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I Do Care What You Smell

by [Alison Glover](#)

Haven space-station, Wonora system, on the borders of the Ursori Matriarchy:

Leia Organa took care not to show it, but she was a little nervous as she watched the *Millennium Falcon* land. At least Han Solo wasn't indulging in any unnecessarily fancy flying; the *Falcon* set down neatly and professionally in the vast hangar.

It wasn't that she didn't trust Han. But so often there seemed to be a field of increased entropy surrounding him. Or some analogue of a gravity well that attracted not matter, but trouble. The fact that Luke and Chewbacca had both promised solemnly to keep an eye on him this trip wasn't particularly consoling. Their track-records with trouble were nearly as bad as Han's....

This station would make such a difference to the Alliance. She couldn't afford to let anything stall the so-far successful negotiations with the Ursori. But they'd been insistent that, if they were to travel to meet the Alliance High Command, their representatives would only do so as private citizens on a civilian ship, so that in the unfortunate event of an encounter with the Imperials, their government could convincingly deny any association with the Rebellion.

And the fleetest, best-armed civilian ship available was the *Falcon*.

Beside Leia, General Madine was, as always, the epitome of the smartly turned-out officer. Commander Gairich, one of the Alliance's engineers, was still talking excitedly with her Ursori counterpart. Both were grinning hugely, pointing in turn at details of the structure surrounding them. Some enthusiasms transcended species differences, a fact which had made the negotiations easier. The Ursori, a

ursine, Wookiee-like species, had obviously been flattered by Gairich's admiration of their station.

The other Ursori ambassador was a very high level priestess, which Leia took as a positive sign of how seriously they were interested in helping the Alliance. The priestess was standing calmly but expectantly as the *Falcon's* ramp lowered. Balanced on her shoulder was a felipillar, a long, six-legged feline with dark green fur. Both the Ursori and the animal had an air of listening to something that Leia couldn't hear. Two sets of pointed ears were swivelled towards the ship and two sets of dark eyes were focussed on its main hatch. Leia suppressed a smile at how similar were the attitudes of priestess and pet.

Attitudes that were interesting, since Luke was on-board the *Falcon*. The Ursori, so Leia had discovered, believed felipillars to be Force-sensitive. Traditionally the animals had been regarded as a combination of good luck charm and oracle. Nowadays, she'd been told, it was still common for members of the priest caste to keep them as pets.

Leia was a little surprised that it was Chewbacca who appeared first in the *Falcon's* airlock. The Wookiee was looking very impressive, his fur groomed and shining and his bandolier beautifully polished.

Chewie bowed deeply, which revealed Han and Luke standing behind him. Leia felt, rather than saw, Madine tense.

Oh.

There was, Leia supposed, some perfectly reasonable explanation why Captain Solo was wearing his jacket but not his shirt and why he was sporting gleaming polished boots but extremely worn and patched trousers. She just couldn't immediately think of what that explanation might be. She had never seen Han wear trousers other than his uniform ones with the Corellian bloodstripe. Typical of him to choose an occasion like this to wear a garment that should have been demoted to cleaning rag years ago.

His loss of his shirt was, she fervently hoped, temporary. That open jacket was not at all good for her concentration.

Luke was somewhat oddly dressed, too, in his Alliance uniform jacket and the light trousers he'd brought from Tatooine. At least his jacket was partly done up. He had something blue and furry draped over his shoulders, though, which made no sense at all until it moved and Leia realised that it was another felipillar.

Leia hadn't thought that Commander Gairich was capable of smiling any more broadly than she had been at the Ursori's feats of engineering, but the older woman did.

The Ursori engineer leaned down and murmured in Gairich's ear, "How cute." To whom she was referring, Leia wasn't sure, but she suspected it wasn't the felipillar.

"Aren't they," Gairich whispered back.

Fortunately, the High Priestess didn't seem to have noticed anything unusual, but then Ursori, like Wookies, wore nothing but weapons' harnesses. She glided towards the *Falcon*, exuding graciousness.

"Thank you, Captain," she said, bowing to Chewie, "for putting your ship at our disposal."

Chewie was clearly enjoying that misunderstanding and for once Han wasn't rushing to correct it. Instead, Han said, "I understand you want to get underway immediately. If so, I'll get back to the cockpit."

"Thank you, crewman," intoned Chewie, his face straight but the rest of him radiating amusement.

Leia managed not to sigh with relief when Han disappeared inside the *Falcon*. Now that her eyes were no longer glued to that tantalising patch of bare chest and stomach, she blinked, searching for the scattered remnants of her concentration. Luke, she realised, was watching her. He grinned – at what, Leia wasn't entirely sure.

The priestess' felipillar leapt from her shoulder to the deck. Luke knelt down and the other one swarmed down his arm. It pattered towards its fellow, which was scuttling up the ramp. The two felines rubbed faces and chirruped happily at each other.

The priestess stopped when she reached Luke, who stood up slowly and looked up at her. She was silent for a moment, studying him intently. "Greetings, young Jedi."

"I'm not a Jedi. Not yet, anyway."

