maneuver was worthy of the ungainly Argosey's limited potential. It utilized her one redeeming virtue, mass, to decisively end the brief attack by the escort ship. He simply sat on her.

"They're getting a little short on head room down there, I think," Han said, watching with interest as the few remaining para militaries and their boss began to scatter out from under the threatening weight.

Han let her down even further until he heard the pleasant sound of the escort's maindrive being permanently disabled. "Now, we go!" He said jubilantly. Chewie joined him in a howl of celebration as the big boat rose majestically and sailed off toward the distant lights of Modrell.

"Trella," Han said, "you look a mess." They were catching their breath in the boat's opulent lounge, all stinking mightily and smearing the elegant appointments with nerf oil. Han was gratefully strapping down his retrieved blaster to his right thigh.

"You should see yourself, Sport!" she shot back. "It'll take more than a sonic shower and one-hour-robo-fresh to make you acceptable company."

"I don't know, Trella," Ben said thoughtfully. "Something about all that oil gives you a certain erotic attraction..."

"That I lacked before. I know." She grinned at him and playfully nudged his knee with a gracefully extended toe. Solo could swear there was a wealth of kinetic communication going on there. He worked on thinking about something else. The Universals started in about eight hours. The bikes were in good shape. But the riders?

The weary dawn that had greeted them hours before had turned into a fine, hot afternoon. A bedraggled foursome, they had filed into Trella's hotel suite and come near to depleting the hot water capacity in an attempt to rid themselves of the nerf oil. Even Chewie. Then Han had commandeered a bed and made the best possible--with perhaps one exception--use of it for a few hours. By the intensified vibrations continuing between Ben and Trella, Han suspected that they had exchanges a few more pleasantries while he slept.

Chewie was itchy. Soaps made for human ablutions disagreed with his skin chemistry, but the others had threatened him with various painful and unpleasant fates unless he showered off.

Now, refreshed and Only faintly redolent of nerf, the companionable group passed through the main raceway gate in a ground car, towing the bikes on a rented cargo lift.

Ben had donned his race gear, and Han had invested in a good but subdued set of leathers and a pair of heavy multi-buckled metal rimmed bikers' boots. Neither had opted for helmets, which were not mandatory, preferring freedom and wide-range visibility. Instead they carried filtered goggles and slung dust baffles at their necks. Ben also wore a wide sweat band to hold back his hair.

Trella looked them over approvingly. "I take back what I said earlier, you both look terrific."

"Right back at you," Solo said, with appreciation for the stunning outfit of shorts and cross over she had chosen for race day. She kissed them both warmly, wished them luck and taking Chewie's arm, headed for the bounce tube that would carry them up to one of the suspended reviewing stands encircling the course.

When they were out of earshot Ben turned to Han and asked directly, "What, exactly, are your priority rights there?"

"Nonexistent," Han admitted with a touch of wistfulness. "Trella's like the Oracle of Keth--everyone's welcome to come and ask questions, but she decides who to answer."

The Universals was an open course event, one of only a few remaining in the path of an inexorable tide of civilization and its accompanying bureaucratic big brotherhood which sought to protect people from

themselves. Anyone--or thing--could enter and a sizeable number did. Only their machines were marginally standardized, all being of the basic roto-cross design: saddle, dual wheels, roto-thrust lifters and the slotted forearm steering bars that terminated in torque-responsive hand grips.

The course itself was a rough circle, 12 kilometer around, which took in some of the worst of Ganna II's badlands. It's most spectacular feature was the DeadDrop, a 1,000 foot canyon that demanded much from a rider.

The race began, appropriately enough, with a gunshot.

Instantly the low rumble of idling machines swelled to a monstrous roar that blew bystanders back and shattered glass a mile away in Modrell. The whole field surged forward, lead bikers vying for the critical hole shot.

Ahead of him, Han saw Ben juke a couple of Maxi-Standards and gun his big Cat at a daring angle for the first tight turn, only to be cut off at the last second by a flashy Synchro-Dyn.

