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Imperial Entanglements

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Luke Skywalker was bored. It was a condition he shared, along with a drink, with the tall arrogant Corellian across the table from him.

"It's been three days! How much longer are they gonna keep us grounded?"

"You asked me that five minutes ago," Solo snapped irritably. He pushed his glass aside. "And I'll give you the same answer I did then -- I don't know."

A small, muffled beep sent Han's hand to his pocket. He pulled out the comlink and activated it. He listened intently to the soft, muted bark, his brows knitted in concentrated thought. "You're sure?"

The comlink woofed, and he nodded. "Okay, okay, yeah, that's kind of how I have it figured. But not before 0200?"

"What is it?" Luke put down his drink and studied the handsome features of his friend, who held up a hand silencing him until the transmission was completed. He pocketed the small electronic device.

"Chewie's tracked down an official at planetary defenses. We're cooling our heels here while an Imperial entourage tours this sector. That's kind of what I suspected, it's happened to us before."

"They're making a grand tour, and they ground everything in the sector?" A look of disbelief touched the young rebel's face.

"Luke, we're practically in the Emperor's back yard." Solo glanced around as if expecting the royal personage to suddenly materialize at the mention of his name. "They do this any time a member of the royal family travels. Fortunately for my kind of business, they don't range too far from home. Chewie and I tend to handle our business a little farther from imperial headquarters than this."

"So how much longer do we have to wait?"

"According to Chewie, there's a tentative time set for 0200 unless something happens to upset it."

Luke glanced suspiciously at the Corellian. "We're actually going to get out of here before morning?"

"Luke," Solo picked up his glass and took a drink, "I can't promise it. But the Falcon is loaded; all we have to do is get clearance and we can leave. I'm not going to make any waves. We can't afford to have my hold checked. You're just gonna have to be patient."

"Coming from you, that's quite a statement," Luke grumbled. "It's just that -- well -- I wanted to get back before Leia left."

A look of interest touched Solo's hazel eyes. "That's right, she did have something in the works. what was it anyway, did she say?"

"No," Luke admitted. "It was pretty hushed up. She wouldn't talk to me about it, just said that if we got back in time she'd likely work us in."

"Well, forget it, 'Cause we're already three days behind schedule. If I know her Royalness, that's at least two days past their deadline. She's one damned impatient woman when she gets her mind made up to tackle something."

The two men fell silent, the only silence that surrounded the busy activity of the drinking establishment.

"Why don't we get something to eat? Otherwise, it's the ship's processor later," Luke ventured halfheartedly.

"Nah, I'm not hungry."

Several men shouldered into the crowded bar. The Corellian stiffened in recognition, unaware of Skywalker's close scrutiny. "What is it?" Luke asked.

"Those men who just came in -- "

Luke glanced around the room, watched the half-tipsy group secure drinks and find seats at a table only a short way from them. "What about them?"

"Do you recognize the uniforms?"

"No." Luke glanced over Solo's shoulder at the men. They were dressed in royal blue trousers, expensive white shirts of a silk-like fabric, smartly tailored with full sleeves which tapered to tight cuffs at the wrists. Around their waists they wore white sashes, over which were buckled holstered blasters.

"I wouldn't call them uniforms," Luke frowned, "more like costumes."

"Don't let those duds fool you," Solo cautioned. "Those men will be more than capable defending their right to wear them."

"Who are they?"

"Members of the Royal Guard." Solo chuckled at the surprise that crossed the young Jedi's face.

"What? Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure."

"How ..."

Solo took another sip from his glass. "I had a friend once who thought the sun rose and set in the royal house. She knew everything there was to know about the royal family. She had high Imperial hopes of becoming apart of it someday."

"Did she?"

Solo grinned thoughtfully. "Well, she may not have had the blue blood, but I sure couldn't fault her other attributes." He shook his head free of obviously fond memories. "Last time I saw her she was still dreaming royal

dreams. I didn't fit into those plans." Solo sighed. "We did have some good times."

"I'll bet."

The lopsided grin touched the Corellian's mouth. "You know what this means, don't you?"

Luke glanced again at the crowded table. "What?"

"That we probably ain't gonna lift off at 0200."

"Why not?" Agitation shifted Luke's attention back to the amused Corellian.

"Because," Han explained patiently, "the royal guard protects the immediate family of the Emperor. Where the Emperor goes, they go."

"You mean the Emperor, himself, is travelling in this sector?" Luke groaned in understanding. "We'll never get off this rock!"

Solo chuckled at Luke's vexation. "What's wrong, kid, I thought you liked rubbing shoulders with royalty." A teasing light flickered in the hazel eyes. "As much time as you spend with Leia."

"Han, what are we going to do around here waiting for the Emperor to decide to go home?"