"You will be." The priestess smiled, seemingly unfazed that Luke had addressed her so informally. "We should talk, later, you and I."

Luke was still staring up at her. "I'd like that."

The priestess moved on, remarking to Chewie, "Your ship smells most pleasant, Captain."

Smell was, Leia knew, much more important to Wookies and the Ursori than to humans, but she was still surprised by that remark. Until she climbed the ramp herself, that was, and walked into a wall of scent exuding from the *Falcon*. It was pleasant smell, evoking memories of spring woodlands, but unexpected. Maybe Chewie had known the Ursori would like it.

She waited for Madine, Gairich and the Ursori engineer to board. Madine was still - somehow - keeping a perfectly neutral expression. Gairich called a cheerful, "Hi, lad!" to Luke. When she got close to him she added, grinning, "What happened to you guys? Don't tell me you and Han were gambling and literally lost your shirts?"

"No." Luke grinned again and glanced at Leia. "In fact, I just won a bet. Our other clothes just aren't dry."

"Right," said Gairich, obviously not totally convinced. "You can tell me the rest later."

Luke smiled at Leia. "Hi. It's good to see you."

She tried for a stern expression, but it was impossible to even pretend to be annoyed with him when he smiled like that. "Don't tell me – the *Falcon's* antiquated laundry systems mangled the rest of your clothes."

"No, they really are just not dry yet." Luke gazed at her, all blue-eyed innocence. Then he relented. "Okay, okay. We had a minor problem en route. One you all ought to know about. We'll explain when we get underway."

"You'd better."

Yagoona, Outer Rim sector, five hours earlier:

"Leave that crate alone!"

"Open it, kid."

Luke Skywalker brushed his sodden hair out of his eyes. He leaned on the crowbar with which he'd been about to open the container in question, trying not to grin too broadly at the spectacle of a soggy and sweaty Han Solo arguing with a four-foot toad.

Most life here on Yagoona was amphibious. The planet was unusual in having several sentient species of varying intelligence which co-existed in a complicated

hierarchy. From what Han had said, the toad-like Birrong carried out many of the roles performed by droids on more mechanised worlds.

This Birrong was insisting, "Wait for Kareela."

Han looked like he was trying to pin the amphibian with a determined glare, a tactic which would have worked better if it were not leaping up and down on the spot, apparently to make up for the difference between its height and Han's. Having nearly got a faceful of it on the last leap, Han took a step backwards.

"Kareela's a busy lady," he said, sounding more reasonable than Luke suspected he felt. "It would be more efficient if we check that our cargo's all present and correct now. Then when she gets here we can simply pay her and leave."

The Birrong blinked, as if surprised at that suggestion. Efficiency, Luke was gathering, was not a highly-rated concept on Yagoona. It also wasn't one that always concerned Han overmuch - something else for Luke to grin about. Han's desire to get off Yagoona as soon as possible was, Luke reckoned, not merely due to its unpleasantly hot and humid climate. Leia had been most insistent that the *Falcon* be on-time to rendezvous with her and the Ursori delegation. Although the Ursori had so far declined to join the Alliance, they did provide invaluable resources – and apparently considered punctuality a virtue.

Han took another step backwards, this time to avoid a dragon-fly with a two-foot wing-span that was flitting towards him and the Birrong. In deference to the heat he had removed his jacket and shirt, but he was still wearing his vest, probably because he had weapons additional to his blaster concealed in its pockets. Today's conditions were, so the Birrong had informed them, balmy. Obviously the 'Goonans had their own definition of the word. Luke was used to heat, but not to being so uncomfortably sticky. He was dripping with sweat doing nothing more energetic than just standing.

It was odd, though – there was something naggingly but incomprehensibly familiar about this lush green world. Perhaps Chewie's complaints about hating Yagoona even more than Tatooine had been sufficiently vivid to make Luke feel he'd been somewhere like this before.

Han needn't have moved to avoid the dragon-fly. The Birrong made another leap, catching the insect neatly in mid-air. "Delicious," it mumbled, around crushed gossamer wings. "Want me to catch you one?"

"No, thanks. What I want is to check this cargo now."

"Kareela said to wait."

"But did she actually say not to check the crates while we were waiting?"

The toad blinked again. "Well..."

"Well, did she?"

But the Birrong seemed to have gone into some sort of trance, whether because it was struggling to recall what it had been told, or to avoid answering, Luke wasn't sure.

He sighed, swatted at a cloud of smaller insects and wrinkled his nose. One reason for coming on this trip was to get planetside and breathe some fresh air. But the smells around this makeshift port were anything but fresh and the air was full of biting insects. Even when it wasn't raining, the atmosphere was saturated with water vapour. For now, that vapour was going up; the downpour that had just stopped was steaming back off the cracked petricrete slab on which the *Millennium Falcon* was docked.

Luke could see why Han and Chewie were confident that the Empire wouldn't know of this port. From orbit, it merged into the dense green jungle that covered most of the planet and he doubted that the average Imperial officer would recognise it as spaceport even at closer range. He'd been puzzled himself by some worn markings on the petricrete, until the locals had rolled out poles and nets and started playing a game which featured three teams, six inflatable balls and very few rules that Luke could discern.