Han was not competitive by nature. Those things which he chose to do, he did well. A few of them, better than anyone--and although he enjoyed the challenge of gaming, the necessity of winning this contest did not possess him. Rather he was simply enjoying the bone-shaking workout of his muscles and the exhilaration of speed and power, throwing the more-than-willing Blackline Deuce over the tortuous terrain.

The pack spread out, approaching the halfway point and their first shot at the DeadDrop. Han had taken a quick course in negotiating it from Ben who had run it several times before, but he was still not prepared for the awesome obstacle.

The course led down a narrow rocky chute, suitable for dicing and also for building momentum which was critical, for at the conclusion of, sweeping turn the chute suddenly opened wide into space--a great gap across which the bikers were obliged to lift, turning hard left and down at the mid point, and aiming for another narrow chute mouth cut into the lower cliff face opposite.

Trying hard to recall everything Ben had told him, Han banked off the final curve and shot out over the dizzying drop. He cut in full-lift with his right hand and leaned into the steering bars to bring the bike around. Judiciously eliminating some of the lift torque, he felt the bike settle and, satisfied that she was responding within tolerance, aimed for the slot just as a silver Defiant blew by him dangerously close, its anonymously helmeted rider out for the money ... or for blood. Han braked

instinctively to avoid a collision at the narrow chute opening, heard the roto-drive cut out briefly and felt an ominous drop. Swearing furiously, he gunned the drive and lift simultaneously and drew up and around in a tight circle, took another shot, and plunged into the chute after the Defiant.

This chute emptied out over a steep lip of rock and gave onto a wide, vacant prospect, a speed section. Here Han took maximum advantage of the Deuce's capabilities and pushed her howling engine to its limits, hot in the wake of the speeding Defiant. To himself Han thought Ben's assessment of the Deuce as having a fraction more go was a vast understatement.

Soon he was drawing close to the Defiant, and with a surprise he recognized the familiar Sand Cat and the flying silver-flecked hair of the rider not far beyond. Then several things happened at once. Han saw the Defiant's rider aim something at Ben, and Ben, unaware of the sneak attack, swerved right to avoid some desert growth. A red laser bolt whistled into the clump of dry bushes and they blazed briefly.

With a shock Solo realized that they had not left all of the ugly Corfut Kune's troopers stranded in the desert and swiftly on the heels of that came the realization there would be no more threats, no more finessing to locate the gemstones.

This was revenge, pure and simple. They were out to waste Ben Adrick on the Universal race course, and, for all Han Solo knew, every other biker out there was one of Kune's men.

Although the comforting presence of his blaster was not weighting his right hip, Han disliked traveling light. He slipped a hand under the edge of his snug racing jerkin and drew out a wrist-slip phase beamer. Swinging in directly behind the Defiant he shot out her rear wheel plastrex and she wobbled, skipped and twisted at full torque into a pile of red stone, her rider traveling considerably further. Then Han dialed the juice and strove to catch up with the flying Cat.

They were gearing down for a series of chicanes when Han came abreast of Ben's machine. Pulling the dust baffle aside, he yelled one word "Kune!" and mimicked a blaster shot. The older man frowned, pulled his own baffle aside and shouted back an obscene suggestion as to what Kune could do with himself that made Han laugh in spite of the danger. He wondered briefly if Ben would consider dropping out of the race and making himself scarce, but decided that anyone who made his living roto-crossing would not be daunted by some extra obstacles on the course.

As Ben was unarmed, Han figured the best idea was to stick as close to him as possible and phase beam anyone who made an aggressive move over and above the normal necessities of a violent sport. To this end he rode shotgun for several laps, which obliged him to keep up with a very fast and classy biker, consequently improving his roto-cross skills.

If he had counted and identified the suspicious riders correctly, there appeared to be four of Kune's men on the course, five if you counted the Defiant rider with the broken neck.

On the third lap, they removed from action two more who had stalled at the top of a rise and turned back to ambush their quarry. Signaling to Ben, Solo cut in front of him as their bikes glowed for the climb, then he gunned the Deuce hard and came up over the hill hanging low on the side of his machine and shooting around the front wheel at the first of the ambushers. Ben imitated Solo's move but at the last moment he slewed his Cat around, hit the rear lifter and blew the second man out of the saddle with a super-heated blast of roto-drive exhaust.