The smile disappeared and Solo frowned. "Yeah, I know what you mean." A strange expression touched Solo's features. He looked again at the four men across from them, back at his friend, and toyed with his glass thoughtfully.

"Han?" Luke studied the Corellian with growing suspicion. "I've got an uneasy feeling you've thought of something. Do I want to know about it?"

"What would you say," Han eyed him closely, "if I told you I know most of the general plans of the royal flagship, guard placements, most of the routines, and procedures on these intergalactic tours?"

"I'd say you had some interesting information. Really worthwhile, if I were ever to be a guest of the Emperor."

"Luke, I'm serious. Think about it."

"You're crazy." Luke glanced at the four men speculatively.

"Am I?"

"You're not thinking what I think you're thinking?" Luke grinned in fascination. "You are!"

"Keep your voice down!" Han warned. He leaned forward. "This is an opportunity we can't pass up. Besides," he smiled, "it won't be boring."

"It's crazy," Luke repeated, but his voice betrayed his excitement.

"So was breaking into the detention area of the Death Star. As I recall, that was your idea."

"But I had a plan," Luke ventured. "And we did have some help getting out, remember?"

"I think I can come up with a plan." Solo pulled out the comlink and flipped it open. "Chewie?" He waited until a muffled whoof acknowledged the opened channel. "Luke and I have an appointment in a few minutes. I'll check in with you when we get there. Don't try to get in touch with us." He quickly deactivated the device and slipped it away.

"You didn't give him much of a chance to discuss this decision of ours."

"He's a worry wart. He'd have wasted our time. Come on."

Luke shivered as the night air hit them, and they moved into the darkness of the alley. "We can't tackle all four of them. And someone on their shuttle is sure to miss them."

"My, we're negative tonight," Solo mumbled under his breath. "Where did you think I went before we came out here?"

"I saw you at the communications--"

"I was doing a little checking. I have a couple of old business acquaintances who were always banks of Imperial information," Solo explained. "There are three contingents off that flagship tonight, from several branches of their services. They're set to lift off at -- " he checked his chronometer, " -- about an hour from now." The flagship will stay in orbit until 0100, that's when they're set to move out of planetary influence."

"So, that many down here, from different services -- "

"Aren't likely to know everyone--" Solo finished for him. "Under a heavy stun, there's no way they're gonna make the 0100 lift off."

Luke slowly shook his head. "You really think we can carry this off?"

"Why not?"

"I can think of several good reasons," Luke admitted. "But, why not? Just one question."

"Shoot."

"I assume you've got the plans for that ship above us from this friend of yours you mentioned earlier. I'm sure she was a wealth of information of the sort we need, but how well did you listen?"

"I'm a quick study," Solo chuckled at Luke's discomfort. "I got a great deal of continued exposure. Don'tworry, I'll get us on."

"I'm more worried about getting us off!"

Luke pulled unconsciously at the white sash around his waist.

"Will you relax," Solo hissed. They moved toward the Imperial shuttle that stood warming on the curtained-off apron of the air strip. "You look fine. Just loosen up!"

"I feel like a fool in this get-up," the blond man complained as he lengthened his stride to match Solo's.

"Why doesn't the Empire recruit shorter men? I'm always in a uniform two sizes too big." Luke shot an admiring look at the Corellian at his side. "It wouldn't be so bad if I looked like you do in one."

"Well, we can't all have my dashing good looks."

"If I'm caught in this get-up I'll never forgive myself," Luke promised.

"And you were the one complaining about being bored," Solo reminded him teasingly. "You remember what to do?" he questioned as they neared the crowd before the shuttle.

"It's too easy, it won't work."

"It'll work, trust me."

Luke's step faltered as they joined the line of loading personnel. He staggered then leaned heavily against Solo. Han put an arm around the boy and they moved toward the hatch. An officer checked their stolen identification papers, and motioned them aboard.

Solo found a seat to the back of the shuttle and eased Luke down, dimmed the illumination over their seats to discourage conversation. He slumped gratefully against the Jedi in pretended weariness. His senses were keyed to every movement about them. His right hand, seemingly relaxed, rested on the butt of his holstered blaster.

It seemed an eternity before the shuttle bumped under them, announcing their docking to the mothership.

Han got up. He wrestled Luke into the thick of the disembarking crowd. He saluted the officer, following the line of men into the corridors leading to the personnel quarters. He slowed, then fell back until they were alone. He stopped in a side corridor.

"Okay, all clear."

Luke straightened, looking around. He got his first glance at the corridor in which they stood. "Han, this ship's the size of a small city! "

"About, I guess," Solo agreed, concern touching his voice as he pulled out the comlink. "Come on, there should be some supply holds down this way."

He found a door and activated it. "Relax -- this is ship's night. They are on skeleton crews."

"How are we gonna get off?"

"If this doesn't work, we won't," Solo stated simply.