Around the perimeter of the petricrete a motley collection of booths were set up; apparently it was market day. From under one of the dripping awnings Chewbacca emerged, one paw smoothing down his damp fur, the other grasping something. As the Wookiee came closer, the something turned out to be one of the fish rolls Luke had seen a vendor making up earlier.

Han gave his co-pilot a look of mock indignation. "Stop thinking about your stomach, Chewie. There's work to be done."

"Not until Kareela gets here," repeated the Birrong.

Chewie brought the roll up to his mouth, about to take a bite. He stopped, sniffing it suspiciously. Emitting a mournful howl, he chucked the roll at the pile of crates. The toad evidently thought that the complaint, if not the makeshift missile, had been directed its way. It squawked and leapt up onto the highest crate, rolling its big eyes anxiously at the Wookiee. Despite its jump, Chewie still towered over it. "Okay, okay," it whined. "Check the cargo if you must."

"Thank you," said Han, with a sarcasm that apparently went unrecognised by the toad, although Chewie smirked smugly.

Luke turned his attention back to the crate and levered off the lid, which had been closed with simple metal staples. The 'Goonans obviously didn't believe in unnecessarily sophisticated packing methods. Han was right - thoroughly checking this cargo would take a while. Firstly, they had to make sure that the goods they'd been given were, if not exactly what they'd asked for, at least useful. That was the official reason Luke was here; he had a good idea what alternative spare parts would be worth having. Medical supplies had to be checked carefully too; those on the black market were frequently past their use-by dates.

Secondly, they had to ensure that the crates didn't contain any unwanted free gifts. The Empire was, unfortunately, waking up to the realities of this war, and the Alliance was having increasing problems with trackers or explosives being added to its cargoes.

Luke swatted away more of the persistent, biting insects, which had apparently decided that human blood was a welcome change to their diet, and hauled the datapad with the cargo manifest from his trouser pocket. Its display was misting over with condensation. His t-shirt having been soaked through with rain and sweat within five minutes of disembarking from the *Falcon*, Luke had dispensed with that piece of clothing, so he rubbed the pad on his damp trouser leg. That didn't help much; the moisture had got inside the display.

He then had to shoo a couple of bright scarlet frogs out of the crate. The cracked petricrete was dotted with puddles, in which small, brightly-coloured amphibians were splashing. These ones, it seemed, were literally jumping at a chance to get off-world.

There was a series of growls from Chewie. The first were to discourage more of the would-be stowaway frogs from the crate the Wookiee was checking. The others were to draw Han and Luke's attention to the nearest canal. With a quiet, rhythmic splashing, a canoe appeared from among the trailing creepers and hanging mosses.

It was piloted by one of the larger Yagoonans. She looked a little like a Mon Calimari, except that her skin was bright green, which made an interesting contrast with her long orange vest. The vest was covered in pockets, out of which hung an assortment of items. There was also a jumble of cages, nets and fish in the stern of the canoe.

The pilot waved one webbed hand enthusiastically. "Hi, Solo, Chewbacca! It's such a lovely day, I thought I'd paddle and do a spot of fishing on the way here."

"Hi, Kareela," said Han, with rather less enthusiasm.

She tied up her canoe and leapt onto the bank. "You got my payment, Solo?"

"Yeah. You can have it just as soon as we check your shipment."

Her wide mouth stretched into a grin. "Don't you trust me?"

"No."

That didn't seem to offend her. If anything, she was smiling even more broadly. "And I don't trust you either. So you won't mind if I run an analysis of your payment before I decide whether or not to accept it."

"Go ahead. You'll find it's pure."

The Birrong bounced off its crate and bounded over to Kareela, butting at her leg like an affectionate canine. She patted it on the head. "You'll be pleased to know, Bundi, that I've got the cash to pay you today."

The toad – Bundi, Luke corrected himself, now that he knew its name- did a little dance, apparently of surprise and joy. Luke wasn't sure he was reading Kareela's body language right, but she seemed very smug about that cash. Too smug, maybe. He saw Han and Chewie exchange glances. They must also have thought the remark worth noting.

"Han," he began.

Kareela turned and looked him up and down. "Who's the new guy, Solo? I hadn't heard that you and Chewbacca had another partner."

Luke stood up, eyeing Han warily, wondering what story he was going to tell this time.

"We don't. Kid owes me for an unpaid passage, that's all. He's broke, so he's working it off." Han gave Chewie a wary look of his own. The Wookiee was sporting one of his innocent 'who, me?' expressions, but Han was obviously remembering the mileage Chewie had got from the time Han had explained Luke as his 'cabin-boy'. Since neither of them had lived that one down yet, Luke was relieved that today Han had chosen something closer to the truth. Han usually did stick to as much of the truth as possible; he was just good at telling it misleadingly.

Kareela waddled up to Luke, her wide, flipper-like sandals slapping on the petricrete. A clammy hand poked at his bare stomach.

He hastily stepped back. "Hey! Stop that!"

She ignored that protest and continued peering unblinkingly at him. "Do you smile?"