There was no question of stopping to assess the damage they were doing. It was still a bike race, although the attrition rate was alarming, and not a quarter of the roto-crossers who had started were still on the course.

As they hit the Dead Drop for the sixth time the remaining two killers took their best shot.

Ben, slightly in the lead, banked off the final curve and sailed out over the gorge, Han right on his tail. Just then a laser-bolt sizzled past Han's ear and took out a chunk of canyon wall. Looking back he saw the two gunmen hurtling down the chute.

Knowing he could never make the jump and defend Ben's back at the same time, he circled rapidly in the air and fired at the closer of the two, who were now at the chute mouth. His aim was spoiled by a violent updraft, but it was good enough to nick the bike's front lifter. Deprived of sufficient lift torque, the machine shot out of the gap and, when her forward momentum was exhausted, began to arc downward. Solo wheeled again, sparing no thought for the would-be assassin, and caught up with Ben at the turning point.

Suddenly he felt a terrific jolt slam into the Deuce. There was no doubt at all that the final gunman had at last connected. The roto-drive cut out for good, and Han knew with dreadful certainty that he was a dead man.

The bike began to drop. With a pained expression he yelled up, "So long, dust buster!"

The canyon walls seemed to race past him in a maddeningly speedy upward rush. It became dark and cold. He thought of a girl he'd known on Treel's Lode, and wished he were there.

Suddenly, with an ear-splitting roar, a Darga-Phelan 800 Magnum Sand Cat was beside him and a huge grin flashed out from behind Ben's wind-whipped mustache. "Need a lift?" he hollered.

Catching the man's extended arm, Solo pulled himself off the doomed Deuce and swung a leg over the Cat's saddle. But before he could get a purchase on the machine the pursuing gunman loosed another near miss that rocked the Cat, and Han found himself dangling out over nothingness, the only thing between him and oblivion his desperate grip on Ben's gem-stuffed vambrace.

But he was mad.

Surging up through the despair and death-fear came a great burst of pure hatred and fury. Han aimed the phase beamer at the rapidly closing gunman and didn't let up on the 'fire' until the depleted weapon began to tingle in his palm. Then he watched what was left of the last of the assassins drift in flaming wreckage down onto the canyon floor.

Somehow he managed, with Ben's help, to scramble aboard the Cat's crowded saddle and hang on while the big bike, engine straining under her double load, lifted out of the shadows and split into the sunshine. Han thought it was like breaking the surface of a deep, deadly river.

"You blew your chance to take the Universals to save my life. That's something to remember," Han said, uncomfortable with gratitude but recognizing its importance.

"And you almost blew your chance to keep on living to save my race. Which one of us is the real hero? I think I owe you one, Junior." They were gathered at the foot of the Falcon's ramp, reluctant now to say good-bye.

"So what are you going to do now?"

"Well," Ben said, "I've been thinking of paying the old homestead on Yaniwess a visit. I'm getting too old for this sort of crazy life. His Royal Majesty my old man is over 80 standard, and my kid brother is dumber

than I am. Last I heard he had five star yachts and as many wives. No one needs more than one of each." He had a proprietary arm about Trella's narrow waist. "Right?"

"Right," she agreed. Han had not seen that look on Trella since the Promenade of Celestial Virgins.

"I'm going home, Han," he said simply. "and there'll always be an empty docking bay for you there."

"Clear skies to you both," said Han.

"Oh, one more thing. I bequeath my racing gear to you, including the 'braces. Chewie has them stowed away on board." Solo didn't know what to say. "Forget it! I said I'd boost your fee if you crewed for me. So long. Clear skies." They turned and left the docking bay. Trella waved once and they were gone.

Han was seldom troubled with double-mindedness but now he was feeling the pull of some conflicting emotions. His pleasure at possessing the gemstones was dampered considerably by the loss of Trella. "Chewie," he said after a minute. "You ever bear of Xthax's Second Law of Econo-Dynamics? No? It says that the hotter they are the quicker they flow towards money."

Chewie allowed as how this sounded reasonable.

"Well, partner," Han finished, folding his arms, leaning against the ramp strut and staring at the empty docking bay entrance, "it just went down the old entropic drain."

End

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