"I was afraid you were going to say something like that."

"Then don't ask," Solo smiled. "You remember the layout I gave you in case we get separated?"

"Seems simple enough," Luke admitted grudgingly. "I just never pictured her being this big."

Han activated the comlink. "Chewie, do you read?"

"Won't they pick up that transmission?" Luke questioned.

"Not if it's short. It'll be over before they can spot it. These comlinks are almost too small to show on sensors, but I'll have to keep Chewie's conversation short. The Falcon's gain is too powerful -- " Solo halted as he heard the click of the opened channel. "Don't say anything, Gruesome, just listen. Luke and I are aboard the imperial flagship above you ... "

A roar sounded over the small device. Solo's features hardened. "W _will_ if you don't shut up! She's scheduled to leave orbit at 0100. I want you on an intercept course as soon as you can get off that rock. She's headed back to Imperial headquarters. Pace her and keep all channels open to this link. We'll keep you posted as things develop. And no improvising, chum," Solo warned. "You wait until you hear from me. If you don't hear anything by 0300 head for home."

Solo deactivated the comlink, recognized the question on Luke's face and groaned, "He's a little upset."

"I'll bet," Luke mumbled softly. "What now?"

"If Shayla's timetable is still accurate, his ultimate royalness will be in some kind of debriefing between now and lift off at 0100 -- setting up tour schedules, defenses and timetables for the next stopover. At lift off he'll go back to his chambers. That's where we'll have our best chance to nab him."

"I don't remember you mentioning his quarters when we were going over the layout."

"I didn't mention it because I don't know where it is," Solo admitted, then held up a quick hand to silence the angry retort he knew was coming. "We've got plenty of time to locate it before lift off. I know where the royal suites are."

"Okay then, it shouldn't be difficult," Luke mumbled in obvious apprehension. "How much trouble are we gonna have wandering round here?"

"If you act like you know where you're going and are late getting there, you shouldn't have any trouble. You got an officer's uniform. There's only a couple people you answer to directly." Solo grinned and pointed to the insignia sewn on his shoulder. "Me, and the Emperor." He shrugged. "Just

stay out of any royal bedrooms and keep your hands off the royal consorts and you'll be fine."

Luke groaned at Solo's teasing jabs. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were enjoying all this."

"It beats what we've been doing for the last three days," Solo admitted as he opened the door and they re-entered the deserted corridor. "Down this way and to the left --"

"Are the conference and throne rooms, I remember to the right and down for two levels are all the personnel quarters."

"Right," Solo nodded. "On this level is the servants' quarters. Now right above us are the royal suites."

Solo took a right and they entered an open lift. He programmed it upwards. "To starboard's the officers' quarters for the Royal Guard. Stay away from that area," he warned, "it's the one place you might be questioned."

"All we have to do now is find the royal bedchambers on the port side of level four, which should only take a couple of days," Luke remarked sarcastically.

"There's two of us," Solo remarked cheerfully. "Should cut the time in half. Come on."

"What about the life pods?" Luke asked as he followed Han out of the lift.

"They'll be located near the Emperor's quarters."

Luke shook his head in disbelief. "I take it all back, Han. You did listen."

"Of course. I always enjoyed the homework."

"I'd love to meet the teacher sometime."

"Han!" The soft voice stopped both men in their tracks, as footsteps sounded behind him. "Han Solo, is that you?"

"You may get your chance," Solo groaned. He turned to face the beautifully dressed woman advancing toward them, her face alight with pleased recognition.

"You handsome devil, it is you!" She swept eagerly into his arms, as beautifully sculptured hands pulled the Corellian's head down and sensuous lips found his.

Solo tensed momentarily then gave in to the passionate welcome. His arms willingly encircled the slender waist, his eyes sweeping Luke with a 'what could I do?' look as he returned the kiss.

Luke looked worriedly down the quiet corridors, as he attempted to look at ease before the two embracing figures. He failed miserably. "Han ... "

The woman released Solo and took a step backward, her hands holding his. She studied him with obvious pleasure. "I'd forgotten how good-looking you are, you Corellian rogue."

"Han?" Luke glanced again down the corridors, then hesitated as he became aware of beautiful violet eyes studying him with interest.

"Who's your friend? He's sure an improvement over the Wookiee," she teased lightly. Color mounted in the young rebel's cheeks. "He's cute."

"Luke, this is Shayla." He turned her away from the young Jedi. "We were just talking about you."

"After all this time? I'm flattered. I always assumed I was forgotten as soon as the Falcon shook Malas' soil from her landing gear." An amused but contemplating light flickered in her eyes. "You do wonders for that uniform. I always suspected it was an injustice to keep Corellians out of the services. Even if they don't know how to take anyone's orders but their own," she teased as her lips brushed his again lightly. "And your friend's a little too short and a lot too young for the rank he's wearing. You're up to no good, Han Solo."