"Yeah, the kid can smile, all right." Luke might not be doing so now, but Han certainly was.

Kareela turned back to Han. "If you'd rather have cash than payment-in-kind from him, I'll buy him off you. I have a client who likes young blue-eyed humans with nice smiles."

"Collects them, does she?" Han asked.

"Ummm... Well, not exactly collects. More goes through them."

"Sounds a little ominous." But not, it seemed, ominous enough for Han to resist teasing Luke about it. "How much would you give me for him?"

"Fifteen hundred credits. I've got cash right here." Kareela patted one of the pockets of her long vest.

Han gave Luke a side-long glance and appeared to consider the proposition. "Nah... I could get more than for him from the Hutts, and he is useful occasionally." He grinned at Luke. "So you keep working hard, kid, or I'll change my mind and strand you here."

Luke decided there was no point in replying, nor in protesting that his old speeder had been worth more than that. Besides, he was still wondering why Kareela was so pleased about having that money.

"We've been hearing rumours about you, even out here, Solo," she was saying. "There's a story going round that you've been working for the Alliance."

"You know me – I'll work for anyone who pays, no questions asked. Chewie and I did do a couple of jobs for the Rebels. But then they stopped paying and expected us to help them out of the goodness of our hearts. So we gave that up. I'm not interested in politics."

"Really? This cargo is just the sort of equipment they'd need."

"Come on, if I were still working for that bunch of righteous do-gooders, would I be paying you in Spice?" There was some truth in that statement, too. Certain members of the Alliance High Command were blissfully ignorant of the details of how some vital supplies were procured, General Reeikan having decided that they had no Need To Know.

"I guess not," Kareela said. "Well, I'm glad to hear you're not working for them any more, Solo. That way you won't get into trouble."

There was something about the way she said that.... Her tone of voice was still light, but Luke was sure she meant it. All the more reason to check the cargo very carefully.

Kareela was continuing, "And talking of payment...."

Han pulled a small vial from his vest pocket. "Yeah, yeah... I don't expect you to do this from the goodness of your heart either. Here's a sample for you to test." He looked around. "Where's our last item of cargo? You didn't forget it, did you?"

"Of course not. It's on the canoe. It wasn't easy getting hold of one out here, either. What in space do you want a felipillar for?"

Han spread his hands. "I don't want one. My buyer does. I've no real idea why." That was true, too. They'd just been told that it might help in negotiations if the Ursori were presented with one of the rare creatures. The story going around was that one of the Ursori matriarchs collected them.

"Bundi..." Kareela was waving her Birrong towards the canoe.

"It's okay," Luke said. "I'll get it." He still had the feeling that something potentially problematical was going on. Maybe checking out the canoe would provide a clue as to what.

Han was obviously thinking along the same lines. "Yeah, on you go, kid."

The felipillar's cage was half-covered by nets and dead fish, which gave Luke a good excuse to rummage around. But all he found was fishing equipment and more deceased aquatic creatures. By the time he'd lifted the cage out onto the dock, Han and Chewie had sauntered over to the canoe, followed by Kareela.

There was no movement from the cage. Curled up inside it was coil of soggy dark blue fur. The huddled ball was conveying a feeling of abject misery. Luke had an urge to stroke it, to assure it that things were going to get better.

Han crouched down and peered into the cage. "I thought felipillars were supposed to be intelligent and lively?"

"I think this one got a little canal-sick," Kareela said. "I can't imagine why, but the climate here doesn't seem to agree with it. I'm sure it'll perk up once you get it off-world."

The fur coil moved, revealing that one end was a triangular snout, with a twitching nose, whiskers and two dark eyes. It sniffed – hopefully, Luke thought – at the fastening of the cage. Further movement revealed several sets of claws.

"Anyway, it's the only one I could obtain at this short notice." Kareela shrugged expansively. "Take it or leave it. If you don't want it, I'll keep it. It's probably edible. Which reminds me - I've got some lovely fish, frogs and crabs here, straight out of the canal, if you'd like. I know how much you spacers appreciate fresh food."

Chewie wrinkled his snout dubiously. *Only if it's fresher than the stuff those stalls are selling.*

"So fresh some of it's still wriggling." Which was true.

I'll have a look, then.

"Provided your weight won't sink the canoe," cautioned Han.

But the canoe remained buoyant and discussing the culinary possibilities of Kareela's cargo gave Chewie a good excuse to examine it in detail.

"Okay, kid," Han said, "you put the felipillar on board and get back to checking that cargo."

"Sure." Luke was just about to pick the cage up when there was a scratching sound, the lid flew open and something blue and furry leapt at him.

The felipillar swarmed up him and wrapped itself round his neck, rubbing its snout against his chin and emitting a soft chirruping sound.

"Looks like it wants to go with you," Kareela observed.

Luke didn't blame it, if its alternative was being Kareela's lunch. "Hey!" The creature was draping itself more comfortably over him, and although its six sets of claws weren't scratching, they tickled.

Han regarded this animate scarf. "Suits you, kid. Goes with your eyes."