"Why don't we go somewhere and discuss my dishonest ways?" Han whispered as he kissed her more alluringly.

"My thoughts exactly," she replied, her voice husky with anticipation. "What about your young friend?"

"He's got places to go, people to see," Han stated, his eyes meeting Luke's over the head of his enraptured companion. "Right?"

"Where'll we meet?"

"Shayla?"

"My quarters are at the end of this corridor, you can't miss them."

"You meet me there in one hour," Han told Luke. "We have an important appointment at 0100."

"Can I see you a minute?" Luke asked, nettled.

Han released himself from the woman's clinches, met her amused smile and excused himself. He and Luke moved away a step or two. The younger man turned his back on the beautiful vision who continued to smile. "Aren't you forgetting some advice you gave me earlier?" Luke hissed in mounting irritation. "This section of the ship is massive! I can't do all the searching alone. And we've got less than an hour before lift off."

Han winked at Shayla over the young Jedi's head. "You worry too much. Shayla's not dressed as a servant, so I figured she's a paid companion to one of the Emperor's consorts." Han sighed with mounting eagerness, "Give me an hour with her and if you haven't found the royal chambers, I'll have the information from her."

Luke threw a wary glance from the woman to his enraptured friend. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"I do. Oh, I do," Han sighed softly.

"You'd better," Luke whispered curtly, then gave in. "Okay, I'll meet you at Shayla's quarters just before 0100."

"Sure, kid." Solo pulled his attention away from the alluring violet eyes and glanced at the blond youth. "If you find what we're looking for keep an eye peeled, and don't walk into any trouble."

"That's good advice. I'll follow it if you will." Luke looked again at Solo's elegant companion. He drew a deep breath and backed down the corridor away from them.

Shayla moved eagerly into the Corellian's arms. They moved down the corridor. "He's really cute, Han. Where did you pick him up?"

"He's a farmboy from Tatooine, out to see the galaxy."

"Oh, he'll see it, shipping out with you."

Han looked uneasily down the empty corridors. "Where is everyone?"

"Relax. We have the wing to ourselves," she chuckled pleasantly at Solo's concern. "The Emperor's traveling light this trip. It's a business trip and sort of a honeymoon for him and a..favored consort. Except for her companions and servants there are no others in this wing."

Shayla paused before a suite and palm activated the huge double doors. "With the royal guard moved to the adjoining wing, there's no need for guards stationed outside doors, although it's still standard practice when the family travels into unfamiliar or hostile systems."

The door slid noiselessly open and she escorted the hesitant Corellian into her quarters. The doors closed behind them. Solo watched them, somewhat amused, turned and surveyed his surroundings. The suite was of a royal excellence that left him speechless.

"You like it?" Shayla turned and moved into a close embrace.

"Like you better," Solo murmured, his lips finding her as he pulled her closer. Small gentle fingers slowly unbuttoned the white shirt and he felt a warm hand on his chest.

She sighed in contentment as the kiss ended and snuggled against him. "Han it's been so damned long."

"Umm," Solo mumbled as he ran gentle loving hands up her back. "It looks like your dreams came true. Are you happy?"

She pulled away far enough to look into the hazel eyes. "Yes, I was -- until you reminded me of what we had," she admitted. "But I wouldn't go back. This -- " she glanced around the expensive decor of her suite, "even without you is much, much better than Malas when you decided to stop by." Shayla pushed her face into his chest. "And someday, my handsome rogue, you're going to get yourself killed playing your dangerous games. I would have nothing but Malas -- and that is nothing at all." She turned her face up to him, closed her eyes and offered her lips again. He met them gently, tenderly as she pressed urgently against him. This time he drew away. His passions were rising faster than his common sense. He had forgotten how much she had once gotten under his skin.

"How about a drink for old times' sake, Shayla?"

"Of course; I'm forgetting my manners," she smiled, as gentle fingers outlined a pattern on his bared chest. "You know, I used to think a lot about this marking when we were apart. It's a Corellian falcon, isn't it? I always thought how appropriate it was that you bore it. You are a wild,

reckless and unshackled as the falcon which has never been successfully in captivity." She moved away from him and reached for a button on the headboard of the gigantic pedestalled bed. He followed her, stopping her hand as she touched a small device.

"I'm calling my maid. Give me a chance to show you how well I fit into these surroundings. You needn't worry while you're here. The servants are all expertly trained to keep their mouths shut."

"Or the Emperor shuts them permanently," Solo stated. He released her hand and she pressed the button.

"Something like that, I guess," she smiled. "I never inquired. But whatever is done, it is very effective."

Solo heard the door behind him swish open and stiffened. Shayla chuckled as she moved into his arms again. "Relax, your true colors are showing. Leanna, would you please pour a couple of glasses of -- " she paused as wide violet eyes met amused hazel ones, "Malasian brandy?" He nodded. "Two brandies, Leanna, a double for my guest."

"Yes, ma'am." A soft, barely audible voice answered her, and Solo heard crystal glasses clink, liquid splashing into them. Soft footsteps sounded behind him. He released Shayla reluctantly and turned.

A gasp of unrestrained surprise came from the small maid, as the tray of drinks crashed to the floor. The startled brown eyes of Leia Organa met and clashed with the amused hazel ones of Han Solo.

"Leanna, what were you thinking of?" Shayla exclaimed in barely controlled anger. She watched the spilled liquid soak into the plush floor covering. "Quickly, get something and clean up this mess. At once, before the carpet is past saving!" Shayla groaned as she saw the spots of brandy that had splashed on the hem of her skirts. "My robes are ruined."

"I'm sure it was an accident," Solo soothed her softly. His eyes settled with roguish pleasure on the beautifully clear features of Leia Organa who was quickly trying to gain her composure again. "Servants are prone to clumsiness. She probably tripped."

Leia knelt, picked up the tray and glasses, paused at his words and shot him a murderous glance.

"Hurry, Leana, lay out my evening robes. I'll step out of this. You will see they are properly cleaned before you retire tonight."

"Yes, ma'am," Leia whispered as she hurried to the small doorway off the bedchamber. She returned quickly with several wet towels, knelt before the stained carpeting and scrubbed angrily at the wet spot, her enraged gaze averted from the Corellian. Solo wondered if she was wishing it was him she had under her small efficient hands. His smile broadened.

"Han, your boots!" Shayla pulled his attention to his badly spattered footwear. "If you leave here like that you could be stopped for improper uniform code." Solo's eyes danced with a growing temptation.

As Shayla moved into his arms he again met the passionate kiss of the beautiful woman. "Why don't you change and I'll have Leanna take these boots to be cleaned and polished before I leave," he suggested.

Shayla pulled reluctantly away from the tall Corellian, her hand pausing momentarily on his bared chest. She moved away with a warm promising smile. Only Solo was aware of the deadly gaze that watched them. A silence fell as both hazel and brown eyes followed Shayla from the room. The door remained alluringly open.

Solo moved a step backward and found he could see Shayla disrobing. A warm smile from the full length mirror told she was aware of his eyes.

"Han Solo, what are you doing here?" The voice was clipped with barely suppressed anger.

Solo sat down on the edge of the large bed, aware of the scene they made, with the small Alderaanian kneeling before him. He smiled, liking the illusion. "Leanna, is it?" Han spoke loudly enough to insure it reaching Shayla. "Would you help me get these boots off?"

"You know where you can--"

Solo tilted his head in warning and glanced over his shoulder, smiling at the half-clad figure in the mirror.

Leia groaned and slowly stood up. With her every move telegraphing her fury she halted before the amused Corellian. She reached down, angrily grabbed the offered boot and wrenched savagely at it. It remained tight. The color rose in her cheeks and she refused to look up. She tugged again.

"If I might make a suggestion, Leanna," Solo grinned wickedly. "Turn around and straddle my foot. You'll get better leverage."

"No way am I--"

Solo put a finger to his lips nodding toward the open door. Leia swore under her breath, her eyes dancing with barely controlled fury. She turned wordlessly, straddled Solo's leg and grasped the boot once again. She tugged. There was a driving force against her well rounded bottom and she and the boot parted company with the Corellian. She came up with a killing fury in her brown eyes, the boot held as a weapon, to face the seated spacer. He cleared his throat and Leia dropped the boot as Shayla entered the room.

"I'm sorry, Leanna," Solo apologized. "The other one comes off much easier."

"Leanna, get on with it. I want you done and out of here in five minutes."

"Yes, ma'am," Leia mumbled, dropping her eyes from the angry woman as she attempted to control her own anger. She grabbed the boot and pulled. Solo had been right, it came off easily. Too easily. she sat down, hard, and shot him a devastating look as Shayla moved again into his arms and his lap. "I'll get you for that," she mouthed soundlessly at him.

Solo smiled benignly over Shayla's snuggling head. Leia picked up the soiled boots and disappeared into the vacated powder room, and again the door remained suspiciously open.

Solo eased Shayla willingly onto the bed, his lips again finding hers. The door slammed shut.

"That girl!" shayla swore as Solo reclined comfortably beside her. "I don't know what's gotten into her. Would you still like that drink?"

"Yes," Solo whispered. She got up and crossed to the open bar and poured two glasses. she returned to the bed. Han took the offered drink, propped himself onto an elbow as Shayla sat down on the edge of the bed beside him. Her fingers again entwined themselves in the dark hair of his chest. "This isn't going quite like we'd planned."