Once the *Falcon* was in hyperspace, the felipillar seemed much happier, perhaps because it was now light-years away from Kareela's stomach. Luke cleaned out its cage and gave it some water. He couldn't bring himself to leave it all alone, so he took into the lounge.

From there he headed for the wet shower. A combined odour of Yagoona's fetid atmosphere and of dead fish seemed to be clinging to his hair; he was really looking forward to not having to smell it any more.

After he'd washed, he dumped his clothing in the 'fresher, but didn't start the cycle. The *Falcon's* laundry system was anything but reliable and the odds of it working twice in quick succession were not good. So Luke decided he'd be considerate and wait for Han to add his clothes to the load. Not having more of a wardrobe to choose from, he pulled on the trousers he'd been wearing when he left Tatooine. Still towelling his hair, he headed back to lounge, where Han, watched attentively by the felipillar, was sitting barefoot on the acceleration couch, scrubbing at his blaster holster and muttering,

"I can't believe how quick this mould grows."

Chewie wandered in, wielding a large comb. He must have just emerged from the sonic shower, because his fur was all standing on end. "What mould?"

"This green stuff. It seems to like leather." With one bare foot, Han prodded at his boots, which, to judge by their shine, he'd just polished.

"Ah," said Chewie, producing his bandolier, which had also been cleaned. "That green stuff. The same stuff that's growing between your toes."

That produced a cry of woe from Han, followed by some choice Corellian swear words when he realised that Chewie had been teasing.

The Wookiee wrinkled his nose. *If it's not Han's feet, what in space is that awful smell?*

"Not me," Luke informed him. "I just had a shower."

"It smells like something died," said Han. "None of those little frogs could have got sealed into a crate and suffocated, could they?"

Chewie shook his head. *All the crates were scanned very thoroughly.*

"It's your last passengers that didn't pay?" offered Luke.

"Nah. Those I spaced to save mass." Han stood up and sniffed too. "Perhaps it's that fish – Chewie, are you sure you put it in the cooler?"

Of course I did.

Han shrugged. "Maybe the galley power-coupling's acting up again."

It wasn't. But the cooler door was slightly ajar and sure enough, the tray of fish did smell. Very badly.

Chewie glowered at the cooler. *I'm sure I shut that properly. I was looking forward to that fish. But not now...*

"No, not now...Phew!" Han shook his head, apparently in disbelief that anything could smell that bad. "Congratulations, Chewie - you've discovered a smell almost as bad as an Imperial garbage masher."

Chewie didn't reply, just gazed, his expression mournful and puzzled, at the opened cooler.

"We'd better space that lot," Han decided. "Ursori have very sensitive noses, and it's been made very clear that we need to make a good impression on them. Besides, I'm sure Leia wouldn't be impressed either, if we arrived at the rendezvous in a reeking ship."

"I'm sure she wouldn't be," agreed Chewie, grinning at Luke. "Even if we're not in this for any princess. Though you could tell her it was a sentimental gesture, to remind you of the circumstances in which you first met her."

Han ignored that, put his hand on his hips and inquired sweetly, "Chewie, how come we always get into trouble when you think with your stomach?"

Less trouble than we've got into from you thinking with your dick.

Han threw a piece of fish at his co-pilot, who promptly caught it and threw it back. Since both Han and Chewie were eyeing the tray as if deciding what to use for ammunition next, Luke hastily said, "Guys, isn't the object to have a pristine-smelling ship when we get to the rendezvous?"

"Yeah, it is," Han admitted. Reluctantly, Luke thought.

Chewie was prodding, with an air of deep distaste, at the stinking pile. *Kids, did either of you eat those two crabs?*

"No, why?"

Because they're gone.

"You sure?"

*Yes, I'm sure. Kareela was very insistent that I take them. She said they're a real delicacy."

"Are you sure they were dead?" asked Han. "Maybe they feign dead when they're caught so they can escape when the coast's clear."

"Could the felipillar have broken out again and stolen them?" suggested Luke.

Han shook his head. "I don't think so. There's been someone in the lounge with it the whole time."

Chewie's puzzled frown deepened and he held up a paw for quiet. Sniffing cautiously, he paced to the end of the galley, looked down and then up.

Okay, he said, pointing first to something on the floor and then to a small ventilation grille, which had an irregular hole at one edge. *Either of you kids got a rational explanation for this?*

Han obligingly tried. "Two apparently dead crabs broke out of an allegedly closed cooler, scuttled across the floor and then pulled their or each other's legs and claws off. Once legless, they climbed up the wall, gnawed a hole in that grille and disappeared into that duct. Or maybe they only shed some of their legs..."

"No," Chewie said, poking at the amputated appendages with a spent welding rod. "Each crab had six legs, and there are twelve here."

"Two crabs which Kareela, who was acting awfully smug, was very insistent we take," Luke added. "Even if that doesn't explain the rest of it."

Grabbing a hand-light, Han pulled up a box and stood on it so that he could shine the light along the duct. "Kareela did look like she was up to something," he agreed. "But this doesn't make any sense..." He turned and glowered suspiciously at Luke and Chewie. "This wouldn't be another manifestation of Wookie humour, or a little Force-related prank, would it?"