"No," he admitted softly. "It's not."

"What're you up to, Han Solo?" an amused light flickered in Shayla's violet eyes."

"Do you really care?" Han fenced warily.

"I do, if it's going to upset what I've got here."

Solo shrugged, "I don't think it will." He smiled. "As long as you pretend you don't know me if I get caught."

"You can bet on it," she agreed readily, her eyes hardening. "I like living."

"And I thought you cared, Shayla."

"I do," she touched gentle lips to the base of the Corellian's throat. "Almost as much as I care for me."

"Spoken like a true Malian," Solo whispered. "No wonder your race is so often confused with mine." He returned the intimate kiss. "I bet you have every man on this barge panting at your door."

"Only one. she confessed knowingly.

"He must be something," solo teased as he traced the low cut front of her robes with his finger.

"Oh, he doesn't measure up to you," Shayla admitted, covering his hand with hers. "But my future is more stable with him." She leaned down and they kissed. A door behind them swished open and with a soft groan, they parted.

"Are you finished, Leanna?"

"Yes, ma'am. Here are the Captain's boots," Leia dropped them unceremoniously at the side of the bed, her eyes avoiding the Carellian, whose hand still rested on Shayla's ample cleavage. "I have your robes to be cleaned. May I be excused?" She looked up, noticed Han's hand. Uncontrolled color mounted in her otherwise pale features.

"Yes, yes, please go. I won't need you again until morning."

"But what if his--?"

"That's enough, Leanna," Shayla snapped curtly, dismissing the uneasy girl. "It's nothing you need concern yourself with."

"No, ma'am," Leia turned. "It sure isn't." She let herself out, manually slamming the door behind her.

Luke stepped into the empty corridors, his hand reaching for the close release button, when activity from the lift a short way from him drew him back into the protection of the empty rooms. Manually he closed the door until he could see the group of men who had stopped before the conveyance. He stiffened in recognition, his hand on the hilt of the silver tube at his weapon belt.

Six men stood before the closed lift doors. Three were heavily armed royal guardsmen, the other three he recognized as being Alliance personnel. Two were in imperial uniforms and securely bound -- the third man was Silas Talason, an Alliance intelligence agent.

Luke frowned as Talason savagely backhanded one of the bound men to the floor, then kicked the man before he could gain his feet. Luke had never liked Talason, because of the rage the man seemed barely able to control. Now, he longed to get his hands on the older man and have five minutes alone with him.

"Take them to the detention area and show them what we do with spies. I will report to the Emperor that all is proceeding as planned."

The highest ranking guardsman saluted Talason and followed the others into the lift with the prisoners. Luke groaned. Things were getting too complicated. He had to find out what was going on before he could let Talason out of his reach. And he still hadn't located the Emperor's elusive quarters. He was running out of time. He drew a deep breath and made his decision. Talason reached for the lift button that would take him to the third level. Luke closed his eyes and projected toward the reaching hand.

It stayed just short of the control. He unbuckled the sabre and moved into the corridor, his eyes focused on the tall figure. "Talason."

Silas Talason whirled at the soft spoken voice, his hand moving toward the blaster holstered at his side.

"You don't want to draw on me," Luke's voiced as a practiced finger activated the ancient weapon in his hand.

"Skywalker!" Talason's hand moved away from the blaster as uneasy eyes settled on the suddenly mature features of the boy. "What are you doing here?"

"I was about to ask the same question."

"we can't stand here," Talason snapped. "You'll blow my cover. I'm here on special assignment."

"I noticed," Luke commented, his voice unemotional as he held the sabre easily at his side. "But for whom, Talason? The Alliance or the Empire?"

"I'm undercover, you know how I work."

"No, I thought I knew." The sabre raised slightly as Luke's blue eyes locked onto the uneasiness of the man before him. "Now you're going to tell me."

Talason relaxed. "Sure. We slipped aboard in the Dalas system. The Princess had learned new imperial personnel were to come aboard. We took their places. It was simple. I'm - working - as - a - double - agent--" Talason's eyes widened in surprised horror. _Why did I say that?_ He hurried to cover his mistake. The boy's expression remained unchanged, his eyes reflecting a strange blankness.

"I mean, I knew an Imperial agent here. I slipped into his place. I've - been - in - the - Emperor's - employment - for - two - years - since - before - the - destruction - of - Alderaan." Talason groaned and fell silent before the slowly advancing youth, afraid to say more, the fear in his eyes increasing as the young Jedi reached him. "What are you going to do?"

Luke smiled. It wasn't reflected in his eyes. "What happened to our two men who just left here?"

"Forget them," Talason said uneasily. "It's already too late for them. The guardsmen had orders to shoot them and airlock the bodies."

"And the Princess? Has she been taken?"