Would I waste good food just to wind you up? asked Chewie. *When there are so many other, less wasteful ways?*

"No, you never let anything come between you and your stomach. And I can't see Luke using the Force to pull the legs of hapless crustaceans, either."

"Can you see anything in there?"

"No. We should check that the felipillar didn't somehow do this. Even though they don't have the teeth to chew through metal grilles."

The felipillar, however, was sitting innocently in its cage, and there were no signs of any crustaceans, deceased or otherwise, in the lounge.

Han slumped down on the couch. "Maybe this is it. The strain of all that blockade running and being chased and shot at by Imperials and bounty hunters has finally got to me, and I'm hallucinating."

My nose, announced Chewie, returning from disposing of the fish, * would like to assure you that this smell is perfectly real.*

Inside its cage, the felipillar nodded, presumably in agreement, and put its paws over its snout.

"And," added Chewie, *spacing the fish and shutting the galley section bulkhead hasn't got rid of it.*

"If those crabs are somehow still alive, they could be anywhere by now. It'll take forever to search all the places they hide," Luke said gloomily.

Han sat up straight. "Only if we do it the hard way, like in all those holo-drama where the space-ship crew splits up and spends hours wandering round darkened holds..."

Until, finished Chewie, *they get pounced on and horribly killed by a vicious slaving alien.* The Wookiee's pantomime of a vicious alien was somewhat spoiled by his clamping one paw over his nose in mid-slaver. *Wow,* he muttered, muffledly, *that smell is **bad**.*

"Okay, okay," Han mock-grumbled, pretending to sniff at his vest. "I'm going to take that shower now. You guys shut the air off, section by section. Once we isolate the smell, we can leave that section sealed until after the Usori have left." He slid along the couch to the games board and called up not a horde of holo-beasties, but a 3-D schematic of the *Falcon*.

"Hey," Luke said, "I've been thinking - "

"Wonders will never cease." Han grinned. "Thinking what?"

"If these crabs are still alive, mightn't they be looking for water?"

Chewie chortled. *You might have company in the shower, Han.*

"I'll take precautions." Han picked up a large wrench.

However, there were no yells of woe from the shower, only a loud rendition of a Corellian drinking song. Although Chewie and Luke had sealed off the entire aft section of the ship and increased the circulation to the lounge, the increasingly nauseating odour stubbornly refused to dissipate. If anything, it was getting worse.

At this rate, Chewie complained, *my poor snout will be permanently wrinkled.*

The felipillar wasn't looking at all happy either; it still had both front paws held firmly over its nose. When it saw Luke glance at it, it whimpered and butted its head against the cage lid.

"It's doesn't smell any better out here," Luke informed it. He looked at the creature, which now did appear lively and intelligent. "If you didn't steal those crabs, maybe you can help us find them." He opened the cage and the felipillar swarmed up his arm, perched itself on his shoulder and buried its snout in his hair. "Since you're small enough to get into the ducts."

*Could the crabs losing their legs be part of an unusual life-cycle?" Chewie was musing. *But then how did they get up the wall?*

"Perhaps they've got suckers as well as claws?" Luke suggested. "No, that wouldn't work... the shells would get in the way."

*I hope they're not looking for some secluded, dark place to mate, so we'll have an infestation of baby crabs... * Chewie wrinkled his nose up even further. He turned the circulation off and paced from one end of the lounge to the other, sniffing cautiously. *I think it's moving.*

There was a chirrup from the felipillar, which nodded vigorously.

"The little guy seems to think so, too."

"Thinks what too?" inquired Han, returning with a towel draped round his waist and carrying a shirt.

That the source of the smell is moving... Grrargh! Chewie growled in disgust and rummaged frantically in a storage compartment, throwing an assortment of items on the deck in his haste. With a huge sigh of relief he pulled out a set of breathing apparatus, which he promptly clamped over his nose and mouth. *That is so much better.*

Han regarded the objects strewn on the deck. "That's where that plasma soldering iron went. I've been looking all over for it." He picked the tool up and tucked it into one side of his towel.

Chewie looked at the pile too, grinned suddenly and pounced gleefully on something. Something black and lacy... The Wookiee triumphantly waved a pair of obviously feminine underpants. *You might want to dispose of these before Leia comes on board.*

Han snatched them and stuffed them in the other side of his towel, clearly working on a come-back to that. "Perhaps they are hers."

Nah. Chewie wasn't convinced. *Hers would be white.*

Han opened his mouth to say something else, then gave up and made a dive for another breather. "Those crabs weren't that big. How they possibly smell so bad?"

No one had an answer to that. Luke decided that Han and Chewie were right; breathing apparatus was required. He leant down, the felipillar still balancing on his shoulder, and picked another set up. Doing so dislodged an large ornate bottle from the pile. It rolled across the deck and fetched up against the couch. "What's that?"

"Something alcoholic, I hope," Han said, retrieving the it and peering at the label. "Oh. No. I forgot." He set the bottle down on the games table. "It's aftershave. It was a present."

"From an admirer, I take it?" Luke wondered if he should ask if it was from the same one who'd left without her underwear.

But Chewie was growling for their attention. The Wookiee held the mouthpiece away from his nose. *It's moving again. That way.*

The three of them looked at each other.

"Towards the cockpit," said Luke.

"I don't believe a crab wants a nice view of hyperspace," muttered Han, already striding from the lounge.

Half way up the gangway, the felipillar chirruped and a small paw tugged at Luke's hair. The creature gestured towards a ventilation grille, this one at deck level. This grille also had an irregular hole in it, in which something was caught.

A crab shell, with gobs of flesh hanging off it.

"Yuck!" muttered Han, as Chewie prodded at it with a screwdriver produced from his bandolier and then cautiously touched it.

This meat is warm.

"Warm? I guess that's why it smells so much."

The felipillar leapt from Luke's shoulder and pattered up the corridor. "Hey," yelled Han. "Don't you go disappearing into any ducts, too."

"It's all right," Luke said. The felipillar had stopped and sat up, its front set of paws off the deck so it could point at something.

Another lump of flesh.

There were several more of them leading towards the cockpit.

"One crab's eating the other and then spitting it out again?" Han inquired, of no one in particular.

The felipillar had trotted ahead again. When it reached the cockpit, it froze. Then it wriggled its rear end, apparently angling to pounce on something. Han, drawing the soldering iron in place of the blaster he wasn't carrying, shirt still in his left hand, silently went up behind it, Luke and Chewie following.

For a second, Luke couldn't figure out what he was seeing over Han's shoulder. It looked like a pile of entrails was crawling, on thin metallic spider legs, up the nav-comp casing. And a crab shell was scuttling, on similar spindly legs, over the comms board.

The felipillar pounced on the shell, as Han yelled and zapped the mobile guts on the nav-comp with the plasma iron. Surprisingly, since it wasn't near any circuitry and the soldering iron wasn't powerful enough to cut through the comp casing, that produced a shower of sparks. Whatever it was dropped onto the deck, legs twitching feebly.

The felipillar yowled indignantly. It had caught the shell – but the innards and legs under it were carrying on regardless.

"What the hell?" Han threw his shirt over the bits that were still moving and scooped them off the comms board.

Luke knelt down beside the first one. "It's some sort of droid. The legs must be magnetic for it climb like that."

Chewie knelt down too and pushed crab bits away from the metalwork with the screwdriver.

"Not much of a droid," Luke amended. "More a mobile comp system interface."

Chewie cautiously touched it. "Feels like it was running hot, even before Han zapped it."

"Well," Han said, glowering at the mess inside his shirt and, now it was well away from the comms controls, zapping it with the plasma iron too, "it's cooling system may not have been designed to operate inside a dead crab."

The scheme worked well enough to fool our scanners, though, Chewie pointed out. *We should check what those shells are made of. If it can shield metallic parts, it might be useful.*

Whatever it was, the felipillar wasn't impressed. Its expression one of evident disgust, it was alternately picking bits of shell out of its fur and rubbing its nose. It leapt over to Luke and butted at his breather.

He pulled it off and gave the felipillar some fresher air. He could see why it needed some. Warm dead crab had smelled disgusting. The charred bits that Han had zapped stunk even worse.

The felipillar lifted its snout from the breather, shook its head and scampered back down the gangway.

Luke hastily replaced his breather and looked back at the still twitching droid. "Looks like it was going to try to access the nav-comp memory."

"Yeah," Han agreed. "Presumably the other one was going to open a comms channel. And tell somebody all the *Falcon's* stored destination coordinates and everywhere we've been for the past month. No wonder Kareela was acting smug. She must have been well-paid to get these on-board."

I even paid her for those crabs, mourned Chewie.

"Wait a minute.." Luke's earlier conviction that Kareela had been telling the truth suddenly made sense. "She believed you when you said we weren't working for the Alliance. She was smug because she thought she'd been paid for nothing."

"How'd you know she believed me?" Han paused, then grinned, waving at Luke not to bother replying. "Okay. Don't tell me. You just knew."

"Yeah."

So, said Chewie, * if we keep up the pretence next time we're on Yagoona, we might be able to get Kareela to tell us who paid her.*

"We should clean up the mechanical bits, too. Once we get back to the fleet, Threepio and Artoo might be able to access information on who built them and where they were intended transmit the data to. Phew," Han added, holding his breather closer to his face. "And I thought the outside bits smelled bad."

Strange.... For a moment, Luke thought he'd heard an echo. Of Han's voice, if not his exact words. "And I thought they smelled bad on the outside." Only Han sounded worried...

He shivered, wondering why he suddenly felt so cold and exhausted.

Han was looking at him. "Kid?"

And then the feeling was gone. He shook his head. "It's okay."

Even with all the rotting crab remnants disposed off, the smell of decay still seemed to linger. Luke wasn't sure if it really was still there, or whether his nose had got so used to smelling it that it just seemed to be.

"We need," said Han, sniffing the air in the lounge, "to freshen this ship up."

"Have we got time to land somewhere and replace the air?"