"Not yet. The Emperor arranged to have her taken when she returned to her quarters. He's to see to it personally. She won't be harmed," Talason assured the Jedi. "He wishes to question her himself."

Talason raised his voice as he saw two guardsmen walking toward the lifts. The boy remained unconcerned before him. "Guards! Take him! He's an Alliance spy!"

The two men paused in surprise before the agitated man and the boy in uniform, armed with the strange weapon. Their hands moved toward holstered blasters.

"You won't need your weapons," Luke stated simply. A gentle smile pulled at his lips as he settled his attention on the two men. "He won't give you any trouble. One of you take his blaster."

"Yes, sir." And Talason was disarmed.

"You fools! Look at him! He's too young to be of the rank he's wearing!"

"What of the other spies?" Luke asked softly.

"They've been taken care of. We've just received word to clear the corridors about the servants' level so that the young woman may be taken unharmed.

"Where will she be held?"

"In her quarters, until we get orders from the Emperor."

"Can't you see what he's doing?" Talason raged. Neither guardsman looked his way.

"This man is a top Alliance spy," Luke explained. "I want him taken to the detention area."

"He will be taken to the detention area," the officer repeated.

"And the Emperor's orders will be followed."

"The Emperor's orders will be followed."

"No!" Talason shouted as he backed away, realizing the trap held fallen into. "Look at him, dammit. He's no guardsman!"

"Carry on," Luke commanded. His eyes touched Talason's and the double agent shivered under the coldness he read in the blue eyes.

"Yes, sir. "

Luke watched the lift doors open. "Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Will the Emperor return to his quarters after the woman has been taken?"

"Yes, sir. He always returns to his quarters at lift off."

"Where are those quarters?"

"At the far end of the corridor leading from the Royal Suites, sir."

Luke smiled. "Carry on. You will not remember seeing me nor will you remember anything except following your Emperor's orders."

"Yes, sir." The two men saluted smartly.

Luke watched the lift doors close. The conveyance started its rapid descent to the detention center and the unpleasant death that awaited the double agent. He deactivated the sabre and returned it to his belt. 'A companion to his consort, he says -- ' He swore under his breath as he turned and quickened his step.

He reached the double doors of the suite, knocked briefly then activated the door-open control. Luke entered, a smile momentarily touching his lips as a scurry of activity accompanied the swish of the closing door.

Shayla swore under her breath as she took a step away from the bed and the comfortably reclining Corellian. "He's a friend of yours, all right -- he has the same manners."

"I'm sorry," Luke grinned helplessly under the woman's anger. He glanced worriedly at the doors, then at the amused spacer. "Han, get up, we've only got a few minutes."

Solo laughed at Luke's discomfort, sat up and slowly buttoned his shirt. "Settle down, we've got time."

"Han, don't you know where you're at?"

The Corellian stomped his foot into a boot and looked up in puzzlement. "Huh?"

Luke groaned. "You're in the Emperor's quarters, settling on the Emperor's bed, and doing -- who knows what with the Emperor's -- "

"What?!" Solo got to his feet, hazel eyes flashing as he moved threateningly toward the young woman. "Shayla, is that true?"

Shayla took a step backwards, shifting her gaze from the advancing spacer to the uneasy youth beside him.

"Now, Han, take it easy. You're getting upset --"

"Yes, I'm getting upset." Solo snapped. "Why the hell didn't you tell me?"

"You didn't ask. Besides, I know you and your hard-headed Corellian pride. I was willing to take the chance."

"Han, he's going to be here any minute."

Shayla's eyes darkened with suspicion. "What are you two up to?"

Luke glanced at Solo, but remained silent as he recognized the fear in the woman's eyes. "We're going to take your boy friend for a ride," Han snapped sarcastically.

"Han, you can't!" Shayla pleaded. "If he thinks I'm a party to all this, he'll have me killed. Please, you know how much this means to me."

"Han," Luke caught the Corellian's attention, "she's right."

"I know she is, damn it!" Solo swore in frustration. "I'm sorry, Shayla, we'll try to keep you out of it."

"And just ruin my life!"

"Better than dying, isn't it?"

"We don't have time for this." Luke told the Corellian briefly about Leia and her dangerously foiled plans.

The smuggler swore hotly.

"I knew she'd find some way to screw this up when I saw her."

"You saw her, here?"

"Yeah, she's posing as a servant of Shayla's. She came in a while ago."

"They have her--"

"Leanna?" Shayla asked as suspicion turned to anger. "You knew her! That's why she was acting so strangely!"

Solo ignored her. "She's the only one alive from her party?"

"Yes."

"How many women of yours are on this ship?" Shayla snapped.

"Shut up, Shayla," Solo said sweetly. "Okay, Luke, things have gotten a little complicated, but I don't see any real problems. We're still where we wanted to be in time for what we planned."