Han checked a time read-out. "Oh, hell! No. We don't have time to do much at all. Maybe we could use the after-shave?" The bottle was still on the games table. Cautiously, he opened it. "Shit!"

Chewie howled, then added, "No, that's not exactly what it smells of. But it's close."

"Ugh," muttered Luke. "Just well you didn't put any on your face."

Han screwed the cap very firmly back on. "Never mind. I'm sure I can find someone I don't like to give this to. But we'll need to find something else to use as an air-freshener."

I know. Chewie was striding down the gangway

"Hey, kid," Han said to Luke as they followed the Wookiee, "did her Highnessness say anything to you about why this meeting with Ursori was so important?"

"Not really. Just that the Ursori matriarch had been hinting about making a gift of some expensive piece of equipment to the Alliance. Commander Gairich had been hoping it would be a ship. But if it was, they wouldn't need the *Falcon* to pick them up."

Chewie stopped outside his cabin and opened a tall, narrow storage locker beside the door. He carefully took out several carved and painted pieces of wood, until there was enough space for him to reach to the back of the compartment, from which he removed an ornately carved box.

Han replaced the wooden poles, handling them carefully.

"They're beautiful," Luke said. "What are they?"

"Wookie prayer poles."

Luke watched the careful, reverent way in which Han handled the poles and whispered, as Chewie ducked into his cabin. "I thought you didn't believe in hokey religions?"

"Wookie theology isn't hokey."

Chewie re-emerged, carrying a tray on which were a dozen tiny pottery bowls, from all of which tendrils of smoke were rising.

"Ah," said Han. "Wood incense. Smart idea, Chewie."

It was an extremely pleasant change to smell something nice. Very nice, and very evocative. Luke could almost see dappled sunlight filtering through foliage, hear leaves rustling in the wind...

His reverie was broken by an timer alarm. The *Falcon* was about to exit hyperspace.

Han flicked switches. "Prepare to cut in the sub-light engines... and prepare to find out what this gift is, and whether it's worth having."

*Present position six hundred thousand kilometres from the rendezvous coordinates and closing," reported Chewie.

At first, Luke couldn't figure out what the structure they were approaching was. There was a small patch of lights against the backdrop of space, but they didn't form any discernible pattern. Not until the *Falcon* got closer, and a vast, unilluminated bulk surrounding the lights became visible.

It was a space station, most of it in darkness, only one small section powered up. A massive, self-contained space-dock by the look of it, with repair bays and weapons platforms. And with other platforms, some of which were fitted with hyperdrive engines, Luke realised.

This station could not just be manoeuvred. It could be flown through hyperspace.

"Wow," breathed Luke.

For once, Han didn't tell him off for leaning over his shoulder. "Seconded. That's reason enough to make a good impression on the Ursori."

The comms panel beeped. Han identified them, then Leia's familiar voice said, "The Ursori ambassadors wish to leave for the fleet immediately. Can you dock

at once?" "Sure," Han said. "No problem." He closed the comms link and looked round at Chewie and Luke. "Is there?"

"I don't think so..." Luke had a nagging feeling that there was. He just couldn't think what.

No, began Chewie, uncertainly. Then he grinned. *Oh. One minor one, maybe. Haven't you guys forgotten something?"

"Oh," echoed Han, looking down at the towel he was still wearing. "Clothes."

*The Ursori won't mind," Chewie called after them as they charged down the gangway. "Leia might not mind, either, come to that, but I had understood that humans normally dress on formal occasions."

"It'll be okay," Han muttered, more to himself than Luke. "The 'fresher will have finished by now..."

But it hadn't. It was sulking, stuck on its rinse cycle.

"Oh, damn," said Han.

"Maybe we should just stay out of the way?" Luke suggested.

"Difficult on a ship this size."

*And the Ursori would find that far ruder than lack of clothes," yelled Chewie helpfully from the cockpit.

"Okay," muttered Han. "We can salvage this. I don't have any more spare shirts, but we've both got our jackets... What are you grinning at, kid?"

Luke decided to practice some diplomacy and refrain from telling Han how amusing it was that a tough Corellian mercenary pilot should be in such a flap over what to wear. "I'm just pleased that the Ursori gift is something so valuable to the Alliance."

"Right."

"Can't you land any slower?" Han yelled to Chewie, as he struggled into his jacket. Luke had already put his on. It probably looked a little odd with his old farm trousers, but it did hide his lack of shirt. Well, almost. He hadn't noticed until now that a couple of the fasteners were missing.

But he was better off than Han. If it hadn't been for the colour, he'd have thought that Han was trying to squeeze into one of his jackets by mistake.

"Oh, hell," Han muttered, having discovered that although he could get his shoulders into it, the jacket would not do up. "I forgot. This was in that last load. The one that bloody unreliable 'fresher shrunk." He breathed in and tried again, but the jacket resolutely refused to fasten.

He gave up and shrugged. "It'll be okay. The Ursori don't care about clothes any more than Wookies do. And her Highnessness will have her head full of diplomatic concerns. I bet Leia won't even notice what I'm wearing. Or what I'm not."

Pulling his own jacket straight, Luke grinned. "All right, Han, you're on. I bet she will."

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