"But Leia -- we can't leave her."

"Of course not. But one thing at a time. First the Emperor, then the Princess."

"Princess?"

"Don't let it worry you, Shayla," Han soothed. "You have the royal position and the ultimate Royalness himself. Leia has the royal blue blood. There the similarities between you ends. You wouldn't get along."

Shayla lifted her chin in determination. "What about me? Are you just going to let the Emperor walk in here and find me with two outlaws?"

Solo's eyes softened. "No, for old times' sake, I wouldn't do that, Shayla. if this works, you may come out of this as an imperial heroine."

"Han?"

"Here's what we're going to do.'

The Emperor was a pleased man as he hurried to his quarters, the vibration of the decking beneath his feet announcing their lift off on schedule. They were on their way to headquarters and he had the infamous rebel leader Leia Organa confined and under heavy guard in the servants' quarters.

He reached the double doors of his suite, activated the control and stepped into a very crowded room. The doors swished closed behind him. He stopped, shock freezing the smile on his face. "Who -- ?"

Han Solo tightened his grip around the woman's waist, and touched his blaster to her temple. "One of the rebels you missed, your worshipfulness."

"What do you want?"

"You."

"Then turn Shayla loose, she's of no interest to you. My dear, have you been harmed?"

"No, Sire," Shayla whispered, fear alight in her pretty eyes. "I let them in thinking they were guardsmen."

"It's all right, child you couldn't have known ... Them?"

"Just stay where you are and don't do anything foolish. Luke, check him for weapons."

Skywalker, his sabre drawn but deactivated, moved up behind the Emperor and quickly frisked him. "He's clean."

"Good. All right, your High Royalness, you sit down on the bed, but keep your hands in your lap. Remember, any wrong moves and the lady buys it."

"You kill her and you have no more bargaining power, my friend."

"That's very observant." Solo's eyes hardened. "Maybe you'd better explain that."

"You have me and Shayla. I have the Princess Leia Organa. I have a feeling after seeing the look that just crossed your young friend's face that she means as much to you, or, at least, to him, as Shayla does to me. You'll never get to her yourselves."

Luke stepped forward but stopped at a warning look from the Corellian. "What do you mean?"

"I've given orders that if anyone approaches her quarters but myself, personally and alone, she's to be killed immediately."

A silence fell over the Imperial suite. "Han," Luke finally ventured, "I think we've got a problem."

"You're great at understatement, kid." Solo shifted his hold slightly then swore. "Get the comlink out and call Chewie. Tell him to shut up and tap out his coordinates. We want transportation real fast. He's to call when he's got us in sight and wait for orders."

A moment later a series of taps sounded from the small device and Solo nodded, pleased. "Good, he's ready. I should have known he'd break those grounding orders."

"You didn't tell him not to," Luke reminded him smiling.

"No, I didn't." Solo's expression became thoughtful. "Probably wouldn't have done much good if I had."

"What now?"

"We start negotiating."

Solo drew a thankful breath as the Millennium Falcon sped away from the Imperial fleet, boomed and disappeared into the protection of hyperspace. He swept his shaggy copilot a grateful look. "Thanks, pal, we couldn't have made it without you."

Chewbacca glared at his partner and barked angrily. His massive hand tightening on the freighter's yoke testified to his fury.

"Now take it easy," Solo voiced uneasily. "It's over and we're all fine."

Chewie roared, blue eyes levelled on the human beside him.

"All right, okay, I agree with you. it was a crazy idea. But it almost worked, damn it!"

"It did, didn't it?"

Solo let out a slow breath as Luke joined them. "You were great, kid. We make a good team. If the Princess hadn't shown up ... "

"We don't know that, Han," Luke stopped him. "I've been talking with Leia. Her plan was pretty good, too. If Talason hadn't been an Imperial agent, her plans would have worked -- if we hadn't been there." Luke shrugged. "Things have a way of working out for the best."

"A philosopher," Solo groaned. "How's her Royalness doing? Still after my hide?"

"No, I don't think so. She realizes if you hadn't traded the Emperor's freedom for hers we'd likely be treading space right now."

Solo relaxed, the lopsided grin pulling at his handsome features. "That's right, I'll probably have to remind her of that occasionally to keep her in line."

"Don't count on it too much, Han," Luke warned easily. "What do you mean?" Solo asked suspiciously.

"Well, we have a couple hours before we drop Shayla off at the agreed pickup point--"

"And she goes back to the Emperor a sweet young hostage that offered her life to protect the Emperor from us bad sorts. She'll have all her dreams intact."

"Well, until then -- " Luke grinned impishly, "the girls are comparing notes."

"About what?" Solo asked, anticipating the young Jedi's answer.

"You."

Solo drew a deep breath, his eyes narrowing in helplessness. "It's going to be a long, long trip."

End

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